Academic Paper

Shattering Silence: Autistic Women Redefining Coaching and Inclusion in the Workplace

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Abstract

This article investigates the workplace challenges of autistic women and the effectiveness of coaching in addressing their needs. It underscores systemic biases and a lack of understanding within coaching practices that impede professional growth and well-being. Through qualitative interviews with autistic women in the UK, the article reveals the necessity for coaches to grasp autism's nuances and for workplaces to adopt autism-inclusive cultures. It calls for a paradigm shift towards neuro-affirmative coaching and organisational cultures that value autistic women's distinct contributions, and aims to contribute to the literature gap on coaching practices for autistic women with actionable insights.

Introduction

Despite the growing acknowledgement of neurodiversity strengths, Autistic individuals are at the highest risk of occupational exclusion (The National Autistic Society, 2016). Additionally, Autistic women encounter compounded challenges due to gendered workplace discrimination (Erickson, et al. 2009). They are more likely to encounter adversity and various forms of discrimination, and their professional development and inclusion are hindered by systemic biases that undermine their potential contributions (Wasan, 2020). Within the field of workplace coaching, autistic women are understudied, and consequently, their needs are potentially misunderstood and underserved. This paper attempts to address this disparity by exploring autistic women's coaching experiences and contribute to the scarce existing knowledge within coaching practice that best meets their unique needs.

Around 1-2% of adults globally are autistic, a number likely underreported due to misdiagnosis and an increase in diagnoses later in life (Smith & Kirby, 2021, Doyle, 2020). Autism is a life-long

condition and compared to neurotypical peers they often face significant life challenges, including poorer academic, employment, health, and social outcomes, as well as dissatisfaction and lower quality of life (ONS, 2021; Marriage, et al. 2009). Autistic people experience difficulties in social interactions and communication, executive functions, lower tolerance to stressors such as changes in structure and routine, heightened sensory sensitivity and challenges with managing stress (CIPD, 2018; Ortiz, 2020; Tomczak et al. 2021: Hayward et al. 2020, 2019; DMA Talent, 2019; Müller et al. 2003). These challenges can lead to decreased concentration and performance, increased stress and burnout, physical discomfort and illness, and negative psychological outcomes (Pearson & Rose, 2021, Raymaker et al. 2020).

Autistic women experience the world in ways that are intrinsically different from their neurotypical peers and face additional layers of complexity due to societal and gendered expectations which are overshadowed by the broader discussions on neurodiversity (Nagib & Wilton, 2020; Offer & Schneider, 2011). With a gender bias and disparity in diagnosis, autistic females are often overlooked and misdiagnosed (Lockwood Estrin et al. 2021). Autistic women frequently encounter societal expectations and workplace barriers, leading to the need to mask or camouflage their autistic traits, which can exacerbate mental health challenges (Cook et al. 2021; Livingston et al. 2019; Green et al. 2019; Parish-Morris et al. 2017, Seers & Hogg, 2021). While used as a coping mechanism, masking can result in an ongoing sense of failure, inadequacy, self-stigmatisation, imposter syndrome, burnout, anxiety, fatigue, irritability, and even suicidal ideation (Bradley et al. 2021, Pearson & Rose, 2021; Dick, 2019; Väänänen & Varje 2019). Ignored and unmet needs in the workplace create obstacles to the inclusion and the overall success and health of autistic women (North, 2023)

Unemployment rates for autistic individuals are approximately 30-40 per cent, three times higher than other disabilities and eight times higher than individuals without disabilities (My Disability Jobs, 2022; ONS, 2021). Those who are employed may contend with detrimental and disabling work environments (Cooper & Kennady, 2021), earn notably less than their peers with similar skills, and encounter greater challenges in securing and keeping employment (Hendricks, 2010). The Equality Act (2010) requires employers to make 'reasonable' adjustments for autistic people whilst balancing the needs of the team and business, job role and environmental constraints. The Access to Work scheme is a UK government-funded programme that offers a range of practical and financial support to all employed or self-employed disabled people (Department for Health and Social Care and Department of Education, 2021). To effectively address workplace challenges, autistic people often require accommodations that are more personalised and tailored to their specific needs such as offering specialised workplace coaching and assistive technology (North, 2023, Weber et al. 2022; Bewley & George, 2016; DWP, 2018;). Although workplace coaching is widely provided as an occupational intervention, the academic literature often lacks perspectives on the personal experiences of autistic employees (Cooper & Kennady, 2021). Job retention supports are often less effective for autistic females than males, owing to delayed diagnoses in females and interventions primarily designed for males, presenting extra challenges for females (Taylor et al. 2015).

Over the last 15 years, substantial research has emerged regarding the effectiveness of coaching within the workplace. Studies have found that workplace coaching effectively reduces sickness absences related to mental health, reduces burnout, and enhances life satisfaction, psychological well-being, self-regulation and coping, overall health, individual performance, work attitudes and positively impacts organisational outcomes (Duijts et al. 2008; Theeboom et al. 2014; Jones et al., 2016). Coaching for autistic individuals has been recognised and endorsed as beneficial across various life areas, from skill development to navigating transitions (Weiss, 2015; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2017; Lauder et al. 2022). Successful interventions, including job coaching, mentoring, social, study, life skills and positive psychology programs, have shown positive outcomes (Lucas & James, 2017; Thompson et al. 2018; Hillier et al. 2022; Lorenc et al. 2018, Sehlin, 2021, Hamsho et al. 2023). Although evidence on the efficacy of coaching for autistic individuals is growing, specific methodologies, their theoretical foundations and the specific needs

of autistic women remain underdeveloped resulting in a significant data gap (Chester, 2019; Santuzzi et al. 2014).

Methodology

Opting for depth over breadth in data collection, a qualitative approach was especially appropriate for examining the complexities of autistic women's lives. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to foster deep, nuanced conversations without imposing pre-existing hypotheses. Participants were provided with an interview guide, which included the pre-set questions, helping to ease any potential uncertainty and anxiety. Participants were informed that the semi-structured interview format provided the flexibility to delve deeply into diverse topics, enabling the use of additional probing questions and clarification of responses. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate geographical spread and ease participants' potential anxiety, with each session lasting up to ninety minutes to ensure comprehensive discussions.

Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants with specific characteristics relevant to the research questions, focusing on women within the autistic community who have experienced UK workplace coaching in the last five years and can communicate in English. Convenience sampling was also used to recruit participants through social media platforms, ensuring a wide reach and diverse responses.

The researcher's background and experiences allowed for effective engagement with participants, remaining mindful of potential biases yet leveraging the researcher's disciplinary knowledge of autism for deeper insights, especially regarding nonverbal communication. Ethical considerations were explored at all stages, focusing on building a trust-based relationship with participants, and maintaining participant well-being was paramount. Reflexivity was practised to carefully manage emotional reactions to themes of 'neurotypical norms' and 'systemic unconscious biases' to maintain objectivity and reduce potential power dynamics. Confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were key, ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences without fear of judgment or reprisal and were aware that they could withdraw at any time. Measures for storing recordings, transcripts and notes ensured the security of participant information in line with the relevant data protection law.

Thematic analysis, a method to identify and analyse patterns within qualitative data, was utilised in this study, particularly through a reflexive approach acknowledging the researcher's subjectivity. Developed by Braun & Clarke, (2022), this approach emphasises encoding data to reveal themes, a process enhanced by the researcher's insights and experiences. Starting with data familiarisation, the researcher organised the data into meaningful themes based on recurring concepts expressed by participants. These then evolved into key identifiable themes that represented the core ideas and narratives within the data. Each theme was refined and clearly defined, focusing on crafting a rich description and selecting a meaningful label. This approach ensured that each resulting theme was robustly supported by the data and resonated with the study's overarching research objectives. The final phase involved synthesising findings into a narrative that encapsulates the research questions, integrating detailed participant information to present a coherent story about the dataset.

Findings

Five participants were interviewed, with each narrative contributing to a richer understanding of the diverse needs and experiences of autistic women in the context of workplace coaching. Respondent One shared a mixed coaching journey, highlighting the significance of finding a compatible coach and addressing the lack of autism understanding in the workplace. Her

experience underscored the importance of coaching that navigates the complexities of autism, fostering self-esteem and advocacy. Respondent Two with a background as Head of HR and now a company founder, emphasised celebrating differences and the need for a nuanced understanding of autism. She advocated for holistic support and practical coaching approaches, stressing action over feedback to accommodate neurodiverse individuals. Respondent Three offered perspectives from receiving and providing coaching, critiquing coach training for its neurotypical focus and lack of preparation for coaching neurodivergent individuals. They highlighted the need for training that includes an understanding of autism-specific needs. Respondent Four discussed her personal and professional struggles with autism, from concealing her diagnosis to navigating daily fluctuations in coping abilities. Her story reflects the challenges of being misunderstood and the potential benefits of tailored coaching and support. Respondent Five spoke on intersectionality, integrating her experiences as a woman of colour and Muslim into the discussion on workplace coaching. She emphasised the importance of genuine inclusivity and allyship in creating neurodiverse-friendly workplaces.

Three emergent themes and six sub-themes developed as a result of the data analysis as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Emergent and sub-themes

Emergent Theme	Sub Themes
Lived experience of autism.	• Coaches' relationship to the experience of Autism. • Coach knowledge of Autism and understanding the individual's unique needs.
Alignment of autism-inclusive culture.	• Institutional ableism - coaching isn't enough. • Cultural ignorance of coaching.
Diversity is not Typical.	• Beyond existing coaching models. • Congruence of autistic perspectives within the field of coaching and coaching research.

Discussion

The following discussion will delve into the three emergent themes that surfaced during the interviews: the lived experience of autism, alignment of autism-inclusive culture and diversity is not typical. It will explore connections with established literature, highlighting the evolving essence of the experiences and examining their implications more broadly for coaching and supporting autistic women in the workplace.

The lived experience of Autism

Understanding the lived experience of autistic women was consistently identified as a crucial aspect when coaching autistic women. This presented itself into two subordinate themes: the coaches' knowledge of autism and understanding of the coachees' unique needs and the coaches' relationship to the experience of autism**.**

The importance of coaches' understanding and knowledge of autism was unanimously emphasised to help foster meaningful and effective communication between the coach and the coachee. It can influence the coach's expectations and how coaching is provided, ensuring it is not uncomfortable for the coachee. Coaches may misunderstand autistic women because they interpret dyadic discussions through the lens of neurotypical expectations, including body language and eye contact patterns (Strömberg et al. 2022). Participants expressed the possible negative impacts of interactions with coaches who have a limited understanding of autism.

Participants had a clear preference for coaches with neurodivergent experiences, believing they offer deeper empathy and understanding. This preference, however, didn't disregard the potential effectiveness of coaching with a coach who has no neurodivergent experience.

If you are a white woman with neurodiversity, that doesn't mean that a woman of colour can't be one of your clients. But it means that you need to be educated enough to understand the implications of being a white woman of neurodiversity because what tends to happen when you sit within the default is the same as a neurotypical person sitting with the default [.....]. So as long as people are willing to understand their own unconscious bias or their own blind spots, and they make a conscious effort to educate those blind spots, then that's fine.

There was also an acknowledgement that neurodivergent coaches, while valuable, may not automatically be the most effective coaches.

I actually got a coach who was neurodivergent[....].And she was like, I know what you need to do. You need to get organised and time management…

An awareness of potential biases and a commitment to reflective practice is essential to a coach's effectiveness. Reflective practice aids understanding and can mitigate any unconscious biases, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to coaching. Coaches inquiry and curiosity about the unique needs and experiences of autistic women that go beyond stereotypical perspectives and any preconceived notions, valuing the varied nature and experiences with autism will better cater to their diverse needs.

Alignment of autism-inclusive culture

The alignment of an autism-inclusive culture was found to be paramount in fostering a workplace that values neurodiversity and effectively supports autistic women. Within this overarching theme, two subordinate themes were identified: institutional ableism and cultural ignorance of coaching.

Institutional ableism, as defined by Fierros (2006), describes systemic practices that disadvantage individuals based on their abilities, impacting autistic individuals through outcomes like underemployment and mental health issues. Autistic women, in addition to facing gendered employment discrimination, encounter stereotypes and stigmatisation in the workplace, a sentiment universally shared by the study participants. Existing discriminatory structures, coupled with deep-seated ableist and gendered beliefs within organisational and political systems, often undermine efforts to implement reasonable adjustments, as mandated by law. Making reasonable adjustments can improve the overall wellbeing of autistic employees and yield broader benefits, including improved performance, prolonged career sustainability and improved systemic inclusivity (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). Many employers, however, tend to view accommodations for autistic people in a negative light, potentially impeding access to broader employment support (Kensbock et al. 2017; Jackson et al. 2000). The participants described situations where they were perceived negatively and described incidents of discrimination, bullying, and mistreatment when implementing workplace accommodations and advocating against discrimination and prejudices.

Constrained resources especially in publicly funded organisations and where neurodiversity is less understood or accepted, can also result in 'internalised ableism' where individuals subconsciously absorb and accept negative societal prejudices and stereotypes (Pearson & Rose, 2021). These harmful beliefs can lead to self-stigmatisation, diminished self-esteem, and a reduced sense of value often resulting in them undervaluing their own worth and capabilities, feeling ashamed of their autism and increasing masking behaviours (Ibid). The participants described a reluctance to disclose their autism to their employers to avoid criticism, investing significant effort in masking or adapting to their autistic traits.

Despite the participant's overall positive view of workplace coaching in supporting autistic women in navigating and overcoming workplace difficulties and challenges, paradoxically they suggested it may accentuate and perpetuate instances of discrimination, harming mental health. Concerns were also expressed by the participants about underlying assumptions that the purpose of workplace

coaching was to improve their performance and 'fix them' to fit into an ableist system. Similarities can be drawn from research on women's leadership coaching programmes that aimed to 'fix' women (Bierema et al., 2022). This is perhaps due to the enduring influence of coaching's historical roots as a tool for performance management coupled with a general lack of understanding of what coaching is (Wahyudi et al. 2022; Cox et al. 2018; The IPEC Coaching Institute, 2019, Grant, 2017). Indeed, Shoukry & Cox (2018) emphasise that if coaching operates within a discourse emphasising competition, return on investment, goal achievement, there is a risk of it becoming a mere instrument for organisational and social conformity.

Diversity is not Typical

Diversity is anything but typical; it is a dynamic and multifaceted concept transcending conventional norms. Within this overarching theme, two subordinate themes were identified: beyond existing coaching models and congruence of autistic perspectives within the field of coaching and coaching research.

Rather than adhering to a standard or conforming to a singular concept, diversity celebrates the myriad differences that make us distinct. Autistic women encompass a broad range of characteristics, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, age, abilities, perspectives, and experiences. The intersectionality of their lives underscores the uniqueness inherent in every person and the importance of fostering an approach to coaching that is flexible to the kaleidoscope of differences. Current coaching practices often overlook the constructed nature of cultural norms, perpetuating ableism, and neurotypical-centric ideologies (Cushion, 2018). Indeed, the coaching field is predominantly occupied by white males with a Western, Eurocentric outlook, limiting demographic diversity (Stout-Rostron 2017). Efforts to increase diversity awareness among coaches often emphasise adaptation rather than critically examining underlying biases (Shoukry 2016). This approach, however, encourages coachees to conform to existing organisational and societal norms. For autistic women, this can inadvertently reinforce harmful coping strategies such as 'masking', potentially worsening their mental health (Bargiela et al. 2016; Seers & Hogg 2021).

Employing a neuro-typical one-size-fits-all approach neglects the distinctive challenges for women with autism in the workplace setting and the workplace coaching that is offered. Traditional coaching models, with their fixed expectations and failure to recognise neurodiversity, can lead to misunderstandings and ineffective coaching practices (Strömberg et al. 2022; Western, 2012). Participants highlighted experiences where coaching approaches did not consider nor address key issues related to their autism.

> *We use the standard and traditional models and they don't always work for autistic people, particularly if you look at things like demand avoidance.*

The participant's expressed views are congruent with the coaching frameworks developed by Hamsho et al. (2023) and Hiller et al. (2022), whereby neuro-affirmative, unique and tailored approaches are adopted that are suitable for the individual coachee. As Daughtry et al. (2009) argue, effective coaching relies on the flexibility of the approach adapted to the specific needs of the coachee. Participants recognised the underlying and complex variables relevant to their unique experience and suggested that the approach and length of the coaching interventions need to vary depending on the need and the context of their autism diagnosis.

Traditional coaching models are also predominantly conceptualised within the framework of a one-to-one relationship between the coach and the coachee. However, this approach overlooks the intricate relationships and group dynamics patterns within organisations. Autistic employees often encounter stereotypes, biases, and stigmatisation from managers and colleagues (Szeto & Dobson, 2010). Low expectations of their abilities can result in a need to prove their competence (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2009). The participants suggested that managers could also benefit

from coaching as a mechanism to help them better understand and support their autistic employees and address social disadvantage. Hamsho et al. (2023) found that autism-focused coaching for teachers improved self-efficacy and better outcomes for their autistic students.

Where coaching persists in adopting an instrumental and positivistic mindset held within traditional coaching models, predefined expectations are increasingly considered as given (Western, 2012). A more critical coaching methodology that questions ableist assumptions and norms could more effectively address the unique challenges faced by autistic women. Emphasising a biopsychosocial understanding of disability and ethical considerations in coaching research and practice is required to challenge existing ideologies.

Research demonstrates that an autistic participatory approach is a crucial element in research (Nicolaidis et al. 2019, Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019, Pellicano et al. 2021). Incorporating autistic women's perspectives into coaching research is vital, their experiences are currently virtually non-existent. With a lack of phenomenological inquiry into autistic women's experiences within coaching research, coaching models may not fully consider, let alone address their needs.

> *So, for the coaches, you have to make sure that it's something that is really advocated within the coaching community, in the coaching education. So it can't be an optional module [….] How do you make it something that isn't just an afterthought? How can you make it at the heart of your assessments and the work that you are doing at the beginning.*

Theoretical frameworks drawn from coaching models, psychosocial interventions like CBT, psychoeducation, and positive psychology may serve as a foundation for an evidence-based coaching approach tailored to autistic women (Sehlin, 2021). Until further research is undertaken, there is no evidence that adopting and adapting these approaches will garner coaching efficacy for autistic women. The findings from this research have shown that so much more is required than simply adapting models.

Conclusion

This research has unfolded the critical insights derived from the lived experiences of autistic women in the workplace, revealing three pivotal themes: the lived experience of autism, the alignment of an autism-inclusive culture, and the dynamic nature of diversity as atypical. It underscores the nuanced requirements of coaching autistic women, emphasising the necessity for coaches to possess an understanding of autism, to attune with the coachees' unique contexts, and for coaches and organisations to transcend beyond neurotypical norms to foster a genuinely inclusive environment. This entails a shift from mere adaptation to a reflexive, neuro-affirmative approach that considers the complex interplay of institutional and internalised ableism, cultural ignorance, and the inherent diversity within the autistic community. The pursuit of an autism-inclusive culture requires more than tolerance; it demands recognition and appreciation of autistic individuals' unique strengths, fostering environments for their full participation and contribution.

The insights highlight the potential adverse effects of traditional coaching models and the systemic barriers that perpetuate discrimination, urging a re-evaluation of coaching practices to better accommodate the diverse needs and challenges faced by autistic women. Effective workplace coaching for autistic women is not merely a matter of policy adjustment or providing additional resources. It is about fundamentally rethinking coaching approaches to fully embrace neurodiversity.

There remains a substantial gap in understanding and addressing the specific experiences of autistic women. A broader discourse on enhancing support and creating a more inclusive

workplace for autistic women, developing, and advocating for coaching models that are flexible, critically aware, and aligned with the principles of neurodiversity and inclusion is required.

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About the author

Cara Langford Watts is a Coaching Psychologist and the Director of Neuro Directions, specialising in providing progressive coaching explicitly tailored for neurodivergent individuals.

Cara is actively working to integrate coaching research and practice through a neurodiverse lens, paving the way for a more equitable and diverse coaching landscape.