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TITLE

"Disability identity development of neurodivergent employees participating in specialist coaching: a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis"

ABSTRACT

This research proposal investigates the impact of specialist coaching on the disability identity development of neurodivergent employees through a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis. Recognizing the global challenge of employment for neurodivergent individuals, exacerbated by social stigma and organizational unpreparedness, the study aims to uncover psychological mechanisms underlying the efficacy of coaching as an occupational accommodation. With neurodivergent people constituting a significant minority yet facing considerable employment barriers, this research addresses a crucial gap in understanding how coaching interventions can foster positive identity development and workplace integration. By examining the lived experiences of neurodivergent employees undergoing specialist coaching, the project seeks to contribute to non-ableist workplace practices, promoting systemic inclusion and better support structures for neurodivergent employees. This work not only aims to enhance theoretical models of disability identity but also practical approaches to neurodiversity in the workplace, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions that acknowledge the unique experiences and challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals.

BACKGROUND

Neurodivergent people are the world's largest minority group, accounting for at least 15% of the global population (Kayess & French, 2008; WHO, 2011). However, neurodivergent people are two times less likely to be employed than their neurotypical counterparts (ILO, 2022). Neurodivergent people who find employment are more likely to earn lower wages and report experiencing challenges with looking after themselves mentally, concentrating, and asking for help when they need it (McDowall et al., 2023; OHCHR, 2022). Since 2006 when the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, coaching has become an increasingly popular occupational accommodation to assist neurodivergent employees with workplace challenges (Doyle, 2020). Coaching is broadly defined as working with a neurodivergent employee on a one-on-one basis to assist with work-related issues (Doyle & McDowall, 2019).

RATIONALE

In recent years, scholars have conducted several meta-analyses to explore the effectiveness of coaching. Theeboom et al. (2014) synthesized 18 studies and found that coaching has positive effects on individual-level outcomes including performance/skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation. Likewise, Jones et al. (2016) synthesized 17 studies and found that workplace coaching has positive effects on employee learning and development. What remains mostly unknown, according to a meta-analysis by Wang et al. (2021), is how coaching works from a psychological perspective. Unfortunately, since prior research on coaching has almost exclusively involved neurotypical participants, even less is known about the psychological effects of coaching on neurodivergent employees (Doyle & McDowall, 2018; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The significant gap in the literature has been highlighted by scholars such as Doyle and McDowall (2021), who suggest that qualitative research about coaching could elucidate the psychological mechanisms of change for neurodivergent employees (i.e., cognition, emotion, behavior, social capital mediators) (McDowall & Mabey, 2008). These scholars recommend employing longitudinal methods to study how coaching works on specific target outcomes and to build more precise theoretical models (Doyle & McDowall, 2015, 2021; McDowall et al., 2023). To help address the literature gap, my proposed study will use a longitudinal method to explore one type of coaching (i.e., specialist coaching) and one target outcome (i.e., disability identity), informed by the lived experiences of neurodivergent employees. By doing so, I aim to answer the following research question: How does a neurodivergent employee's sense of disability identity develop by participating in specialist coaching?

LITERATURE

Specialist Coaching

At an organizational level, typical workplace accommodations for neurodivergent employees include mentoring, assistive technology, extra time, flexible hours, sensory accommodations, and coaching (Doyle, 2021). In general, coaching is a one-to-one accommodation that uses a collaborative, reflective, and goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes (Doyle, 2018; Smither, 2011). In contrast to generalist wellbeing coaching, specialist coaching targets specific organizational issues and has been shown to be more useful for neurodivergent employees (McDowall et al., 2023). Over several months, specialist coaches meet regularly with neurodivergent employees to assess strengths, weaknesses, what is working well, what is not working well, and develop strategies to improve work (Genius Within, 2023). Prior research has demonstrated that the process can assist neurodivergent employees with cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes to improve outcomes with time management, organizational skills, and functioning (Bruyère & Colella, 2022; Colella & Bruyère, 2011; Doyle & McDowall, 2015).

Disability Identity

In the current management and psychology literature, disability identity is treated as a social identity with membership in a protected and socially stigmatized group (Bogart, 2014; Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). Scholars have largely favored a "social model" to define disability identity, arguing that social structures (e.g., culture, social attitudes, legislation) create universal challenges for neurodivergent people, regardless of differences in impairments (Barnes & Mercer, 2001; Oliver, 1996, 2013; Shakespeare, 2006; Zeyen & Branzei, 2023). However, some researchers and theorists have criticized this approach, arguing that it ignores impairments and limits our understanding of the experiences of neurodivergent people (Finkelstein, 1993; Reeve, 2004). These scholars have suggested that a biological or "medical model" is essential for determining how an individual's disability-related experiences inform their personal identity, which includes other identities as well (e.g., demographic, occupational, social) (Hahn & Belt, 2004; Onken & Slaten, 2000; Shakespeare, 1996).

In an attempt to reconcile the "social model" with the "medical model", scholars such as Santuzzi and Waltz (2016) have proposed a dynamic model that defines disability identity as "a social identity that is informed by intraindividual experience of an impairment (whether it qualifies as a legally defined disability or not), attitudes and beliefs about disability conveyed through social environments, and psychological experiences in reaction to intraindividual and social factors" (p. 1114). The dynamic model, in addition to the medical model and social model, has been used in the fields of business, education, and medicine to investigate disability identity. For example, a study by Bogart (2015) found that a stronger disability identity predicted lower depression and anxiety in patients with multiple sclerosis. Prior research has also revealed that a coherent disability identity may help individuals navigate social stressors and daily hassles (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013), live with ableism (Campbell, 2008), and have better career outcomes (Mpofu & Harley, 2006).

METHODOLOGY & ANALYSIS

To study how a neurodivergent employee's sense of disability identity develops by participating in specialist coaching, I will follow a small number of neurodivergent employees through the specialist coaching process (i.e., four coaching sessions, two hours each, spread over two months). I will employ Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) to explore neurodivergent employees' personal accounts of the experience (Smith, 1999). LIPA is a qualitative, phenomenological, and idiographic approach to understanding participants' personal lived experiences and how participants make sense of those personal lived experiences over time (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Merleau-Ponty & Bannan, 1956; Smith, 1996; van Manen, 1990, 2023). The approach is double hermeneutic (Palmer, 1969). As the researcher, I will be responsible for making sense of the participants trying to make sense of their personal and social worlds (i.e., lifeworlds) (Smith, 2004). My primary role will be: (a) to invite participants to share their sensemaking; (b) act as a witness to their articulations; (b) make sense of what is shared (Heidegger, 2002; Smith, 2018).

Once my research proposal receives ethical approval from Royal Holloway, I will recruit a purposive sample of 10 participants (n = 10) (Morse, 2000). To be eligible for participation,

participants must: 1) identify as neurodivergent, 2) be qualified to work in the United Kingdom, 3) not be actively participating in specialist coaching 4) not have participated in specialist coaching before, 4) be scheduled to receive specialist coaching within six months. Best efforts will be made to create a homogenous sample (Smith, 2017). I will provide eligible participants with an informed consent form to sign that outlines the purpose of the study, the format, and their rights as participants. The informed consent form will clearly communicate that participation is uncompensated, confidential, and responses will be anonymized to protect privacy. Each participant will be expected to participate in five interview sessions over two months. Each interview session will occur within one week of each specialist coaching session, except for the fifth interview session which will occur six months following the final specialist coaching session. For each interview session, I will interview participants virtually (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Webex) for approximately 45 minutes. The interview sessions will be recorded for transcription purposes. The informed consent forms, recordings, and transcriptions will be securely stored in the School of Business and Management at Royal Holloway for analysis. If a participant decides at any point that they would like to drop out of my study, they may do so without penalty. All records pertaining to the participant will be promptly and securely destroyed.

Following the precedent of previous LIPA studies, I will use the same semi-structured interviews for each interview session (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). I will listen and take notes as participants give accounts of their experiences with specialist coaching. If necessary, I will ask probing questions for participants to elaborate on details. Examples of interview questions include the following:

- 1. Please describe for me your experiences as a neurodivergent employee who is participating in specialist coaching. Share all of your thoughts, perceptions, feelings, decision-making, and activities you can recall until you have no more to say.
- 2. How would you describe yourself as an employee who is neurodivergent?
- 3. What sort of person are you?
- 4. Has participating in specialist coaching made a difference in how you see yourself? If so, how do you see yourself now as different from before you started participating in specialist coaching?
- 5. How would you say you have changed? What about compared to before you started participating in specialist coaching? What about the way other people see you?

I will use Smith's (1996, 2011a, 2011b) method to analyze the transcripts, case by case, beginning with participant examples before escalating to more general categorization and theoretical claims. Through sustained engagement and interpretation of the participants' talks, I will try to understand the content and complexity of meanings. In particular, how those meanings represent aspects of the respondents' disability identities (Eatough & Smith, 2017). This will be achieved through a step-by-step process of repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, identifying emergent themes, establishing connections between emergent themes, constructing a table of themes (e.g., ordinate, superordinate), developing a master list of themes (e.g., individual, group), and translating the themes into a narrative account to provide an "insider's perspective" (Conrad, 1987; Smith et al., 1999).

With any qualitative study, analysis is subjective and susceptible to researcher bias or error. I will regularly consult with my supervisor, Professor Anica Zeyen, and colleagues at Royal Holloway, to engage with the texts more deeply and reach accurate interpretations (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Since my proposed study is longitudinal, there is an inherent risk of attrition (Holland et al., 2006). However, I am confident that I will be able to adequately control for this risk by having a larger sample size (n = 10) than what is typically used in LIPA studies (Nizza et al., 2021).

POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Employment for neurodivergent people is a grand challenge, a global problem that can be addressed through coordinated and collaborative efforts (Montiel et al., 2021). The reduced access to quality jobs (i.e., full-time, meaningful, fair compensation) for neurodivergent people is strongly influenced by social stigma, discrimination, and a lack of preparedness in organizational policies, procedures, and leadership (Corrigan et al., 2004; Fairclough et al., 2013; Follmer & Jones, 2018; Zeyen et al., 2014). In organizations, neurodivergent employees often struggle to maintain employment (Corbiere et al., 2011), have fewer opportunities for career advancement (Wästberg et al., 2018), and experience challenges with being integrated into the workplace (Elraz, 2018; Hennekam et al., 2023). By conducting my proposed study, I hope to help address these issues by improving our general understanding of how a frequently utilized accommodation works from a psychological perspective. With greater awareness about how specialist coaching influences the disability identities of neurodivergent employees, according to the lived experiences of neurodivergent employees themselves, organizations may become better prepared to provide the appropriate resources for neurodivergent employees to thrive at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

TIMESCALE

Timescale of Dates and Milestones for the Proposed Study		
Year	Dates	Milestones
1	January 2024 – January 2025	Comprehensive Research Proposal Ethical Approval Participant Identification Sample Creation
2	February 2025 – February 2026	Interview Sessions Transcription Analysis
3	March 2026 – August 2026	Write-up Report Findings

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