Tales from the Interview from a Perspective of Autism

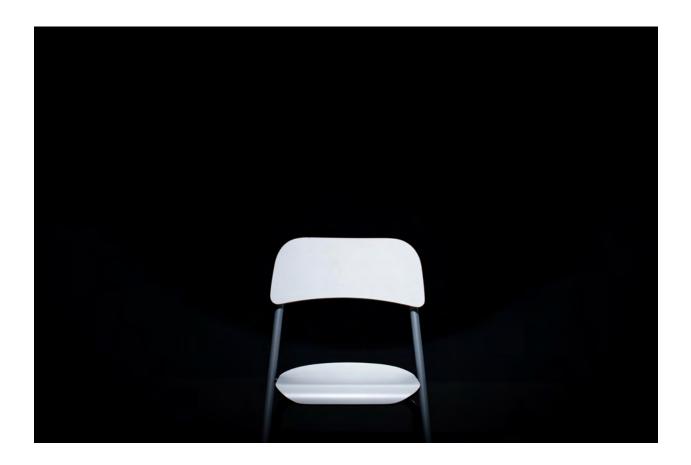**William F. Gilreath**
January 2020

I'm a late in life diagnosed aspie or autistic/kindred person—I am neurodivergent, atypical, Asperger's Syndrome. I am also a software development engineer that has done many different projects with different languages, platforms, operating systems, and technologies. I have also interviewed before and after I was formally diagnosed as an autistic/kindred person.

Note that my experiences are my own, and not necessarily the same for other autistic/kindred individuals. *Caveat emptor!*

Introduction

I will describe my perception and experiences interviewing for software development positions (an umbrella term meaning both testing, development, documenting, deployment, build, etcetera), both before I knew of my autism, and now afterwards. In summary, before I knew my autism diagnosis, I experienced the perception I was missing something, or something was communicated in one form, but mean something else entirely—something I only realized afterwards.

Now that I know, and have had the opportunity to interview at autism neurodiverse events I can see the problem is two-fold. One is being autistic, I process information very differently and have my own challenges in the interview setting. The second is that except for the interview environment around neurodiverse hiring, interviews are very ad hoc and subjective, no matter how objective or "scientific" the veneer is for an interview.

Open-Ended Questions

Questions that are open-ended, like a Rorschach inkblot question are frustrating for me. Mostly because I have to make a blind guess at the parameters of the question.

Consider:

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Interviewer: "So what are you most proud of?"

Me: "In terms of what?"

Interviewer: "What do you mean?"

Me: "In terms of personal, professional, hobby, project?"

Interviewer: "Well anything?"
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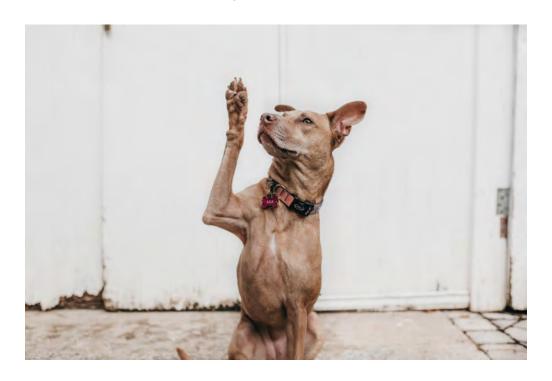
I then sigh in frustration, and try to connect aspects of the job description to what I'm most proud of...but it often is ham-handed verbal fumbling which does not go over too well appearing obvious and telling what the interviewer wants to hear. Not an elegant verbal segue into my skills and the job, but more a stumble as I become tongue-tied.

The classic cliche questions of "What is your weakness?" or the converse "What is your greatest strength?" have so many pre-planned responses you can read in interviewing articles, books, blogs, videos they are not asked. But again, in context, "In terms of what?"
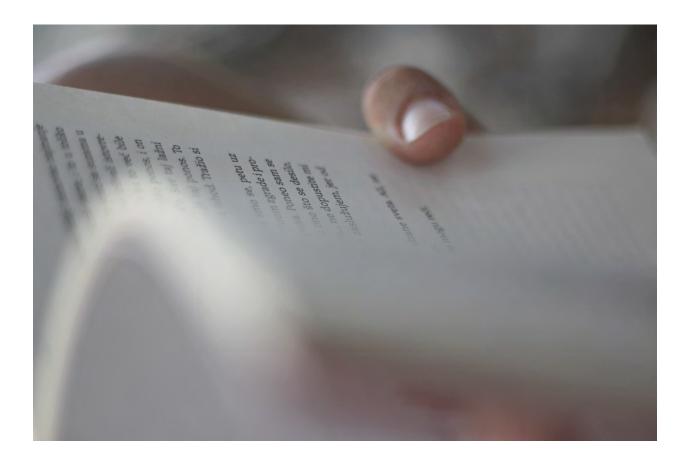
Simply asking for clarification is taken as stalling, or in some cases I think the interviewer really has no idea or the question is like a lie-detector test "throw away" question. But open-ended questions are like the advice to get rich on the stock market "buy low, sell high." Sounds great, but without any quantification like what is high, low, and what to buy, and what buying entails, the open-ended nature is irrelevant.

White boarding code (I will get to that shortly...) I always will ask "What programming language?" and in some interviews "You decide." Or I am told, "Use whatever programming language you want." Or "Use whatever programming language you are most comfortable with, etc." I then use say Java when they wanted C, or C++ when they wanted Java, or Pascal when they wanted C#.

Ask a Technical Question, or Read from the GRE/ACT/ Schaum's Computer Science/The Book of Questions

The frustrating point of such a technical question is often the context is from the previous material or questions. But a technical question is read verbatim (often by someone who doesn't know what they're reading...I once had an interviewer in a phone screen say: "C double plus" for C++ and they have the answer. But for the interviewee, I don't know the context, what the interviewer is looking for, and worse if I use technical jargon they are stumped and unable to comprehend my answer.

- Once, for a company notorious for being data-oriented, I was asked in the lead in part of the question "For an array with no negative numbers or zero..." I later said in explaining my answer "well since all the elements are positive..." and was interrupted because this person had no clue...(and if I have to explain you have made my point, or dear reader if you see why, then you get my point.)

- The flaw in this is two-fold, you have someone that doesn't know what they're talking about, and secondly you either get the right answer or you don't. This reminds me of how I'd go crazy when learning algebra, differential, integral calculus that the answer was given, but not the process to get to that answer. Reminds me of 42, the answer to the ultimate question in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

- So most of the time is asking questions, trying to understand the context of the problem, what answer the interviewer is looking for...incredibly frustrating. Especially when the interviewer is completely ignorant (often an HR person reading the technical question).

Non Sequitur Comments

"A non sequitur is a conclusion or reply that doesn't follow logically from the previous statement." In Latin, non sequitur means "it does not follow." (Merriam-Webster dictionary)
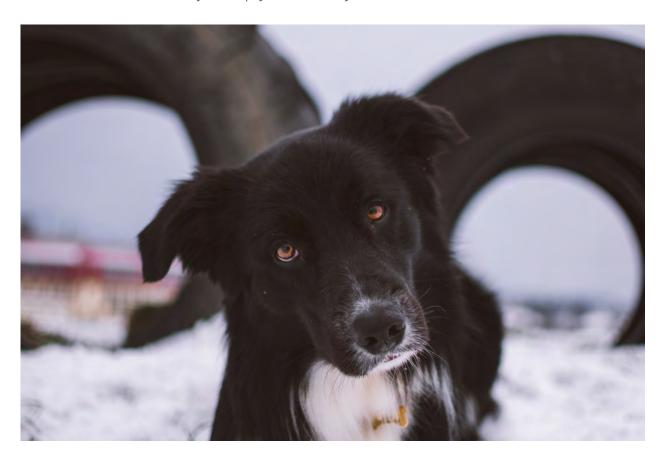
I will use a non-sequitur to mean: Make a comment that is useless, pointless, a gratuitous, vituperative remark that is irrelevant. Non-sequiturs occur for many reasons, but are still a statement "it does not follow."

I've had the following comments made in interviews, and my usual response is to be polite and respond with a non sequitur…but it wastes time.

- "This resume format is terrible." I wanted to ask the manager that said this why they didn't contact me beforehand, or what can I do about this now? My e-mail address is on the resume, contact me for a different format. And then I could have reminded them my LinkedIn profile is given, if you want a different format. I perceived this manager was playing a mind game of being the "alpha male" in the room with "social dominance."

- Computers are getting faster, and memory bigger." Once in an interview, I chose an algorithm the interviewer had clearly never heard of…they stopped learning about this category of algorithms after college. When they asked why I chose this algorithm, I explained the algorithm had linearithmic O(N lg N) performance versus quadratic N^2 performance. The interviewer then responded with the comment. Again they ask the question, but then dismiss the answer.

- "Why did you write X?" X is an app, library for some use. I had written a file hosting shell, so I could connect to the file storage in the cloud, and use the shell like an FTP or Telnet app. But the question by the comments made after I explained, was in the realm of wasting time and pointless. I then wondered why this manager would ask, and then with the follow-up comment indicate they saw it as a waste of time. I have had other versions of this non-sequitur either the implication waste of time, there is no need. I realize the question is meant to put down rather than illustrate my coding ability, initiative.

- "I guess we could have some animation in our GUI stuff." This was the answer when I asked a technology question. I asked, since they used Java to do all their GUI (graphic user interface to all you non-computer nerds out there…) stuff, if they were using JavaFX. The reason this was a non sequitur is Oracle has said the future of Java visual interfaces is not Swing, but JavaFX. I just wondered what animation had to do with using the future of Java GUI stuff. Later I realized they were in a condescending and supercilious way trying to hide their ignorance on the subject.

- "Any person without a background in mathematics could solve it." This was the comment in an interview to one of those cliche puzzle problems thrown at me by the interviewer after doing a whiteboard coding problem. But the interviewer asked about my background, and I'd mentioned being a minor in math in college, and looking back wish I had doubled in computer science and mathematics. Apparently this non sequitur was to diss on my mathematical interest and background.

- "You're solution is…blank." I have had questions, especially on code tests to do something. But later in a phone screen with the code test as the primary conversational parameter, I'd have a comment made without explanation. Or, if that is what the code test question was to assess, state that as a way to structure the solution.

- Once the feedback was that the answer I gave was not efficient. I then pointed out that efficiency was not a specified parameter, and I heard someone stifle a laugh in the background. The phone interviewer said he always wrote code for maximum efficiency. I simply said, "Okay."

I often find such non sequiturs just make me stop, think of what I'm supposed to say that neurotypicals do, but after a few seconds its clear I'm flummoxed and it creates the awkward impasse of the "pregnant pause" in the interview…

White Boarding

At some point, most technical interviews call for white boarding to solve a technical problem. This actually can be fun, because the entire process can get the neurons popping. But I've experienced times when my neurons are overloaded and melting down.

- Trainee in the room. An interview I had, a trainee, learning how to interview, was in the room, sending signals that are distracting, confusing. As I wrote the code in C for a problem, I kept seeing him frown, shake his head, or other facial gestures that were very distracting. And he'd cross and uncross his legs, shift in his seat, and he's right next to the interviewer. Not only as a visual interruption, but also confusing as I could not discern the social meaning. So it made me very anxious and out of place.

- Constant interruptions from the interviewer. I had a code problem given, and I started to whiteboard the code. But the interviewer kept interrupting, so I couldn't keep my train of thought, and it seemed the interviewer while trying to be helpful, was guiding me to write their solution not mine.
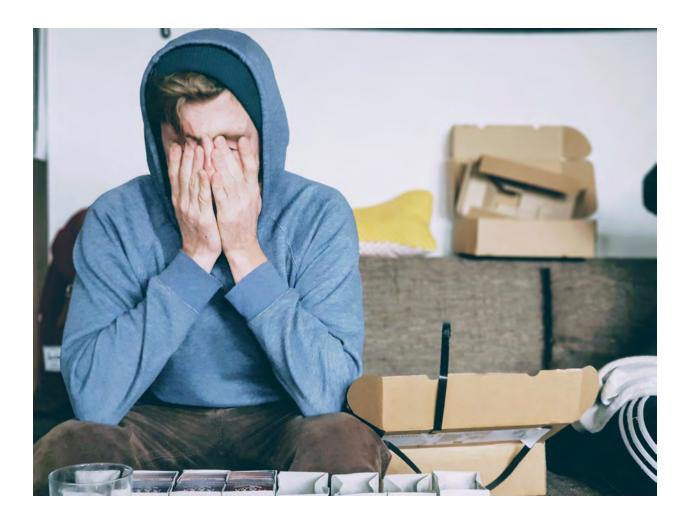
- No clear boundaries while white boarding. In an interview, I was white boarding code. But the interviewer then explained and talked, and I sat down, I thought the white boarding done. Worse, the interviewer did not ask me to go back to the whiteboard. Yet the long discourse to discuss the problem and solution I perceived as completion, but it was a long interruption. There were no clear boundaries of when I was finished or that I was not yet done.

- For one coding problem, the interviewer handed me a printout with the problem, all the parameters of the problem, and what I could assume. It was a gargantuan amount of information front and back. There were too many data points at once in the coding problem.

Room Distractions

Room distractions are things about the room that are a constant distraction, and keep me from focusing. I am hyper-sensory, so distractions in the room are really overwhelming. If I succeed in tuning out the distraction, so much effort and energy is used, I can't focus.

- Sunlight streaming in from window. In one interview, the person's office had a window with sunlight streaming in, and their blinds were completely open. So I sat with this glare burning into my eyes while I tried to focus on the interviewer, the questions being asked, but couldn't. I bombed that interview because I could not focus on the interviewer. Even worse, his whiteboard reflected the light, so it was more a solarium than office.

- In one interview in a conference room, there was a video conferencing screen on the wall. But it was on, and the clock time had the blinking colon. Visually it was the same as a metronome clicking away on a piano. A continuous change in my field of vision, since I was facing the video conferencing monitor while speaking to the interviewer.

- An open window, so see people passing in the hall, or across the way in another building. I've had two interviews where the window allowed me to see either people in the corridor outside, or people across the way in another building. The constant interruptions in my visual field were distracting and overwhelming.

External Interruptions

External interruptions are the worst, I find my train of thought is not just lost, but derails, twisting the train tracks in the process. I use the term "external interruptions" to mean interruptions not specific to the room, but what goes on around an autistic person. Here are some examples:

- Dragged room to room. In one interview, the interviewer took from the lobby, and not to his office. He opened a door, found an empty conference room, and started the interview. Unexpectedly a group of people showed up, said they had reserved the room. So had to go to yet another room, with the same result. Eventually we wound up in his office, but the interview was in fragmented pieces.

- People opening the door, barging into the room. I had one interview in an office, and I was explaining my answer to a technical question, when a guy just opens the door. He asked about some luncheon, ignoring me. The interviewer then

said, "I'm in an interview." The person left, but I was now flustered and the surprise interruption (my back was to the door) had me on edge.

- Annoying sounds. An interview I had once with the manager in his office with his laptop computer on his desk. I was sitting in front of the desk, with the laptop to my left near the desk corner. The problem is the manager had a computer chime when he got an e-mail. The chime was so loud it hurt for me to hear it. And apparently this manager was in everybody's e-mail address book so that laptop kept the loud chime coming. I thought I was on the gong show, sans gong but with a loud chime.

- Noise in the next room. Once in an interview in the interviewer's office that adjoined a conference room it was a constant bombardment of noise. People talking, entering and exiting, all while the interviewer pretended the noise next door did not exist. I could not think when given the technical question.

Irrelevant Feedback

Some companies will give feedback, but not always. The idea is to learn from interview mistakes, but the useless, irrelevant feedback is more perplexing than helpful. Here is some of the feedback I received, and it baffled and flabbergasted me more than anything else.

- "He's not a consensus builder." This seems a culture-fit comment. The company was a Fortune 50 company (later that was broken up, and broken up again after merging, and then had layoffs, and later more layoffs…) But how does an interview candidate show they are a "consensus builder?" I wondered if that was simply code, a euphemism for saying, "Not a team player."

- "You're code is inefficient and unsound." I got this feedback after doing a code test. They didn't bother to ask me why I had written my code the way I had. Simply put, I used a counter-intuitive method to cover about four or five corner cases, and that made the actual code implementation simpler. It introduced

redundant data to guarantee none of the corner cases occurred. Nor did they offer an explanation for the comment.

- "You complete ignored question X." The question was dealing with Java streams. However the interviewer over the phone was talking, and then made the comment in passing without an emphasis as a question. It was a verbal aside, and asked after much verbiage when I replied with "Uh-huh" when the interviewer paused. The conversation was like: "Java has really evolved, and it's recent features…What about Java streams? We typically use Spring as a server…" I focused on Spring, a Java J2EE server, but missed his question in the middle. Also the interviewer did not revisit the question, or ask it again as a question.

- I get the interview feedback "We don't program in that language X, or my team doesn't use Y…we use Z." When I get that feedback I have to bite my tongue. If you want me to do white boarding or examples in language X, specify Z. As an aside, I've gotten the advice "Use whatever programming language is in the job description." But if three or more are given, it's hard to guess which one is the one the interviewer wants.

- I once got interview feedback that: "You stalled too much asking too many questions." Or I was told: "You didn't remain on point." It's difficult to remain on point when the interviewer is vague and ambiguous in the problem.
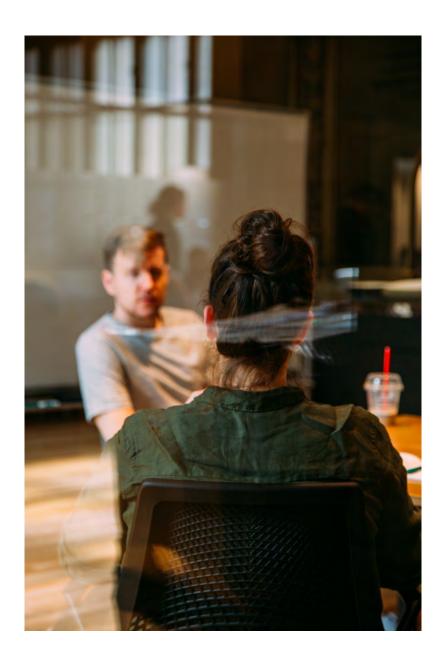
Suggestions for Interviewing an Autistic Person

- Do not ask open-ended, vague questions, give a specific question with context, and an idea of the details in an answer. Example: "What technical challenge have you solved are you most proud of in your career, from college up to now?" Now it is clear for the timeframe, the what and the how.

- For a question, ask it as a question, not in passing, and not casually in conversation. Directness is important, as it defines the context boundaries of a question asked. When talking questions do not have quotation marks and a question mark.

- For white boarding, give the problem, step-by-step, specify language, but allow steps to solve or write code, and then after a solution, add constraints, helpful hints. And don't keep interrupting until either a clarification question is asked, or you can see the autistic person is "stuck" in the logic of the solution.

- Make it clear when the white boarding is done and the solution to the coding problem is satisfactory.

- Do not make non sequiturs, irrelevant comments, they only confuse, baffle, and distract from the interview. They are a cognitive and verbal noise just nicer sounding to the interviewer.

- The room should be sensory friendly. No distractions that are visible, or sounds that disrupt and over stimulate. No interruptions of any kind and indicate an interview in progress, silence.

Conclusion

Interviewing is very *ad hoc*, but there are ways to make an interview more friendly and accessible for an autistic/kindred person. Distractions, interruptions only keep someone with autism from focusing, thinking, and showing their gifts and skills. Non sequiturs, ambiguous questions, and worst of all making presumptions and assumptions without being explicit are obstacles in the way.

The best neurodiverse hiring event that I attended, I was shown into a conference room, had my resume on the table, a whiteboard on each wall (blank) the blinds lowered, and each interviewer came into the room.

Also on the outside door was my name, along with words: "Interview in Progress!" Between each interview, I could go to the break area and get a pop, snack, or use the bathroom, or whatever. Some of the problems I have discussed came up in the neurodiverse interview, such as interviewer interruption, and non sequiturs. But sensory and external distraction wise, the interview setup and format were excellent.

About the Author

I am a developer, computer scientist, and writer with many years of development experience. I program in Java for work and fun.

My home site about me is: **https://wgilreath.github.io/WillHome.html**. I describe himself as: a writer of code, equations, poems, text, and lover of cats. He can be reached online at **will.f.gilreath@gmail.com** by e-mail.

I've written another essay about being an autistic/kindred person on Medium "*A Perspective On Autism: Seen from the Opposite Side of the Mirror — a Reflection.*" Read online at: https://medium.com/@will.f.gilreath/a-perspective-on-autism-seen-from-the-opposite-side-of-the-mirror-a-reflection-8388c31c0f3d?

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