




COMMENTARY

From environmental niches to unique contributions: Reconsidering fit to foster inclusion across neurotypes

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Much research has focused on the challenge of fit between people and organizations (Kristof, 1996). Given the prevalence of unemployment *and* underemployment, the challenge of both finding fit between oneself and one's organization, and being seen as fitting in, is especially acute for neurodivergent job candidates and employees. Building on LeFevre-Levy and colleagues (2023), in the current commentary, we emphasize how despite the growing acceptance of the social model of disability and increasingly positive views of neurodivergent strengths (e.g., den Houting, 2019), research and practice need to move beyond finding niches within neurotypical systems where neurodivergent people can exist and thrive to systems that are collaboratively constructed across neurotypes. This means extending opportunities beyond well-publicized, specialized neurodiversity hiring initiatives that in total employ fewer than 1,500 globally (Bernick, 2021). Doing so requires better understanding the underpinnings of “misfit” for neurodivergent individuals and identifying what makes for the right workplace conditions to redress it. To advance this discussion, we articulate how the “double empathy problem” (Milton, 2012) and the heterogeneity of neurodivergent populations (Bury et al., 2019) requires rethinking traditional—and, most frequently, neurotypical—approaches to fit in research and practice.

The double empathy problem and neurodivergent heterogeneity

Misfit for neurodivergent individuals is rooted in the “double empathy problem,” or the disconnect in understanding across neurotypes (Milton, 2012). Here, neurodivergent—notably individuals on the autism spectrum—and neurotypical individuals see and experience the world in different ways and, as a result, often have difficulty empathizing with and understanding one another. The lack of empathic understanding means that organizations and individuals have different understandings of workplace expectations, relationships, and what makes a “good employee” (Martin et al., 2022). In addition, forms of neurodiversity like autism have a great deal of heterogeneity in their manifestation (Bury et al., 2019), with corresponding heterogeneity in employment preferences. A recent study of autistic university students found that—despite most neurodiversity hiring initiatives being focused on roles in information technology—employment in a helping-oriented role was most preferred compared to a computing or math-based profession (Cheriyian et al., 2021). In actuality, the abilities and aspirations of neurodivergent individuals are as varied as neurotypicals. As such, the double empathy problem suggests that neurotypical efforts to identify domains for neurodivergent employment may be based on misunderstanding. Further, the vast heterogeneity across the interests, needs, and preferences of neurologically diverse

individuals means homogenizing the interests of a group may lead to stereotyped efforts at inclusion (e.g., hiring autistic employees in the information technology sector). Thus, although progress has been made in incorporating neurodiversity into organizations, we must explore the ways in which existing concepts and organizational practices involving fit may inhibit inclusion.

Prototypically, fit research has emphasized the match of the person with their environment as comprising both objective and subjective experiences (Edwards *et al.*, 1998). It is no wonder that individuals with atypical neurological processing may have different subjective experiences regarding objective social stimuli than neurotypicals, leading to differences in valued work environment characteristics. In addition, fitting into an environment or being seen as a “good” employee may be challenging for a neurodivergent candidate trying to adhere to a neurotypical standard. For example, “fitting in” for some jobs (e.g., investment banking) may require “cultural matching” that emphasizes similarity in leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles (Rivera, 2012). Given differences in processing social situations and cultural opportunities, neurodivergent individuals may struggle to fit based on such nebulous criteria.

In contrast, scholarship on neurodivergent employees has found work success to depend on fit between personal interests and work tasks (Krieger *et al.*, 2012). However, in primarily neurotypical organizations, the interests expressed and reinforced as legitimate may be relatively narrow (Schneider, 1987). Due to the double empathy problem, neurodivergent job candidates may have difficulty detecting whether their unique interests will be valued and supported in systems designed by and for neurotypical individuals. As such, although holding the promise of being more individualized, and correspondingly more inclusive, a focus on interest-based fit within organizations can still create divides between neurotypical and neurodivergent employees. Given these challenges, a significant question remains: What can be done to improve the extent to which neurodivergent people “fit” at work? Here, we argue that it is crucial to consider how organizations can enhance the value of neurodivergent employees’ unique contributions.

Toward flexible fit to foster inclusion

Rather than emphasizing broad areas of neurodivergent strength (i.e., niches) that may apply differentially both across and within manifestations of neurodivergence (e.g., Bury *et al.*, 2019), we argue for reconceptualizing fit as ensuring unique cultural contributions. That is, fit perceptions often emanate from attributes “that are uniquely desirable by only some individuals” (van Vianen, 2018, p. 93). As such, theory needs to specify the attributes that are meaningful or interesting to *individuals* rather than focusing on needs that are presumed to be universal (van Vianen, 2018). Individualized fit, which may especially benefit neurodivergent employees, is more likely when an organization culturally values unique contributions. Importantly, identifying and benefiting from employee uniqueness requires organizations to shift their notion of fit from how well individuals fit into the culture to how individuals contribute unique value to it (Grant, 2017)—a shift that may be challenging yet have a high pay-off in fostering inclusion. A cultural contribution approach considers each individual for their unique skills, interests, and expertise, and their ability to enrich the organization’s culture. Focusing on contribution may create more possibilities for the neurodivergent because it explicitly values different ways of seeing and experiencing the world, *and* reduces the need for neurodivergent individuals to fit into an often ambiguous and hard to decipher culture grounded in neurotypical approaches and preferences.

For more individualized fit to be a function of unique contributions, organizations need to redesign work in ways that draw out unique contributions. This can occur when organizations create idiosyncratic jobs where formal job duties match the abilities or interests of a specific person (Miner & Akinsanmi, 2016). Unique contributions to the organization may also be more likely to emerge when employees can define their job titles to reflect the value that they bring to their jobs and make it visible to others. These personalized titles may signal unique contribution, provide

meaning (i.e., self-verification), and enhance psychological safety (Grant et al., 2014). Job crafting is another process of redesign that alters the tasks, relationships, and perceptions of a job to make them personally meaningful and identity aligned (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting reduces relational barriers to making unique contributions and enhances interpersonal collaboration and task performance (Fletcher, 1998). Although typically conceived of as a bottom-up process by which employees alter task and relational boundaries, jobs may also be collaboratively cocrafted by employees and managers. For example, qualitative evidence from an internship program at Deutsche Bank for people on the autism spectrum suggests that collaborative job design activities—decision making regarding their work placement, adjustments, and the office environment—corresponded with better employment outcomes (Remington & Pellicano, 2019). Similarly, Dreaver et al. (2020) found that autistic employees performed equally as well or better than neurotypical workers when employees and supervisors worked collaboratively to align job tasks to the employee's interests and limit exposure to particularly stressful job demands resulting from misfit with strengths or interests.

Prioritizing cultural contribution also implies that every individual has something unique to contribute to the culture and that an organization is worse off without these contributions. As mentioned by LeFevre-Levy et al., adjustments to work seen as accommodations may stigmatize neurodivergent employees in a workplace dominated by a neurotypical paradigm. Emphasizing cultural contribution also means that organizations commit to providing supports and accommodations to all that need them to access unique contributions. As such, practices like employers and employees codesigning roles may become more common and help build a foundation for everyone to make contributions to the work environment, maximizing fit for all.

Conclusion

In this commentary, we build upon the shift from a “deficit” to “difference” approach to neurodiversity and correspondingly “recognizing neuroatypicality as a natural part of human variation with positive aspects to it” (LeFevre-Levy et al., p. 7), but we argue that to realize this aim in research and practice we need to rethink foundational concepts like fit. More specifically, we argue for individualizing interest-based forms of fit coupled with organizational cultures that recognize and reinforce difference and uniqueness as contributions, as well as job crafting and collaborative job design. We suggest that cultural contribution, rather than traditional cultural fit (cf. Rivera, 2012), will aid in bridging the double empathy problem while recognizing the full range of neurodiversity, thus contributing to the reduction of stereotyping and stigmatization of neurodivergent employees. We hope these ideas will spark further conceptual development, empirical research, and practice innovation regarding fit, cultural contribution, and collaborative job design to help realize the considerable promise of neurodiversity detailed by Lefevre-Levy and colleagues.

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