

**Neurodiversity, Equity, Inclusion: Autism, Employment, & Organizational Change**

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In partial fulfillment of  
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Master of Arts

In

Anthropology

by

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## Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read *Neurodiversity, Equity, Inclusion: Autism, Employment, & Organizational Change* by Bird E. Sellergren, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Anthropology at San Francisco State University.

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this literature review was to explore how anthropologists and others have studied various aspects of autistic employment, including high unemployment and underemployment rates, the historical pathologization of autism, societal perceptions of autism and autistic individuals, accessibility and accommodation for disabilities, the evolution of autistic culture, and the impact of organizational culture on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Throughout this research, I explored how medical constructs of autism have marginalized the autistic community, countered by the community's resistance to overly simplistic medical narratives about autism; this conflict has led to the emergence of autistic culture as a manifestation of resistance. I investigated workplace and organizational culture as a modifiable system capable of fostering or impeding inclusion, examining how leadership's cultural responsiveness could improve the integration of autistic employees. Literature was gathered from publicly accessible databases and libraries, employing critical autism studies, intersectionality, and the neurodiversity paradigm as theoretical frameworks to illustrate how organizational leadership could glean insights from autistic struggles to facilitate meaningful employment, incorporate diversity strategies inclusive of neurodivergence, and harness the transformative potential of autistic narratives and knowledge for organizational and societal change.

This review revealed that neuro-cultural disparities, such as differences in communication styles, social norms, and behaviors, influence interactions between autistic and non-autistic individuals, potentially contributing to low employment rates within the autistic

community. Relevant research suggested that autistic workers desire equitable employment opportunities with access to accommodations enabling successful job performance, and support from their employers that includes educational efforts aimed at reducing stigma, stereotypes, and communication barriers among the non-autistic population. Furthermore, resistance against being Othered can serve as a unifying force, empowering the politicization of autistic identities and enabling individuals to advocate for equitable treatment. The findings of this thesis underscore the importance of organizations developing neuro-inclusion protocols guiding the recruitment, hiring, and retention of autistic talent, both for ethical and performance considerations.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction, Background, and Methods**

I have been employed on and off since the age of 16. The various and complex barriers I encountered at work made me wonder why I struggled to please my supervisors. I was often on the receiving end of their discontent or punishment. Despite my ability to complete tasks productively and efficiently, others doing the same job appeared to be free of the challenges that I was experiencing. Relationships with colleagues were not as strained, and miscommunication was not as common.

My autism diagnosis came in my 40s—late in life, comparatively, and clarified the primary source of the difficulties I faced in the workplace and life. As I built a community with other autistic people, I discovered that many of the issues I faced as an employee were common themes across the population, regardless of the job sector. I observed other autistic people experiencing long stretches of unemployment. They had trouble adapting to organizational culture. Once employed, many were relegated to jobs below their skill set and struggled to gain accommodations for their disability that could improve productivity and job satisfaction. Autistic people face barriers to gaining employment, preserving their jobs, and achieving lasting job satisfaction.

In this literature review, I reflexively employ critical theoretical frameworks regarding autism and disability to understand what historical factors have influenced public perceptions of autism and how those beliefs contribute to autistic people's high rates of unemployment, then the emergence and significance of autistic culture and how organizational culture might adopt the cultural responsiveness needed to be inclusive of autistic people in the workplace. I look at the

history of autism as a medical diagnosis, the unemployment and underemployment of autistic people, the evolution of autism as an identity, how autistic ways of being challenge ableist assumptions and abetted the development of autistic culture, and factors shaping organizational culture that challenge or enable diversity within a company. I examine neuro-normative ableism, a bias that centers neurotypicality as the ideal and views neurodivergence as deviant and in need of a cure. Within this context, I analyze autistic experiences with access to autism diagnoses, communication with coworkers, and job accommodations.

The social arena of a workplace can amplify autistic traits that may be viewed by neurotypical managers and coworkers as deficits by highlighting how different they are from allistic (nonautistic) ways of communicating and socializing. Consciously or subconsciously, employers and coworkers may impose pathological narratives that autistic people are defective, unfriendly, socially withdrawn, or alien based on allistic medical and cultural ideologies that foster stereotypes and bias. Autistic characteristics are not disordered, however, and some autistic traits may contribute to autistic workers' ability to perform—a benefit to the company that employers and coworkers might fail to recognize. The dichotomy between outside assumptions about autism and an autistic person's lived experiences may create tension due to implicit bias. Then, organizational culture may conflict with organizational goals of diversity and inclusion.

In workplaces that embrace autism and value cultural diversity, autistic individuals can excel. They often prove equally or even more productive and efficient than their nonautistic counterparts. However, their focus on tasks rather than socializing might lead to misconceptions and potential exploitation by employers. This dynamic creates a troubling cycle where autistic workers, by focusing on their work, inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of social aloofness. This

alienation can lead to burnout and further marginalization of autistic workers within the workforce. My research investigates assumptions about productivity, intelligence, and social conformity within organizational cultures and how they might contribute to the marginalization of autistic individuals in the workforce. I argue that debating autistic traits' need to be "fixed" is an incorrect approach to autism inclusion and that it is the unwarranted medicalization and stigma surrounding autism that unfairly label autistic individuals as social outliers.

Davies et al. (2023) argue that systemic change is needed to improve opportunities for autistic individuals to be hired, supported, and treated equally within the workplace. To understand the dynamics at play within autistic employment trends is to understand some of the ways that autistic people experience social inequities (Ott et al., 2022), those artifacts of the asylum (Foucault, 1965) wherein autistic people are the Other, stigmatized as social pariahs (Bettelheim, 1967), and subjected to the ideologies of the dominant neurotypical majority (Farahar, 2022). Through the lens of critical autism studies (CAS; Davidson & Orsini, 2013), autistic narratives reveal how autism disrupts the "culture of normality" (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022) promoted by neuro-normative expectations and challenges power and knowledge. Disruption of norms can act as tools to dismantle ableist systems within society and institutions, as those deemed abnormal push back on discriminatory power structures.

The story of autism and employment bears significance within the legacy of the fight for social justice because autistic identity emerged not just from a neurological characteristic but into an apparatus for social change (Vakirtzi & Bayliss, 2013). Movements for the social acceptance of autistic people go beyond clinical interventions as "solutions" for the autistic population and pivot toward facilitating autistic people's struggle for autonomy and liberation from social

exclusion, subpar employment, and the forced assimilation currently required to “fit in” in society and experience career success.

I begin Chapter 2, “Autism, a Crisis of Representation, and the Origins of a Culture,” by defining autism from the medical and autism-affirming perspectives. I reconstruct the history of autism as a pathologized diagnosis and argue that these roots may have established bio-essentialist public perceptions of autism. I discuss how autistic people are Othered as a social alterity and the ways ableism develops around disability to sustain the marginalization of autistic people. I explain the differences between the medical, social, and cultural models of disability and the ways they form public opinion and provide frameworks for the analysis of autistic experiences. I challenge the pathologic perspective by offering a view of autism through the lens of autistic advocates, researchers, and the neurodiversity paradigm. I look to canonical anthropologists to define culture and its role in identity-building. Then, I discuss the ontology of autistic culture and the significance of autistic culture as a tool for resistance and as a sanctuary for community solidarity. I also contrast autistic culture against allistic neuro-normativity and validate the need for neuro-inclusion that embraces atypical neurologies as natural occurrences.

From there, I review the state of employment for autistic people in the Western world over the last two decades by evaluating studies and narratives around autistic unemployment and underemployment. Chapter 3, “Neuro-Confusion, Neuro-Inclusion,” investigates cross-cultural relationships between autistic and allistic colleagues and how, through cultural difference, autistic people may be subject to stereotyping, stigma, and bullying. I also explore autistic representation in popular media that contributes to stereotypes. I draw connections between barriers to fulfilling employment and culturally specific communication challenges, explaining

how negative perceptions of autistic traits and behaviors limit opportunities. I introduce workplace accommodations and discuss how accommodations are individualized and designed in response to the individual's needs. I also consider autistic coping mechanisms, such as masking, and their paradoxical adverse implications for self-coherence and mental health. Next, I review autistic strengths and talents that may be highly desirable to employers, such as attention to detail and focus, and how discourse limited to deficit-based viewpoints of neurodivergence subverts the potential of autistic workers.

In Chapter 4, “Negotiating Disclosure, Diagnostic Disparities, and Access Infrastructure,” I move into a deeper exploration of disability access and accommodations. In discussing the Americans with Disabilities Act, I consider how disability disclosure facilitates access to accommodations that improve the ability of disabled workers to perform on par with nondisabled people. I argue that many autistic people face diagnostic disparities wherein women, people of color, and people of low economic means have historically been underdiagnosed. I also look at the concerns and fears of autistic workers that cause them to hesitate when deciding to disclose their disability such as interpersonal conflict or autism-resistant organizational culture that devalues its significance. In addition to obstacles to disclosure, I consider access infrastructure as an elemental system that facilitates access to accommodations through best practices, access strategies, inclusion programs, and implementation of adaptive tools. Relatedly, I review the typologies surrounding accommodations: environmental, technological, and sociocultural, and investigate details of each—what they mean, examples, and how they can improve autistic workers’ ability to succeed.

Chapter 5, “Organizational Culture and Neurodiversity,” investigates the origins of organizational culture studies in social science and discusses how early anthropological methods have been adapted to organizational analysis. I explore how organizational culture is formed and how it determines an organization’s capacity for diversity and inclusion. I consider organizational culture and its potential to influence social dynamics and attitudes within the company. Then, I review opportunities for organizations to diversify their workforce and why managing diversity is worthwhile for ethical, social, and business reasons. Finally, I examine how organizational culture transforms itself. Diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) initiatives, building a culture difference, and collaboration with autistic workers all facilitate organizational change. I discuss how these practices can improve cultural competence and sensitivity to build more hospitable work environments.

Chapter 6, “Discussion and Conclusion,” reiterates the purpose of this research and the primary methods and methodologies that guided my exploration. My hypotheses and the significance of the research to autistic and allistic audiences are highlighted. I offer additional interpretations of the data and draw connections between quantitative and qualitative data, personal narratives, and repeating themes. In discussing future research on autistic employment, I explore how the process could be adapted to make autistic stories more accessible to researchers and broader audiences. Given the disparities in gender, race, age of diagnosis, educational level, and accommodations in autism research, I suggest ways to nuance research about autistic populations by disaggregating data. I also emphasize the importance of research on autism carried out by autistic researchers, which centers autistic people as experts on the autistic

experience. Finally, I offer recommendations on how increasing research on autistic issues could improve the quality of life and advance policy to ensure better support for autistic adults.

### **Background**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM), in 2020, one in 36 American children had been identified as autistic by age 8. As defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2021), autism is a multifaceted developmental condition involving differences from allistic people in social communication, focused interests, and repetitive behaviors. Autism is an “invisible disability,” meaning it does not present visibly like physical disabilities do, and may affect social interactions, communication, attention, and knowledge acquisition (Ott et al., 2022). Autism impacts an individual’s development across the lifespan, making autism inseparable from one’s person and, thus, an embodied lived experience. This integration may explain the autism community’s preference for identity-first language— “autistic person” over “a person with autism” (Taboas, Doepke, Zimmerman, 2023). Autism impacts each autistic person differently.

How autistic traits present may be influenced by multidimensional inputs such as environmental stimuli, social interactions, and physical factors. Apart from its neurological aspects, autism is also shaped by historical, sociocultural, and rhetorical contexts (Yergeau, 2018), impacting its public understanding and perception. In my exploration, I look at facets of the autistic experience by considering the medical model of autism, autism-affirming perspectives, and the narratives of autistic individuals themselves. Examining multiple perspectives of autism may provide insights into sociocultural determinants of employment for autistic individuals and their overall satisfaction in various job roles.



In the medical model of disability, society frames autism as a disorder comprised of a set of impairments that set autistic people aside from the allistic majority. However, pathologizing autism dehumanizes the population by delineating a stark boundary between “normal” and “abnormal” brains and behaviors, and research suggests that neurological binaries are reductive (Yergeau, 2018; Minot, 2021). Additionally, disorder-based thinking disregards the potential for accommodations to drastically improve an autistic person’s success by providing support for executive functioning, relationship, education, or employment issues (Price, 2022). If society could accept autism as a neurological profile that entails unique cultural differences, strengths, and talents (Hutson & Hutson, 2023), it could allow a shift in public perception of autism to one where autism is a way of being (Sinclair, 1993/2012) and a feature of personhood, rather than an undesirable condition. A transformation in social acceptance could result in greater opportunities for autistic people to participate equally in all aspects of life, including employment.

Notably, only 16% of autistic individuals in the United States are employed full-time, and another 16% are employed part-time (National Autism Society, 2016). In total, 32% of autistic people are employed. In contrast, 80% of abled individuals and 47% of other disabled groups are employed (National Autism Society, 2016). The disparity in employment of autistic people compared to their allistic counterparts may not be due to a lack of skills or education. Still, organizational hiring decisions may be influenced by likeability, a social factor linked to neurotypicality (Flower et al., 2021). Research studies have shown that autistic people are considered less likable by allistic people (Alkhalidi et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022). However, some economists and organizational analysts suggested that neurodiversity could promote greater

innovation and opportunities to retain a competitive edge (Morris et al., 2015; Priscott & Allen, 2021; Schuurmans et al., 2023).

A diverse array of cognitive styles within an organization may allow companies to stay abreast of shifts in labor needs. According to the World Economic Forum's (2023) *Future of Jobs* report, the job landscape is shifting across sectors. WEF's report shows that employers anticipate 44% of workers' skill sets will undergo disruption over the next 5 years as jobs are displaced by robotics and AI, creating a shift in desired job skills. Cognitive skills are the fastest-growing area of need, underscoring the increasing importance of proficient problem-solving abilities. Other job skills that are growing in demand include analytical thinking, technological literacy, reliability, attention to detail, a desire for continued education, and inventive thinking -- all strengths within the autistic population (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). It is possible that autistic workers could be excellent candidates to fill high-demand cognitive roles. However, organizational cultural transformation to embrace a culture of difference may present challenges (Spataro, 2005).

Traditional recruitment and interview processes can exclude autistic people (Costello et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023). Accordingly, revisions to recruitment, interview, and hiring practices to address neurodivergent needs may facilitate autistic inclusion. Davies et al.'s (2023) inquiry into autistic personal narratives describing requests for and receipt of workplace accommodations showed that job interviews were one of the most significant barriers for autistic people in attaining viable employment. They suggested that these challenges are because hiring practices are built around neurotypical expectations for acceptable behaviors, disenfranchising autistic talent under neuro-normative parameters.

Indeed, from an allistic perspective, autistic people may interact in unexpected ways. Autistic behaviors may be unfamiliar or uncanny, even if not harmful. Allistic people may interpret autistic people as just slightly off from “normal,” an unsettling phenomenon causing hesitation around future interactions (H2, 2018). More inclusive hiring protocols and working environments that challenge cultural and individual implicit biases against autistic people could make room for those with different cognitive and interactional styles.

Morris et al. (2015) also reported autistic people experiencing job interviews as incredibly challenging and a great cause of stress. One respondent concluded that his lack of eye contact probably made the interviewer believe he was untrustworthy. However, companies could adapt their process to be more inclusive of neurodivergent candidates. For instance, by applying a strengths-based approach, autistic candidates could demonstrate their skills rather than be restricted to conversational interviewing, which may impede their ability to show their worth as employees (Ott et al., 2022). Indeed, increasing amounts of data show that neuro-inclusive interviews have positive outcomes. SAP, HPE, J.P. Morgan Chase, and Microsoft have revised their interview processes to improve workforce neurodiversity by reaching neurodivergent talent (Wei, 2013; Morris, 2015). These steps accommodate autistic people and improve outcomes in getting hired.

Once an autistic person is employed, research suggests that workplace exclusion can be another obstacle. Coworkers may ostracize autistic colleagues because of their atypical social, cultural, or professional behavior. Organizational culture may inhibit inclusion, even when leadership aims to improve diversity (Spataro, 2005). Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs have been rising in popularity, mobilized to build more inclusive companies by

teaching tolerance and how to support workers with disabilities alongside racial, ethnic, religious, and gender differences. However, DEI may not address employment challenges such as a lack of understanding and support, poor treatment, environmental challenges, mental health issues, comfort in disclosing disability, access to accommodations, and impacted career opportunities (Wood & Happé, 2021). Diversity training that does not address neurodiversity might uphold divides between autistic employees and teammates. Organizations that adapt their culture to value difference and engage in autism-affirming communication, social expectations, and environments may be more inclusive than if diversity efforts omit autistic people (Costello et al., 2021; Lindsay et al., 2021; Gedikli et al., 2023).

Although challenging, changing company culture to be more inclusive of neurodivergence is worthwhile in terms of productivity, innovation, and profitability (Morris et al., 2015). However, diversity management requires flexibility to adopt environmental, technological, and sociocultural practices that accommodate neurodiverse employees. According to Hedley et al. (2018) and Costello et al. (2021), lighting, noise, and spatial organization are some environmental aspects that could change, and multimodal forms of communication using different technologies can improve accessibility (Morris et al., 2015; Hutson & Hutson, 2022). Autism awareness training may address sociocultural challenges that emerge between autistic and allistic employees (Annabi et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2015). Disability inclusion experts suggested that a diverse, equitable workplace goes beyond workers' attitudes. It also requires multidimensional consideration and adjustments.

Workplace equity depends on access to all aspects of a job that may be hindered by one's disability. This access should be facilitated through disability accommodations. Accommodations

are supports that allow disabled persons to perform their job duties (US Department of Labor, 2023). In most cases, a worker must disclose their disability to their employer to access accommodations, particularly when it is an invisible disability like autism. However, there are benefits and drawbacks to disclosing one's neurodivergence. Sociologists working in social inclusion and participation Lindsay et al. (2021) posited that it is challenging for workers to obtain a fulfilling job where it is safe to disclose and receive accommodations.

The rarity of jobs that are comprehensively supportive of disabled workers contributes to the complexity of disability disclosure decisions. Disabled people must choose if, when, and how to disclose their disability. In a 2022 US workplace inclusion survey that focused on neurodiversity, literacy software maker TextHelp, along with the disability inclusion organization Disability:IN, found that 76% of neurodivergent employees do not disclose their disability due to fear that doing so will compromise their career trajectory (McKay & Houghton, 2022).

According to Hutson and Hutson (2022), disclosure is often prompted in response to a conflict that arises from autistic characteristics creating discord. Disclosure provides a gateway to requesting accommodations that could improve employee performance and well-being (Petty et al., 2022). Still, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not offer legal protections for all needed accommodations (Santuzzi et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Labor, 2024), so an accommodation request may be denied if perceived as unnecessary or costly. Accommodations are critical in disability inclusion and may improve productivity and the bottom line.

Neuro-inclusion has been shown to deliver multiple benefits to companies and employees alike. Neurodiversity in the workplace allows companies to leverage the full spectrum of skills and knowledge within the workforce (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021). Neurodivergent employees at

JP Morgan Chase worked 48% faster and 92% more efficiently than their neurotypical counterparts (Bernick & Holden, 2018). Furthermore, companies that employ diverse workforces and incorporate them into their teams demonstrate more significant innovation and are more receptive to change.

Organizational cultures that value difference tend to be early adopters of new business systems and are adept at developing novel products or processes to thrive in an evolving business landscape (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Moreover, diverse teams excel in creative problem-solving, surpassing even highly skilled but less diverse teams in performance (Mello & Rentsch, 2015). Without neuro-inclusion training, employers may view employees as all the same, which can create unreasonable expectations for autistic workers' behavior and overlook their potential to contribute from their unique background (Wen et al., 2022).

By tapping into the lived experiences of autistic individuals, we can gain valuable insights into areas within the workplace that require adjustments to enhance accessibility. Providing opportunities for autistic individuals to contribute to autism inclusion training can bolster their confidence, leading to more effective inclusion outcomes for autistic workers (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). My research aims to deepen our understanding of how autistic individuals navigate employment and how organizational culture influences inclusion and worker experiences. The findings from this study hold the potential to offer valuable insights that could inform the development of more effective support systems for autistic workers, with a focus on cross-cultural responsiveness.

## Methods

This thesis reviews the literature on autism as a medical designation, identity, and culture, then explores autistic employment, encompassing perspectives from anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, clinicians, disability access specialists, government bodies, autistic self-advocates, scholars, and activists. I use CAS as the theoretical framework and a reflexive approach to explore the autistic employment experience. CAS and its forebearer, the neurodiversity paradigm, assist in evaluating how workplace culture, values, attitudes, and practices affect the quality of life and job success for autistic workers. CAS also provides foundational methodologies that could shape organizational cultures to build more equitable workplaces while simultaneously spreading autism awareness through the broader society.

Autism varies between individuals and is influenced by the environment, relationships, and emotions. The research represented in this thesis epitomizes the complex personhood of autistic individuals. To evaluate autistic experiences and autistic employment, I include viewpoints and data on the diagnostic history of autism, autistic culture, behaviors, knowledge, and ways of knowing, relationships of power and domination, models of disability, implicit and explicit bias, exclusion, neuro-normative social expectations, ableism, disability access and accommodations, organizational culture, and DEI initiatives. To collect the data in this thesis, I used publicly available published studies, archives, database materials, books by autistic authors or on autism, and writings by autistic people.

Due to Anthropology's wariness of autoethnographies (Kasnitz, 2020; Biella, 2021), I have not included my troublesome experiences in the job market, though there are many. However, considering the incredible value of disabled voices as the experts in their experience, I

hope Anthropology shifts toward a discourse that embraces students and researchers as authorities on our lives and lived experiences. This thesis is also a drastic divergence from my starting point 1 year ago, and I would be remiss if I did not expand my methods section to discuss the study I could not complete. My research study on autism and employment could be an important contribution to the body of anthropological works on the topic, specifically because of the long history of autism research being conducted by nonautistic researchers and without community participation (Milton 2014).

Anthropology's long history of Othering its subjects, whether intentionally or not, perpetuates inequalities and fosters shallow understandings of the cultures under study. Even Malinowski's participant observation, aimed at bridging the gap between the observer and the observed, ended up objectifying the individuals being studied despite theoretical efforts to humanize them. This damaging practice of Othering is perpetuated by and perpetuates research methods and methodologies (Sarukkai, 1997; Marcus & Fischer, 2004).

As an autistic researcher with years of experience and a vast social network of autistic friends and colleagues, I believe that my research design, data, and analysis could significantly contribute to the scholarly understanding of autism. However, the Institutional Review Board's heightened concern about working with the autistic population led to contradictory and delayed guidance for revisions. Language that was held to be appropriate by an earlier committee was found to be inappropriate by a later committee. Ultimately, the time constraints imposed by protocol revision cycles led to abandoning my proposed research study. While it was an unintentional outcome, and my ethical protocol wasn't rejected, it was still never approved, and its delays led to the exclusion of valuable autistic voices from my research.



Anthropology graduate programs could consider encouraging, rather than discouraging, student autoethnographies, especially for individuals from vulnerable populations who encounter IRB barriers due to the vulnerability of the communities they wish to study. One narrative from inside the community could be better than none. Notably, research on autistic experiences within the labor force could greatly benefit the autistic community's desire to improve employee relationships with their employer and career success. Despite the obstacles I faced in conducting my own research study, I believe my research design has value. It could be used in future inquiries into autistic personal narratives on their employment experiences. Therefore, I include this thesis's research design and intent as a supplemental component.

In this research study protocol, I outline the criteria for inclusion, recruitment strategies, and data collection methods. I provide a detailed overview of the recruitment materials and information shared with potential interviewees. Additionally, I describe the screening process developed to assess eligibility. Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities autistic individuals face, I discuss how these considerations influence my selection of research methods and methodologies. I then address ethical considerations in approaching this vulnerable population, including enhancements to the informed consent process tailored to meet the communication needs of autistic individuals. Then, I establish the framework and process for conducting interviews. Finally, I address confidentiality concerns and outline procedures to safeguard both the research data and the anonymity of participants, ensuring confidentiality remains protected throughout the study. The comprehensive design of this research study could allow for the ethical, inclusive, and important participation of autistic people so that their first-hand experiences in the labor market are documented.

This research study was intended to capture authentic, contemporary autistic stories of employment, disability, culture, and accommodations through a narrative inquiry (Evans & Esposito-Winters, 2022). This was accomplished through in-depth, semistructured interviews with people who self-identify as autistic and who are or have been employed. By evaluating participants' responses and comparing them to the extant literature, a researcher could connect themes across data and construct narratives that illuminate how autism plays a role in work experiences, how allistic colleagues may perceive autism, how accommodations are managed, and if organizational culture can be managed to include autistic people effectively. By setting parameters on specific demographic information, researchers can access a pool of autistic people with relevant experiences.

This research study's inclusion criteria require participants to be (a) 18 or older, (b) previously or currently employed, and (c) self-identified autistic or having an autism diagnosis. Interviewees are recruited through two private Facebook groups for autistic adults, where administrators have granted permission to do so. A recruitment flier is posted to group members that identifies the researcher, provides their contact information, and informs readers that this is a research study on autism and employment. A link with a QR code to a Qualtrics screening survey is included so the interested parties can complete the screener survey.

The researcher explains to members of the Facebook groups that participation in the research study is voluntary. They also explained that participation would entail an interview of up to one hour on Zoom or via email, depending on participant preference. The research design prioritizes multimodal interviews as an essential study feature because no singular method of communication fits every autistic person's needs. Initially, I included phone interviews as an

interview modality, but that type of communication conflicted with my autistic characteristics, which included auditory processing issues. Auditory processing issues could be exacerbated in phone conversations and thus create delays that could affect interview efficiency.

Ethical considerations come into play when conducting research with any human subjects, particularly with disabled stakeholders. The importance of community involvement in designing research, along with the researcher's dedication to enhancing the welfare of disabled individuals through theoretical advancements and a critical evaluation of the power dynamics between researcher and participant, should be thoroughly scrutinized to avoid any negative consequences, conflicts of interest, or exploitation. Autistic people are developmentally disabled and vulnerable, and their individual support needs vary. Accounting for these factors, the researcher will emphasize to participants that participation is optional, and should the participant decide to end the interview at any time, there would be no consequences.

A conscientious approach to the informed consent process when working with vulnerable populations aims to minimize the risks of coercion, pressure, or manipulation. The researcher provides participants with an information sheet of mental health support resources in case participation evokes stressful emotions or leads to adverse mental health outcomes. However, this research study carries minimal risk to participants. While discussions may evoke strong emotions for some participants, this study may offer autistic individuals a chance to share their employment experiences while remaining anonymous once data is collected.

At the beginning of the interview, participants are asked to select a pseudonym for the research. Audio and video recording are used when using Zoom, and any identifying information, including age, place of residence, job title/s, and current/former employers, are

removed from the transcript when the interviews are transcribed. Then, the interview recordings are deleted, leaving only the transcripts. All interview records are purged of personal information like names, company names, or coworker details. All emails are also de-identified. Because email interviews could result in a loss of confidentiality as they are a two-party form of communication where both retain the interview content, participants are informed of this possibility. At the end of the project, the researcher recommends that participants delete study-related emails from their devices. Then, research data is stored in a secure Box folder accessible only to the researcher and any supervising party. Finally, no identifying information of participants will be shared in the findings, published research, or presentations.

Before the research interview, participants are provided a consent form that they agree or decline to sign. Should they decline, they will be released from the research process. The interview introduction is then reiterated verbally or via email. It states, “This interview explores autistic workers’ experiences with employment and job satisfaction regarding job recruitment, training, disability disclosure, disability support, social acceptance, communication, the physical environment, DEI initiatives within the company, and career advancement. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. The total time to complete the screener and interview is roughly 85 minutes. The research study has sixteen interview questions for its framework, with clarifying questions to be added where necessary.” The recruitment screener questions appear in Appendix A of this chapter, and the research questions are in Appendix B.

The researcher’s goal throughout the research process is to understand autistic people’s employment experiences through their personal narratives describing their job experiences, perspectives on organizational inclusion, and if and to what degree they have received

accommodations. The research study I describe would yield primary data that, when supported by extant literature, illuminate the lived experience of autistic people as they face multiple challenges to achieve social equality and improved quality of life. Secondary research is insufficient to offer the whole picture of how disparities affect autistic people so inquiries that include autistic voices is critically important in studying this research topic.

## Chapter 2: Autism, a Crisis of Representation, & the Origins of a Culture

### Introduction

To have a well-rounded understanding of autism, it's crucial to recognize the shifting quality of this diagnostic label across scientific, clinical, academic, and public spheres. What we know about autism is ever-changing and expanding. Demographic and cultural factors play a role in shaping autism. This chapter looks at autism primarily through the lens of the medical model of autism, which has guided clinical interpretations and interventions of autism, and that of the neurodiversity paradigm, which rejects the medical model and instead frames autism as a form of biodiversity.

The American Psychiatric Association (2021) described autism in a medical sense as a complex neurodevelopmental condition marked by distinct differences in social interaction and communication compared to nonautistic individuals (referred to as allistic), manifesting alongside focused interests and repetitive behaviors or activities. According to the CDC (2020), approximately 2.2% of the population in the United States is autistic.

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013) outlined a person to have at least two of the criteria to be diagnosed as autistic. These criteria include deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, challenges in nonverbal communication commonly utilized in social settings, difficulties forming and maintaining relationships, repetitive movements or speech, adherence to routines, aversion to change, monotropism, and sensitivity to sensory stimuli.

In comparison, the neurodiversity model presents autism as a natural expression of human neurological difference—a testament to our diversity. The manifestations of autism are as

diverse as individuals themselves, but what unites autistic people is their unique nervous system, which gives rise to experiences, processes, and reactions to the world that are distinct from those of allistic people. The autistic experience isn't static—needs and responses to stimuli change—but it continues across one's life (Henderson et al., 2023). The medical community has historically represented autism as a condition contrasted against what is “normal,” i.e., neurotypicality, and supported interventions that try to make autistic people appear less autistic, such as behavior therapies and other treatments.

The first section of this chapter delves into the medical perspective of autism, tracing its history as a diagnostic category back to WWII-era Germany. The historical, medicalized treatment of autism has led to the Othering and ableist treatment of autistic individuals. A comparison between the medical model of disability and the social model of disability illuminates this concept. Section two introduces the neurodiversity paradigm as a theoretical framework and CAS as a lens for interpreting literature, research, and media. Rooted in the concept of diversity, the neurodiversity movement and paradigm offer new ways of understanding autism as a political identity. Finally, the third section explores how autistic behaviors, communication, social habits, and shared experiences form a distinct culture. This section identifies autistic culture in the United States emerging from the community's resistance to prevailing narratives. Unifying the autistic community through culture enables greater advocacy for control over narratives, research, treatment, and policy. Autistic culture is positioned as relevant, political, and deserving of inclusion in cross-cultural diversity efforts.

## **The History of Autism Under Eugenicist Policy**

### ***Autism as a Diagnostic Category***

Over time, various factors have influenced public perceptions of autism and autistic individuals. These include historical interpretations of autism, societal and cultural influences, and ongoing discussions about the origins of autism, its nature, and the societal value attributed to autistic individuals. Autism's medical narrative traces back to the 1930s at the Children's Hospital of Vienna—an institution changing as much as Austrian society.

After World War I, the cultural center of Europe, Vienna, Austria, reemerged as a shell of its former self. Austria's political state was a newly democratic republic following the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy (Rauchensteiner, 2014), voting in a socialist government in 1919 (Sheffer, 2018). Historian Britta McEwan (2010) explained that social welfare became a top priority, with eugenics (Ploetz, 1895) as the core social policy and comprehensive social work intended to revitalize the postwar population as its principal appendages (McEwan, 2010).

A network of municipal welfare units and clinics supplanted the imperial poverty alleviation clinics and individual medical practitioners. The cornerstone of the transition to a welfare state was the Hospital Establishment Law, enacted in October 1920, mandating state financial responsibility for hospital provisions. Vienna's Minister of Welfare and Social Administration, Julius Tandler (1869–1936), oversaw the emerging public policies in Vienna. Tandler's eugenics in Vienna was not part of a fascist regime at this stage. However, positive or negative eugenics relies on social control to shape the population's composition (McEwan, 2010). While social Darwinism (Hofstadter, 1944) didn't serve as the basis for eugenics under



Tandler, its principles translated into race hygiene and social purity became fundamental to Vienna's ideology.

Erwin Lazar (1877–1932) founded the Heilpädagogische Station (the Therapeutic Pedagogy Ward) within the Vienna University Children's Clinic, a division of the city's general hospital, in 1911. The Children's Clinic was concerned with the study of neglected, rebellious, mentally ill, psychopathic, and developmentally or intellectually disabled children. The clinic's children are referred from institutions, juvenile courts, the educational system, and private entities (Michaels, 1935). Pediatrician Hans Asperger (1906–1980) joined the clinic in May 1931 under the guidance of his mentor, Franz Hamburger (1874–1954).

Hamburger, an adherent to Nazi ideology, wielded significant influence over the clinic, orchestrating a strategic alignment of Vienna's professional associations with fascist ideals. As right-wing sentiments burgeoned within the Children's Hospital, Jewish and liberal staff members were either dismissed or resigned. Hamburger initiated a faculty replacement process, prioritizing personal characteristics favored by the regime over intellectual qualifications. By 1932, Asperger had assumed the role of an "auxiliary physician" at the Heilpädagogik ward, eventually ascending to the position of an assistant by May 1935 (Czech, 2018; Sheffer, 2018).

The mid-1930s saw the emergence of discourse within the Children's Hospital about a newly recognized condition called "autism." Articles published in 1935, 1936, and 1937 by clinic physician Georg Frankl and psychologist Anni Weiss referred to children exhibiting autistic attributes, such as social difficulties marked by unemotional facial expressions, awkwardness, and excitement leading to jumping or spinning, repetitive utterances (echolalia), and challenges in grasping and responding to social norms (Sheffer, 2018). As did the others at Children's

Hospital, Frankl and Weiss, both Viennese Jews, fled increasing antisemitism in 1937. They immigrated to America with sponsorship from Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins University, a notable child psychiatrist who was the first to introduce autism as a distinct diagnosis in his 1944 paper “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” in which Kanner characterized autistic individuals by their routine-based, monotropic, socially disinterested, echolalic, and repetitive behaviors, notably without negative connotations (Czech, 2018; Kanner, 1944; Sheffer, 2018).

However, the conceptualization of autism became pathologizing with the influence of the eugenicist doctrines of the Third Reich. In Nazi Vienna, autism transcended mere characteristic traits. Asperger characterized autism as psychopathic, a designation that posed a societal threat and conflicted with the racial hygiene agenda of the National Socialist Party, which sought to eradicate genetic “impurities” such as disabilities (Sheffer, 2018). In addition, autism was almost strictly a male diagnosis, whereas females were classified as “hysterical” when demonstrating the same characteristics. This gendered disparity in diagnosing autism was due to what Asperger described as boys’ capacity for higher-order thinking, “an extreme variant of male intelligence” (Asperger, 1944).

Embracing Hitler’s 1939 eugenicist and biologically deterministic (Belek, 2023) policy known as “children’s euthanasia” (Neuspiel, 2024), Asperger, though never formally affiliated with the Nazi party, arranged home visits where healthcare workers could assess children and their home lives to determine if they should be removed and sentenced to Spiegelgrund. Asperger collaborated closely with Nazi party members within the medical community, advocating for the sterilization and institutionalization of numerous disabled individuals and others deemed genetically defective (Czech, 2018). Autistic children identified as incurable and ineducable by

the Society for Curative Education faced removal from their families and placement in institutions like Spiegelgrund, where tragically, staff exterminated 789 children.

Spiegelgrund began euthanizing children in 1940 and was one of 30 clinics run by Nazi sympathizers that exterminated approximately 5000 children through starvation or barbiturate overdose. Conditions at Spiegelgrund remained bleak for years after 1945, with many personnel involved in patient killings retaining their positions. The marginalization, ostracism, and disregard of individuals with disabilities endured in Austria until the 1980s (Neuspiel, 2024). Asperger's classification of certain autistic children as unfit for social integration served as grounds for their admission to Spiegelgrund. Asperger acknowledged the skills and capabilities of many of his patients as having a varied degree of ability, ultimately determining their social value. Those identified by Asperger as "favorable cases" were more likely to survive extermination in places like Spiegelgrund. The designation of "favorable" was often influenced by economic privilege, perceived intelligence, and communication abilities (Sheffer, 2018).

It is worth noting that in 2012, the American Psychiatric Association released a statement that Asperger's syndrome would no longer be recognized in their upcoming 2013 edition of the DSM-5 because those diagnosed with Asperger's would be diagnosed under the autism spectrum disorder category in its new definition, eliminating the need for distinction (Vroom, 2013). The DSM-5 is a resource produced by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) to categorize mental disorders utilizing uniform terminology and criteria. It serves as the primary reference for diagnosing and treating mental disorders in the United States. Asperger's had been included as a diagnostic category in two previous versions, the DSM-IV and the DSM-IV-TR, beginning in

1994, after British psychiatrist Lorna Wing translated the work Asperger had conducted on four of his patients (Vroom, 2013).

### ***Pathologizing Autism***

Autism is often considered an invisible disability in that it impacts social interactions, communication, attention, and knowledge acquisition, but unlike physical disabilities, its manifestations are not immediately apparent (Henderson et al., 2023). Although autism is a lifelong condition that may be disabling, the extent of functional limitations varies between autistic individuals. Autism is heterogeneous (Tan, 2024). Its expression and the degree of challenges an autistic person faces often depend on outside variables and are highly influenced by environmental factors, interpersonal relationships, and emotional contexts, thus changing over time (Ott et al., 2022). Symptoms may vary based on social demands or be masked through adaptive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Research indicated that while the diagnostic label of autism may be slightly clearer today than it was in the 1930s, it still carries many of the negative stereotypes associated with its original classification under eugenicist German clinicians. Autism is widely considered a deficit and impairment to this day.

Since World War II and continuing today, autistic children have been subject to various medical interventions and campaigns to “cure” them of autism. Behaviorism (Gates, 2019; Price, 2022; Tan, 2024), electroconvulsive therapy (Price, 2022; Tan, 2024), punitive efforts, social isolation (Silberman, 2015), and LSD treatments (Sigafos et al., 2007) have all been used routinely to make people “less autistic” and more aligned with neuro-normative autistic expectations. Many of these treatments continue today, though there is much advocacy against the pathologizing of autism that sanctions such interventions (Price, 2022; Tan, 2024).

Pathologizing is a concept employed within psychiatry and biomedicine to designate the categorization of psychological behaviors or physical symptoms as sick or abnormal and in need of cure, treatment, or rehabilitation (Carel, 2023). Sociologist Catherine Tan details how perceiving autism solely as a pathological disorder and impairment significantly influences the perspectives of clinicians, parents, professionals, educators, and society at large. R. Richard Grinker (2020), a cultural anthropologist at George Washington University, described impairment as a condition that may be considered an antithesis to “normal,” productive, or having value, a concept based on what Marx (1893) called the “ideal modern worker.”

Health policy expert Michael Orsini and geographer Joyce Davidson (2013) explained that misconceptions that frame autism as an impairment, disorder, or public health crisis often cause allistics to believe that medical interventions are necessary to fix autistic individuals so they can become productive, socially accepted members of society. Pathologizing medical narratives of autism perpetuates notions that autistic people are defective, which prevents the transformation in social consciousness needed to shift toward autism acceptance (Gates, 2019; Price, 2022). The neurodiversity/ autistic rights movement, discussed later in this chapter, has played an important role in changing the narrative about autism and, in doing so, redirecting much of the focus of autism research.

In contrast to viewing autism through a pathological lens, some autistic scholars, researchers, and activists perceive autism not as a collection of deficits but as a natural neurological phenomenon devoid of negative connotations. According to transautistic author Nick Walker (2022), autism is “a genetically-based human neurological variant” with interconnected features that distinguish it from neurotypicality. Tan (2024) underscored that

contemporary autism research predominantly centers on understanding autism as a neurology influenced by both hereditary and environmental factors under a “neurobiological theory” of autism, which posits that significantly heightened cognitive functions result in a sensory system that receives inputs at an extreme level (Walker, 2022; Tan, 2024). The contemporary approaches to autism could negate many of the harmful earlier medical beliefs and promote the autism-as-an-identity movement, to be discussed later in this chapter, which may allow autistic people to find liberation from several of the negative assumptions about their character, capabilities, and potential.

### ***Othering***

O’Dell et al. (2016) offered a nuanced perspective on autism, defining it as “an identity shaped by specific sociocultural contexts,” highlighting its diverse interpretations worldwide. The prevailing narratives surrounding autism, often rooted in deficit-focused frameworks, can be challenged by those directly affected, inspired by misrepresentations. In contrast to the deficit-focused approach, O’Dell et al. advocated for a “critical abilities framework” that respects the multifaceted personhood of autistic individuals. They argued that this framework not only acknowledges the complexity of autistic identities but also offers valuable insights into redefining notions of cognitive “normalcy” and embracing diversity.

O’Dell et al. (2016) emphasized the subjective nature of “facts” about autism while highlighting how perceptions shape autistic identity and how perceptions are influenced by available information. Context plays a crucial role in knowledge building about autism, with varying understandings of autism emerging in settings with differing levels of knowledge about the condition. Moreover, the collective marginalization of autistic individuals, alongside personal

lived experiences, contributes significantly to how autism is perceived. The perception of autistic identity is inseparable from ableism, medical models, and power dynamics within a predominantly allistic culture. Autism, according to O'Dell et al., emerges from the embodied sensory experiences of individuals, evolving into a political identity as it intersects with sociopolitical factors. In essence, autism is not just a physiological condition but also a sociopolitical construct deeply entwined with lived experiences and societal perceptions.

Otherness is a social alterity arising from a dominant group's construction of in-groups and out-groups. The concept of Otherness is built on colonial notions of biological inferiority and always positions the Other as the dubious, inferior person or group (Sarukkai, 1997), historically to dominate them (Said, 1977). Business management experts specializing in cultural intelligence and talent management, Dana Ott and colleagues (2022), argued that within Western society, autistic people are often seen as different or outside of the norm, leading to their marginalization or exclusion from mainstream social structures. Much of society may view autistic people as "Other," i.e., not belonging to the dominant group of neurotypical individuals. The Othering of autistic people begets social inequality highlighted by the disparity in treatment and opportunities experienced by autistic individuals compared to allistic people.

Edward Said's (1977) concept of *Othering* is a pivotal framework in postcolonial studies and social justice. It illuminates a process where the dominant group in society—in Said's work, the West or "Occident"—constructs and reinforces a sense of difference and inferiority in relation to marginalized or subordinate groups—the "Orient" or Middle Eastern and Asian populations. This process unfolds in two stages: first, the dominant group gathers information about the Other, typically focusing on characteristics perceived as different or deviant from their

own. Second, based on this information, the dominant group constructs a body of knowledge that reinforces the perception of the Other as inherently different and less competent (Said, 1977).

By portraying the Other this way, the dominant group establishes a power dynamic wherein they assume authority over the Other. This power dynamic, deeply rooted in the construction of knowledge, justifies, and perpetuates the subjugation of the Other. The portrayal of the Other as inferior not only legitimizes the dominance of the dominant group but also reinforces existing social hierarchies, leading to the marginalization and disempowerment of the Other (Said, 1977).

Furthermore, this process allows the dominant group to position itself as the authority on what is considered normal or acceptable behavior, culture, or identity. This authority, wielded by the dominant group, is then used to justify the imposition of hegemonic institutions and ideologies onto the Other group. These institutions, often presented as providing assistance or guidance, maintain the dominant group's supremacy while further marginalizing and disempowering the Other (Said, 1977).

When I apply Said's (1977) theoretical framework to the autistic experience, parallels between the Othering of a group and societal treatment of the autistic community emerge. Medical professionals, akin to the dominant group, began collecting data on autistic individuals during World War II, shaping a narrative of autistic people as the Other, aligning with the essentialist agenda of the Third Reich. In this narrative, autistic individuals were marginalized and subjected to the state's whims in Nazi Vienna. In its quest for biological purity, the Third Reich demonstrated that Othering could be stratified beyond the duality of a dominant group and a singular subordinate group.



The Nazi regime instated a hierarchical method of Othering wherein Asperger's child patients were less favored than nondisabled German children but more favored than autistic children who showed less social promise and were eventually euthanized (Valente, 2022). The marginalization that results from Othering and the constructed and artificial supremacy of lower support needs autistic people over those with higher support needs persisted postwar as autism and Asperger's were secured as separate diagnostic categories. Othering narratives of autism extended to the United States and into subsequent decades despite bio-essentialism's decline in medical discourse (Czech, 2018; Sheffer, 2018).

Because of the efficacy of Othering, autistic individuals in the United States have found themselves relegated to various degrees of medical interventions and experiments deemed useful by the medical establishment, ostensibly aimed at "normalizing" them for the benefit of nonautistic society (Silberman, 2015; Price, 2022). However, these interventions often reflected societal norms rather than genuine consideration for the well-being of autistic individuals (Gates, 2019).

I argue that the Othering of autistic individuals has entrenched neurotypicality as the misguided cognitive standard in Western society. This social stratification of Othering disabled people promotes ableism. Othering also necessitates the autistic community's resistance to medicalized perspectives of autism, the galvanization of autistic culture, and movements that demand inclusion in the workplace and elsewhere. In the following sections, I further investigate ableism as a form of discrimination, the medical, social, and cultural models of disability as influential frameworks in the perception of disability, and autistic self-determination, particularly through the lens of the neurodiversity paradigm and CAS. Presenting these issues may provide

an understanding of how Othering seeps into the mistreatment of individuals from that community and how mistreatment can be a catalyst for social transformation by activating a community that may have previously been isolated or denied the ability to express their needs and desires.

### *Ableism*

Ableism is a term first used in 1981 by “Ruth,” a disabled lesbian, who was interviewed in polio survivor Yvonne Duffy’s (1981) *All Things Are Possible*. This groundbreaking book about the sexuality of disabled women explored personal narratives of how disabled women were perceived and treated across their lifespan, particularly concerning reproductive health and sexuality. Ableism is a pervasive element in the social relationship to disability that shapes how disabled people are perceived and allowed to move through the world (Ladau, 2021). Emily Ladau (2021), a disability rights activist, author, and speaker, defines ableism as “attitudes, actions, and circumstances that devalue people because they are disabled or are perceived as having a disability.”

Ladau (2021) explains that ableism is deeply enmeshed in our culture and pernicious, making it hard to name at times. It affects all aspects of disabled people’s lives. I posit that having the language to identify ableism where it manifests allows autistic people to name points of oppression where they are devalued because of their autistic nature. Through this, we may identify where there is an opportunity to change and shift from an ableist moment to an abolitionist and emancipatory one.

Ableism can be structural or systemic and can arise explicitly or implicitly. Ableism is structural in that it is a manifestation of processes, policies, and institutions that are hierarchical

and discriminatory by demonstrating a preference for able-bodied people, leaving out or inadequately portraying the disabled experience, and operating within a web of ableism that sustains and reinforces inequality for disabled people (Keefe, 2022). Systemic ableism refers to the framework of institutions, policies, and societal norms that place individuals at a disadvantage due to societal judgments regarding intelligence, physical capabilities, and mental aptitude. Systemic ableism encompasses a variety of obstacles, including attitudinal, communication-related, physical, policy-driven, programmatic, criminal justice-related, social, environmental, and transportation-related barriers (Wasser, 2021).

Ableism occurs when individuals, systems, or spaces fail to include disabled people as equal members of society. It manifests in casual negative judgments about disabled individuals or their disabilities, revealing underlying assumptions about their competence, appropriate treatment, value, and social interactions (Ladau, 2021). For example, using labels such as ‘crazy,’ ‘stupid,’ or ‘lame’ to demean someone reflects the connotation between disability and disdain. To combat ableism, a shift in perspective on disability may be necessary to challenge its negative associations. It’s important to note that opinions on what constitutes ableism may vary within the disability community, with resistance to anti-ableism advocacy predominantly coming from nondisabled individuals (Ladau, 2021).

I propose that by comprehending the complex manifestations of ableism, autistic individuals could parse out where they are targeted and engage in self-advocacy. Self-advocacy sheds light on the autistic experience, which has long been obscured by medical rhetoric that pathologizes it.abled people can gain insight into the lived experience of disabled people. By illuminating ableism and recognizing its overt and covert impacts on the freedom of disabled

individuals, we secure crucial steps needed in inclusion initiatives and the broader societal shift toward accepting autistic individuals.

### ***The Medical and Social Models of Disability***

Structural and systemic ableism have framed disability as an impairment that devalues people, dating back to the emergence of the asylum. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault (1973) described the medical gaze, which assumes the authority to define normalcy, and situates a patient into its “biomedical paradigm” (Misselbrook, 2013) constructed within the landscape of medical practice. The medical gaze not only constructs perceptions of individuals by using revisionist history to reduce the patient’s story to what is relevant to the clinician (Misselbrook, 2013), but in doing so, establishes power dynamics, facilitating the subjugation, segregation, and institutionalization of disabled individuals (Hughes, 2015).

The medical model of disability, rooted in a framework less based on patient experiences than in generalizations about medical conditions, has historically characterized autism as a disorder. This portrayal depicts autistic individuals as flawed and incomplete rather than recognizing autism as a distinct neurological condition with inherent strengths and capabilities (Bernal & Roca, 2016; Hutson & Hutson, 2023). The medical model perpetuates a crisis of representation (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), pathologizing autism and obscuring autistic lived experiences, while also denying the potential for autistic individuals to positively contribute to society (Bernal & Roca, 2016) and be appreciated for their intrinsic value (Hughes, 2015).

One useful theoretical framework to understand ableism is the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Price, 2022), which challenges the pathologizing, medical model of disability and autism mentioned earlier in this chapter. Under the medical model of disability, autism is a

deficit, and autistic people are ‘tabula rasa’ (Lovaas, 1977), blank slates, ready to be shaped according to a behaviorist, eugenicist, or rehabilitative agenda. The social model of disability, on the other hand, asserts that disability is an effect of sociocultural factors. In the case of autism, autism is pathologized under the medical model of disability because autistic characteristics are contrary to normative expectations. Under the social model of disability, autism is a social construct wherein the dominant, abled society is the primary source of disability, primarily due to its failure to provide necessary accommodations for individuals with differences.

The social model of disability champions autonomy, self-determination, and agency for individuals with disabilities, rejecting the paternalistic approach of the medical model. Within the social model’s framework, autistic and other disabled individuals recognize that disability can come with challenges, and some may choose to pursue treatments, therapies, and accommodations to alleviate their difficulties. Still, many autistic people do not consider their way of being a disability and do not seek out treatments for any autistic characteristics, instead pursuing care to alleviate the effects of living in an ableist society, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality.

Moving away from medical models that portray autistic individuals as having deficits and instead recognizing autistic cognitive function as a minority neurotype could reshape perceptions of autistic individuals as equals within society. Identifying autism as the source of a community provides a new landscape for appreciating how disability contributes to society’s cultural richness. Furthermore, acknowledging differences between autistic and allistic groups opens opportunities for bridging these gaps through education and compassion (Keates & Waldock, 2023).

The neurodiversity movement and the autism rights movement, operating within the social model of disability, advocate for acceptance, inclusion, and improved services and supports rather than rehabilitation and “cure”-oriented approaches. This model recognizes the value of autism-affirming healthcare but underscores that interventions to address autistic characteristics should only be administered with the recipient’s informed consent (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021). Moreover, it contends that shifts in societal perspectives could significantly alter the way disabled individuals engage with the world, leading to a more accessible and inclusive society.

### **Autism in a New Light**

The neurodiversity paradigm, according to psychologist Nick Walker, is a theoretical model built on three core principles. First, it acknowledges neurodiversity as a natural and valuable aspect of human variation. Second, it boldly rejects the notion of a singular ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ brain, enlightening us about the societal constructs that define these concepts. It reframes them as culturally constructed fictions that can be detrimental to societal well-being, like claims of a singular ‘normal’ ethnicity, gender, or culture. Third, it highlights those social dynamics surrounding neurodiversity mirror other forms of diversity, such as ethnicity and gender, including power imbalances and, when celebrated, the potential for creative contributions to the fabric of humanity (Walker, 2021).

The neurodiversity paradigm merges critical disability studies, CAS, and the neurodiversity movement to challenge the foundational principles and cure-centric aspirations of the pathological model of neurodivergence (Stenning et al., 2021). The term *neurodiversity* describes the variation of neurologies in a population, highlighting the existence of many

cognitive states beyond neurotypicality or the dominant neuro-culture (Singer, 1998; Ott et al., 2022). Neurodiversity is often erroneously conflated with the term neurodivergent, a term coined by autism activist Kassiane Asasumasu, which refers to an individual with a less typical cognitive variation, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's, etc. (Asasumasu, 2010).

Critical disability studies (CDS) is a multidisciplinary theoretical framework rooted in critical studies used by scholars and activists to scrutinize theoretical constructs and assess their potential impact on enhancing the quality of life of disabled individuals (Davidson & Orsini, 2013). In her autoethnography, "The Politics of Disability Performativity," anthropologist Devva Kasnitz (2019) portrayed CDS as a theoretical and political tool that unveils hidden dimensions of disability within various domains such as research, scholarship, the arts, and literature. CAS, aligned with CDS, is founded in the social and other emancipatory models of disability (Keates & Waldock, 2023; LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021), as discussed later in this chapter.

### ***Critical Autism Studies***

CAS is a framework that examines theoretical contributions to autism research to assess if they position autistic individuals as primary authorities in shaping knowledge about autism (Milton, 2014), delineate who holds authority in the sphere of autism knowledge (Tan, 2024), and advocate for an emancipatory framework that prioritizes agency, and self-determination of autistic people. CAS, as an area of research, was coined by Joyce Orsini and Michael Davidson (2013), which they described as encompassing three core principles. First, it emphasizes examining power dynamics within autism scholarship and research. Second, CAS promotes novel, liberating epistemologies that challenge pathological models of autism, which can potentially influence public opinion, politics, and culture. Third, CAS is committed to

constructing new theoretical frameworks that employ integrative and holistic interdisciplinary approaches to explore the essence and culture of autism, recognizing its complexity, individuality, and contextual nature (Orsini & Davidson, 2013). While CAS acknowledges that autism may present disabling challenges for some individuals requiring support, it rejects the notion of experts dictating the definition and significance of autism within medical, social, and personal contexts (Orsini and Davidson, 2013).

In addition, CAS challenges biological essentialism, which upholds stereotypes and social hierarchies by suggesting humans are biologically predetermined and immutable (De Cecco & Elia, 1993). Neuro-biological citizenship uses biological commonalities to form a collective identity, typically a marginalized one, which may serve as a launch point for negotiations on whether one will accept, participate in, or reject social norms. Neuro-biological citizenship is a community based on a shared neuro-biological identity. It could serve as a social safety net, empowering the collective to participate in social and medical advocacy, decide who is the authority on their experience, and fight for autonomy, self-determination, and collective liberation from essentialist determinants (Rose & Novas, 2005).

I propose that CAS and the neurodiversity paradigm could play significant roles in driving social transformation, particularly in promoting the workplace inclusion of autistic individuals. These frameworks challenge prevailing narratives suggesting that neurodivergence complicates organizational functioning and that inclusion and accommodations lead to adverse economic or social repercussions. Companies that embrace neurodiverse identities may discover opportunities for growth by challenging norms, embracing cognitive diversity, and fostering higher labor standards. Orsini and Davidson (2013) perceived CAS as an academic approach to



analyzing research, literature, and media of autism that complements autistic self-advocacy and modes of existence. They viewed CAS as contributing to “empathetic scholarship,” which advocates for inclusivity, support, and recognizing autistic individuals’ distinctiveness and autonomy (p. 15).

### ***Origins of Neurodiversity***

CAS relies heavily on the neurodiversity movement and its theoretical counterpart, the neurodiversity paradigm (Roqvist et al., 2020) to provide reasoning for why autism should be engaged through a critical lens. Neurodiversity refers to the range of neurological differences within a population, the collective state of human neurologies, and acts as a classification mechanism that disrupts eugenicist social stratifications (Bertilsdotter et al., 2020). The Neurodiversity Movement is a human and disability rights social justice movement that originated in the 1990s as an extension of the autism movement (Costello et al., 2021). It is an ideological and pragmatic project to secure civil rights, equity, respect, self-determination, and complete societal integration for neurodivergent individuals by dismantling hegemonic thought structures (Bertilsdotter et al., 2020).

The concept of “neurodiversity” has long been credited to autistic sociologist Judy Singer’s (1998) thesis *Odd People In: The Birth of Community Amongst People on the Autism Spectrum: A Personal Exploration of a New Social Movement Based on Neurological Diversity*. However, Singer herself has disputed this credit (Dekker, 2023). Moreover, on July 13, 2023, a former computer programmer turned autism advocacy pioneer, Martijn Dekker (2023), released a statement on his online blog that corrected the origin of the term *neurodiversity* (Dekker, 2023):

Along with many others, I credited Judy Singer with coining the term ‘neurodiversity.’ As it turns out, that was in error. I have found evidence that the concept of neurodiversity was fully formed in my online autistic-run group ‘InLv’ as early as October 1996, well before Singer’s 1998 thesis. The term ‘neurological diversity’ was already used then as well. The concept and the term both came from the wider community of autistic/neurodivergent people, and no one is their sole originator.

Botha et al. (2024) evoked Patricia Hill Collins in emphasizing that Dekker’s statement marks a notable shift in awareness of neurodiversity from a concept coined by an individual and embraced by many to a community-sourced description of humanity that locates autistic people as viable social actors (Collins, 2011).

The neurodiversity paradigm is an emancipatory model serving as the underlying philosophy of the neurodiversity movement and the genesis of CAS, centering autistic people as the experts of their own experience (Orsini & Davidson, 2013). The neurodiversity paradigm rejects the Othering of autistic people and advocates for the acceptance and support of the autistic community and its members. Furthermore, the neurodiversity paradigm establishes autistic culture as a legitimate social representation based on identity (Tan, 2024). The neurodiversity paradigm represents a shift in theory and ideology from that which positions neurodivergence as Other, instead reframing those of the neuro-minority as people who are marginalized by a society organized around neurotypicality and favoring those in the neuro-majority (Chapman, 2020, p. 58).

The neurodiversity paradigm views neurodivergences like autism not as individual medical problems, but as societal situations engaged in power relationships (Chapman, 2020).

Autistic people are directly and possibly negatively impacted by the actions and expectations of the dominant neuro-majority. Therefore, instead of considering a narrow definition of normality, the neurodiversity paradigm views neurocognitive diversity as ideal to the biological ecosystem of humanity. This perspective is important for autistic self-coherence and well-being because it may reverse internalized ableism imposed by neuro-normative standards that marginalize autistic people. According to the neurodiversity framework, the suffering experienced by neurodivergent individuals is primarily the consequence of social exclusion and stigmatization, rather than the result of neurodivergence as innately bleak and unfulfilling (Chapman, 2020).

## **Autistic Culture**

### ***What is Culture?***

In “Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions,” American anthropologists Albert L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) provided an early definition of culture as encompassing the symbolic, linguistic, and meaningful dimensions of human groups. Some 2 decades later, Clifford Geertz (1973) cited Goodenough’s assertion that “a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in operating in a manner acceptable to its members” (p. 12). However, Goodenough’s definition of culture may present an incomplete view, particularly concerning marginalized communities.

Individuals from marginalized cultures often navigate both their native cultural norms and the expectations of the dominant culture for survival. W. E. B. Du Bois (1897/1996) terms this dual awareness as “double consciousness,” highlighting the tension between one’s self-perception and the perceptions imposed by the dominant culture. In *Black Skin, White Masks*,

Frantz Fanon (1952/1986, p. 90) underscored the stress emanating from one's existence in relation to the dominant culture.

Culture serves as the lens through which individuals perceive the world. It shapes our thoughts, beliefs, and values and influences our interactions with others. An etic (outsider's) perspective may not be the most effective way to comprehend a situation. Cultural responsiveness is a practice of understanding that acknowledges and reflects upon the complex array of cultural factors that an individual brings to communication, behavior, and interactions. (Hopf et al., 2021). I argue that such an approach is pivotal not only in understanding autism but also in fostering autism acceptance and integrating autistic individuals fully into all facets of society, including the workforce.

### ***Autistic Culture***

To expand upon the above concepts of culture, I lean into music theorist Joseph N. Straus (2013) essay, "Autism as Culture," from *The Disability Studies Reader*. Straus posited that autistic culture is a creation of autistic individuals and a complex interplay between biology and culture. Drawing on Morris' biocultural model, which views medical conditions as products of biological and cultural influences (Morris, 1998), Straus argued that autism is more than just a condition of the mind; rather, it is a relational phenomenon defined by social and cultural interactions. Additionally, the relational aspects of autism are largely influenced by the fact that autists are classified as autistic and because of autistic characteristics that become noticeable during interactions.

Straus (2013) highlighted the irony that the term "autism" is derived from the Greek word 'auto' meaning self, and the English '-ism' indicating action, to describe one who is withdrawn

and inwardly focused (Valente, 2022), but this is contradicted by the reality that autism is nothing if not inherently relational. Straus suggested that autistic culture has emerged as a form of resistance against the medical model of disability and its implications. He acknowledges the heterogeneity of autistic identity, comparing it to other diverse identity groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, Indigenous peoples, or Southerners, equally recognizable as cultural entities. He presents autistic culture as encompassing various forms of expression, including art, music, crafts, and writing—but also its more mundane forms. These expressions allow autistic individuals to assert their identity, challenge diagnostic categories that pathologize their experiences, and produce tangible artifacts (Straus, 2013). Importantly, “autistic communities and cultures...become a way of disrupting the culture of “normality,” (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022).

Straus acknowledges the need for cultural groups, including autistic culture, to seek out and identify its historical roots to enhance self-coherence within their cultural context, though he warns against autistic peoples’ “search for ancestors,” who would have had very different manifestations of autism in the context of the asylum, abandonment, or other contextual factors that would differentiate autism from what we know it to be today (Straus, 2013). In this way, it seems that Straus positions autistic culture as a contemporary phenomenon that, while influenced by its historical concepts, is served by its galvanization through getting ever closer to emancipation from its medical model confines.

In her work “Sense and the Senses: Anthropology and the Study of Autism,” Olga Solomon (2010) supported Straus in proposing a perspective in which autistic individuals are viewed as socioculturally significant community members. Both Hopf et al. (2021) and Solomon

challenged the stereotype that autistic people are solitary individuals confined to their own isolated experiences. *Autistic culture* may be a controversial designation in the eyes of nonautistic culture. Still, autistic culture is relevant to the autistic community, valid, and worthy of celebration. Retention of autistic culture is a critical step in the liberation of autistic people, for assimilation only serves the comfort of allistic society and denies the intrinsic value of autistic people. Cultural devaluation not only adversely affects the individual, but it can also devastate a community by compromising its agency (Tan, 2024).

### ***Cross-Cultural Differences: Allistic vs Autistic***

Culture informs social communication and interaction styles, their implications for daily interactions and functioning, and native judgments regarding their quality. The authority on what defines the quality of social communication and interactions—what is meaningful, accurate, and logical—should belong to members of the community as the authors of their own society. Allistic culture is the ‘normative’ culture and the source of the medical system that has established the subjective notion of skills and deficiencies related to social communication and interactions of autistic people (Golson et al., 2021). Autistic communication deficits are a construct of neuronormative cultural and medical expectations. Autistic culture is defined by the collective experiences of autistic people, including the experience of being a minority group.

In discussions about autistic culture, acknowledging autism as a distinct entity rather than solely in comparison to neurotypical culture could provide a framework for understanding autistic behaviors and practices in a way that could allow allistic culture to normalize the differences and learn how to operate in conjunction with them, rather than in conflict. In *Unmasking Autism*, Devon Price (2022) suggested that the collective values of autistic

individuals significantly shape their culture, which stands on its own as an autonomous entity (Tan, 2024).

Honesty appears to be an important driver of behavior among autistic people (Hu et al., 2020; Henderson, 2023), with integrity, fairness (Kapp, 2016), equity, and a strong commitment to social justice constituting some of the core values within autistic culture (Guthrie, 2023; Hu et al., 2020; Kapp, 2016). Justice-oriented belief systems may be rooted in autistic people being a minority class and empathizing with struggle (Silberman, 2015). This may be partly because autistic individuals perceive communication primarily as a means of conveying information, often finding casual conversation and superfluous chatter irrelevant to meaningful interaction (Tan, 2024).

Autistic people struggle to make predictions of outcomes when others use figurative speech, metaphor (Vincente et al., 2023), and subtext (Meyer-Lindenberg et al., 2022; Hutson & Hutson, 2023). These factors contribute to a preference for certainty and explicit communication (Vincente et al., 2023). The autistic preference for accessible meaning through direct communication and actions that align with one's intentions and statements reduces ambiguity. Clarity over ambiguity is a core need for autistic understanding and access to knowledge, which may explain why honesty and integrity are valued in autistic culture (Henderson & Wayland, 2023).

Autistic peoples' clear, straightforward behaviors hold significance for autistic people but often lead to misunderstandings between allistic and autistic individuals because allistic people do not share the same style of communication (Silvertant, 2019). When allistic individuals interpret autistic actions through the lens of allistic behavioral norms, it can distort their true

meaning and potentially undermine the autistic person's intentions without their awareness (Silberman, 2015).

It is not uncommon for allistic people to attribute alternate meanings to autistic communication, such as interpreting a literal statement as figurative (Silvermant, 2019), even though autistic individuals typically don't rely on such subtext. When autistic individuals are tasked with navigating communication while also contending with the possibility of misinterpretation and challenges in understanding the emotions, behaviors, and subtext of allistic individuals, it creates a complex situation ripe for misunderstandings and an undue, unnavigable burden.

### ***The Politics of Autistic Culture***

Autistic scholars purport that the neurodiversity movement and its subsector, the autism rights movement, are social justice movements and political mobilizations of autistic culture that highlight the burdens placed on autistic people to assimilate by pursuing treatments, interventions, masking behaviors and generally concealing their authentic selves (Henderson & Wayland, 2023; Price, 2022; Tan, 2024; Walker, 2021). Psychology researchers Monique Botha and Kristen Gillespie-Lynch (2022) proposed that redefining autism as a cultural phenomenon could transform perceived disability-related challenges into identity-based political tools, shifting authority from the dominant society. I view this reframing as acknowledging that autism is a potent cultural force engaged in the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor rather than merely being subjected to it. Furthermore, by embracing this perspective, individuals diagnosed with autism could view themselves through a new lens, empowering collective resistance against the societal norms imposed by nonautistic individuals.



From my perspective, the significance of Botha and Gillespie-Lynch's (2022) suggestion lies in its potential to unite individuals with autism through a shared diagnosis, transcending conceptual limitations to embrace autism's identity-building aspects. This unity fosters collective resistance against the authority of nonautistic individuals who traditionally shape perceptions of autism, dictate available services and support, and allocate funding for research and interventions. Furthermore, by recognizing autism as a cultural entity, individuals affected by prevailing narratives can find solace in a supportive community working towards change and a substantive culture shared with others facing similar experiences. Straus (2016) suggested that autistic cultural identity is a product of autistic resistance to the dominant culture, and I would add that autistic cultural identity feeds autistic resistance to power.

Within the autistic community, the active involvement of autistic individuals as determinants of their destiny challenges the negative stereotypes and narratives surrounding autism wherein autistic people are passive actors in their lives, which are run by parents, clinicians, and other professional entities (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Political and cultural mobilization is part of the larger effort to reclaim identity, counteract the influence of eugenic perspectives often found in nonautistic cultures, and reduce the challenges autistic people face while trying to exist alongside and within allistic-autistic relations (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Straus, 2016). Furthermore, Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) advocated for public recognition of the inherent value of autistic individuals and promote acceptance, accommodation, and support.

The neurodiversity movement and CAS challenge misconceptions about autism by portraying the autistic experience as a valid variation in neurology that contributes to the

diversity of the human experience. Relating this to my thesis topic, acknowledging and understanding autistic culture, its differences from allistic culture, and the significance of identity within the autistic community can inform workplace inclusion efforts. I submit that by promoting cultural responsiveness among allistic colleagues, companies can create a more inclusive environment that embraces the diversity of neurodiverse individuals, including those who are autistic.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 2, I have organized notions of autism into historical contexts, medical perspectives, alterity, emancipatory theoretical frameworks, and politico-cultural developments. Thematically contrasting prevailing narratives with those of the autistic community evidence that autism is more than a diagnosis—it is controversial and relational, and the autistic community is continually engaged in power struggles. Autism advocates contest that autistic people are subjected to sociocultural opinions of autism and disability. Therefore, the perceived value of autistic people and behaviors by allistic society are fluid and inconsistent, though often situated as “facts.” Acknowledging that a population is partially defined by fluctuating and inconsistent narratives may facilitate an understanding that the only consistent narratives about autism are that of the autistic lived experience.

Indeed, for allistic people to be culturally responsive to the autistic community, they must understand and appropriately respond to the cultural variables and dimensions that autistic individuals bring to interactions (Hopf et al., 2021). Societal and cultural awareness and appreciation could benefit members of autistic culture and legitimize inclusive practices by

recognizing the neurodiversity inherent in our world. Valuing and embracing autistic culture contributes to enhanced cultural awareness across cultural landscapes.

Establishing community spaces and work environments that embrace cultural differences and value diversity can play a crucial role in reducing the marginalization and Othering experienced by autistic people. How organizations respond to autistic workers, acknowledging them as individuals and integral members of a cultural community, can significantly impact the perception of autistic characteristics within the organization. This approach diminishes the likelihood of interpreting these characteristics as abnormal behaviors and encourages viewing them as relevant aspects of an entire culture.

### **Chapter 3: Neuro-Confusion, Neuro-Inclusion**

In this chapter, I examine the obstacles that autistic adults encounter in obtaining and retaining consistent employment. Research indicates that autistic people have high rates of unemployment, underemployment (working under their skill and educational level and at risk for lower wages and unemployment), and frequent job transitions. Autistic people who are employed may find themselves in roles that fail to capitalize on their abilities, align with their ambitions, or correspond with their educational qualifications (Davies et al., 2023; Petty et al., 2022). Yet autistic people may exhibit many beneficial characteristics for an employer, including analytical thinking, technological literacy, reliability, attention to detail, problem-solving, creative thinking, and a lifelong passion for learning.

I draw connections between these difficulties and colleagues' limited understanding of autism, resulting in stereotypes, stigma, bullying, exploitation, and communication problems. I investigate how cross-cultural approaches to understanding autistic workers may facilitate more inclusive work environments. I explore anthropological theories about cross-cultural engagement that could help accomplish autism acceptance in the workplace.

#### **Autistic Employment**

##### ***The State of Autistic Employment***

Numerous studies and surveys indicate that autistic people are unemployed at disproportionately high rates compared to allistic people. Costello et al. (2021) showed that only 22% of autistic adults in the U.K. could secure employment despite their desire to have fulfilling careers. A large-scale survey by the National Autism Society (2016) of more than 2000 respondents showed that the full-time employment rate among autistic individuals continues to

be persistently low, standing at 16%, up only 1% since their previous survey in 2007. Combined with a 16% part-time employment rate, the overall employment rate for autistic individuals stands at 32%. In stark contrast, the employment rate for nondisabled individuals is approximately 80%, while the figure for nonautistic disabled individuals is 47% (National Autism Society, 2017).

Research on autistic young adults demonstrates that low employment starts early. More than 66% of autistic young adults are unemployed 2 years after completing school and disconnected from postsecondary education (Singh, 2015). In a review of literature on autistic employment, June Chen et al., special education; Connie Sung, Ph.D., rehabilitation psychology and special education; Michael Leahy, educational psychology and special education, and behavioral psychologist Geraldine Leader showed that autistic people are underemployed and underpaid (Chen et al., 2015). An earlier study, the National Longitudinal Transitional Study-2, followed a nationally representative student sample of 13- to 16-year-olds enrolled in and after graduation from special education from 2000 to 2010 through in-person and telephone interviews. The researchers discovered that young autistic adults leaving high school had an employment rate of 15% in their first year after high school, a meager rate compared to other disabled groups at 54% (National Center for Educational Research, 2010). Further, a 2012 study by developmental disability epidemiologist Paul Shattuck et al. showed that only fifty-five percent of autistic youth were employed in the first six years following high school (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Additionally, low employment among autistic people appears to be consistent across age ranges. An informal online global survey by autism advocate Chris Bonello (2022) intended to

understand current attitudes towards autism-related issues by collecting opinions and experiences from autistic people, parents/caregivers of autistic individuals, autism professionals, and others indirectly linked to autism. Respondents numbered 11,212 people, with nearly 7500 of them autistic, responded. The survey covered geographic location, age, gender, life experiences like social isolation, feelings about being autistic, and public perception, as well as thoughts on their history of employment. Bonello reported that 50% of autistic respondents stated that they struggled to find employment. Some 47% said they struggled to retain employment (Bonello, 2022). Most of Bonello's respondents were in Western countries, specifically the US and UK (8000 respondents), and approximately 76% were between the ages of 20 and 59 (Bonello, 2022).

I argue that the persistent challenges faced by autistic individuals in securing and maintaining employment across various Western countries and age groups suggest the presence of widespread systemic and structural barriers hindering their success in the workplace. This chapter investigates these barriers by first addressing the limited understanding of autism among employers and coworkers. I explore how the perpetuation of stereotypes, stigma, bullying, exploitation, and exclusion contributes to difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment and job satisfaction for autistic people. Additionally, I examine how differences in nonverbal communication may hinder positive relationships between autistic individuals and their nonautistic colleagues and leaders. Then, I evaluate coping mechanisms used by autistic individuals in social situations, such as masking, and discuss their impact on self-coherence and mental well-being. Last, I highlight the skills and strengths identified in research among autistic

workers and argue that employers adopting a culturally responsive approach stand to benefit significantly from these attributes.

In this chapter, my aim is not just to highlight the myriad ways in which autistic individuals endure personalized mistreatment in the workplace, hindering their chances of success. I put forth that in this process, fundamental and intrinsic cultural rights are being denied. Achieving equity in employment for autistic individuals demands more than merely accepting and supporting people with disabilities. It necessitates a profound cultural transformation that promotes respect for diverse backgrounds and cultural expressions. In the following chapters, I discuss disability and accommodations further, but I want to underscore that those may be necessary largely because of culture-based operational differences.

### **A Limited Understanding of Autism**

The invisibility of autism, compounded by its diverse manifestations, could obstruct access to autistic individuals' specific support needs (Solomon, 2010). Autistic people also may be prone to experiencing micro-aggressions, mistreatment, and job insecurity (Praslova, 2022). These circumstances prompt a thought-provoking question: Are autistic individuals seen and understood as people with neurologic variation that may be disabling in an ableist world, or are they instead perceived as uncanny variations of neurotypicals? What does it mean for autism to be understood, and how does understanding happen? By embracing Geertz's (1973) semiotic method of immersing ourselves in the culture under study, I suggest that we can better understand the individual we aim to comprehend, such as the autistic employee. This requires actively engaging in an intellectual pursuit driven by curiosity about the cultural nuances of the Other.

### *Cross-Cultural Understanding*

While many companies are embracing cultural diversity, the relevance of autistic culture may go unrecognized. I propose that employers could enhance their understanding of autistic employees' behaviors and needs by situating them within the context of autistic culture. Recognizing autistic culture offers an avenue for cultural responsiveness. At its core, autistic culture stems from the shared experiences of autistic individuals (Straus, 2007). Autistic individuals exhibit a distinct neurological profile characterized by heightened sensory experiences and unique communication patterns and behaviors, distinguishing them from neurotypical individuals (Price, 2022).

I offer that while autistic communication styles, social habits, behaviors, and sensory responses may differ from those of neurotypical individuals, they are considered standard within the autistic community. Moreover, they represent distinctive cultural attributes that underpin autistic values, rituals, and traditions. Presenting autistic characteristics not as individual idiosyncrasies but as culturally significant elements of a community foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment. I suggest that doing so encourages cultural awareness and responsiveness, allowing autistic employees to feel understood and valued for their identity.

For instance, as discussed in Chapter 2, autistic individuals prioritize direct and honest communication due to challenges in grasping subtleties, metaphors, and nonverbal cues (Costello et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2023). This preference for explicit messaging underscores a value system emphasizing clear communication without ambiguity. Rituals among autistic individuals often involve self-regulating behaviors such as repeatedly watching a movie, listening to the



same song, or maintaining a sense of order and sameness, known as cognitive rigidity (Hsu et al., 2009).

Following consistent routines in daily activities, such as commuting to work, eating the same meals, completing tasks in a specific sequence, or arranging items meticulously, holds significant importance within the autistic community (Price, 2022). The shared values, rituals, and traditions among autistic individuals contribute to the formation of “autistic culture,” representing a collective identity rooted in shared experiences (Tan, 2024), which research demonstrates to be prevalent across the global autistic population (Hsu et al., 2009).

However valid autistic culture’s rituals and values, autistic individuals understand that adapting to communicate, behave, and adjust sensorily to an allistic culture could potentially reduce their struggles as a marginalized group. Notably, autistic ways of being do not inherently conform to allistic norms. Attempting to assimilate can lead to internal conflict and distress for autistic individuals. Conforming to a culture grounded in different neurological experiences can be a source of suffering (Pearson & Rose, 2023; Price, 2022). I speculate that cultural conformity may not be the answer to autistic acceptance in the workplace because it overlooks the underlying issues, mainly disability discrimination and mistreatment of employees.

Cross-cultural training and learning respect differences across cultures and place value on culturally unique qualities. Cross-cultural training promotes awareness among people for whom a common cultural framework is absent and is an integral part of equity within the global workforce (Anjelika, 2024). Devva Kasnitz’s (2020) autoethnography simplifies the process of cross-cultural learning by explaining that the direct path to understanding difference, in this case, disability, begins with being exposed to others’ embodied experiences and appreciating their

value. One might deepen their understanding of the nuanced elements of another's culture through close involvement rather than simple observation (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz (1973) advocated for a semiotic approach to understanding cultures beyond one's own, suggesting that anthropologists can gain insight into the "native's point of view" by immersing themselves in the cultural elements that hold significance within that society. Geertz emphasized the importance of delving into the implicit aspects of culture, such as nonverbal communication styles, behaviors, and values, to facilitate meaningful communication with its members. While these implicit aspects may be challenging to identify from an outsider's perspective, recognizing unfamiliar elements, especially those occurring outside of spoken language, may cue further exploration into their cultural significance.

### ***Stereotypes***

However strong an autistic worker's skills might be, employers in all sectors should take care to avoid stereotyping autistic people. Employers should avoid "positive" stereotypes, which may be as harmful as obviously negative ones. Framing autistic skills as superpowers or autistic people as savants are frequent issues where autistic people are assumed to possess a set of extreme talents that offset their extreme deficits. Straus (2016) highlighted the problematic nature of the "savant stereotype" for several reasons. First, it links the savant skill directly to the disability, creating an unrealistic association between the two. Next, the savant stereotype perpetuates an uncanny portrait of autistic people as not quite human.

Media portrayals of autism have been significant cultural influences on autistic stereotypes. The "autistic savant" stereotype has been depicted widely in popular US media (Murray, 2006). For example, the autistic character Sheldon Cooper in the television comedy *The*

*Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019) and its spin-off, *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) is depicted as brilliant yet awkward, outside the norm, and of superior intellect but having many communication deficiencies (Valente, 2022), which are frequently the material for comedic moments (McGrath, 2014). His castmates often correct his social missteps; thus, Sheldon’s disability is highlighted as a source of laughter, which may fuel social practices of demeaning those who struggle to fit into society.

In the television drama *The Good Doctor* (2017–2024), the representation of Dr. Shaun Murphy’s autism “does a disservice to autistic people by creating the new myth of the ‘model neurominority.’” (Duan et al., 2018). The model minority stereotype, a term coined in a *US News and World Report* article titled “Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.” (1996), is a stereotype that suggests a minority group universally achieves unparalleled success in academics and careers. This stereotype can perpetuate ignorance and distorted perceptions about the population, even if some perceive the myth as empowering or positive (Museus & Kiang, 2009). This stereotype carries negative consequences. First, it may be strategically used by opponents of diversity and inclusion policies to argue for meritocracy, suggesting that discrimination does not impede the progress of neurodivergent people. Second, communities subjected to the model minority myth face pressure to conform to this stereotype, which can negatively impact their well-being and self-coherence (Duan et al., 2018).

In Episode 1 of the first season of *The Good Doctor*, neurosurgeon Aaron Glassman defended his desire to hire Shaun by arguing, “Sure, he has autism, but he also has savant syndrome...undeniable assets.” He highlighted that adding Shaun to the team enhanced the experiences of his neurotypical colleagues, as they would have the opportunity to collaborate

with someone uniquely talented. Additionally, it would project a positive image of the hospital as inclusive and benevolent (Shore, 2017). In this argument, Glassman reinforced the prevailing norms of neurotypical expectations by making Shaun an exception. Shaun's savant abilities maintain and reproduce dominant perceptions of autism as bizarre or beyond human understanding, thereby diminishing its recognition as a fully human neurotype (Moore, 2019).

Savant stereotypes and generalizations could promote discrimination and stigma by dehumanizing autistic people and their ways of being (Praslova, 2021). Not all autistic people are savants, have above-average intelligence, are technology nerds, are unable to form relationships, or are good at math. Just like allistic people, all autistic people have areas of strength and areas where they are less skilled. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for allistic people to assume that autistic people have a predictable set of above-average skills and below-average skills and to use those assumptions to deny or remove support from autistic people or, conversely, to presume their incompetence.

Functioning labels, such as *high-functioning* and *low-functioning* or *Levels 1, 2, and 3*, are often deployed by medical professionals, educators, and parents to classify autistic people (Price, 2022). Such designations are also misleading generalizations because functioning labels and levels of autism reinforce assumptions about abilities and inabilities rather than considering a person's complex individualized needs. Autism is not a spectrum in a linear sense; autistic people have multilayered capacities in which support needs may be high in some areas but low in others. Developmental psychologist Steven Kapp (2023) suggested that traits associated with autism and sensitivity to sensory stimuli can fluctuate minute-to-minute, as will the needed

accommodations. Verbal and nonverbal communication skills and adaptability may vary between individuals (Kapp, 2023).

Acknowledging social, environmental, and technological factors to understand autism and autistic individuals' lived experiences may be helpful because they collectively shape an individual's support requirements. Furthermore, autistic support needs are not static, requiring a dynamic set of accommodations because stimuli sensitivity may vary daily (Kapp, 2023).

Countless challenges autistic individuals encounter in the workplace stem from discord created by a lack of comprehensive understanding of autism paired with strict adherence to what is “normal.” In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss autistic support needs further and investigate how access to support may be helped or hindered based on the attitudes of those around them.

### ***Stigma***

In the realm of public perception, a lack of understanding about autism contributes to stereotyping, stigma, discrimination, and exploitation among autistic individuals. The autism-as-a-deficiency model, for instance, has been a product of a “war on autism” wherein medical professionals package autism as a dangerous enemy and social threat (Broderick, 2022; McGuire, 2016; Sheffer, 2018). As discussed in Chapter 2, the pathologized, medical version of autism has instilled fears surrounding autistic people, and discomfort with autism has shaped public opinion about autistic people. Such concerns have fostered stigma and seeped into public opinion, coming to life in settings such as the workplace.

Social, communication, and behavioral differences can create challenges in professional environments, prompting employees to adapt and bridge these gaps (Davies et al., 2023). Such modifications may discourage employers who prefer maintaining the cultural status quo from

embracing workplace inclusion. Wasser (2021) highlighted attitudinal rigidity as another disruptive factor, describing it as a significant barrier to achieving workplace equity. I hypothesize that such rigidity hampers one's ability to perceive and understand others objectively within their contexts, hindering acceptance and perpetuating stigma.

In his landmark text, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) defined *stigma* as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.” The use of ‘disqualified’ in Goffman’s definition seems particularly relevant to the circumstances of autistic people because it indicates that there is an intention to exclude the stigmatized person because they are deemed unfit (Landau, 2000). Stigma is a prominent aspect of autistic employment experiences and the disability experience. Furthermore, autistic people may experience stigma more than people with severe mental disabilities because autistic characteristics can be episodic, prompting coworkers to expect that autistic people can control autistic behaviors because their colleague appears “normal” (Wen et al., 2022).

Stigma carries a heavy weight, and neurodivergent individuals often experience what researchers call “stereotype threat” (Burton et al., 2022). This phenomenon occurs when they observe neurotypicals devaluing neurodivergent people. The fear of being devalued can lead to increased vigilance at work and may negatively impact marginalized groups by adding to job-related pressures and stress levels. Consequently, this can hinder job performance, reinforcing the stereotypes members of the marginalized social group seek to dispel.

Some research indicates that autistic individuals experience feelings of being distrusted, rejection, exclusion (Praslova, 2022), and diminished psychological safety (Edmonson, 1999) due to stigma in the workplace. Additionally, they may observe that their work relationships

suffer because of assumptions about their autism (Wen et al., 2022). Fears of experiencing stigma can be a source of stress for an autistic person by undermining their sense of belonging and mental well-being (Praslova, 2022; Santuzzi & Keating, 2023). Memories of times when autistic social or behavioral characteristics negatively affected relationships or circumstances may create anxiety and may affect one's desire to build relationships in the future. Anticipation of exclusion may prompt them to conceal their true selves, avoid circumstances that reveal their disability, diligently observe cues related to the perception of their identity, and adapt to their surroundings (Santuzzi & Keating, 2023), sometimes by masking and adopting the identity of the "normal" (Goffman, 1963).

### ***Bullying & Exploitation***

Similarly to stigma and discrimination, exploitation and bullying are additional dysfunctions that autistic people may experience in the workplace. In an online survey published in *Autism in Adulthood* of almost 200 autistic employees in the UK, social media, and adolescent mental health researcher Jade Davies et al. (2023) sought to investigate what employment topics autistic people think should be researched, why these topics are important to them, and what the desired employment outcomes would be. One autistic worker reported that every employer they have had has taken advantage of their focus and skillset, piling on the workload when they recognize their efficiency and inability to decline added work (Davies et al., 2023).

Unfortunately, workplace bullying is not uncommon for autistic employees. Autistic individuals also face a higher incidence of bullying compared to their nonautistic counterparts (Leader et al., 2018). According to the National Autistic Society (2016), one third of autistic adults reported being bullied or discriminated against in the workplace. Moreover, autistic

individuals are more often the target of laughter, which may be puzzling to them due to differences in cultural norms (Leader & Mannion, 2021). However, the effects of bullying can be profound and persistent, leading to ongoing distress caused by repeated traumatic experiences, the detrimental mental health effects of bias, and insecurities stemming from mistreatment. Additionally, bullying may adversely affect job performance (Praslova, 2022).

Bullying of autistic people can have various causes, many of them contradictory to the next. Autistic workers may be far more productive than allistic workers—up to 140% more productive (Ossola, 2021). They are targets for other workers who wish to sabotage high-achieving workers. Bullying can also affect workers who perform poorly (Praslova, 2021). As organizational psychologist Ludmila Praslova (2021) pointed out, the difference is that, in most cases, high performers receive covert bullying. In contrast, overt bullying is more familiar to poor-performing employees (Praslova, 2022; Ossola, 2021). Autistic peoples' tendency to be frank and blunt can be off-putting to the more subtext-oriented allistic, and generally, being different can provide grounds for bullying (Praslova, 2022).

Autistic people may be mistreated due to misconceptions about their character and behaviors or due to long-standing cultural beliefs about autism being a social threat. I suggest that many of these issues may be implicitly reinforced through communication difficulties between autistic and allistic people, wherein an issue that arises only becomes more complicated by communication incongruence between the two parties. When negative perceptions take over, and tensions arise, resentments may build between parties, and resolution may be difficult because of fundamental cultural differences.



## **Nonverbal Communication Problems**

### ***Negative Perceptions and Limited Opportunities***

Negative perceptions from allistic people have been shown to impact autistic employees significantly and in multidimensional ways (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020). Negative perceptions and stereotypes held by employers and colleagues restricted autistic workers' potential to build work experience and instilled fear in them about disclosing their neurodivergence. Invidious perspectives held by colleagues have left some autistic people with a pervasive feeling of microaggressions being directed toward them, feeling sidelined, overlooked, and profoundly misunderstood by their coworkers and employers (Burton et al., 2022).

Some autistic people have reported limited career opportunities due to how people perceive their neurodivergence. They missed opportunities that allistic colleagues received because of negative assumptions about character, ability, or desire for promotion. Some research has revealed that autistic employees encounter limited chances for career progression and upward mobility. They attributed this situation to implicit bias and negative assumptions that cast them as incompetent rather than acknowledging their demonstrated leadership abilities through their accomplishments (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020).

Indeed, social cognition can exhibit cultural variation (Varnum et al., 2010). In a neurotypical workplace, neurodivergence, such as autism, may influence an individual's ability to secure and find fulfillment in employment (Praslova, 2021). Cultural psychologist Michael Varnum et al. (2010) elucidated how diverse cognitive patterns and perspectives manifest across different cultures. I hypothesize that some conflicts between neurotypical and autistic individuals may stem from these variations. Coupled with misguided perceptions held by neurotypicals

regarding autistic individuals, interpersonal and group dynamics can significantly impact job satisfaction, leading to compromised work performance, loss of accommodations, and inadequate workplace protections (Praslova, 2021).

Nonverbal communication is another area of potential misinterpretation between allistic and autistic people because intended meaning can elude both parties, affecting how each understands the other. Differences within cultural groups are widespread, and intersecting cultural affiliations can create more complexity. Language and nonverbal language are critical to cultural expression (Golson et al., 2022). Body language, for example, is dependent on the person. Gestures, their timing, and frequency are also culturally unique. Gestures and expressions may dictate emotions and vary from culture to culture.

Additionally, research has indicated that autistic people have difficulty interpreting and expressing emotions verbally or through nonverbal means. However, psychologist David Matsumoto and 60 colleagues across the globe (Matsumoto et al., 2008) conducted a study of over 5000 participants from 32 countries that examined cross-cultural communication. The study found that people from the same cultural group (in-group) are more expressive in interactions than those from different groups (out-groups). Accordingly, Golson et al. (2022) postulated that discrepancies due to cross-cultural communication differences may be relevant when evaluating the level of autistic expression in interactions where the researcher is not autistic. While there does not appear to be any research specifically on the intensity of autistic in-group expression, I hypothesize that autistic people may be similarly more expressive with other autistic people than with allistic people.

Matsumoto et al. (2008) explained that connections within one's own group are marked by a shared past and envisioned future, fostering feelings of closeness, comfort, and reliance. Conversely, connections outside one's group lack these attributes. Thus, relationships within one's group are likely to adhere to cultural norms that encourage heightened emotional openness, as there is less anxiety stemming from uncertainty about interpreting emotional cues within the relationship. On the contrary, relationships outside one's group tend to favor more restrained emotional expression due to increased uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in such relationships. Matsumoto's research suggests that cultural dynamics where people from the same social group have an increased sense of emotional security with each other may explain why allistic and autistic people, coming from different social groups, feel discomfort and experience misunderstandings during interactions. The next section illustrates how out-group miscommunication may arise through nonverbal activities.

### ***Culturally-Specific Nonverbal Communication***

Nonverbal communication, which involves conveying and understanding thoughts and emotions through gestures and expressions, is important in human interaction. However, organizational psychologist Sylvia Bocaccio et al. (2016) proposed that nonverbal communication only has the potential to communicate meaning. The effectiveness of nonverbal communication depends on how the recipient interprets the cues (Bocaccio et al., 2016). Upon considering Bocaccio et al.'s work, I believe this insight sheds light on potential challenges in communication between allistic and autistic individuals, particularly when nonverbal cues are relied upon instead of direct verbal or written communication.

Autistic individuals may struggle with deciphering subtle meanings and ambiguous gestures, while allistic individuals may face challenges in understanding autistic behaviors and cues accurately. This communication barrier can lead to conflict, particularly in workplace settings where effective communication is essential for successful operations (Bocaccio et al., 2016). Goffman (1963) highlighted how normative expectations of conduct can contribute to misunderstandings between individuals from different backgrounds. Additionally, cultural instincts and socialization shape expectations regarding specific nonverbal cues in interactions. When someone's nonverbal signals deviate from their interaction partner's expectations, it can create interpersonal tension (Bocaccio et al., 2016).

For instance, the autistic tendency to avoid eye contact may create unfavorable impressions among those not familiar with autistic culture because Western allistic culture has normative expectations around the value of eye contact (Tan, 2024). In cultures where eye contact is considered a universal indicator of attention, emotions, and personhood (Goodwin, 1981), as in American culture, failing to maintain eye contact may evoke impressions of dishonesty, lack of confidence, or ignorance. Such assumptions, however, are culturally biased and can lead to unjust moral judgments against autistic individuals (Costello et al., 2021; McCarthy, 2008). Furthermore, gaze avoidance is not unique to autistic culture. East Asian cultures do not hold eye contact as Westerners do. In Japanese culture, eye contact may be disrespectful (Uono & Hietanen, 2015). In Navajo and Ethiopian cultures, eye contact is perceived negatively, and looking downward is a respectful gesture (McCarthy et al., 2008).

Indeed, many autistic people reported that they are averse to eye contact because eye contact can be very distracting when listening and trying to absorb information and can

sometimes be physically painful (Price, 2022; Tan, 2024). Psychologist Dominic Trevisan et al. (2017) qualitatively analyzed how autistic people experience eye contact. Autistic people described having many negative reactions to eye contact, including fear, pain, anxiety, invasiveness, sensory overwhelm, and inability to understand how to use eye contact adequately. Most respondents expressed that they understood that eye contact holds allistic social value but lamented its importance. All reported that forced eye contact is not only inappropriate but also a denial of autistic autonomy (Trevisan et al., 2017).

### ***Impacts of Communication Breakdown***

Communication discord between autistic and allistic colleagues may lead to tensions, conflicts, and general misunderstandings that compound and amplify disconnects over time. Job instability is a significant concern for autistic workers in this regard. Baseless termination is not uncommon for autistic people (Praslova, 2022). Frequently, the discharge of autistic workers depends on employers' misinterpretations of autistic behaviors. Davies et al. (2023) interviewed autistic individuals who faced repeated dismissal from jobs and were consistently relegated to low-paying positions. The respondents described a trend of unfulfilling job placements that could have utilized their unique skills and abilities.

Research conducted by Lim et al. (2021) revealed that autistic individuals were often perceived as deceitful and as having lower levels of competence and character when compared to their neurotypical counterparts. However, these perceptions were not rooted in facts—they were a product of unexpected or atypical behaviors based on cultural differences and misinterpreted by their superiors (Lim et al., 2021). Lim et al. emphasized that it is not a problem with autistic

behaviors that need correction; it is a deficiency of knowledge about autism that precariously positions autistic job security.

Employers may misinterpret typical autistic behaviors, such as asking clarifying questions to better understand task steps, desired outcomes, or unclear information, as acts of insubordination, rudeness, or disrespect. Asking questions can also be perceived as challenging a person's authority—a common experience in many autistic employment scenarios. If managers communicate task responsibility poorly, autistic workers may not realize what they are tasked to do, and they may do nothing, which is then perceived as laziness.

Tone is another area that may confuse allistic colleagues. Autistic may be unable to modulate their tone of voice, creating room for substantial misunderstandings as they are perceived as being angry, sarcastic, or difficult when that is not the case (Henderson & Wayland, 2023; Praslova, 2022). Autistic people may be perceived as not being “team players” due to a tendency to focus on their work rather than interacting with others (Davies et al., 2023). Unfortunately, the termination of an autistic worker often occurs without allowing the employee to present their perspective or defend themselves.

Indeed, 43% of autistic workers said they had left or lost a job because of autistic characteristics (National Autism Society, 2016). In Davies et al.'s (2023) study, a participant described their repeated history of job loss, a result of them saying the wrong thing, offending someone, or using a misinterpreted facial expression—never due to job performance. Being perceived as deceptive, untrustworthy, or unlikeable is a familiar, well-documented experience among autistic people (Alkhaldi et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022). If and when employers allow their autistic employees to voice their concerns or ask questions following reprimand, their

sincere and logical account of the situation can be mistaken for excuses or manipulation (Praslova, 2022).

In fact, research studies have shown that autistic individuals are more susceptible to negative judgments than neurotypical individuals (Praslova, 2022; Sasson et al., 2017). In three separate studies, Sasson et al. (2017) discovered that when allistic people observe autistic individuals, they tend to view autistic people less favorably than nonautistic people. Their perceptions are not only significantly less favorable in reaction to autistic people but also lead to diminished intentions to engage in social interactions (Sasson et al., 2017). If an employer perceives an autistic worker as deceptive or simply unlikeable, they may have a low tolerance for employee mistakes or atypical behaviors (Lim et al., 2021; Praslova, 2022; Samson et al., 2011; Sasson et al., 2017). I speculate that this resistance to interact once a negative judgment has been made could be one reason why autistic employees are terminated so frequently.

Negative judgments toward autistic people emerge within a moment, remain consistent even with prolonged exposure, and persist across both child and adult age groups (Sasson et al., 2017). As Ludmila Praslova (2022) explains that behaviors often associated with stereotypes of being dishonest are also common among autistic individuals. Misguided negative assessments may worsen already tense or conflict-ridden situations in the workplace, amplifying emotional distress and causing further confusion. Thus, per Goffman (1963), “The failure to sustain the many minor norms important in the etiquette of face-to-face communication can have a... pervasive effect upon the defaulter’s acceptability in social situations” (p.129).

Notably, the research discussed in this section draws heavily from the personal narratives of autistic individuals recounting their lived experiences of interacting with and facing

challenges from allistic individuals. These accounts highlight the struggles autistic individuals often encounter when their autistic traits lead to misunderstandings, negative judgments, stereotypes, stigmatization, and bullying by their allistic counterparts. Autistic employees frequently reported experiencing declines in mental health, feelings of alienation, increased stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout resulting from workplace challenges (Davies et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2022; Tan, 2024). In the following section, I look at coping mechanisms autistic individuals use to navigate allistic norms, mitigate conflicts, and safeguard their mental well-being. However, success in this endeavor is not always guaranteed.

### **Autistic Coping Mechanisms**

#### ***Masking***

In the autistic community, the phenomenon of concealing one's identity and adopting neurotypical behavior is called masking. Masking is a common survival technique where autistic people expend copious energy, hiding autistic characteristics to pass (Goffman, 1963) in mainstream society (Price, 2022; Santuzzi & Keating, 2023). Masking is comparable to acculturation and assimilation, concepts originating from sociologists Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess in *The City*, where one adopts the dominant culture's norms and "established codes" (Geertz, 1973) to avoid social problems (Park & Burgess, 1925).

Trepidation around stigma and discrimination can drive identity incongruence or degradation—a discord in self-coherence. Compromised self-coherence is a notable effect of subjugation to a dominant, oppressive culture (Fanon, 1986). Many autistic employees rely on identity management and suppression tactics of masking to control the extent of information revealed about their autistic identity (Price, 2022). Paradoxically, although masking might help



someone navigate through a neurotypical society, it frequently leads to negative mental health consequences for individuals on the autism spectrum (Price, 2022). It is crucial to note that masking is not entirely voluntary. As medical and social anthropologist Ben Belek (2023) put it, social pressure to mask is coercive yet disabling since nonconformity could hinder one's prospects of finding and retaining work, accessing essential services, or nurturing social connections. When one can unmask, it is a great relief (Belek, 2023).

Belek (2023) called attention to the “temporary inversion of hegemonic social order” in describing the collective unmasking that may occur at autistic events or in autistic spaces, underscoring the rarity of such opportunities. Allistic attitudes toward neurodivergent individuals, insufficient workplace accommodations, miscommunication, and discouraging remarks from peers and others all contribute to the extent to which autistic individuals embrace and express their authentic identity. Belek's concept of subverting the dominant social order in autistic spaces reflects a sense of liberation from the anxieties imposed by allistic society and a shared authenticity within the autistic community. In these spaces, autistic individuals are free from concerns about how they are perceived or judged, representing a shift from the norms of allistic culture to those of autistic society. These moments of collective unmasking are cherished due to their rarity (Tan, 2024). Given the relatively low prevalence of autism in the general population—around 2% (CDC, 2023)—opportunities for autistic individuals to simultaneously experience unmasking and a sense of togetherness are limited.

### ***Coherence of Self & Mental Health***

Autistic people have more anxiety at higher rates than neurotypicals (Holmes & Annabi, 2020) and are significantly more vulnerable to harmful psychological stress originating from

overactive chronic autonomic nervous system dysregulation, more commonly known as hyperarousal (Praslova, 2022). More tolerant workplaces could help improve psychological safety. Psychological safety ensures that employees feel safe engaging in interpersonal risk because their competence is respected, they do not fear rejection, they have positive intentions for each other, and they can engage in constructive conflict or confrontation. Psychological safety enhances the mental and physical well-being of all employees of any demographic (Edmonson, 1999).

In their phenomenological study of neurodivergent employment experiences, Burton et al. (2022), participants emphasized the importance of self-education about neurodiversity to find more suitable jobs and better understand their own neurology, their self-coherence otherwise at risk of being obscured due to neuro-normative pressures. Reduced self-coherence related to neurodivergence often caused autistic employees to doubt themselves, which could delay their decision or ability to get a diagnosis, which made it more difficult to assess why they were experiencing challenges. Additionally, a lack of identification of their neurodivergence led to internalized ableism, self-disparaging thoughts, and misunderstandings about themselves (Burton et al., 2022). Furthermore, adding complications to achieving a positive self-image by misunderstanding one's self-identity makes it extremely difficult to access accommodations that could facilitate a positive work experience (Burton et al., 2022).

### **Autistic Skills and Strengths**

Stereotypes aside, autistic people possess specific characteristics and skills intrinsic to autistic neurology, differentiating them from their allistic counterparts. Innovative thinking processes due to highly active synaptic activity include noticing patterns, errors, and

inconsistencies others may overlook (Costello et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2015), the ability to draw novel connections, atypical visualization abilities (Morris et al., 2015; Tomczak & Kulikowski, 2023), and unique cognitive styles (Cooper & Mujtaba, 2022; Hutson & Hutson, 2022), perspectives and ways of thinking (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2015).

### ***Innovation***

Common ways of thinking for autistic people may be considered innovative by nonautistic people (Cope & Remington, 2022), so the outside-the-box thinking autistic workers possess may introduce new perspectives for employers. Director for Human-AI Interaction Research for Google DeepMind, Meredith Ringel Morris et al. (2015) studied challenges autistic workers face by interviewing eight autistic people. They also surveyed 846 neurodivergent software developers and software engineers and got insightful feedback about the workings of autistic brains in a professional environment. One software developer described being able to “execute code in my head” to work out bugs beforehand (Morris et al., 2015), demonstrating a propensity for creative thinking. In the Cope and Remington’s (2022) study, respondents reported that autistic workers’ unconventional ideas offered unique creativity and innovation to the talent pool.

### ***Accuracy and Problem-Solving***

Pattern recognition, attention to detail, and sustained, intense focus are autistic qualities that lend themselves to high accuracy rates in spotting errors or maintaining consistency in work (Coper & Remington, 2022). Austin and Pisano (2017) discussed how autistic individuals exhibit remarkable accuracy, often performing tasks such as manual data entry up to eight times more effectively than their neurotypical counterparts. Autistic people’s extreme accuracy in visual

perception was also noted by researcher, lecturer, and occupational therapist Melissa Scott et al. (2017). Solomon (2020) stated that jobs requiring repetition and accuracy, such as assembly lines, programming, data entry, or lab work, could be well suited for autistic people. He also points out that the patience and precision necessary for these tasks may elude mainstream workers while autistic people find them calming.

Problem-solving is another strength for autistic workers, often because they can see patterns where others cannot. They may also see the big picture and the order of components within the big picture to identify what could change to resolve issues. Therefore, autistic workers may approach problem-solving in ways that expand possibilities for organizational operations due to atypical perspectives on dilemmas (Costello et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2015; Tomczak & Kulikowski, 2023). Morris et al.'s research into autistic worker's experiences provided insight into autistic capabilities. One participant described his approach to problem-solving, saying, "I can make leaps that...other people do not," meaning that he makes unusual connections because of his cognitive style, and his unique thinking is an asset to an organization (Morris et al., 2015).

### ***Organization & Systematization***

Organization and systematization are two more hallmark characteristics of autism, as evidenced by the early identifier of autistic children who line up their toys (Ungerer & Sigman, 1981). These tendencies continue across an autistic person's life, translating into work skills. These skills could position autistic employees as well-suited for systematizing and information cataloging positions. Cope and Remington (2022) conducted interviews with autistic people about their strengths and abilities in the workplace. One participant explained that her autistic ways of thinking helped her systematically conduct literature reviews from many sources.

Autistic people can also be very efficient in completing tasks, possibly due to their intense focus and attention to detail (Costello et al., 2021; LeFevre-Levy et al.; Morris et al., 2015) or the fact that repetition can be appealing for autistic people (Costello et al., 2021). Other noted strengths are focus on long-term recurrent tasks, tolerance for monotonous activities, and technical interest in specific work areas. Companies may find that autistic candidates embody these qualities naturally.

### ***Morality***

Another intriguing characteristic documented in autism research is the tendency of autistic individuals to possess a strong moral compass, often prompting them to voice concerns about moral issues when others may remain silent (Cope & Remington, 2022). Another example comes from a study conducted by neuroscientist Yang Hu et al. (2021), which examined brain activity in autistic and allistic individuals faced with decisions involving morally questionable actions, suggests that autistic individuals demonstrate robust moral inclinations influenced by neuro-specific traits, particularly related to the atypical function of the right temporoparietal region. Autistic individuals consistently lean towards acting in good faith more than their nonautistic counterparts (Hu et al., 2021; Koster-Hale et al., 2013).

Autistic people also have a strong sense of justice (Cope & Remington, 2022; Guthrie, 2023; Milner et al., 2013). The propensity for blunt, direct honesty is a consistent quality among autistic people, thought to be due to their own need for explicit communication with little ambiguity (Costello et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023; Guthrie, 2023). Autistic people also demonstrate increased empathy when working with other disabled people, dedication (Cope & Remington, 2022), reliability, dependability (Solomon, 2020), loyalty, a high degree of

authenticity, and a lifelong enthusiasm for learning (Kirchner et al., 2016). Many autistic traits could be highly desirable for employers but may be overshadowed by stigma and stereotypes, preventing autistic workers from having a chance to prove themselves (Solomon, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The multidimensionally troubled state of autistic unemployment, underemployment, and job dissatisfaction may be the result of society's compulsory allism. Frequently, allistic people view classic autistic traits as character flaws, dissuading hiring or cultivating internal organizational discord. The research from studies highlighted in this chapter indicates that autistic people are often passive actors in their unfortunate circumstances—ones produced by bias, ableism, and organizational inflexibility—all products of normative culture's dominance. The subjectivity of normative culture, wherein one culture is determined to be "normal" or standard, and all others are abnormal, suggests that through education on autism focusing on cultural responsiveness and cross-cultural awareness, conditions for autistic people and relationships between allistic and autistic workers at work may improve. Furthermore, organizations could become more open to change and willing to adapt, which would set the stage for granting accommodations that could address job difficulties autistic people face beyond social stigma, such as environmental and technological barriers.

## Chapter 4: Negotiating Disclosure, Diagnostic Disparities, and Access Infrastructure

### Introduction

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore historical, social, and culturally-driven nuances that shape allistic views on autistic individuals in and out of the workplace. I also discussed how autistic people may need workplace adjustments beyond just physical accommodations, some of which could be perplexing because those needs are highly personalized. The disability is invisible (Wen et al., 2022). Attitudinal, behavioral, and physical organizational barriers could affect an autistic job candidate's chance of being hired and once hired, the worker's ability to keep a job (Bruyère, 2000). Sociocultural, environmental, and technological accommodations could make a workplace more accessible for autistic recruits and workers.

In this chapter, I define access and disability accommodations and briefly explain the ADA and Title I, the ADA's employment section, and the bill's shortcomings. I discuss several aspects of disability accommodations. I begin with disability disclosure, elements that may affect autistic workers' decision to disclose, disclosure's benefits, and its drawbacks. Next, I explain the need for a medical diagnosis of the disability to access accommodations and how intersectional determinants affect access to diagnosis. I then examine how access to diagnosis impacts disclosure and receipt of accommodations. Finally, I review disability access across multiple dimensions, structural frameworks, procedures, and implementation to elucidate the comprehensive approaches necessary to address disability requirements and foster fair and inclusive workplaces.

## **Disability Access and Accommodations**

### ***The ADA***

Disability accommodations are complex from conception to execution. They are wide-ranging in application, individualized, and highly contextualized. Thanks to the ADA, disabled people have legal protections that allow them to access reasonable accommodations at work (Petty et al., 2022). Ultimately, accommodations positively impact employee well-being and their ability to work by making their job as accessible to them as it is to any abled person. However, employers may impose constraints on their accommodations because they do not want to go beyond what the law requires under the ADA, may not recognize the importance, may have a bias against disability, or lack an understanding of the legal and functional process of accommodations.

The ADA (1990) became law on July 26, 1990, marking the first comprehensive civil rights legislation for individuals with disabilities. The result of a long social justice movement for disability rights, independence, and self-determination after a long history of social exclusion, the ADA sought to enact civil rights for disabled Americans. The ADA prohibits discrimination against disabled people through policies and government mandates for employers, state and local governments, public-facing businesses, commercial establishments, transportation services, and telecommunications firms. The ADA's Title I sections pertain to employers with fifteen or more employees. Title I also encompasses state and local governments, employment agencies, and labor unions. The ADA and Title I's primary obligation is to afford individuals with disabilities an equitable chance to access employment-related opportunities on par with their abled counterparts. Equal opportunities include the recruitment of job candidates in hiring



processes through promotion criteria, training initiatives, compensation structures, and involvement in social activities. The ADA establishes explicit criteria for employers to guarantee equitable employment access for disabled people (Civil Rights Division, 2024).

Despite the ADA's legal protections, autistic workers may face barriers to access to accommodations. An autism diagnosis ties a person to a widely pathologized condition (autism), which may deter those needing accommodations from seeking a diagnosis (Davies et al., 2023). While the ADA safeguards against discrimination for individuals with disabilities, it does not guarantee their inclusion in recruitment and hiring processes. Many companies lack motivation to seek out and employ autistic individuals actively, primarily because they assume autistic people have intellectual disabilities (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2021). This hesitancy preemptively excludes autistic people from jobs where accommodations may create inclusive environments. Disclosure may not warrant substantial accommodations (Lindsay et al., 2021), according to an employer, despite the needs and requests of the employee. Indeed, there is a complex process for requesting and receiving accommodations that involves the recognition of unmet needs and collaboration between employee and employer. Cooperation influences access outcomes.

From my standpoint, understanding disability disclosure and why some autistic individuals opt not to disclose requires an examination of various factors, including personal, intersectional, legal, sociocultural, technological, and environmental elements that influence disability accommodations and the decision to disclose. While disclosure can lead to positive outcomes with significant potential for solutions in the workplace, for individuals, and for society, a parallel potential exists for adverse consequences. Autistic workers often face external challenges, including stigma, employer-imposed barriers, and mistreatment by colleagues. These

factors can make accessing accommodations seem daunting and insurmountable. Organizations' commitment to fostering inclusion through established values, open communication, and transparency shapes the effectiveness of accommodation outcomes. In the subsequent sections, I investigate the accommodation process, exploring the factors influencing whether, how, and when individuals disclose their disability. I then examine the disparities impacting access to diagnosis and how they might affect a worker's ability to access accommodations.

### ***Disability Disclosure***

Legal protections against disability discrimination, like access to accommodations, hinge upon an employee's decision to disclose their disability. This decision is particularly critical for individuals with invisible disabilities like autism. Given that autism is a cognitive-developmental condition, the characteristics associated with it may go unnoticed by colleagues. Consequently, autistic employees may encounter more significant challenges in disclosing their disability compared to those with more visible or physical impairments (Santuzzi et al., 2014) because they also must explain how it manifests and impacts their productivity. A study by TextHelp, a global leader in literacy software development, revealed that 76% of neurodivergent employees do not disclose their disability due to fear that doing so will compromise their career trajectory (Hutson & Hutson, 2022). Inclusive environments, built upon the premise that neurodiversity is omnipresent and that diverse neurological profiles constitute the authentic fabric of society, including its workplaces, can provide proactive support for autistic individuals who may be hesitant to disclose their condition.

Lindsay et al. (2021) explain how, for autistic workers, obtaining a fulfilling job where it is safe to disclose one's disability and access accommodations is challenging (Lindsay et al.,

2021). Accessibility could ensure positive interview experience and job performance, so nondisclosure could impede autistic people's ability to acquire and keep paid employment (Davies et al., 2023). Still, disabled people face difficult decisions about if, when, and how to disclose their disability (Lindsay et al., 2021). In a study of autistic people's priorities for future autism employment research, Davies et al. (2023) found that dis/comfort around autism disclosure is a common theme. One participant expressed, "I would like [autistic] people to feel safe and comfortable disclosing." Another respondent felt that disclosure should not be a fraught decision—it should be as natural as disclosing that "English is their second language, or that they are left-handed."

The advantages or disadvantages of disclosing one's autism vary by individual (Lindsay et al., 2021). Pediatrician and occupational therapist Sandra Thompson-Hodgetts and colleagues conducted a scoping review of autism disclosure. They found that out of thirty-seven research studies, only nine included autistic voices. However, in those studies, autistic people indicated that by disclosing their disability, there may be positive outcomes, including greater social awareness of autism (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020).

It is possible that an employee's disability disclosure could benefit others in the organization. Post disclosure support may enhance work environments to the benefit of autistic and allistic workers alike by providing multiple methods to execute tasks. Some research has shown that autistic employees' anxiety decreased as support increased and confidence grew. Another benefit was improved acceptance, inclusion, and empathy from coworkers (Morris et al., 2015). Santuzzi et al. (2014) found that autistic workers felt encouraged when work accommodations were granted after their disclosure. Autism awareness among peers improved.

Improved safety and enhanced job performance resulted from autistic employees' disclosure and accommodations. Santuzzi et al. also demonstrated that disclosure reduced workers' chances of unemployment because being understood gave them more job security because colleagues better understood their differences.

The decision to disclose one's disability is deeply personal for most autistic individuals and not made lightly. Revealing oneself as autistic carries the risk of facing unpredictable outcomes, where the benefits might outweigh the negatives, or it could lead to disastrous consequences. The uncertainty surrounding disclosure adds to the complexity of this decision (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Moreover, when an autistic individual decides to disclose their neurodivergence, having a formal diagnosis becomes crucial to validate their identity. I argue that this intricate web of factors presents a unique hurdle for disabled workers that nondisabled employees typically do not encounter. Additionally, the level of organizational support for navigating the disclosure process can vary greatly. Consequently, the job security of an autistic employee might already be in jeopardy even before discussions about accommodations come into play.

### ***Diagnostic Disparities***

Once an autistic employee recognizes that they could benefit from disability accommodations and want to disclose their disability, in most cases, they must submit a record of an autism diagnosis to receive reasonable accommodations. A licensed psychiatrist, psychologist (Ph.D.), neurologist, or medical doctor can diagnose autism. In most cases, the patient is put through a series of tests administered over days or weeks (Harvard Medical School, 2024; Price,

2022). However, a long-term relationship with one's doctor may provide enough evidence to diagnose autism without testing (Mayer, 2021).

The decision to seek a diagnosis may be difficult, and procuring the diagnosis adds another complicated step (Lewis, 2017). Before seeking a diagnosis, many autistic individuals report feeling marginalized. They face significant risks, including misunderstanding others and being misunderstood, bullying, social isolation, loneliness, and a dearth of close friendships (Portway & Johnson, 2005). So, autistic people report consistently feeling like outsiders before embarking on the diagnostic journey in adulthood. Throughout their childhoods, their autistic traits went unrecognized by adults (de Broize et al., 2022). Long-term consequences of being undiagnosed might include underachievement and prolonged reliance on parental support, as well as mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, obsessions, and expressions of suicidal ideation (Lewis, 2017).

The medical part of the diagnostic journey is often marked by missed opportunities, not being believed by care providers, inadequate support systems, skepticism towards healthcare systems, a personal history of misdiagnosis, poor self-esteem, and other mental health challenges, including habitual masking that had become part of their identity (Lewis, 2017). Distrust of the medical system is commonly mentioned as a reason that autistic adults have not sought diagnosis (Lewis, 2017), reporting that misdiagnoses, a lack of autism awareness, feelings of being misunderstood, and being unfairly blamed by professionals led to anxiety and mistrust towards mental health practitioners (Punshon et al., 2009).

Moreover, the financial costs of diagnosis can be highly prohibitive, particularly for a population with unstable employment. Many autistic adults must pay thousands of dollars out-of-

pocket for their diagnoses because insurance may not cover later-life diagnoses (Price, 2022). In a review of literature on diagnostic experiences of autistic adults, Laura Foran Lewis (2017), RN, PhD, found that 70% of respondents were concerned about the cost of seeing a professional. Almost 60% noted that cost was a deterrent when pursuing a diagnosis because it was not covered by insurance (Lewis, 2017).

Indeed, autism has historically been underdiagnosed, and access to autism assessments, diagnostics, and therapy is affected by numerous cultural, structural, and intersectional (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) identities (Singh & Bunyak, 2019) and factors. Intersectionality, originating from Black feminist thought, provides a theoretical framework and methodology for analyzing social relations and processes across various aspects of life and systems. It examines how overlapping and hierarchical social identities such as race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status shape the specific systemic oppression and discrimination faced by individuals. This framework recognizes the power dynamics within these intersecting social categories (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) and how they affect one's lived experience. By incorporating intersectionality into the analysis of autistic experiences, we can account for social and structural inequities and how those differences affect various individuals and communities.

Historically, white children are diagnosed as autistic more often, and they are diagnosed earlier than children in other racial and ethnic groups (Pham et al., 2022). Today, autism diagnoses are more accessible than in years prior, and the disparity gaps are shrinking, according to the CDC (2022). Autism is recognized more often in women, people of color, transgender people, people of lower economic means, or those without access to healthcare (CDC, 2022; Price, 2022). Autism diagnosis rates have increased by about 178% since 2000 (CDC, 2023) due

to de-institutionalization, broader diagnostic criteria in the DSM-V, increased screenings (CDC, 2022), fewer systemic barriers such as race (Furfaro, 2017; Pham et al., 2022), increased services, increased autism awareness, early identification (CDC, 2023) and increased survival rates of preterm babies who are more likely to have developmental disabilities (CDC, 2022).

According to the CDC (2022), research has also indicated that stigma, limited healthcare accessibility stemming from noncitizenship or low socioeconomic status, and a primary language other than English have been obstacles to detecting autism in children, particularly among Hispanic populations. Sociologists Jennifer Singh and Garrett Bunyak (2019) analyzed peer-reviewed qualitative research on social and structural elements contributing to autism diagnostic disparities. They identified three main barriers to diagnosis: familial, cultural, and structural. Family values and relationships play a role in whether one gets diagnosed. Autistic characteristics may not stand out, parents may want to avoid labeling their children (Lewis, 2017), or autistic people might not want to burden their families with the notion of being autistic (Singh & Bunyak, 2019).

Cultural barriers to diagnosis can include community beliefs regarding autism, stigma (Lewis, 2017), language barriers, and cultural isolation (Habayeb et al., 2021; Lewis, 2017; Punshon et al., 2009). Structural barriers include access to health care, competent medical providers, and education about autism (CDC, 2022; Pham, 2022; Singh & Bunyak, 2019). Then, intersectional identities, where autism intersects with race, class, gender, or low socioeconomic status, can obfuscate one's ability to gain a diagnosis—particularly so if the autistic person is outside of childhood (Angell et al., 2018; Habayeb et al., 2021; Saxe, 2017). Cultural, structural, and intersectional factors may be why many autistic adults go undiagnosed until later in life

when work or other difficulties demand an evaluation of why they are struggling to communicate, fit in, get, or retain a job (Lewis, 2017). Importantly, it is because of diagnostic disparities that many autistic people in the neurodiversity movement support autism self-diagnosis as valid (Price, 2022). However valid self-diagnosis is in the social environment, a lack of a medical diagnosis can make access to accommodations difficult because that is the key to legal protections (Civil Rights Division, 2024).

For an autistic person who has not been diagnosed and has had trouble keeping a job because they have not received the necessary support, the financial and other costs of getting diagnosed may be a barrier, even though the diagnosis could help improve their employment situation. Thus, disparities in diagnosis can have multiple adverse outcomes in how and if autistic people can gain access to the support they need to succeed in work and life overall. In one phenomenological study, most of the autistic participants reported that a formal diagnosis benefited them (Lewis, 2017), stating that the diagnosis gave them a sense of self-worth, offered strategies to improve their well-being, and helped them establish and sustain their sense of normality (Lewis, 2016). Nevertheless, the journey to diagnosis is fraught with challenges, and once the diagnosis has been made, additional concerns affect one's decision to disclose.

### ***Factors Affecting Disclosure***

Disclosing one's disability can be a complicated decision for autistic people and is influenced by personal and external factors. Sally Lindsay, Senior Scientist at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, and colleagues (Lindsay et al., 2021) pinpointed several factors affecting an employee's decision to disclose their disability: age at diagnosis, comfort with their diagnosis, social demands of the job, workplace policies, and lack of awareness about autism



from colleagues and management. Accommodations and disclosure may become imperative even when they do not want to disclose, but revealing their autism is necessary to prevent job loss (Hutson & Hutson, 2022).

Robert Edgerton was a groundbreaking anthropologist who conducted ethnographies on individuals with developmental disabilities. In “Mental Retardation and Anthropology,” (1984) Edgerton discussed how some individuals with cognitive disabilities navigate the workplace by either withholding information about themselves or presenting themselves in a manner that conforms more closely to neurotypical standards. This early literature on disability indicates that masking is an adaptation that exists as a self-preservation skill and has been around if disability has been deemed an impairment. While masking may be detrimental to the authentic nature and mental health of autistic people (Pearson & Rose, 2023; Price, 2022), the adaptation (Edgerton, 1984) could impair one’s disclosure and diagnosis (CDC, 2023; Price, 2022).

Autistic individuals may harbor various fears regarding disclosing their autism. These apprehensions stem from the anticipation of encountering stigma and losing job stability, reinforced by past experiences with discrimination (Santuzzi & Keating, 2023). Consequently, many individuals belonging to neuro-minorities opt not to disclose their status out of concern for facing stereotype threats (Priscott & Allen, 2021), bullying (Pearson et al., 2022), exclusion, or other negative behaviors (Price, 2022). Reluctance to disclose poses a significant barrier to seeking accommodations in the workplace (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020). One factor could be that neurodivergent individuals may perceive themselves as lacking authority and influence over their circumstances despite possessing vast untapped human potential and unique skills that could significantly benefit organizations once recognized. Consequently, when these

individuals hesitate to disclose their neurodivergence due to fears of stereotyping, organizations may fail to recognize the significant advantages autistic individuals could bring to the workforce (Priscott & Allen, 2021).

Burton et al. (2022) noted that neurodivergent individuals are hesitant to disclose their condition. Morris et al. (2015) reported that 50% of their autistic participant pool decided against disclosing their disability at work. Motivations for concealing their autism diagnosis aligned with the research above; primarily, autistic workers worried about negative judgment and discrimination. One participant explained his logic around nondisclosure. “I do not think our business is mature enough around its understanding of autistic spectrum conditions at the moment” (Morris et al., 2015). The participants that Morris et al. interviewed or surveyed expressed a desire for increased awareness and sensitivity among colleagues toward the needs of neurodivergent coworkers. They struggled to reconcile this aspiration with the perceived risks of disclosing their neurodiversity.

Thus, it appears that disability disclosure is a multifaceted scenario affected by issues like access to diagnosis, difficulties at work, and issues such as fear of stigma, termination, rejection, or the absence of autism awareness. As I see it, disclosure and accommodations may be the only course of action to retain a job once autistic characteristics become an issue, even if the employee would rather keep their medical history private. Once one’s autism has been disclosed, there is a wealth of factors that impact one’s access to and the efficacy of disability accommodations.

### ***Accommodation Obstacles***

I have identified many factors that impact the effectiveness of workplace accommodations for autistic employees. These factors, ranging from the initial recognition of the need for accommodations to their eventual implementation, include legal considerations, organizational attitudes and values, and the distinct and highly individualized needs of autistic employees. Once the need for accommodations is recognized, they can take various forms, such as environmental, technological, and sociocultural adjustments. However, I speculate that an organization's accessibility infrastructure can either facilitate or hinder autistic employees' access to these accommodations. Furthermore, organizations may face challenges in providing accommodations, further complicating the process.

Many disabled people may refrain from requesting accommodations because they feel they lack the knowledge to make an informed request for accommodations that will solve workplace issues such as communication or performance challenges. It may be difficult for an autistic employee to know what would be helpful for them because accommodations can be iterative and trial-and-error—particularly without precedent (Burton et al., 2022). There could be financial or relational costs if colleagues are bitter about an employee's unique circumstances (Schur et al., 2005). When coworkers are not on board with accommodations, it could damage worker spirit, increase mistreatment of the autistic employee, or affect job performance.

Abled employees could interpret disability accommodations in a variety of ways, depending on their awareness of disability. Coworkers may perceive accommodations as giving the disabled employee an advantage or reward, negatively impacting abled employees, eating up resources, or making the work environment less competitive. These possibilities indicate the role

of a cohesive, comprehensive culture of inclusion with established working relationships that harbor empathy and compassion (Schur et al., 2005).

Susanne Bruyère, an expert in employment and disability, and her colleagues conducted a study to explore the factors affecting the acquisition and retention of employment for individuals with disabilities (Bruyère et al., 2003). Their research involved sampling organizations of various sizes and interviewing human resource representatives. The study highlighted several key barriers to accessibility. These included a need for more awareness among managerial staff regarding the nature and process of accommodations, financial constraints, and a tendency among leadership to prioritize maintaining hierarchy, authority, and control within the workplace. The rigid cultural norms within an organization may further impede its ability to recognize the necessity for and effectively implement disability accommodations (Bruyère et al., 2003).

I suggest that organizations adopt what I refer to as “access infrastructure,” which could encompass all essential elements for effectively managing disability accommodations to overcome the access barriers outlined earlier. The key facets of this access infrastructure will directly address the challenges identified by Bruyère et al. (2003) that hinder disabled workers’ access to and retention of employment opportunities. Based on my research findings, I identify the components of access infrastructure, which include disability awareness and cross-cultural training, financial strategies for disability management, inclusion tactics, and the establishment of legal frameworks. A comprehensive access infrastructure could support organizational leadership in navigating the accommodations process confidently and support employees through

a well-defined plan. Access infrastructure would be guided by methodologies representing an organization's values and principles around disability.

## **Access Infrastructure**

### *Access Methodologies*

Access methodologies encompass the system of methods used to approach and navigate disability access. Access involves affording a disabled person the ability to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use. Access frequently relies on disability accommodations and implemented measures to ensure accessibility. In my view, a company's values and commitment to inclusion principles primarily determine access. Achieving access involves a collaborative process of discovery between employee and employer, revealing information about the autistic worker, the organization's leadership, and their capacities for collaboration (Ott et al., 2022).

There are generally five phases in the accommodation process. First, the employer or employee must identify that accommodations are needed. Second, the employer and employee must determine the necessary accommodations to help the disabled person. In phase 3, a formal request for accommodations will occur, and the process moves into phase four, the planning phase, where the employer and employee strategize how to develop the accommodations. In phase 5, the final phase, accommodations are implemented. Accommodation plans also include regular monitoring of their effectiveness and adapting them for any needed changes (Job Accommodation Network, 2023). Autistic needs vary from person to person, so there may be numerous accommodation solutions and strategies to get there.

### *Access Strategies*

Building strategies for supporting workers before accommodations arise may benefit organizational operations. Disability support initiatives could go above and beyond legal requirements within organizations (Johnson et al., 2020) to improve access to more nuanced aspects of autism, such as sociocultural and communication challenges (Morris et al., 2015; (Davies et al., 2023). In Morris et al.'s (2015) study, approximately 32% of autistic respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the support or accommodations provided by their employer or manager. Thirty percent voiced concerns about the need for more support or adjustments they received. Thirty-eight percent of participants indicated that the work environment's suitability in the context of their autism was subpar. According to an informal survey by autism advocate Chris Bonello (2022), only 18% of the 7500 participants considered their employers adept at accommodating their needs, while 46% expressed dissatisfaction.

In a study of neurodivergent software engineers, Davies et al. (2023) revealed that employment, while needed and wanted, was also the cause of adverse mental, physical, and emotional health effects. It was also a contributor to burnout. Participants felt that a more inclusive environment that did not require so much effort to adapt to would result in more positive mental health outcomes. Despite the challenge of identifying necessary accommodations, companies can implement easily executable support options without significant economic impact. Primary among these is fostering a company culture of acceptance, which can help mitigate sociocultural tensions. Developing a neurodiversity strategy and ensuring all managers and leaders are informed about the company's commitment to neuro-inclusion is the initial step in addressing the access needs of autistic workers (Ott et al., 2022).

Providing training on neurodivergence for managers and workers could establish a robust support system, potentially alleviating the daily challenges faced by autistic workers.

Company culture that accounts for neurodivergence across all settings, from recruitment and hiring to employment, could effectively establish comprehensive policies that embrace diversity. Initiating adjustments to the recruiting and interview processes can prevent the alienation of autistic individuals, encouraging more to apply for open positions. Traditional recruitment and interview methods may unintentionally exclude autistic candidates (Costello et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023). Davies et al. (2023) found that, according to autistic research participants, interviews represented a significant barrier to viable employment due to their alignment with neurotypical expectations and behaviors, placing autistic talent at a disadvantage. As noted in Morris et al.'s 2015 study, an autistic participant mentioned that his lack of eye contact might have made the interviewer perceive him as untrustworthy.

Autistic individuals and those with developmental disabilities may encounter assumptions that they are unsuitable candidates. They may feel the need to mask their autism in job interviews. In both scenarios, their employment prospects are hindered (Gedikli et al., 2023). However, there are programs actively recruiting autistic workers that are dismantling systems that exclude autistic workers. Companies like SAP, HPE, J. P. Morgan Chase, and Microsoft have adapted their interview processes to boost neurodiversity in their workforce by actively seeking neurodivergent talent during recruitment (Wei, 2013). Esther Shein (2020), a freelance technology and business writer, interviewed Anthony Pacilio, former vice president and global head of Autism at Work for JPMorgan Chase, to learn more about the program's outcomes.

Autism at Work is an inclusion initiative that started in 2015 after Pacilio witnessed autistic workers' success in IT roles and needed to fill four roles at JP Morgan Chase.

Pacilio explained that the journey of the Autism at Work program at JPMorgan Chase began with a strategic approach (as quoted in Schein, 2020). The company enlisted the help of a local talent sourcing firm to scout for candidates, focusing initially on filling quality assurance (QA) roles. Pacilio emphasized their organization's commitment to recruiting and retaining autistic employees, offering accommodations in the early stages of their relationship, such as providing detailed directions to the interview location, descriptions of the interview environment, and interviewers' photos to build familiarity and alleviate anxiety before the interview took place (Schein, 2020).

What started as a small-scale pilot project with four individuals has since flourished, a testament to the power of strategic planning and commitment to diversity and inclusion. The project spans eight countries and has placed workers in over 40 diverse job roles. It has successfully employed 176 autistic individuals. The pilot group's performance was particularly noteworthy, with autistic workers demonstrating a 48% increase in productivity compared to their allistic peers. The initiative's success has led the pilot to evolve into a full-fledged program (Schein, 2020).

Schein (2020) explained that Pacilio emphasized the unique qualities that autistic individuals bring to the workplace. These qualities, such as keen focus, adept pattern recognition, and innate logical thinking, have brought a fresh perspective to their teams. Pacilio explained that autistic workers' decision-making and problem-solving skills are unmatched, and their presence fosters a unique work ethic that can drive innovation and success in the environment.



Interacting with autistic coworkers has also increased awareness among JPMorgan Chase employees (Schein, 2020).

Pacilio highlighted that many of his allistic colleagues are often surprised by their initial assumptions about working with autistic individuals. Interacting with diverse perspectives challenges their preconceived notions. This exposure to different viewpoints has led to a greater appreciation for the benefits of an open-minded approach to problem-solving. Moreover, Pacilio emphasized that embracing individuals who approach challenges differently enhances workplace dynamics and fosters innovation and growth opportunities (Schein, 2020).

From my perspective, the success stories of autism inclusion efforts at JPMorgan Chase are a reassuring reminder that hiring individuals on the autism spectrum can significantly boost productivity and expand employment opportunities for autistic individuals. These examples may inspire other organizations to adopt similar autism inclusion practices. The Autism at Work program at JPMorgan Chase is a practical model for incorporating diversity and inclusivity from the outset, including during recruitment, hiring, and interviews, which could lead to successful employment outcomes and catalyze shifts in organizational culture.

## **Accommodation Approaches and Typologies**

### ***A Strength-Based Approach***

A strength-based approach to accommodating autistic workers in their job roles and performance may be an optimal way of managing worker needs and struggles. A strength-based approach rejects impairment and deficit-focused perspectives that may impose constraints on employees by focusing on what they cannot do. Instead, the strength-based approach prioritizes a more comprehensive understanding of the autistic individual and capitalizes on their assets

(Silverman et al., 2023). In addressing the needs of people with developmental or mental disabilities, strength-based strategies will focus on their assets instead of what they lack (Ott et al., 2022; Tomczak, 2022; Wiklund et al., 2020). Building on one's talents may be more favorable than correcting deficits and promoting worker and managerial confidence (Proslova, 2021). Likewise, strength-based approaches to workplace inclusion during the recruitment and interview may help attract and acquire autistic employees. Indeed, in research conducted by Morris et al. (2015), development and achievement goals based on individual strengths are more likely to see success than models based on deficits.

I argue that viewing autism through a neuro-affirming lens rather than a set of deficits supports difference-as-strength and identity-specific strengths approaches to worker access and may require some shifts in organizational culture to be fully integrated to reach inclusion. Culturally appropriate, strength-oriented accommodations could challenge norms rooted in stigma, stereotypes, and inequality and assist in uprooting systems of oppression. Moreover, changing a company's environment to accommodate neurodivergence may foster a more compassionate, culturally sensitive, and understanding climate that could inspire autistic workers to disclose their disability and allow others to discover their neurodivergence (Morris et al., 2015).

### ***Environmental Accommodations***

Navigating complex work environments poses challenges for autistic individuals due to sensory hypersensitivity (Costello et al., 2021). While allistic brains experience sensory tolerance and acclimatization, where prolonged exposure to stimuli desensitizes the person, autism significantly heightens sensory experiences, magnifying environmental stimuli over time (Price,

2022). For an autistic person, minor sounds can be experienced as unbearably loud.

Photosensitivity may be more acute for autistic people, so lighting tailored for neurotypical individuals may prove overly intense. Heightened tactile sensations often result in discomfort or pain from clothing the longer one wears it. Routine distractions within a workplace, like movement and conversations, can compound, increasing overstimulation for autistic individuals, thus impeding their task concentration.

In a study of 30 autistic men, 30 autistic women, 20 allistic men, and 24 allistic women that examined sensory sensitivity and autism, psychologist Michelle Leenders Kiep et al. (2023) showed that autistic individuals often experience overstimulation, which can lead to mental and physical shutdowns due to compromised executive functioning and is often affected by sensory reactivity. Overstimulation occurs when sensory input overwhelms the visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile systems, and may render the individual unable to cope (Price, 2022). Prolonged exposure to excessive sensory stimuli can contribute to social anxiety and other related conditions, including depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and dysregulation (Price, 2022; Wood et al., 2010).

Open workspaces can exacerbate overstimulation, heightening anxiety and presenting sensory and behavioral challenges (Costello et al., 2021). However, environmental adjustments, as recommended by Hedley et al. (2018) and Costello et al. (2021), such as lighting modifications, noise control, creation of scent-free spaces, and thoughtful spatial organization, including furniture and desk placement, can effectively alleviate sensory overwhelm among autistic individuals in the workplace. These alterations to the physical environment can help reduce stress and anxiety triggers.

Given that open floor plans may not suit the needs of neurodivergent individuals, alternative arrangements should be made available (Morris et al., 2015). Implementing indirect lighting with adjustable brightness, maintaining clean and organized workspaces, and providing quiet or private rooms for focused work or breaks (Holmes & Annabi, 2020; Ren, 2020) can significantly enhance the sensory experience for autistic individuals in the workplace.

Considering the significant influence sensory experiences exert on the functioning of autistic individuals and the stark contrast in these experiences compared to those of allistic individuals, it is not uncommon for allistic individuals to view reports of overstimulation from autistic individuals with skepticism. In a workplace setting, such complaints might be misconstrued as laziness, difficulty, or defiance when, in fact, the autistic individual may be simply trying to manage their environment and perform their job effectively. Adding to the complexity is the variability of autistic sensitivities, which can fluctuate from day to day or even moment to moment, influenced by both external and internal factors. This unpredictable nature of sensory sensitivity may even undermine the effectiveness of accommodations provided, indicating the need for flexibility when granting accommodations (Lindsay et al., 2021). Sensitivity to environmental needs through training and awareness may foster more accommodating environments for autistic workers.

### ***Technological Accommodations***

For disabled people, identity and assistive technology may be inseparable. Wheelchair users, for instance, may feel that their wheelchair is an extension of their body. The embodiment of disability is a central part of the disability experience and identity, particularly for those with congenital disabilities like autism (Loja et al., 2012). Assistive technology, while necessary for

many, might not be accessible to all due to financial barriers and limited knowledge of existing technologies. Workplaces are ripe with opportunities to implement assistive technologies.

Autistic people may face executive functioning issues with organization or scheduling, speech differences such as being nonspeaking, processing delays, and compulsory movement habits (Costello et al., 2021; Hedley et al., 2018; Price, 2022). These may be addressed through integrations of assistive technology. The cultural understanding and interpretation of autism within a workplace will influence the accommodation strategies chosen (Ripat & Woodgate, 2011). Individual feelings around using a device may dissuade an employee from accepting help in this form.

Autistic communication challenges extend beyond the content of interactions; some autistic individuals may be nonspeakers intermittently or consistently, relying on assistive technologies for communication. Various forms of sign language, including ASL (American Sign Language) (Bonvillian et al., 1981), BSL (British Sign Language) (Denmark et al., 2014), and BASL (Black Sign Language) (Arumburo, 1989), may be used, despite the difficulty autistic individuals may have in understanding facial expressions, which are integral to sign languages. Augmentative and alternative communication devices can generate speech. Speech recognition and speech-to-text software may also be helpful (Price, 2022).

According to neurologist Eleni A Demetriou et al. (2019), executive functions are the comprehensive regulation of purpose-driven, proactive, and higher-order cognitive processes related to the brain's frontal lobe. Autistic adults reported having significantly more problems with executive functioning than their allistic counterparts. Executive functions involve faculties influencing and coordinating fundamental capacities, such as attention and memory (Demetriou

et al., 2019). EF describes a repertoire of skills around one's capacity for planning, organization, and strategic thinking, as well as the ability to attend to and retain details, initiate, and halt actions, and conceptualize and engage in abstract reasoning.

Executive functions also serve to deter inappropriate behaviors and engage mental flexibility. Individuals with compromised executive functions encounter challenges in monitoring and regulating their conduct, which could affect their ability to monitor and modify behavior as necessary, prepare future behavioral strategies in response to unfamiliar tasks and contexts, and forecast potential outcomes while adapting to changing circumstances. Autistic people with compromised executive functions may encounter obstacles in interpersonal interactions (Demetriou et al., 2019).

Accommodating executive functioning challenges may involve providing calendars or organizing software, setting timers, creating flow charts, setting clear descriptions and divisions of tasks, introducing customizable interfaces, and delineating timelines. While the above is only a tiny example of technological accommodations available to organizations and their employees, there are countless more options if collaborating employee-employer teams are creative and flexible with planning and implementation.

### ***Sociocultural Accommodations***

The sociocultural aspects of a workplace may encompass relations, interactions, and communication. Organizations often excel at offering environmental and physical accommodations compared to sociocultural adjustments (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020). However, when an organizational culture does not appreciate diversity or fails to make room for accommodating disabled workers in various capacities, it can contribute to adverse

mental and physical health conditions for employees (Bruyère, 2000). As discussed in Chapter 3, allistic-centered sociocultural norms may clash with autistic sociocultural norms, resulting in misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Research indicates that this phenomenon is not exclusive to allistic-autistic relations—in many cases, different cultures may have difficulty relating to the cultural expectations and habits of another (Matsumoto et al., 2008).

For example, by neurotypical norms, autistic individuals may come across as rude or peculiar due to their inclination towards formal speech or difficulty controlling their volume. Such deviations from social norms can lead to peer rejection or even victimization, intensifying social anxiety and prompting withdrawal in autistic individuals (Ollendick & White, 2012). Within the workplace, peer exclusion and alienation may force autistic individuals to suppress their natural behaviors, consequently worsening sensory sensitivities and emotional dysregulation. These sociocultural challenges may intertwine, creating an unsustainable work environment (Morris et al., 2015).

Adding further complexity to interactions, autistic individuals often face challenges deciphering the subtle nuances in their coworkers' statements and facial expressions (Meyer Lindenberg et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2015). This difficulty extends to navigating office politics and managing conflicts with colleagues, ultimately contributing to heightened tensions (Morris et al., 2015). Moreover, alexithymia, a common co-condition in autism characterized by struggles in identifying one's and others' emotions, poses significant obstacles to mutual understanding (Morris et al., 2015).

Due to their difficulty in meeting synchronous communication expectations, autistic individuals may find asynchronous communication preferable. This allows them additional time

to process and interpret messages before responding. Morris et al. (2015) suggested that stressors such as team meetings and job interviews were explicitly highlighted in conversations with autistic employees about working conditions. Autistic individuals may experience challenges related to auditory processing or become overstimulated by the presence of many people or the volume of information (Morris et al., 2015). Implementing accommodations such as providing audio recordings of meetings for later reference could help address these issues.

Characteristics associated with autism, alongside others' reactions to them, can contribute to anxiety (Ollendick & White, 2012). Repetitive behaviors and fixations (Costello et al., 2021; Lefevre-Levy et al., 2021), as well as rigidity in routines (Costello et al., 2021), such as resistance to change or disruptions in predictable schedules, may interfere with supervisors' workflows (Holmes & Annabi, 2020). For autistic individuals, navigating the flexibility required in many workplaces can present challenges (Costello et al., 2021). The resulting tensions may lead to consequences or behavioral corrections that worsen social anxiety and related conditions like depression and OCD (Wood et al., 2010). Increased levels of anxiety and negative emotional states can intensify autistic traits, behavioral difficulties, and personal distress, ultimately diminishing overall quality of life (Wood et al., 2010).

A Columbia University study discovered that employers implementing robust programs offering participatory decision-making, conflict resolution, job security, and disability support and accommodations can mitigate dysregulation and other traits that may worsen with increased stress, such as executive functioning issues (Lewin & Schecter, 1995). Additionally, implementing personalized communication strategies tailored to individual needs, utilizing multimodal communication methods, and emphasizing specificity, directness, and explicitness



can significantly support autistic employees (Morris et al., 2015). The challenges in social communication and interactions experienced by autistic individuals can adversely affect teamwork, leadership, and emotional well-being (Costello et al., 2021). Regular misunderstandings in social situations between allistic and autistic workers may contribute to social anxiety and aversive experiences (Wood et al., 2010), underscoring the importance of fostering understanding and accommodating diverse communication styles in the workplace.

Corporations have found that modifying communication protocols to reduce ambiguity, subtlety, idioms, metaphors, subtext, and hyperbole in instructions and interactions with autistic workers has led to more effective communication between parties (Hutson & Hutson, 2023). Additionally, support from coworkers (Costello et al., 2021), transparent team relationships, and clear roles (Morris et al., 2015) have resulted in positive outcomes for autistic workers in performance and relations. Furthermore, supervisors can provide support by establishing solid managerial roles (Morris et al., 2015) and offering one-on-one meetings where autistic workers can feel comfortable asking for clarification and receiving feedback without fear of judgment (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013; Morris et al., 2015).

In Morris et al. (2015), one respondent explained how they set up a private weekly meeting with their manager to address miscommunications or confusion on jobs that may have arisen during the week. This individual also requested that their supervisor provide supplementary details to emails and conversations to clarify any ambiguities. Autistic workers could also benefit from receiving meeting agendas beforehand. Buddy and mentor schemes have been shown to offer important support, relationship-building, and someone who could act as a mediator if needed (Lee et al., 2020). Fundamentally, creating a climate of tolerance that

recognizes the relevance of autistic social norms and how they differ from allistic norms is crucial to a more harmonious workplace. As educator Sonny Jane (2019) explained, “It is not that being autistic affects our social skills. It is that being autistic means we have a different way of socializing that needs to be understood and accommodated.”

## **Conclusion**

An autistic worker’s access to disability accommodations is contingent on a spectrum of factors. While the ADA provides a legal foundation for meeting access needs, a medical diagnosis, personal concerns, social consequences, organizational culture, and infrastructure will likely guide the accommodations process. Collaborative efforts between employer and employee, communication, and a vision of worker strengths could lay the foundation for fair and equitable disability accommodations, leveling the playing field for autistic workers. Research suggests that autistic workers are more successful in their jobs, relationships, and communication when leadership makes efforts to meet autistic workers where they are rather than expecting them to assimilate to allistic practices. Critically, autistic neurology places limitations on autistic people’s ability to take on allistic behaviors while maintaining their mental health. Employers who consider this may find that neuroinclusion is more successful than if they lack flexibility. The ability to do so may depend on organizational culture and how well flexibility is integrated into its values and practices. In Chapter 5, I discuss the relevance of organizational culture as an asset or hindrance to autism inclusion within a company.

## Chapter 5: Organizational Culture and Neurodiversity

### Introduction

Organizational culture may determine how a company treats its employees and whether it fosters an environment hospitable to people with differences. In this chapter, I explore the pivotal role that organizational culture plays in cultivating diversity and, in turn, employing autistic individuals. I begin by defining organizational culture and reviewing its study and anthropological roots. I discuss the complicated dynamics of the relationships between disability and organizational culture and how organizational culture may interact with autistic culture. I investigate factors motivating organizational change toward inclusion. Then, I examine strategies for organizations to encourage a supportive environment for autistic and otherwise neurodivergent workers. I draw on early scholars' theories about organizational culture, comment on how those frameworks were built upon influential anthropological approaches to culture, then employ works by organizational psychologists and disability in the workplace experts to build a robust picture of what creates and sustains organizational culture and how it fosters or hinders disability inclusion.

My inquiries may provide insight into how organizations contribute to the persistently low employment rates among autistic individuals, which exacerbate economic and social disparities for disabled workers. Organizational concerns about the presence, economic costs, and capabilities of disabled people have been noted by anthropologists as early as the 1980s (Edgerton, 1984). Integrating disabled individuals into the workforce not only promotes inclusion but additionally normalizes disability, fostering autistic people's integration into daily workplace dynamics and cultivating a diverse workplace. Higher rates of workforce participation

may have the potential to diminish stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination against autistic and other disabled individuals.

## **Organizational Culture**

### ***Organizational Culture and the Social Sciences***

Edgar Schein, a prominent authority on corporate culture, described organizational culture as “the pattern of basic assumptions which a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1983). Schein subdivides organizational culture into three interconnected types, which, while mutually reinforcing, may also lead to tensions where inconsistencies appear between them (Schein, 2010). As Schein suggested, first, an organization’s values and norms will dictate how it responds to challenges, determining its adaptability. Second, the organization’s mission encompasses strategies, goals, and principles that shape its policies. Last, the tangible manifestations of its culture are evident in its physical and social environments. Schein proposed that the three components of organizational culture—adaptability, policies, and environment—should ideally synergize to form a cohesive organizational culture (Schein, 2010). Key determinants such as values, social norms, operational strategies, goals, and principles dictate an organization’s capacity for fostering an inclusive workforce.

Sociologists William Ouchi and Alan Wilkins (1985), in the late 1970s and 1980s, explained that the study of organizational culture has its roots in disciplines such as anthropology, cognitive psychology, and sociology. Scholarly works on organizational culture

began to appear in numbers in 1983, and across that literature, the most frequently cited work was Geertz's (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Scholars researching organizations tended to be cross-disciplinary and generally divided into two groups: those examining organizations' external, apparent facets and those concentrating on the internal, more implicit elements. The discourse between these two viewpoints triggered the emergence of organizational culture as an area of study (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). Anthropological analyses of organizational culture draw on fundamental human sciences principles from scholars such as Durkheim, Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown, and Geertz, including the nature of culture and its appropriate analytical methods.

Anthropology has influenced the study of organizational culture by drawing from Malinowski's (1961) and Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) theoretical contributions centered on the praxis, rituals, and lore of organizations using structural-functional concepts. Initially, applying anthropological methodologies from scholars like Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown, and Geertz (1973) to study organizations was considered unconventional. However, for organizational anthropologists, embracing the holistic perspective in anthropological approaches to understanding organizational culture proved highly practical (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). By employing these theoretical frameworks in their analyses, researchers have hypothesized that organizational culture plays a pivotal role in determining an organization's success. (Peters & Waterman, 2015).

Durkheim emphasized the importance of myth and rituals in culture as the superficial expressions of deeper underlying forces. Ouchi and Wilkins explained (1985) that contemporary analysis of organizational cultures applies equal importance to "myths and rituals" as Durkheim

did in his work. In an organizational sense, “myths and rituals” emerge as behaviors, social actions, values, and principles (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). I argue that understanding an organization’s culture’s conduct, social norms, ideals, and philosophies may provide a window into its capacity for inclusion and, if capacity is limited, this understanding may help clarify what areas could change to expand workforce composition beyond neuro-normative hires.

### ***Organizational Culture and Disability***

The degree of diversity in an organization’s workforce presents challenges and opportunities for leadership and employees. To achieve its ideal workforce composition, a company may make conscious, strategic decisions about its diversity profile and how to achieve it. Numerous variables influence the organization’s inclusion goals and process. One rationale for diversity may be based on justice-based arguments emphasizing fairness, historical redress, and equality. This view often advocates for demographic proportionality across the organization, presuming that failure to achieve this stems from injustice, possibly due to unequal opportunities or biased hiring practices. Advocates of justice-based arguments focus on demographic or identity diversity, aiming to rectify disparities resulting from systematic mistreatment and privilege. They argued that organizations should strive for bias-free demographics reflective of a world with equal opportunity (Brennan, 2023).

Performance-based arguments, on the other hand, contend that workplace diversity enhances organizational performance (Brennan, 2023). This perspective posits that diverse teams produce faster novel discoveries, improve communication and marketing efforts, enhance productivity and recruitment, render more accurate judgments, and make smarter decisions (Brennan, 2023; Mello & Rentsch, 2015). Many proponents assert that diversity ultimately

boosts profitability (Jankelová et al., 2021; McKay & Houghton, 2022; Brennan, 2023; Mello & Rentsch, 2015).

While both justice- and performance-based arguments advocate for diversity, their focus and motivation differ. Justice-based arguments emphasize morality and rectifying past injustices, while performance-based arguments appeal to organizational success. According to Brennan's (2023) assessment, empirical evidence suggests that cognitive diversity, rather than demographic diversity, is most conducive to performance, challenging the assumption that demographic diversity inherently improves outcomes (Brennan, 2023; Mello & Rentsch, 2015;)

Human resource development expert Marilyn Byrd (2018) suggested that an organization's diversity goals may only be realized through an approach that centers organizational culture, acknowledging its power and what forces maintain or change it (Byrd, 2018). Challenges may emerge if the company's professed inclusion values fail to translate into action. Inclusion, after all, extends beyond mere rhetoric—it demands genuine efforts in recruitment, hiring practices, and ongoing support for the individuals hired (Schur et al., 2005).

Research on organizational culture has traditionally focused on company values because values are linked with a company's ability to adapt culturally to facilitate change (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2009). Research from author and corporate management expert Sandra Spataro (2005) underscores the critical role of organizational culture in shaping efforts to diversify internal composition. When diversity is relegated to an afterthought or omitted from an organization's core values, it can breed rigidity within the organizational framework (Spataro, 2005). This suggests that the degree of flexibility and deliberate commitment to diversity within

an organization's culture directly influences its willingness to provide accommodations for disabilities—a pivotal factor in fostering inclusion for autistic individuals.

Schein (2010) proposed two fundamental inquiries for analyzing organizational culture: What are this company's inclusion criteria, and how does the internal power structure operate? Exploring the intricacies of organizational culture uncovers a landscape teeming with potential challenges and opportunities for embracing disability inclusion and fostering accommodation processes (Schein, 2010). There may be transformative power in incorporating feedback from autistic employees into an organization's inclusion efforts. They can reshape workplace dynamics through participatory action, injecting fresh perspectives and invaluable insights into the mix. This underscores the importance of tapping into the expertise of marginalized individuals to identify essential changes and craft effective inclusion strategies that may enhance worker performance (Schur et al., 2005).

Organizations often have a performance-based culture, and Brennan's research sheds light on the compelling argument for performance-based diversity (Brennan, 2023). Indeed, organizations that prioritize cultural inclusion are better equipped to navigate market shifts, as highlighted by LeFevre-Levy et al. (2021) and the World Economic Forum (2023). By fostering an equitable workforce, they adjust to changes more effectively and nurture a conducive environment for growth and innovation (Schein, 2010). Chip Jarnagin and John Slocum (2007) underscored the perils of cultural rigidity, noting how it undermines organizational sustainability by stifling adaptability, innovation, and competitiveness. In organizations, standards and principles are pivotal in defining cultural parameters and managing organizational culture through intentional efforts, which could usher in positive transformations. (Stone & Colella,



1996). This highlights the importance of cultivating an environment where organizational culture is not static but dynamic, evolving to embrace inclusivity and meet the ever-changing needs of its workforce and performance goals.

Spataro (2005) underscored that organizational culture is not a “passive spectator” but an “active driver,” determining the success and evolution of diversity initiatives and how employees are supported once they are team members. Importantly, policies and human relationships are not isolated entities but entwined throughout an organization’s culture. The relationship between policy and how people relate within a workplace is a focal point for diversity analysis and illuminates what traits are valued, and which are devalued. She explained that whether a company prefers workers with public-facing charisma or business-oriented task completion skills, these priorities shape the organizational landscape. For instance, a consulting firm valuing social dynamics might favor extroverted personalities, while a telecommunications company prioritizing task completion may not emphasize social interaction as much (Spataro, 2005).

Spataro’s (2005) insights reveal a correlation that illuminates the interplay between organizational values and employee traits. Her research suggests that employees embodying the valued traits may wield more influence, earn more respect, garner greater loyalty, and excel in their roles. The implication is that employee success may depend on alignment with the specific organizational values and the desired traits its values establish. To this, when traits associated with disability are devalued, there could be implications for disabled employees that prevent their ability to wield influence, earn respect, garner loyalty, and excel in their roles. Spataro indicated that organizational culture is not just a backdrop but a dynamic force shaping the trajectories of individuals within its realm.

According to Spataro (2005) and previously discussed autistic strengths (Costello et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2015), task-oriented organizations might better fit autistic workers, who may not typically display extroverted traits. However, I suspect that even within extroversion-leaning environments, there could be pockets that accommodate introverted individuals. Furthermore, some autistic individuals do well in public-facing work, a reminder that autistic people are not homogeneous.

While autistic people share many traits, each has their strengths and skills. Identifying and fostering workers' traits could aid organizations in integrating workers with diverse personalities and skills, thereby enhancing inclusion and performance. This approach embraces a culture of difference (Spataro, 2005). Indeed, a culture of difference may influence how salient disabilities are in a work culture. For instance, in organizations that use a strength-based approach to accommodate workers and optimize their potential, differences may contribute to their strengths as they introduce a novel perspective (Spataro, 2005). Normalizing novel perspectives offered by workers of different backgrounds may foster teamwork and collaborative working relationships.

### ***Organizational Culture and Social Dynamics***

Organizational culture impacts all operations and the employee experience within a company. Organizational diversity shapes organizational culture. In Spataro's (2005) view, organizational culture holds sway over a range of factors, from guiding actions and behaviors of employees to shaping norms, what receives attention, how workers navigate various situations, and even the integration or isolation experienced by new members. Spataro stressed the role of organizational culture as an "informal [social] control system," subtly informing company

dynamics, potentially wielding more influence than formal structures designed to regulate behaviors (Spataro, 2005).

Thus, Spataro (2005) argued, organizational culture defines the diversity of its environment, including the social landscape. Cultural values give rise to preferences for some employee traits. Valued or devalued traits emphasize distinctions among workers. Behaviors are deemed appropriate or inappropriate according to culture, thus how people of similar and different backgrounds interact. Therefore, dimensions of diversity between people are emphasized or de-emphasized according to the culture, i.e., how coworkers treat colleagues. Accordingly, culture determines an organization's policies regarding diversity practices while simultaneously being reinforced by extant diversity practices (Spataro, 2005). The ongoing exchange between culture and diversity practices suggests that changing organizational culture requires established logic behind inclusion initiatives, goals for outcomes, and meaningful effort.

Spataro (2005) highlighted the unequal treatment faced by disabled employees, which organizational culture should acknowledge to encourage change. Disabled people may encounter more negative judgments (Pearson et al., 2022), stereotyping (Burton et al., 2022), and fewer opportunities (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020) than their counterparts in the dominant group (Spataro, 2005). Spataro underscored the role of organizational culture in shaping preferences for specific employee traits, which may then be amplified within the workforce as positive or negative, depending on the value assigned to them and the power of those assigning that value. Employers who perceive disabled people as valuable because they bring a novel perspective to production will increase the likelihood of instilling that value into their organizational culture. However, organizational culture isn't the only factor that shapes the

successful inclusion of disabled or otherwise marginalized people. Stigma, lack of knowledge about autism, and neuro-bias that prioritizes allistic people can figure into how different workers are received by colleagues.

### ***Diversification of the Workforce***

In “Making Sense of Cultural Diversity’s Complexity: Addressing an Emerging Challenge for Leadership,” Shireen Chua, director of Third Culture Solutions Ltd., and her colleagues explained how, in the wake of a rise in public interest around social justice fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter and other transformative events, social expectations of inclusion dictate to companies that it is imperative to embrace diversity and equally employ workers from marginalized groups (Chua et al., 2023). Autistic people recognize that they have been historically marginalized by being denied equal opportunities for fulfilling careers and are entitled to their rightful place in the workforce (Bernick & Holden, 2018). I suggest that historical factors, like stigma and a lack of understanding about autism, have hampered organizational efforts to support autistic employees. Indeed, a tangled web of issues makes neurodiversity in the workplace challenging to navigate.

Chua et al. (2023) elucidated the intricate, structural nature of organizational diversity. To understand organizational diversity, we can look to Schein (2020), who offered two points for analysis. First, how does this company set the inclusion criteria? Two, how does the internal power structure operate? Chua et al. also stress that setting inclusion criteria involves an interplay between demographics such as race, nationality, gender, and religion and deeper psychological aspects of employees, such as attitudes, personalities, values, and beliefs. According to Chua et al., when organizations develop inclusion criteria, they must consider

multilayered factors of successful inclusion. In other words, inclusion criteria should consider surface-level diversity factors and deeper individual characteristics.

Chua et al. (2023) suggested that considering both demographic factors and deeper psychological aspects could be important because diversity in the workplace goes beyond just surface-level characteristics. Demographic factors are visible and tangible, and deeper psychological aspects such as attitudes, personalities, values, and beliefs significantly shape individual experiences and interactions within the organization. So, while demographic factors like race, nationality, gender, and religion are essential to diversity, they only scratch the surface. People from the same demographic group can have vastly different experiences, perspectives, and values. Therefore, solely focusing on demographic diversity may overlook the richness of individual differences within those groups (Chua et al., 2023).

By considering these deeper aspects, organizations can create more inclusive environments that cater to all employees' diverse needs and perspectives. Additionally, understanding psychological aspects can help address biases and stereotypes that may influence workplace dynamics and hinder true inclusivity. Deeper psychological aspects such as attitudes, personalities, values, and beliefs significantly influence how individuals perceive and interact with others in the workplace. For example, someone's attitude towards teamwork, their communication style shaped by their personality, or their values regarding work-life balance can all affect their interactions with colleagues and overall experience within the organization (Chua et al., 2023).

Thus, inclusivity appears to require recognizing and valuing individuals' deeper psychological aspects. When organizations develop inclusion criteria that consider both

demographic factors and psychological aspects, they may be able to create environments where employees feel understood, respected, and supported regardless of their background. Biases and stereotypes may stem from oversimplified categorizations based on surface-level characteristics (Burton et al., 2022). By understanding deeper psychological aspects, organizations could challenge these stereotypes and create opportunities for individuals to be seen and valued for who they are rather than confined to predefined boxes.

Another aspect of effectively fostering diversity and inclusion involves understanding the motivation driving these initiatives. For instance, organizations may exhibit proactive or reactive approaches towards diversity. Proactive efforts entail implementing diversity initiatives based on foresight recognizing the benefits they bring to both employees and the organization. Conversely, reactive measures are triggered by external events, such as criticism for lacking diversity. Leadership can gain insight into areas for improving diversity metrics by examining the underlying motives behind an organization's commitment to organizational diversity (Chua et al., 2023). Given the complexity of inclusion, organizational leaders must assess their diversity approach while considering societal priorities on equity, the organization's current demographics, and their employees' psychological backgrounds. Holistic evaluations could help organizations maintain a competitive edge while effectively managing inclusion efforts (Chua et al., 2023).

Therefore, a proactive approach to understanding how societal, demographic, and psychological factors contribute to achieving and maintaining diversity and viewing that approach as a novel, relational, and collaborative ontological process may enable organizations to manage and leverage differences (Hubrig et al., 2020). Framing differences as assets may improve the treatment and acceptance of autistic people at work by renegotiating norms and

favoring mutual exchange rather than pursuing inclusion through assimilation (Reeves et al., 2022). Paige Reeves, an expert in rehabilitative medicine, highlighted the danger of falling into a false sense of inclusion success, where the quantity of relationships is seen as the measure of belonging. Instead, she suggested that assessing the quality of belonging, focusing on the strength and value of relationships may provide more accurate insights into the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion efforts (Reeves et al., 2022). Evaluating the quality of these relationships necessitates obtaining feedback from autistic employees, as they may perceive the value of relationships differently than someone who is not autistic.

In earlier chapters, I explore the distinctions between autistic individuals and their allistic counterparts, their challenges in securing and maintaining employment, and the accommodation options for autistic employees. Now, I ask why organizations may consider hiring autistic workers. I suggest approaching this inquiry on an individual and systemic scale. On an individual level one could analyze organizational incentives for hiring on an individual level, i.e., what sets one autistic candidate apart from an allistic candidate. On a systemic level, we might ask why organizations prioritize including autistic individuals as part of their broader diversity goals. In the following sections, I argue that there are ethical, legal, and social reasons for including autistic people in the workforce.

### **Reasons to Manage Organizational Diversity**

Numerous concerns may prompt an organization to reevaluate its diversity goals and initiate the expansion of diversity practices. An organization may want to manage diversity, so its workforce aligns with ethical, legal, and societal standards for inclusion. As Brennan (2023) explained, motivations for an organization's pursuit of diversity largely fall under justice-based

or performance-based reasons. Justice-driven inclusion efforts rest on moral principles and addressing historical wrongs, whereas performance-driven diversity initiatives focus on achieving organizational goals. Spataro's (2005) proposed culture of difference may address both within a feedback loop where the diversity procured from justice goals results in performance goals that drive continued inclusion efforts. Below, I review the ethical, social justice, social inclusion, mitigation of exclusion, and business reasons that may motivate an organization to diversity its workforce composition.

### ***Justice-Based Reasons to Diversify Organizations***

Managing organizational diversity through deliberate, structured, intentional programming is vital for various reasons. There are ethical and legal grounds (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024) for hiring workers from all backgrounds rooted in the need for employment equity, fairness, and prevention of discrimination (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). In the U.S., social demands and policy changes drive shifts in organizational diversity themes, shaping who is prioritized in diversifying an organization.

Throughout the 20th century, efforts to promote organizational diversity were spurred by social activism and unrest, as demands from identity groups have reached a critical mass, compelling organizations to respond, often forced by legislative policy changes following social movements. Over time, the push for equality from various groups of workers has led to increased workplace inclusion of women, individuals from diverse racial backgrounds, older individuals, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and transgender individuals.

Drawing from the insights of Mello and Rentsch (2015) and Brennan (2023), who argued that cognitive diversity, rather than demographic diversity, enhances organizational performance,



the next stage of inclusion may involve advancing and embracing neurodiversity in the workforce. It appears that autistic culture and the neurodiversity movement are poised to drive this shift, as the collective voices advocating for change grow louder.

Autism inclusion in the labor force relies on social inclusion. According to the United Nations (2016), social inclusion is a human right. Social inclusion is the holistic process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of individuals who face disadvantages based on their identity, enabling them to participate in society and ensuring they have access to opportunities and resources necessary to fully engage in life's economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. Social inclusion enables people from marginalized groups to enjoy a standard of living that aligns with societal norms (United Nations, 2016). The United Nations described a potential benefit of social inclusion as social cohesion, which is the sense of shared responsibility among community members. Social cohesion could contribute to organizational success by strengthening teams through the absence of conflict or skilled conflict resolution.

Therein, organizational culture, as expressed by policies, values, and attitudes, will shape how it manages divisions within the workforce (Schein, 2010). Cohesion fosters a sense of belonging among its members, encourages trust, reduces exclusion and marginalization, and provides opportunities for upward mobility (United Nations, 2016). I speculate that social cohesion may also advance social justice as workers find solidarity within their ranks, and that sentiment carries over into everyday life. One of the greatest obstacles to achieving a diverse workforce is exclusion. Exclusion is when management or colleagues do not consider a coworker an essential part of the organization. They may omit them from activities, opportunities, and accomplishments. Exclusion negatively impacts employees' lived experiences and could result in

poor mental health (Santuzzi & Keating, 2023), reduced job satisfaction (Davies et al., 2023), and, ultimately, termination (Praslova, 2021). However, preventing workplace exclusion and promoting inclusion is not solely about achieving diversity.

Inclusion concerns an individual's feeling of belonging within the organizational system, encompassing formal aspects of job satisfaction like access to information, decision-making processes, and informal settings like social interactions where information exchange and informal decisions occur. Organizational cultures may convey an atmosphere of exclusion when they don't give everyone a seat at the literal or figurative table (Spataro, 2005). This hinders equitable work experiences.

In *Diversity in the Workforce*, Marilyn Byrd (2024) examined disabled individuals' experiences with inhospitable work cultures across sectors and found that discouraging work environments can contribute to poor performance and adverse mental health, affect working relationships, and flag the employee as problematic to leadership. Being employed in an exclusionary environment can build frustration and stress for excluded workers. Additionally, communicating exclusion to colleagues who do not share the same experience may be difficult, preventing resolution or support. Byrd also explained that some workers will feel alienated, ashamed, anguished, or angry because of being excluded. Feeling excluded can create numerous issues for workers. However, incentives that inspire change often lie in the potential for business advantages and profits.

### ***Performance-Based Reasons to Diversify an Organization***

The labor market is constantly in flux, demanding new and different skill sets. Employers forecast that around 44% of workers' skill sets will face disruption for the next 5 years. Among

these, cognitive skills are experiencing the most rapid growth, emphasizing the increasing significance of proficient problem-solving abilities in the workplace (World Economic Forum, 2023). Robotics and AI are increasingly replacing jobs, creating a notable shift in sought-after job skills. The 2023 Future of Jobs report by the World Economic Forum (2023) highlighted the rising demand for analytical thinking, technological literacy, reliability, attention to detail, problem-solving, ongoing education, and creative thinking.

Interestingly, psychologist Rose LeFevre-Levy et al. (2021) suggested these strengths are common in the autistic population. They argued that as the labor market shifts toward cognitive skillsets, neurodivergence is an increasingly relevant area of organizational diversity that could improve employee job satisfaction and success as well as performance. Lefevre-Levy et al. highlighted that social context, and personal or organizational values shape how people perceive neurodivergence—whether it is framed as a set of deficits or as a normal expression of diversity, and when higher-order thinking, and specialized skills are demands of a job. Seeking and hiring employees who thrive in this condition could help organizations retain a competitive edge (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). However, this strategy may require organizational leadership to reject traditional medical model representations of autism and opt for framing autism as a natural variant of neurology that creates difference, and that difference is precisely why they are ideal for the role (Spataro, 2005; Lefevre-Levy, 2023).

A 2022 study by TextHelp, a leader in inclusive technology, showed that organizations with greater workplace diversity achieve higher levels of profitability (McKay & Houghton, 2022). Some prominent disability-inclusive companies have realized a 28% increase in revenue and have doubled their net income with a 30% boost in profit margins compared to their

counterparts. Inclusion may appeal to the client base because many consumers favor products and services that embrace inclusivity for people with disabilities (McKay & Houghton, 2022).

Companies that employ diverse workforces and incorporate them into their teams experience more significant innovation and are more receptive to change, according to Chaudhry et al.'s (2021) findings when surveying approximately 500 workers from different firms and industries. Companies also tend to be early adopters of latent business systems and are adept at developing novel products or processes to thrive in an evolving business landscape (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Diverse teams are shown to excel in creative problem-solving, surpassing even highly skilled but less diverse teams in performance (Mello & Rentsch, 2015). Employee retention also reduces turnover increasing an organization's competitiveness by maintaining a workforce with experience within and loyalty to the organization (Hutson & Hutson, 2023). Employers may be able to improve the retention of autistic and otherwise marginalized employees by dedicating themselves to acceptance and inclusion, so their talent pool feels supported and valued (Ott et al., 2022).

Numerous national retail companies have developed autism inclusion policies and programs, such as Walgreens, which prioritized hiring autistic workers in a disability hiring program started in 2007 (Bernick & Holden, 2018). Data collected by Walgreens has showed that productivity and employee retention were higher with disabled Walgreens employees than with abled workers, with disabled turnover 48% lower than nondisabled workers. Safeway and Best Buy have taken on similar initiatives, which prioritize autistic hires, finding positions that are good fits for autistic workers within the company, and offering social services that support employees (Bernick and Holden, 2018).

## **Autistic Culture as a Disruptor of Exclusion**

### ***Cultural Curiosity***

Considering research by Spataro (2005), Strauss (2016), Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022), Lefevre-Levy et al. (2023), and others, autism, viewed through a cultural lens, has the potential to disrupt exclusionary organizational cultures by shifting organizational leadership's approach to inclusion. Rather than focusing solely on the individual with disabilities, attention could be directed towards fostering cultural responsiveness, thereby integrating disability into a larger community (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Lefevre-Levy et al., 2023; Spataro, 2005; Strauss, 2016). Autistic individuals, as a collective, are challenging norms that prioritize assimilation into the dominant culture's behaviors and values for acceptance—instead, autistic culture advocates for social inclusion by urging neurotypical society to embrace differences (Price, 2022; Tan, 2024).

In my assessment, meaningful social inclusion entails openness to diverse ways of being, requiring those from the dominant culture to be receptive to the experiences of marginalized individuals. This willingness to be influenced by an autistic person's narrative may involve actively listening and empathizing, thereby transforming perspectives on autistic people and their culture. Embracing an autistic person's story has the potential to fundamentally alter an allistic individual's outlook, cultivating empathy and understanding.

According to sociologist Paige Reeves et al. (2022), achieving workplace inclusion for intellectually and developmentally disabled individuals requires a “fluid, ongoing negotiation” that enhances relationships and fosters a sense of belonging (Reeves et al., 2022). This approach emphasizes reciprocity, meaning that successful inclusion demands flexibility and constant

employee and employer feedback. Such a strategy promotes active engagement and collaboration between all parties involved (Reeves et al., 2022). At the same time, employment services that place autistic workers in more competitive job placements can facilitate organizational change by creating opportunities for them to advance into positions of greater responsibility, decision-making, and leadership. This is particularly significant in areas where such opportunities were previously limited (Bernick & Holden, 2018).

Bernick and Holden (2018), as well as Reeve et al.'s (2022) approaches, offered strategies that align with the changing needs of autistic workers, which may be better met through a continual, flexible rapport with leadership and anticipatory design of inclusive practices. Building a solid rapport between parties as accommodations are requested and granted and positively impacting performance can create a mutual exchange that informs organizational values based on reciprocity. Engaged DEI initiatives have recently facilitated this process.

### ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

DEI is a growing topic of conversation in organizations who are intent on managing diversity within their company (Chua, 2023). Consultants and educators Rossella Riccò and Marco Guerci (2014) defined diversity management as the “organizational approach aiming to achieve better organizational results by creating an inclusive workplace where people’s distinguishing qualities and needs are met in a diversified, effective, efficient, and equitable way” (p.236). Ethical and legal grounds for diversifying an organization’s workforce may incentivize the inclusion of differences.

As mentioned, social pressures due to current political events and social demands also carry influence. Companies may also recognize that by incorporating diversity into their ranks,

they could become leaders in emerging cultural transformations (Ott et al., 2022). For these reasons, in the contemporary organizational landscape, integrating DEI measures has become a prevalent phenomenon, shaping the professional experiences of employees across various sectors. Survey data reveals that many workers have encountered these initiatives within their workplace environments, indicative of their widespread implementation and relevance (Minkin, 2023).

In *Cultural Diversity in Organizations: Theory, Research, and Practice*, author, researcher, and consultant Taylor Cox, Jr. (1994) defined diversity as “the representation in one social system of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance” (p. 5). Economics and IT strategist Kurt April (2021) explained DEI in three parts. Diversity encompasses visible and invisible differences, such as gender, race, nationality, ability, age, skills, sexual orientation, languages, and psychological factors. Equity involves fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all individuals, aiming to eliminate barriers hindering equal participation. Unlike equality, which assumes identical starting points for everyone, equity acknowledges diverse circumstances and allocates resources accordingly to achieve equal outcomes. Inclusion focuses on creating a supportive workplace where individuals feel valued and empowered to participate fully, regardless of their differences. It ensures that diverse perspectives are integrated and respected, fostering a sense of belonging among all employees (April, 2021).

According to social and demographic researcher Rachel Minikin (2023), Pew Research’s *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Report* showed that approximately 61% of respondents affirm the existence of comprehensive policies within their respective companies or organizations

designed to uphold principles of fairness in crucial domains such as recruitment, compensation, and career advancement. Of the surveyed workforce, 52% reported participation in DEI-focused training or meetings, indicating that cultivating awareness and understanding among staff is not a priority for almost half of employers. Pew's report also indicated that among those fortunate enough to access DEI measures, there is a prevailing sentiment of positivity regarding their impact within the workplace. The majority attest to the tangible benefits of these initiatives, indicating their instrumental role in fostering a culture of inclusivity and equity. Such findings underscore the significance of DEI initiatives as pivotal components of contemporary organizational strategies to enhance workplace dynamics and promote social justice principles (Minikin, 2023).

Nevertheless, neurodiversity has received substantially less coverage than other diversities in DEI agendas (Ott et al., 2022). As discussed in Chapter 3, a lack of awareness of neurodivergence can foster the stigmatization of neurodivergent workers. Social consciousness may not be sufficient to drive true inclusion for companies, and the stigma attached to autistic people may interfere with the company's willingness to hire outside their comfort zone (Solomon, 2020). Preconceived notions of autistic people that undermine their potential may contribute to exclusion, negatively impacting employee well-being and career opportunities.

Notably, inclusion is "the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and ability to influence the decision-making process" (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998, p. 48), which, on this level, begets a sense of belonging. Elemental to belonging is also a sense of equity wherein the employee experiences "the absence of systematic disparities ... between groups with different



levels of underlying social advantage/disadvantage—that is, wealth, power, or prestige” (Bernstein et al., 2019). Notably, equity differs from inclusion in that it focuses on outcomes at the systemic or organizational level rather than at the group or individual level. Equity emphasizes the correction of systemic and structural injustices that initially marginalize people. Inclusion and equity are equally integral to meaningful employment and employee well-being within an organization. An organizational culture that understands the power of these two elements and approaches DEI on individual and systemic levels may be more effective than an organization that omits one or the other.

DEI is an organizational approach that sees diversity and inclusion within organizations and institutions as a pathway to equity for workers who have previously been denied equal employment opportunities compared to those from the more privileged dominant group. Education and training may help achieve inclusion goals (Davies et al., 2023). According to the National Autistic Society, DEI participants exposed to autism acceptance training displayed increased positive perceptions of autistic adults, reduced misconceptions and stigma surrounding autism, raised expectations of autistic individuals’ capabilities, and demonstrated greater social engagement with hypothetical and real autistic individuals (National Autism Society, 2016).

### ***Building a Culture of Difference***

When autistic individuals are not welcomed or included within an organization, they could be hindered in their opportunities for success, advancement, and recognition as leaders, whether formally or informally. The strengths of autistic workers could be overlooked because of neurotypical bias though they are valuable assets to the organization’s talent pool. For instance, qualities commonly associated with autism, such as systematization, organization, focus, and

learning, might be needed in an organization's workforce. One approach to cultivating inclusion of people whose differences are also their strengths is for leadership to show appreciation for these traits in all workers, irrespective of neurotype, fostering unity based on shared qualities rather than segregating based on perceived abilities and inabilities (Spataro, 2005). Representing diverse groups in an organization's leadership can foster inclusion by demonstrating that people from different backgrounds are participating in decision-making, organizational policy, and training workers they supervise. This approach may mitigate employees' negative perceptions of diverse groups and the individuals who represent them (Spataro, 2005).

An organizational culture that acknowledges and explores differences without creating divisions may enhance autistic workers' leadership opportunities by increasing their social capital. Colleagues may be more likely to respect and collaborate with those they perceive as valuable contributors to the group's success (Spataro, 2005). I suggest that future research analyzing how social dynamics affect the perceptions of and opportunities for specific populations, such as autistic people, could inform practices that foster their success in the workplace. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, there is a risk when an organization overly values a stereotypical trait associated with autism, such as systematization, and may inadvertently overshadow the diverse strengths of individual autistic employees. Autistic stereotypes, if left unchallenged, could lead employers to generalize expectations for all autistic individuals unfairly (Burton et al., 2022).

### **Training for Cultural Change**

Marilyn Byrd (2024) described organizations as "microcosms of society" and for inclusion to be achieved, companies may want to shift away from sole focus on profits and lean

into ethical, socially just workplaces. Byrd explained that social change within an organization requires a multipronged approach to educating workers that includes training, facilitated dialogue, case analysis, and personal coaching and mentorship. These approaches allow for discourse that can bring light to issues hindering inclusion, challenge prevailing narratives, and receive one-on-one support for marginalized workers (Byrd, 2024). Socially just, ethical, and competitive workplaces may be achieved through more dialogue, respect, and collaborations amongst employees.

Encouraging dialogue, respect, and collaboration among employees of diverse backgrounds could benefit from an approach that values perspectives from all sides and several tools to provide education. Developing inclusion strategies that are both effective and manageable may benefit from insights gained through an understanding of organizational culture, as well as the viewpoints of workers in the dominant group and those from groups the organization seeks to include. Exploring why individuals from the dominant group may be hesitant to include outsiders could help address their specific concerns. Similarly, gaining insight into the experiences and challenges faced by autistic individuals in the workplace may offer valuable guidance for organizational cultural change.

### ***Autistic Expertise and Collaboration***

Several successful DEI training initiatives have been developed by inclusion specialists in collaboration with autistic individuals, based around autistic lived experiences with employment (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015). Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2022) showed that autism awareness training developed using a participatory approach involving autistic collaborators was

more effective in raising autism knowledge and reducing stigma than training developed solely by nonautistic individuals.

Similarly, autism education researcher Maria Ashworth et al. (2023) showcased the positive impact of autism awareness training sessions on employers, leading to enhanced understanding and dedication to workplace inclusion. Participants who received training from autistic and nonautistic trainers together demonstrated improved autism awareness than those who received training exclusively from allistic trainers. The training's effectiveness was attributed to its design, which involved input from autistic individuals, likely contributing to its impact on both groups (Ashworth et al., 2023).

Furthermore, studies have indicated that interaction with autistic individuals significantly improves the attitudes and acceptance of nonautistic coworkers (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017, 2019; Nevill & White, 2011; White et al., 2019). Therefore, the transformative potential of involving autistic individuals in autism awareness and inclusion training programs within organizations and other institutions could substantially enhance their effectiveness in shifting allistic perspectives toward viewing autistic people more positively (Ashworth et al., 2023).

It appears that including autistic perspectives in training development may be fundamental for their success within an organization's workforce. Additionally, recognizing the unique expertise stemming from autistic lived experiences acknowledges them as the primary source of knowledge (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017) and as ambassadors for autistic culture. In this way, I argue that autistic culture and the individual experiences of those within it offer valuable insights for fostering greater acceptance within organizational cultures.

By offering a contextual framework that traces the history of the marginalization of autistic individuals through medicalized and pathologized narratives, autistic culture and the neurodiversity movement have the potential to serve as a foundation for shaping colleagues' attitudes and promoting inclusion. Being acquainted with autistic culture may make employers and colleagues responsive to the community. Cultural awareness shifts the focus from viewing an individual solely as someone needing significant accommodation efforts from the employer to being part of a larger collective.

### ***Cultural Competence, Cultural Sensitivity***

Jaqueline Flaskerud (2007), Professor Emerita of Nursing, explained that cultural competence is a systematized, synchronized set of behaviors, philosophies, policies, and methods that merge among professionals, enabling them to work effectively cross-culturally. Cultural competence is a praxis that can be engaged by an individual or on an organizational level. It involves operating proficiently amidst cultural diversity for individuals. Critical aspects of cultural competence include appreciating diversity, conducting self-assessments of cultural awareness, actively managing diversity dynamics, institutionalizing cultural understanding, and customizing services to suit the cultural identities of the community served (Flaskerud, 2007).

Cultural sensitivity may be a significant skill when driving organizational culture toward including autistic workers. Improving outcomes for any group may require colleagues to engage in deep self-reflection and appreciation of that group's beliefs, norms, and practices. Cultural sensitivity could begin with efforts to understand society's diverse cultural backgrounds, and it likely evolves as people within an organization learn to approach individuals from various cultures with openness and respect. Flaskerud (2007) suggested that professionals who possess

cultural sensitivity demonstrate qualities like warmth, empathy, and authenticity, allowing them to adapt effectively to different cultural contexts and situations.

Employers could consider integrating neurodiversity inclusion training into the standard onboarding process for all new employees, they may establish a culture of acceptance from the beginning of employees' working relationships. According to Spataro (2005), within the onboarding process, management may take proactive steps to champion a value system that celebrates diversity and cultural sensitivity, explicitly emphasizing the talents, perspectives, and value of workers with disabilities. Informing new hires about the nuances of employing autistic workers and others from different backgrounds, the diversity goals of the organization, and shedding light on the challenges and invaluable contributions of every employee could facilitate more ingrained understandings of company culture. Additionally, relaying policies regarding bullying and harassment may provide more explicit guidelines and stronger protections for neurodivergent and otherwise marginalized employees. Achieving a safer and more respectful work environment for all workers could occur by emphasizing a culture of difference from the beginning (Spataro, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

I propose that a key to fostering cultural sensitivity may lie in actively listening to workers from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those representing autistic culture, and strengthening relationships through education, collaboration, and regular case studies of inclusion efforts and issues within the organization. By addressing implicit biases through continuous learning and organizational adaptation to changing needs, it could be possible to create a workplace environment where all cultures are not just accepted but regarded as valuable

assets. Transforming a company's culture to one of true inclusion is a significant undertaking that may require ongoing commitment and dedication to equity. Cultural sensitivity is a critical aspect of successful inclusion that should not be overlooked. Adequate support for disabled workers, as enmeshed into the organizational culture, hinges upon a compassionate, tailored, and regularly reinforced approach from leadership. By addressing individualized needs, management can bolster the strengths of neurodivergent staff. By recognizing that autism is not strictly an individual experience, but the basis of a culture may foster broader acceptance of the entire autistic community.

Developing practices that promote understanding and accommodation for individuals with diverse neurological profiles can greatly enrich organizational culture. By creating inclusive spaces for individuals outside the dominant group, organizations can reap various benefits, enhancing both employee satisfaction and the company's bottom line while fostering a socially just and equitable environment. In organizations that embrace and honor deviation from the norm, conflicts stemming from differing viewpoints and ideas tend to decrease. To further counteract the suppression of diverse perspectives, organizations can focus on actively cultivating an environment that encourages tolerance and openness. Ultimately, the aim goes beyond merely recognizing the potential business benefits of incorporating diverse group members. In a truly inclusive company climate, diversity is valued and celebrated, and everyone's uniqueness is appreciated.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

I undertook this study to gain a comprehensive understanding of why autistic people are disproportionately unemployed and underemployed. To examine these issues, I embarked on a literature review which explored the autistic experience across time and cultures to gather information that could provide insights. To begin, the review of literature explored historical factors potentially responsible for negative public perceptions about autism and their potential impact on the high unemployment rates among autistic individuals. It evaluated how autistic resistance to structural and systemic discrimination has politicized the autistic community and propelled the development of autistic culture. Finally, it addressed the significance of organizational culture in adopting the necessary cultural responsiveness to foster inclusivity of autistic individuals in the workplace and mitigate unemployment rates.

In Chapter 2, I used CAS as the theoretical framework and a reflexive approach to understanding the history of autism as a diagnostic category. In the first section of Chapter 2, I investigated how autistic people have been Othered and marginalized, prompting a resistance to social alterity that has given rise to and galvanized autistic culture as a framework for a community and a political apparatus used as an emancipatory tool. My discussion of ableism revealed the problems of the medical model of autism, which I contrasted to the social model of disability.

Chapter 3 offered an in-depth analysis of the state of autistic employment and unemployment. This includes various factors that contribute to the unsatisfactory career experiences of autistic individuals, such as communication difficulties, stigma, and stereotyping. The chapter also examined coping mechanisms employed by autistic individuals, particularly



masking, which poses risks to self-cohesion and mental health, thus influencing the autistic employment experience. Furthermore, the discussion examined the unique skills and strengths of autistic individuals, which could serve as valuable assets toward organizational diversity and performance objectives, creating an argument for why organizations may want to consider hiring more autistic workers.

In Chapter 4, a discussion of the Americans with Disabilities Act, presents legal frameworks and access challenges encountered by autistic workers, along with processes for securing suitable disability accommodations and barriers to their implementation. Literature addressing access to autism diagnostics and diagnostic disparities provided insights into why the topic of disability disclosure for accommodations could be complicated. Additionally, I introduced the concept of “access infrastructure” to encapsulate the comprehensive scope of disability access and accommodations in the workplace. Finally, various accommodation typologies were explored, including environmental, technological, and sociocultural needs of autistic workers.

Chapter 5 explores literature on the history of organizational culture as a subject of study within the social sciences. The chapter highlighted how anthropological theoretical frameworks could be utilized to analyze organizational culture, facilitating the evaluation and transformation of workplaces to improve the inclusion of autistic workers. My research underscored the significance of recognizing organizational culture as the system guiding a company’s approach to DEI, unveiling strategies to enhance inclusion in a company’s workforce, such as fostering a culture of diversity.

## Primary Findings

Based on the literature I reviewed, I discovered that there is an extensive history of pathologizing autism by clinicians, scientists, society, which may have ingrained negative perceptions of autistic people as people with deficits and incompetence into the fabric of US society. Due to the normalization of cure-based rhetoric research around autism, wherein clinicians and professionals focus on subjecting autistic people to behavioral interventions, there has been a shortage of acceptance toward autism and autistic traits as a naturally occurring neurotype. A lack of societal acceptance of autism has alienated and Othered autistic people and underpinned the exclusion of autistic people in research, employment, and policy decisions. Autistic people, however, have pushed back against prevailing eugenicist notions by vocalizing the harmful implications and with their atypical neurotype.

Yet, despite these efforts, autistic individuals have not achieved complete emancipation from pathologizing ideologies, possibly exacerbating alarming unemployment rates through neuronormative societal expectations. Autistic people are the least employed of all disabled groups, and research indicates that this may be due to tensions between autistic and allistic workers fostered by communication difficulties, disparities in social priorities, and the lack of accommodations autistic people have at work, which can adversely affect performance. Autistic people report having an interest in working and in fulfilling careers but are frustrated by the challenges they face in this uphill battle. They also describe the damaging implications of masking their autistic traits to achieve acceptance in work and society. Autistic adults hesitate to disclose their disability due to the inability to access diagnoses, stigma, and lack of awareness of autism among coworkers.

Research indicates that the process of receiving disability accommodations at work is multifaceted and necessitates collaboration among clinicians, employees, and company leadership. Notably, workers must typically have received a formal autism diagnosis to request accommodations from an employer. However, socioeconomic barriers hinder access to diagnosis for women, Black and Hispanic individuals, nonnative English speakers, those with lower economic status, and the uninsured. Moreover, autistic individuals often hesitate to disclose their diagnosis due to legitimate concerns about stigma, job instability, or exploitation. To request accommodations, they must first recognize their need for accommodations and determine which adjustments would enhance job performance before approaching their employer. The complexity of the accommodations process can prove intimidating or challenging for employees grappling with job-related or executive function-based performance issues and navigating complicated or tense workplace dynamics.

Autistic individuals often face compounded challenges in the workplace, exacerbated by the fact that although the law mandates reasonable accommodations, employers may sometimes deny accommodations they perceive as unnecessary. These accommodations typically fall into three main categories: environmental adjustments, technological aids, and sociocultural support measures. Environmental accommodations could mitigate autistic hypo/hypersensitivity, and technological accommodations may improve executive functioning by helping autistic workers stay organized. Socio-cultural challenges are some of the more complicated areas to address when building autism-inclusive workplaces because they may require allistic workers to adapt communication and social expectations. Allistic colleagues may doubt the need to adapt their communication styles if autistic workers' disabling issues are not readily apparent to their

neurotypical counterparts. However, practice, feedback, and autism-awareness training that is informed, developed, and taught by autistic people could reduce sociocommunicative differences between autistic and allistic coworkers.

Another factor playing a significant role in autistic employment experiences is organizational culture. The concept of organizational culture emerged from the social sciences as a field of study forty years ago but has provided the basis for analysis using tools supplied by earlier anthropologists. Anthropologic analytical tools examine cultural foundations such as myths and rituals as they translate to organizations. These factors influence behaviors, attitudes, and opportunities for employees. However influential, organizational culture is not static. Organizational culture could be transformed by integrating diversity goals into its value system, informing employees of diversity goals, and enforcing diversity policies. Diversity improves innovation, tolerance, and equal opportunity while reducing the stigma and adverse mental health of excluded workers. Leadership use of a strength-based approach to workers outside the dominant culture and an organization's embrace of a culture of difference, where employee differences are valued and represented in company leadership, could also transform workplaces and autistic employment experiences.

### **Future Inquiry**

First, to ensure the accessibility of research on autistic experiences, the IRB approval process could be more streamlined and expedited, enabling researchers to undertake studies incorporating autistic perspectives. While autistic adults are classified correctly as a vulnerable population, it is essential to recognize their inherent capabilities and autonomy in making decisions about participating or not participating in qualitative research. Autistic adults

comprehend the significance of informed and participatory research in advancing their quality of life, and there is a shortage of such research compared to clinical research on the causes of autism, autistic children, and treatments. A central tenet of the autistic rights movement emphasizes the necessity for research that prioritizes autistic lived experiences, addressing real-life challenges with autistic people as the primary source of knowledge. However, research endeavors may encounter obstacles if ethics boards hesitate to approve research of autistic people.

Indeed, qualitative research on the autistic experience is the most direct path to understanding the obstacles and challenges they face in acquiring and maintaining rewarding, fulfilling employment. Researchers should give autistic research participants ample opportunity to select what aspects of research they participate in and what they wish to share, and it will be helpful for researchers to explain the participants' options for opting-out of the study at any point. Researchers should also be attentive to the autistic need for explicit communication and offer multimodal forms of communication in terms of instruction and participation to ensure that autistic people are giving informed consent at every turn, are able to consider the implications of all aspects of participation autonomously and can respond in ways that are most comfortable for them.

Additionally, by breaking interviews down into short segments and spreading them out over several days, offering time between sessions may help autistic people articulate their thoughts and revisit topics they would like to discuss further. Autistic researchers may facilitate this process due to inherent communication similarities and understanding of autistic cognition. Moreover, using reflexivity to adapt research to autistic traits and needs may offer researchers

more insight into conducting research using the autistic population as they could recognize themes and patterns in what communication is most effective, what causes discomfort, and what areas require more attention.

Second, researchers could garner invaluable insights by examining autistic experiences within various employment sectors and job roles to discern potential differences across industries and positions and identify emerging themes that warrant sector- and job-specific interventions. Specific sectors, such as STEM fields, might offer a more favorable environment for autistic employees, whereas others, like customer-facing service roles, may not. Furthermore, utilizing methodologies that separate data based on gender, race or ethnicity, and other demographic factors can help uncover any discrepancies in work experiences by distinguishing the experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

A deeper look into autistic peoples' educational backgrounds and job experiences across the lifespan can further elucidate disparities in employment and pinpoint areas of concern requiring organizational or other additional job support. Further avenues for research include investigating reasons for autistic people's job terminations and the frequency thereof. Additionally, addressing the efficacy or inefficacy of identifying necessary accommodations and subsequent requests for worker support, the nature of autistic relationships with colleagues and comfort levels, and the availability and effectiveness of mentorship opportunities for autistic workers seem to be areas where research could be helpful. Finally, understanding where employment differences may lie between late- and early-diagnosed autists could clarify if early diagnosis improves job outcomes. Information about how diagnosis helps or hinders autistic workers' job success could potentially act as data to advocate for broader access to diagnosis.

Third, pursuing research into organizational and leadership roles in autistic employment could enhance our understanding of the dynamics at play in autistic job experiences. For instance, what are the concerns of companies who do or don't prioritize autistic workers in diversity goals for their organization? Researchers could inquire with organizations directly about their approach to hiring and accommodating disabled workers. Employers may be able to provide insight into creative ways they have found to improve autistic job performance and the sociocultural nuances within the company. Some companies that have intentionally hired autistic workers have provided positive metrics on their success; gathering more data in this area could provide the evidence needed to incentivize more companies to act on neurodiversity hiring and retention campaigns.

Finally, conducting research on the experiences of autistic adults is crucial. With many support services diminishing after autistic individuals exit the public school system, numerous autistic adults encounter challenges such as poverty, isolation, and various mental health issues. By intensifying research on the factors contributing to these difficulties, researchers could pinpoint essential services necessary to enhance the quality of life for autistic individuals and devise strategies to ensure their accessibility, especially for those often overlooked under the assumption they have minimal support needs. Additionally, this research could lay the groundwork for advocating policy changes aimed at better serving the adult autistic population and inspiring grassroots or mutual aid initiatives within the autistic community. Expanded research on autism can validate the lived experiences of autistic individuals, dispelling the notion that challenges in acquiring, retaining, and finding fulfillment in employment are solely personal

issues experienced by only a few in the autism community. Strengthening solidarity within the broader autism community can potentially improve outcomes for all autistic people.



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**Appendix A: Recruitment Screener**

1. Are you autistic?
2. Are you 18 or over?
3. Are you employed or previously employed in the tech sector?
4. What is your job role/description?
5. Are you interested in participating in a Zoom interview or an interview through email.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your identity at work.
2. How vital is autism to your identity as a worker?
3. Did you disclose that you are autistic to your coworkers or employers, and if so, when?
  - a. Was there an event that prompted disclosure?
4. I would like to ask about the hiring process and the job environment.
5. Tell me about the recruitment, interview, and hiring process and what aspects accommodated or understood your autistic needs.
6. Were autism-related challenges present during the recruitment, interview, and hiring? If so, say more.
7. Was your job training conducted in a way conducive to your learning style?
8. Once you were hired, were there supports within the company that helped bridge communication gaps between you, an autistic employee, and allistic employees?
9. Did any environmental factors at work conflict with your autistic needs?
10. How did the social environment at work help or hinder your job experience?
11. How did the physical environment influence your job performance and satisfaction?
12. Was communication a barrier in the workplace between you and others or concerning your job performance? If so, when and how?
13. Has autism factored into your career advancement opportunities?
14. Does the organization's culture support neurodivergence?
15. Does your company employ DEI training?
  - a. If yes, does the DEI training include neurodiversity, specifically autism?

16. How could your employers improve the workplace for autistic people.