

Navigating the Duality of Autism in the Workplace: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Autistic Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Although neurodiversity is a category of diversity, research tends to focus on neurodiversity, specifically autism, from the pathological perspective of a disability and its accompanying deficits, emphasizing disclosure and the needed accommodations for employees on the autism spectrum. Conversely, the neurodiversity movement challenges the disability perspective and instead emphasizes diversity over disability, particularly in the workplace. Rather than focusing solely on deficits or strengths, in this study I focus on both by exploring how Autistic professionals navigate the duality of their challenges and strengths in the workplace, how they work to maximize strengths and minimize challenges, and how managers and organizations can facilitate this process. I also explore any gender differences that may exist in these processes. As the management research on autism in the workplace is still in a nascent stage, I employ a qualitative, inductive approach by interviewing individuals who are currently employed professionally and have a diagnosis of ASD or identify as Autistic. To date, I have conducted 11 interviews and will continue gathering data until reaching theoretical saturation. Current themes include organizational justice, identity intersectionality and hyper-empathy of Autistic women, and the role of Autistic special interests in career path choices.

INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity encompasses individuals who perceive and process information differently from neurotypical people and includes people with diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and others (Armstrong, 2015). Although neurodiversity is a category of diversity, research tends to focus on neurodiversity, specifically autism, from the pathological perspective of a disability and its accompanying deficits, emphasizing stigma, disclosure, and the needed accommodations for Autistic¹ employees (Ezerins et al., 2023; LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). Conversely, the neurodiversity movement challenges the disability perspective and instead focuses on models in which people on the autism spectrum emphasize diversity over disability, particularly in the workplace, highlighting the strengths of a neurodiverse workforce (Kapp et al., 2013; Lorenz et al., 2017). Rather than focusing solely on challenges or strengths, in this study I focus on both by exploring how Autistic professionals navigate the duality of their challenges and strengths in the workplace, how they work to maximize strengths and minimize challenges, and how managers and organizations can facilitate this process.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodiverse developmental disability which causes significant deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted, repetitive behaviors and interests (APA, 2013). ASD now includes several conditions previously diagnosed separately, including Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism (CDC, 2023). According to estimates by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 36 children in the United States has been diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2023), which represents a four-fold increase in diagnoses since the initial prevalence estimates in 2000 (Maenner et al., 2023) and may indicate a rising generation more impacted by autism than prior generations (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). Despite the rise in prevalence, many Autistic individuals remain unemployed or underemployed, with estimates of unemployment rates for Autistic high school graduates ranging from 50-90% (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). High unemployment rates in conjunction with a growing prevalence of autism underscore

¹ While many members of the Autistic community prefer identity-first language (e.g. Autistic person), others prefer person-first language (e.g. person on the autism spectrum; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2016; Wooldridge, 2023). As such, this paper employs a mix of identity-first and person-first language. I have also chosen to capitalize the word Autistic as a proper adjective, reflecting the unique culture and shared community of Autistic people, similar to the Deaf community (Pellicano & Heyworth, 2023).

the urgency of researching and better understanding the duality of strengths and challenges Autistic individuals bring to organizations, as well as how managers can better understand this duality to reduce challenges and amplify strengths for Autistic employees.

The limited organizational research examining autism in the workplace focuses primarily on individual experiences and managerial relations from a disability perspective. Research exploring Autistic identities as stigmatized (e.g. Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Romuladez et al., 2021a, 2021b; Whelpley et al., 2021), a disability in need of accommodations (e.g. Lindsay et al., 2021; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2019, 2021), a minority combatting stereotypes (e.g. Hayward et al., 2018, 2019; Nagib & Wilton, 2020, 2021), and an employee navigating the workplace (e.g. Campanaro et al., 2021; Coleman & Adams, 2018; Tomczak et al., 2021) all emphasize the drawbacks to autism. The findings of such studies include challenges such as communication style, routine adherence, social skills, and sensory perceptions, all of which are considered key Autistic traits. What this research does not consider is the possibility that these traits may have a dual nature, or in other words, that these traits may be translated into strengths to benefit both individuals and organizations.

Recently autism and neurodiversity have gained awareness and interest within the business world (Doyle, 2020; Ezerins et al., 2023); yet despite the rising interest in this subject, little research to date has examined the work experiences of Autistic individuals from a strengths-based perspective (Ezerins et al., 2023). While theory papers and chapters have advanced propositions about the career experiences of Autistic people from a strengths-based perspective (e.g. Annabi & Locke, 2019; Khan et al., 2023; Whelpley & Perrault, 2021), little empirical research has explored the lived experiences and strengths of Autistic professionals in the workplace. The few studies exploring strengths suggest a variety of possible Autistic assets, including creativity, hyper-focus, efficiency, honesty, dedication, pattern recognition, attention to detail, and logical reasoning (Black et al., 2020; Buckley et al., 2021; Cope & Remington, 2022; Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014). While these studies suggest the potential for a variety of strengths, theory building related to how individuals capitalize on these strengths, as well as how organizations can foster them, has been hampered by the largely descriptive nature of these studies. Moreover, these studies do not consider how specific Autistic traits typically viewed as deficits may possibly be converted to strengths for individuals and their organizations.

Given the research focus on autism as *either* a disability *or* a strength in organizations, I seek to answer questions about autism as *both* and to build understanding about autism as a disability *and* a strength, what I term the duality of autism. I employ an inductive approach and seek to build grounded theory about the process of navigating the dual nature of autism in organizations.

In addition to exploring the duality of autism broadly, more specifically I seek to understand gender differences in the experiences of Autistic workers. The nascent research examining the intersectionality of autism and gender in the workplace focuses on how women manage gender role expectations and combat gender stereotypes for sociability and communality, emphasizing the challenges of being both female and Autistic (Baldwin & Costley, 2016; Gemma, 2023; Hayward et al., 2016; Nagib & Wilton, 2020). What this research does not explore is whether and how Autistic women bring unique gender-based challenges and strengths to their professional work experiences, and how managers can better support these women in removing barriers and facilitating strengths. An understanding of gender differences will add nuance and specificity to this research about the dual nature of autism.

By focusing on the duality of autism and exploring gender differences, I recognize the difficulties that can arise for Autistic professionals while also maintaining a focus on benefits in conjunction with any drawbacks. Focusing solely on deficits can cause individuals, managers, and organizations to emphasize “dealing with” autism or mitigating the differences between Autistic employees and their neurotypical colleagues. Such an emphasis may create an environment in which Autistic professionals feel they are surviving with autism rather than thriving as an Autistic person and may result in organizational attrition. Conversely, a focus on strengths can lead managers and organizations to emphasize developing and supporting Autistic employees, encouraging individuals to highlight Autistic differences with their inherent benefits and emphasize the value they add to their organization. A strengths focus can encourage managers to bring out the most in their Autistic employees and help them thrive in their careers rather

than simply survive. Additionally, organizations focusing on strengths will be more likely to emphasize inclusion rather than forcing cultural fit, which may result in organizational loyalty from Autistic employees. However, focusing on strengths without recognizing possible difficulties negates the differential experiences of Autistic people living and working in a world made largely by and for neurotypical people. Thus, I seek to understand the duality of autism from the intrapersonal perspective of Autistic professionals by asking: *How do Autistic professionals perceive and navigate the duality of autism at work? What, if any, gender differences exist? And what do Autistic professionals need from managers and organizations to better support the duality of autism and foster strengths?*

The Duality of Autism

The growing research on autism at work typically employs either a strengths-based perspective or a deficits-based perspective, which overlooks the dual experiences of autism as both a strength and a weakness. Focusing on strengths without recognizing the weaknesses or difficulties associated with autism may cause researchers, managers, and organizations to minimize the challenges of Autistic professionals, and conversely, focusing on deficits without recognizing strengths may contribute needlessly to undermining individuals' ability to thrive in the workplace, as well as to underutilization, underemployment, and turnover. Viewing autism as unidimensional by only exploring *either* strengths *or* weaknesses fails to provide an understanding of the full range of experiences and traits for this population. While the deficits-based literature clearly articulates weaknesses in social skills, communication, routines, and sensory perceptions, the strengths-based research largely focuses on related but different strengths, such as attention to detail, hyper-focus, pattern recognition, and honesty. What is significantly less well understood is how these weaknesses and strengths connect and relate, i.e. an understanding of the dual nature of autism. For example, how might differences in communication style simultaneously serve as both a strength and a weakness? And what processes and conditions help facilitate this different communication style to serve as a strength? This research explores how autism broadly, and Autistic traits specifically, have a dual nature, as well as the work Autistic professionals engage in to navigate this duality and convert what is typically viewed as a deficit into strengths.

The idea of duality is not exclusive to autism – duality occurs across other bodies of literature, describing both the positives and negatives of constructs and conditions and how they interact in a given experience. For instance, in emotions research, anger in the workplace is typically considered a negative emotion, replete with negative consequences such as organizational incivility, decreased job satisfaction, harmful organizational climates, and even aggression and violence (Deffenbacher et al., 1996; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Stearns & Stearns, 1989). However, another perspective considers how anger may instead motivate action and positive change, benefiting both individuals and organizations depending upon how an individual enacts angry feelings (Callister et al., 2017; Geddes & Callister, 2007; Geddes et al., 2020). This view suggests anger has a dual nature and can be translated from a negative emotion into a positive experience through agentic work. Similarly, the research on meaningful work generally explores the benefits of finding a calling in work, such as increased career commitment, work engagement, job satisfaction, organizational identification, and reduced turnover intentions (Allan et al., 2019; Cardador et al., 2011; Duffy et al., 2013; Hirschi, 2012). Yet those employed in calling work also experience significant stress and make substantial sacrifices to fulfill their work responsibilities, sometimes to the detriment of personal relationships (Bailey et al., 2019; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cardador & Caza, 2012; Oelberger, 2019). Work as a calling has a dual nature, with clear benefits that can be negated when individuals choose to allow work to overcome their lives. Anger and calling research illustrate just two examples of how duality can exist in many facets of work, and how understanding this duality broadens our knowledge of the topic by uncovering conditions and processes to facilitate positive outcomes.

METHOD

As the management research on autism in the workplace is still in a nascent stage, I employ a qualitative, inductive approach to explore the experiences of Autistic professional employees as they navigate the duality of autism at work. A qualitative approach producing grounded theory is particularly beneficial and appropriate when seeking understanding about a new area of study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2006; Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Seidman, 2006).

Context – Level 1 Autism

In this study, I focus specifically on the experiences of professional employees with Level 1 autism, or what was formerly called Asperger’s Syndrome or high-functioning autism. Examining the professional experiences of individuals with Level 1 autism represents an “extreme case” (Eisenhardt, 1989), even within the neurodiverse community. These individuals are more likely to be employed in professional positions than those with other types of autism due to fewer learning delays. They are also more likely to engage in interviews for research due to generally stronger language abilities than those with other forms of autism. Focusing on an “extreme case” amplifies the potential to observe the key phenomenon of this study (Eisenhardt, 1989), specifically, the duality of autism in professional work.

A recent social movement using #ActuallyAutistic serves to amplify the voices of Autistic individuals rather than the parents, medical providers, and others involved in the lives of Autistic people (Egner, 2022). Scholars have recently argued for the importance of allowing Autistic individuals to determine what constitutes Autistic flourishing rather than relying on a set of requirements determined by neurotypical physicians and other experts (Pellicano & Heyworth, 2023). To understand the lived experiences of Autistic employees navigating the duality of autism, we need to take an intrapersonal perspective and talk with Autistic employees, which is the aim of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

I will conduct 40-50 semi-structured interviews with individuals who are currently employed professionally and have a diagnosis of ASD or identify as Autistic. To date, I have conducted 11 interviews (7 women and 4 men), which constitutes the first round of interviews. All interviews were conducted online via video conferencing on Zoom, recorded, and then transcribed. Interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes, averaging 75 minutes. The 11 participants included thus far work in a wide variety of professions, including city planning, communications, television production, and social work.

I have read and coded the first round of interviews, exploring emerging themes prior to conducting the second round of interviews. I analyzed the data from this first round following steps recommended for grounded theory, including open coding and axial coding, while looking forward to aggregate themes and working toward a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After this first round of interviews and coding, I will begin an iterative process of comparison with the literature and findings and update the interview protocol accordingly.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

After this early stage of data collection and analysis, I currently find three overarching themes emerging from the interviews. First, the data highlight the differential experiences of Autistic professionals concerning organizational justice, serving as both a challenge and a strength throughout their careers. Participants discussed difficulties in moving on from a perceived injustice and the resulting negative impact on their relationships with managers, colleagues, and the organization as a whole. Conversely, they also expressed how their “need for justice” (9W) made them better colleagues and managers as they would fight for their teams on important issues, such as equal pay and opportunities. Importantly, these experiences differ from theories of organizational justice derived from neurotypical employees. The data in this study highlight how Autistic professionals’ expectations of justice differ from prior research findings, particularly concerning the lesser importance of distributive justice (Colquitt et al., 2001) and the ability to be placated by one form of justice when another lacks (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Greenberg, 2009). The findings suggest Autistic professionals place strong importance on all types of justice, with perhaps the most importance on distributive justice. Autistic tendencies toward following rules and routines leave no latitude for substituting one form of justice for another, while Autistic tendencies toward hyper-empathy, particularly in Autistic women, influence needs for justice.

Second, the data show both challenges and strengths of Autistic professional women as they navigate their intersectional identities of neurodiversity, gender, and disability. Autistic women often violate stereotypes of warmth and kindness attributed to women and disabled people (Eagly et al., 2020; Heilman, 2012) due to Autistic tendencies toward direct communication and rationality. As one participant succinctly summed up, “I don’t girl well” (6W). However, as women, they also violate stereotypes of masculinity attributed to autism (Bargiela et al., 2016). To compensate for these potential

stereotype violations, women participants shared how they often engage in masking behaviors to conceal the stigma of autism and “pass” as a neurotypical woman, leading to feelings of inauthenticity and burnout. One woman described her experience of navigating these intersectional identities as getting “the short end of the stick” (1W), highlighting the challenges faced by Autistic women. However, many participants also discussed how Autistic women have unique capabilities to deeply empathize with others, including in the workplace. As one man stated, “Most Autistic female professionals I’ve met are hyper-empathetic, and they have a higher level of empathy than almost anyone on the planet” (8M). Participants discussed how their tendencies toward hyper-empathy can serve to increase their advocacy efforts as leaders, as well as deepen their kindness toward others at work. These findings suggest that while Autistic women face layers of intersectional identities with all their associated stereotypes, they also bring unique capabilities of deep empathy which serve to strengthen relationships and advocacy.

Third, the data suggest Autistic special interests directly impact the career path choices of Autistic professionals in both challenging and positive ways, influencing initial career choices as well as organizational tenure and loyalty over time. For some, their special interests lead to a narrow set of careers they are willing to consider, and when a chosen career path does not prove viable, they struggle to find sustained, meaningful work. Others find ways to engage their special interests in a variety of possible careers and thus create options for career opportunities. As this study progresses, I will ask further questions about how those who successfully created opportunities navigated this process.

IMPLICATIONS

This research aims to make several contributions to theory. First, while the literature on autism at work has typically taken either a deficits-based approach or a strengths-based approach, this study takes a holistic approach, recognizing the dual nature of autism with both strengths and challenges in the lived experiences of Autistic professionals. Prior research has typically not considered the duality of autism at work, and this research is the next step in understanding this lived experience. By examining autism from a duality perspective, scholars can shift the types of questions they ask from focusing on mitigating weaknesses or emphasizing strengths to embracing holistic experiences and thereby work to promote Autistic flourishing (Pellicano & Heyworth, 2023). Second, this study aims to move beyond a descriptive narrative of strengths or challenges by building an understanding of the processes Autistic professionals engage in as active agents navigating both the workplace and autism. I seek to understand not only what these individuals experience, but also how people actively navigate this space in a positive way. Navigating duality is an experience common to humanity in various aspects of work (e.g. anger, calling work, etc.), and I seek to understand this universal experience of managing duality through an Autistic population. Third, I aim to examine the surrounding conditions and supports from the organization in helping reduce challenges and maximize strengths for Autistic individuals. I explore when and how individuals with autism perceive managers and organizations as facilitating utilization of strengths and translating pitfalls into possibilities, thus building our theoretical understanding of the conditions enabling the strengths of Autistic workers.

Fourth, this study seeks to contribute to the literatures on gender and identity intersectionality by exploring the experiences of Autistic women in the workplace. This population remains vastly understudied, and an understanding of the intersection of gender, neurodiversity, and disability will increase our knowledge of the processes involved in navigating this intersection. By building an understanding of how Autistic women specifically navigate professional work, this research challenges both stereotypes of individuals with autism as well as stereotypes of women and encourages scholars to consider how gender differences may change what we currently know about autism at work.

FEEDBACK I AM SEEKING

- From the preliminary findings, what seems the most interesting?
- What other literatures should I consider for making theoretical contributions?
- Tips for ensuring this research will appeal broadly to management scholars?

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