

Compliance in autism: Self-report in action

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Previous research has found that autistic people are more likely to be bullied, and that they experience heightened anxiety and reduced self-esteem. These factors are known to predict heightened compliance, which is the tendency to agree with or carry out the requests and demands of others. This has a range of potentially serious consequences, particularly for an autistic person. The present study asked 26 autistic and 26 typically developing (TD) participants to self-report their tendency to comply with others' requests (on the Gudjonsson Compliance Scale, GCS) alongside a behavioural test of compliance in which the experimenter made an unreasonable request for participants to complete more tasks for no extra payment of their time (the 'Door-in-the-Face' task, DITF). Participants also completed measures of early life bullying experiences, anxiety and self-esteem. Autistic participants were more compliant on both self-report (the GCS) and behavioural (the DITF) tasks, and they reported more bullying experiences, higher anxiety and reduced self-esteem. Although bullying, anxiety and self-esteem were all associated with self-reported compliance on the GCS, only self-esteem specifically predicted self-reported compliance. Participants' propensity to go along with the experimenter's unreasonable requests in practice, in contrast, may be better predicted by situational and motivational factors rather than bullying, self-esteem, or anxiety. Findings have important implications for a range of real-life settings including requests made in the context of research, schools, the criminal justice system, and the workplace.