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Short reports

Short report: Gendered workplace social interaction processes in autism

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ABSTRACT

Background: Navigating workplace social interactions can be stressful for autistic people and be experienced differently by gender. A better understanding of the autistic experience of these difficulties is needed to inform effective policy, practice, and individualized support.
Method: Fifty-five autistic individuals (*n* women=32; *n* men=22) participated in either an online survey or focus group. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.
Results: The data suggests that the social and interaction expectations placed upon autistic individuals differ by gender and can contribute to occupational stress.
Conclusions: The data provides a basis for further investigation considering Conservation of Resources Theory and its practical application to inform reasonable adjustments in the workplace for autistic people.
What this paper adds: The gendered workplace experiences of autistic people is an emerging area of research. However, how workplace social interactions are experienced by each gender remains under-researched. An understanding of this could help decrease occupational stress, inform reasonable adjustments, and increase labor market participation in this population.
This paper adds to the existing literature in showing that workplace social interactions for autistic people are experienced differently by gender. As such, the implications in the experience of occupational stress may also differ. Therefore, the importance of having reasonable adjustments in the workplace that account for gender is highlighted.

1. Introduction

Many autistic people experience stress arising from workplace interactions and consequently experience adverse impacts on their physical and psychological health (Cage et al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2020). Understanding why workplace interactions are stressful and considering gender in these interactions may suggest means of improving these, which in turn could enhance inclusion and career success (Nusrat & Sultana, 2019).

Women in the general population are expected by others to possess superior social skills (Eagly et al., 2019). Such expectations are part of gender role attitudes (Ellemers, 2018), which in turn affect people's social experiences. Notably, compared to autistic men,

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autistic women experience fewer interpersonal challenges possibly due to a greater level of social adaptation or potentially enhanced masking ability (Wilson et al., 2016).

However, masking is a key element of emotional labor leading to burnout (Hochschild, 1983). Masking drains individuals' resources, leads to stress (Miller et al., 2021), and ultimately burnout (Kenworthy et al., 2014). This is akin to the processes described by Conservation of Resources Theory (CORT; Hobfoll, 2001); where stress arises when there is either an actual depletion of personal resources or a sustained threat of a depletion of personal resources in conjunction with a lack of opportunity to replenish those resources. As such, workplace stress can be understood in terms of the interaction of environmental demands (expectations) and the capacity of the individual to respond to these demands over time. Here, the potential capacity for social adaptation of autistic women (Wilson et al., 2016) may buffer workplace stress enabling individuals to obtain and replenish resources, including assistance navigating other interpersonal relationships. For example, where the navigation and negotiation of relationships and tasks completed within teams is required.

Thus, the aim of the present study was to explore the processes behind autistic people's workplace social challenges with reference to gender. To these ends, we asked if personal accounts of workplace challenges differed between autistic women and autistic men, and why these might differ.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were aged 18–68 years (M=39.33; SD=12.68) participating in either an online survey (N = 46; n women=28; n men=18) or a face-to-face focus group (FG; N = 9: n women=5; n men=4). Although data were gathered from international participants as part of this research on autistic people in the workplace, to control for potential cultural influences we present here only the results from Australian participants.

All participants self-reported a formal autism diagnosis, consistent with established practice (e.g., Lee et al., 2019). An independent samples t-test using participants from both the survey and FG found that women were significantly younger than men (see Table 1). There were no significant differences between women and men on highest level of educational attainment using chi square.

2.2. Procedures

After University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number 1748956, data for this study were gathered via online survey and FG. Offering both options, while acknowledging differences in modalities was considered important to maximize participation opportunities for an autistic population (see: Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2014). The survey and FG participants were recruited at separate times, starting with the survey participants. Yet both groups were recruited in the same way, which was via autism-related social media channels and the researchers' networks. No incentives were offered other than light refreshments for FG participants.

Survey participants were instructed to follow a Qualtrics link to access the Plain Language Statement before presentation of questions. Completion of the survey was taken as consent.

Before the FG was conducted a screening survey hosted on Qualtrics invited potential participants to register their interest for a one-and-a-half-hour discussion group about their employment experiences. The screening survey asked potential participants to self-report their demographic information which assisted in gaining a broad sample with respect to gender, age, and education. Participants were selected based on having equal numbers of participants from each gender, age group, and level of educational attainment. They were emailed the FG questions after selection.

An adaptation of the World Café (WC) method was used to structure the FG. This allowed participant discussion in small homogendered groups before connecting them to a mixed-gendered conversation (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The mixed-gendered

Table 1
Participant demographics.

	Survey n = 46			Focus Group n = 9	
Age by group (Mean, SD)	38.63	(13.12)*		42.89	(10.04)*
Highest Level of Education					
Year 12/High School or lower; includes Diploma level (n, %)	24	52 %		3	33 %
Bachelor/Honors degree (n, %)	16	35 %		4	44 %
Master's/Doctoral degree (n, %)	6		13 %	2	22 %
	Men		Women	Men	Women
	n = 18		n = 28	n = 4	n = 5
Age (Mean, SD)	46.17 (12.69)*		33.79 (11.09)*	49.75 (4.99)	37.40 (9.92)
Highest Level of Education					
Year 12/High School or lower; includes Diploma level (n, %)	9 50 %		15 54 %	2 50 %	1 20 %
Bachelor/Honors degree (n, %)	8 44 %		8 29 %	2 50 %	2 40 %
Master's/Doctoral degree (n, %)	1 6 %		5 18 %	0 50 %	2 40 %

Note: * denotes significant difference between groups.

conversation, where participants shared ideas, in the context of WC, is called a 'harvest'; participants bring insights from their smaller group discussion to refine with the help of all participants. Five harvests occurred within the 90-minute FG. To address potential conformity and domination in the current study, the FG facilitator modified the format of harvests by asking each participant individually in differing orders if they would like to add comments. The impact of gender was not asked directly, with any differences between women and men intended to be induced from subsequent data analysis.

2.2.1. Analysis

Analysis followed an inductive process as described by Saldana (2011). All data were coded using *nVivo Pro11* (QSR International). The first author reflected on the data and developed initial themes, then similar themes were grouped into final themes (see Table 2).

Sixty-five to 100% of the illustrative evidence applied to each theme was double coded by a Research Assistant (RA); inter-rater reliability was very good ($\kappa = 0.96$). Discrepancies were discussed and conciliated between the first author and RA. Data saturation was achieved after analyzing 40% of the data.

3. Results

3.1. Themes emerging from the data

Differences in gender are highlighted within the following themes. Where gender differences are not described, none were clearly apparent.

3.1.1. Social expectations; what I 'should' do

Autistic employees encounter workplace situations where they feel other people place social expectations upon them which dictate the way they believe they should behave to be accepted. Anticipating either meeting or not meeting these expectations can, consistent with CORT, result in resource loss, as illustrated in the FG.

> "You have to be a different person in the workplace than who you are in everyday life. especially in offices you have to be a certain type of person in different industries or whatever you have your standard stereotypes, so if you're outside of that there's not a lot of acknowledgement or understanding."

> "I basically dread Christmas from about October because having [to], not going to the Christmas party. You know, you're not allowed to do [that]. But going, you know just going…" *Participant makes explosion sound with her hands surrounding her head*

3.1.2. Navigating interactions; support helps me appropriately respond

Having inclusive, understanding, and supportive workplace relationships was reported by participants as helping them to change their behavior to better navigate social interactions. For example, a survey respondent described how they had:

> "… picked up strategies along the way to fit in better and not alienate people. For example, one of the supervisors sat me down once and explained that people thought I was rude for never saying 'good morning' or saying 'goodbye' when I left. I now do these greeting rituals every day and fit in a little better."

Another survey participant stated that:

> "…mentors [are] really helpful as they have been able to provide constructive feedback on a range of different situations. Through their experience I can start to learn from my mistakes and learn better strategies for approaching situations."

3.1.3. Meeting and navigating social expectations

Autistic women and men reported differences in workplace social expectations and how they navigate these. For women, meeting

Table 2
Development of Themes.

Initial theme name	Definition of initial theme	Final theme name
Expectation	Identifying expected behaviors to feel accepted in a workplace	Social expectations
Cost/benefit analysis	Anticipating and evaluating the costs/benefits of potential performance of behaviors that feel expected to be accepted in a workplace	
Behavior modification	Modifying behavior to feel accepted in a workplace.	Navigating Interactions
Supportive relationships	Workplace relationships which help one navigate workplace social interaction. E.g., having a mentor, co-worker attitudes or assistance, workplace culture	
Gender roles	Gendered differences concerning interpersonal interaction	Meeting and navigating social expectations
Difficulty coping	Feeling overwhelmed; stressed and anxious	Stress
Wellbeing concerns	Feeling exhausted, burnt out, unable to participate in usual activities	

perceived social expectations seemed more important; as a woman from the survey described how she must "…wear the vacuous, pleasant veneer expected of women in the workforce." Not meeting these social expectations included social difficulties such as "… problems making friends".

In contrast, meeting and successfully navigating perceived social expectations appeared less important for men. A man in the FG shared his experience in a particular workplace where he "…worked for an employer that expected you to do a lot of social things outside of work". In response to these expectations, he reported making a statement to his colleagues which he felt his gender allowed:

> "…and one day I said to them, 'you're my workmates not my friends, isn't 40 hours a week enough!?'. I think you can mostly get away with it [saying that] as a bloke."

The women in the FG indicated that this response would be completely unacceptable for them. A woman replied to him, to which all other women in the FG nodded in agreement:

> "…as a woman, and I mostly work in teams of women, if I ever said that I would be ostracized. If I ever said, 'you're not my friends, you're my work-mates' I would pay the price of that absolutely."

3.1.4. Stress; workplace challenges cause me stress

Where workplace interactions cannot be effectively negotiated, and personal resources cannot be replenished, stress and poor wellbeing results. FG participants explain that "…the stressors, all these things we've been talking about [workplace challenges] cause you stress." The following FG conversation involving a participant and the FG facilitator illustrate:

> "Having a chance to escape from the office environment in one way or another [helps]. So that might just be as simple as being able to put your headphones in or it might be getting out the place and doing your work on a laptop somewhere else."
>
> "Ok, what happens if you don't?"
>
> "It builds up [to] the point where you just can't cope, and you can't do anything at home. You get home and you can't talk to your kids. You can't do anything and eventually you meltdown at work and people think, *participant sighs* , and then you burnout, and then you quit!"

4. Discussion

As part of a larger program of research (see, [citations deleted to facilitate blind review]), this study's aim was to explore and begin to understand the processes behind autistic people's workplace social challenges with reference to gender. The data reveals a preliminary understanding of first, autistic people's workplace social challenges including how social expectations create a basis for 'acceptable' behavioral responses. Second, the gendered nature of social challenges. Third, how autistic people negotiate these challenges, and lastly the possible outcome of such negotiations.

Specifically considering gender differences in this study, although both women and men reported social barriers at work, women described greater importance in successfully negotiating these. This may be why Hull et al. (2020) found that autistic women are more likely to engage in masking to meet social demands than autistic men. Thus, we could view gender, in the context of CORT, as both a beneficial resource and something that requires resources to be spent. This is given how gender appears to change others' social expectations of autistic adults, and seemingly affords the individual some capacity to adapt to social circumstances and safeguard their resources in some instances.

As unequal workplace gender role expectations are apparent in this research, workplaces might examine and define roles which support more equitable solutions. For example, non-autistic colleagues could be educated to help support autistic people to navigate social interactions (e.g., Flower, Hedley, Spoor, & Dissanayake, 2019).

4.1. Directions for future research and limitations

It was not clear whether autistic women experienced or perceived greater social expectations of them by others, or if they are more attuned to these. On this latter point, it has been suggested that some autistic women have increased social attention compared to men (Lai & Szatmari, 2020). The inferences made here regarding gender could be strengthened with further research. Yet, the findings here are consistent with research on differing gender role expectations for women and men (see: Dennhag et al., 2019). Additionally, as stress is the consequence of workplace social challenges, whether social expectations are perceived could impact the experience of stress. For example, if social expectations are not perceived then this could result in decreased stress because there are no expectations to be met. Contrarily, this could also increase in stress by way of missing a social cue which could place a person at increased risk of incivility or disciplinary measures. Further investigation is required.

The account of their workplace experiences provided by survey respondents and FG participants resonated with CORT (Hobfoll, 2001). Yet, further work needs to be undertaken to better understand and address the workplace circumstances that either deplete or threaten to deplete autistic employees personal (psychological) resources, with a focus on gender. These might include issues in the workplace environment, the way work is organized, the social context in which work is conducted, as well as the prevailing attitudes towards and expectations employees have of each other.

Future research might also consider the possibility of conformity in FG settings. It is unknown if some FG participants conformed

with the opinion of the majority or outspoken individuals, and to what extent. Nevertheless, it is possible that some participants did not fully express their views. This is potentially problematic, given the small sample of women and men from which data were drawn. To address this, the facilitator invited participants to email or phone after the FG should they have more to add to the discussion, however no participants took this opportunity. Using the survey data in conjunction with the FG data assisted in triangulating findings but the FG was instrumental in putting the process of workplace social challenges together. Future research should consider a greater number of FGs within one study. The proposed findings should be considered exploratory until rigorously replicated and extended.

5. Conclusion

It appears that successfully navigating workplace social interactions are more important for autistic women compared to autistic men. A supportive, inclusive organizational culture where members of workplace teams understand and can help each other navigate social interactions may provide a solution.

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Declarations of interest

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