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# Organisational neurotypicalness: fighting unintentional ableism in working spaces

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## ABSTRACT

Places of work and educational settings are dominated by neurotypical leadership and policy, yet within those settings we are working with, and teaching, significant numbers of autistic individuals. Powerful organisational misunderstandings exist regarding what an autistic person looks like and what support they are likely to need, compounding a lack of a safe psychological space where individuals are likely to share their autistic identity. Autistic people find themselves working in conservative spaces where difference can be viewed with suspicion, which increases the need for masking with calamitous results on wellbeing and mental health. This current issue commentary examines the wider impact of the continual suppression of 'self' on autistic individuals and how organisational behaviours can be unintentionally ableist in their support of those individuals. It also explores the constructive impact of allyship, and how positive transformation comes from micro interactions within compassionate and caring teams, building an environment that nurtures wellbeing and allows difference to shine.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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To wear a professional demeanour is normal for us all; standing in front of a lecture theatre requires a certain amount of 'performance' but it doesn't impact on my psychological wellbeing or how I view my personal identity. Equally, social opportunity in my working day is 'downtime' – I'm off script just chatting and sharing personal, bland and innocuous chat with colleagues. For me this can be a restorative and welcome part of my working day. But I'm neurotypical, and luckily for me my entire career has been spent in settings governed and controlled by neurotypical leadership and policy. As my career has progressed, both my job and personal life have become entirely dominated by the need and drive to understand 'difference' – particularly autistic people. This has afforded me huge job satisfaction and personal joy but occasionally heart-wrenching sadness. My research examines the lived

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experience of being an autistic nurse, and personal testimony from individuals can be hard to hear.

Autistic students and colleagues in health care settings strive to avoid being misunderstood and perceived as poor calibre colleagues or learners (Pryke-Hobbes et al. 2023). A constant undertone of 'doing better' - being less like themselves - can dominate their working day. The requirement to navigate spaces and social constructs not designed for you is daunting. Then begins an exhaustive cycle of moderating body language, eye contact and social banter as well as doing a job or attaining enough to progress through a professional course (Cook et al. 2022). Neurotypical pedagogy can increase an autistic individual's need to mask; an organisational misunderstanding of what an autistic (particularly female) person looks like and what support they are likely to need is detrimental to progress and wellbeing (Yau, Anderson, and Smith 2023).

Most autistic individuals choose not to disclose, which can compound misunderstanding and poor support (Romualdez et al. 2021). However, autistic people find themselves working in a conservative workspace where 'difference' in colleagues can be viewed with suspicion and a cause of additional labour by other team members (Lindsay et al. 2023). Disclosure of a difference in workplaces is highly problematic; neurodiverse individuals may have experienced previous calamitous results when disclosing their diagnosis to management, compounded by misjudgement and unskilled attempts to support them. Employment or beginning a University course is a chance to own your own identity - possibly for the first time. Organisational settings are rarely psychologically safe places to make a disclosure, yet continually suppressing 'self' forces masking behaviours to increase and wellbeing to deteriorate (Han et al. 2023). Some individuals I have spoken to explain that their days off work are spent just sleeping to enable them to fully 'recover', ready to start their working week again. I am sure none of us could view this as a good work-life balance, and as fellow humans we do not want to increase anyone's suffering or disenfranchisement.

The good news is that powerful allies in healthcare organisations and University settings exist (RCN n.d.). Leaders and admission teams are beginning to understand the value of diversity in the workforce. Much more impactful than this is the motivation by individual team members and departments to build enabling spaces for autistic and other neurodiverse individuals to flourish and thrive. This inclusive approach begins very simply, each of us embracing the notion of difference; we need to collectively think less like a neurotypical person and accept that autistic people navigate the world differently. We know this at a cognitive level, but how strongly do we believe it's true? We need to acknowledge the fact that just because an individual is employed or studying at University they may still be unable to maintain eye contact whilst talking to you, or struggle to walk into a staff

room to make themselves a hot drink. Just because a person is employed in professional spaces does not mean they do not find social banter highly stressful or even impossible. These truths need to be unconditionally accepted by neurotypicals to make working spaces more equitable.

We neurotypicals find the contrast unfathomable and can begin to build stories about neurodiverse individuals' motivation to 'make the effort'. We struggle to believe that people who seem to be like us will avoid having a break with us and choose to sit in their car or 'zone out' with headphones on. Just as importantly is us losing the urge to 'put it right'; spending point-less time advising or cajoling autistic individuals into how they can be more neurotypical. This is as inappropriate as expecting a deaf colleague to spontaneously hear better because it suits us and makes us feel more comfortable.

The good news is that by truly believing that it is entirely possible to have a different world experience to your own, and not expecting 'self-improvement', you can transform the lives and experiences of those colleagues hiding in plain sight. 1 in 68 people are now thought to be on the autistic spectrum (O'Nions et al. 2023). We are working with, and teaching autistic individuals every day. Just by being accepting and open to difference you can transform an individual's working day and reduce the need for them to mask.

At strategic level, organisations might talk with confidence about their commitment to social models of disability, a much more powerful narrative would be the active creation of inclusive spaces and a commitment to have neurodiversity fully represented in all corners and levels of organisations' structures (Arnold & Hill 2023). This way, neurotypical thinkers don't dominate the ethos and direction of policy and culture. The spaces we live and work in have room for everyone; how we shape our structures and create working policy has a profound effect on us all. Organisations should not be aiming merely to avoid facilitating poor mental health; we can do better, we should aim to make working life and learning environments enjoyable and life enhancing places to be. However, If we don't include everyone in strategic planning, our workplaces will lack a deep connection with the people who work and study there. If we understand and clearly embrace the uniqueness, skills and talents which autistic individuals bring we have the capacity to build a place that enhances wellbeing and allows difference to shine. Narratives and understanding need to move away from conversations about how we prevent our neurodiverse colleagues and students becoming mentally unwell to a focus on what is enjoyable, life enhancing and facilitates an authentic presence; surely an aspiration worth working for.

### **Disclosure statement**

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