

Leading with understanding: cultivating positive relationships between neurotypical leaders and neurodivergent employees

Inclusive
leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – Neurodivergent employees have atypical needs that require distinctive leadership approaches. In this study, the specific nature of a relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders is explored through the lens of the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory.

Design/methodology/approach – This two-phased qualitative study builds on 12 semi-structured interviews with neurodivergent employees and an unstructured focus group with 15 individuals with professional and/or personal interest in neurodiversity. The researcher spent almost 13 h listening to the lived experiences of research participants concerning neurodiversity and leadership.

Findings – Leaders who exhibit empathy and understanding were noted to provide greater support. The findings also highlight the complexity of neuro-inclusion in the workplace. Specifically, the delicate balance between accommodation and avoiding stigmatization is emphasized, addressing the concerns raised regarding the legal risks associated with neurodivergent inclusion. Additionally, the findings underscore the necessity for leaders to avoid patronizing behaviors while catering to the diverse needs of neurodivergent employees. This underscores the importance of supporting both neurodivergent employees and leaders navigating such challenges.

Practical implications – The findings help establish inclusive and accommodating employee relations practices that conscientiously address the requirements of neurodivergent employees while providing support for those in leadership roles.

Originality/value – This study constitutes a direct answer to recent calls to develop a more nuanced understanding of workplace neurodiversity, with a specific focus on neuro-inclusive leadership. Acknowledging that we still use inappropriate, old tools in new situations that require novel approaches to leadership helps set the agenda for future research in this area.

Keywords Neurodiversity, Leadership, LMX, Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Relationships, Leader–follower

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A recent surge of research on the topic of neurodiversity in the workplace has explored ways to promote neuro-inclusive employment through recruitment and selection practices (Davies *et al.*, 2023), by leveraging technologies (Walkowiak, 2023) and remote work opportunities (Kalmanovich-Cohen and Stanton, 2023; Szulc, 2022a), through optimizing job design (Tomczak, 2022) and enhancing the well-being of neurodivergent employees (Szulc *et al.*, 2021). While all these elements play a part in constructing a more inclusive work environment, the discussion seems to overlook the crucial role of leadership in establishing neuro-inclusive workplaces. Leadership can be defined as a social process of exerting

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influence that occurs within the dynamic interaction of two or more individuals (Yukl *et al.*, 2018). Various levels of leadership have been recognized (DeChurch *et al.*, 2010), but the primary emphasis of this paper is on the bottom level of leadership. Specifically, the focus is directed toward direct supervision, encompassing tasks such as hiring, task allocation, performance management or terminating employment (see Jacobs and McGee, 2001).

Leaders are vital figures in the creation of inclusive work environments due to their direct influence on employee experiences (Ferdman, 2014) and their important role in helping their subordinates experience well-being (Luu, 2019). However, our knowledge of inclusive leadership is scant and calls have been made for a more comprehensive exploration of what leaders do in an attempt to create more inclusive environments (see: Roberson and Perry, 2022). What is more, existing fragmented research on inclusive leadership tends to look at universal leadership styles, somewhat ignoring the fact that distinct categories of employees have different expectations (e.g. Kinnie *et al.*, 2005). For instance, neurodivergent employees have atypical needs and preferences that require specific attention and distinctive leadership approaches (Roberson *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, existing leadership theories are based on the false assumptions of employee homogeneity (see Winterton and Cafferkey, 2019) and do not recognize the unique mechanisms that are needed to successfully engage and lead neurodivergent employees (Szulc *et al.*, 2023).

Thus, the main problem that I analyze is the concept of neuro-inclusive leadership, i.e. leadership that recognizes the variance, value and challenges associated with different neurological perspectives among employees. By examining the nature of a relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders within the organizational context through the lens of the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), the study reported in this article contributes significantly to the existing literature on contemporary employment issues. First, the findings provide a direct answer to recent calls to develop a more nuanced understanding of the concept of neurodiversity in the workplace context (for recent calls, see Hennekam *et al.*, 2022; Weber *et al.*, 2022), with a specific focus on neuro-inclusive leadership (see Doyle *et al.*, 2023; Volpone *et al.*, 2022). Second, through explaining how neurominorities may have very specific perceptions of and reactions to what may only seem like a universal leadership practice, the study addresses recent calls to move away from universal management as a simple route to positive employee outcomes and to stop treating employees as having identical needs (Cafferkey *et al.*, 2020; Szulc *et al.*, 2021). Third, by seeking to view neurodiversity as its own entity, regardless of the diagnosed condition and combining a variety of perspectives on neurodiversity, the outcomes of the study provide a more holistic understanding of the wide spectrum of neurodiversity (for recent calls, see Volpone *et al.*, 2022). Finally, the findings also help to set the agenda for future research in this area – thus, generally contributing to developing a field of inclusive management, leadership and neurodiversity at work.

The article is structured as follows: First, the concept of neurodiversity against the backdrop of employment is explored. Second, the existing research evidence concerning leadership and neurodivergent employment is discussed, and an argument is made that we need novel approaches to leadership that are inclusive of neurodivergence. Third, the LMX theory is introduced, and its role in neurodiverse work relationships is emphasized. The research design and method are then presented and justified. The qualitative data are analyzed, and the main findings are discussed, considering their theoretical and practical contributions. Directions for future research conclude the discussion.

Neurodiversity movement and employment

The concept of neurodiversity suggests that all humans vary in terms of their neurocognitive ability (Singer, 1999). Analogically, neurodivergent is an umbrella term for a subset of neurodivergent conditions, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia or Tourette's syndrome – which imply that one's cognitive profile is not

“typical.” Management research on neurodivergence is increasingly aligned with the notion of a strength-based approach to neurodiversity (Wiklund *et al.*, 2018). It sees the problems experienced by neurodivergent employees as a direct consequence of the unpreparedness of the modern workplace. The approach assumes that universally used management practices are not designed to effectively address the complexity surrounding the employment cycle of neurominorities (Hayward *et al.*, 2019), who are not offered sufficient opportunities for engagement and growth (Johnson *et al.*, 2020). The strength-based approach has influenced public awareness of neurodiversity in recent years and resulted in the attention of the business press describing neurodivergence as a “competitive advantage” (Austin and Pisano, 2017). This approach chimes with broader initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in organizational contexts, described as the “business case” for inclusion (Saleh and Bruyere, 2018).

Aligned with growing interest in workplace neurodiversity among practitioners, management scholars have initiated research to explore effective strategies for neurodiversity management (see, e.g. Khan *et al.*, 2022; Tomczak, 2022; Weber *et al.*, 2022). The key focus has been placed on the success factors enabling employment (e.g. Dreaver *et al.*, 2020), workplace accessibility (e.g. Waisman-Nitzan *et al.*, 2021) and barriers to employment (e.g. Hayward *et al.*, 2020). More specific focus was also placed on improving the conditions for neurodivergent employees during the specific phases of the employment cycle, such as recruitment and selection (e.g. Carrero *et al.*, 2019) or job retention (Tomczak *et al.*, 2021), be that in stationary but also remote settings (Kalmanovich-Cohen and Stanton, 2023). Scholars also focused on the specific outcomes related to the well-being of neurodivergent employees (Szulc *et al.*, 2021; Tomczak and Kulikowski, 2023) and their motivation (Goldfarb *et al.*, 2019).

Leadership and neurodiversity

The role of leadership in organizational settings with diverse employees (Nishii and Mayer, 2009) and neurodivergent employees specifically (LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023) has been elevated. For instance, one of the findings from a large-scale survey with employers and neurodivergent employees carried out by McDowall *et al.* (2023) was that line managers “are absolutely a key” (p. 60) in supporting neurodivergent individuals at the workplace. This significance stems from their role as the primary point of contact. However, as argued by Seitz (2022), it is wrongly assumed that traditional leadership theories that were developed and tested in neurotypical environments apply to neurodivergent employees. While we suffer from a lack of research concerning the leadership of neurodivergent employees, the fragmented evidence in this area suggests that despite its popularity and universality, transformational leadership tends to be associated with increased anxiety levels and lower job satisfaction for some neurodivergent individuals (Parr *et al.*, 2013), for whom this style may appear too abstract (Hurley-Hanson and Giannantonio, 2017). Volpone *et al.* (2022) suggested that authentic leadership is more supportive for the neurodivergent group of employees but provided no empirical evidence to back up their claims other than stating that authentic leaders are in a position to transmit social information about the importance of inclusion in the work environment (see also: Boekhorst, 2015).

What is more, difficulties that some neurominorities experience with following social rules, understanding affect, reading facial expressions or the tone of voice, asking too many questions or their inability to “read between the lines” often lead to experiencing problems with communication and social interaction with their leaders (see Tomczak *et al.*, 2021). Fragmented evidence in this area also suggests that leaders may find the process of managing neurodivergent employees “extremely draining” due to the myriad of hidden yet complex, emotional and time-consuming interactions involved in the process (Richards *et al.*, 2019, p. 1903). In their rich qualitative study focused on the lived experience of line managers managing neurodiversity, Richards *et al.* (2019) found that managers who lead neurodivergent individuals often have to engage in the above-average number of

interactions with this group of employees, which they find “time-consuming and highly distracting” (p. 24). The authors, however, further demonstrated that if managers drew on their specific skill sets that were unrelated to the wider leadership role, they experienced high degrees of personal satisfaction that stemmed from managing a neurodivergent subordinate.

The role of LMX in neurodiverse work relationships

This paper centers its attention specifically on the relationship between a neurotypical leader and a neurodivergent employee through the lens of the LMX theory. LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), recognized as one of the most influential leadership models (Gooty and Yammarino, 2016), elucidates how leaders establish and maintain diverse exchange relationships with their subordinates (Dimotakis *et al.*, 2023). The model assumes that leaders will treat some of their followers more favorably than others (Henderson *et al.*, 2009). Whether such relationships involve high mutual trust and respect or, conversely, remain more transactional and distant, they will have an impact on a range of outcomes, including job satisfaction, commitment, supervisory evaluations of job performance or opportunities for career advancement (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012).

Although the quality of relationships between the leader and subordinate plays a pivotal role in fostering a thriving culture of workplace inclusion (Gates, 1993), existing research indicates that leaders are more likely to form lower-quality LMX relationships with subordinates with disabilities (Colella and Varma, 2001) or with racially dissimilar others (Brouer *et al.*, 2009). Our understanding of the relationship between leaders and neurodivergent employees is scant (Richards *et al.*, 2019), but it has been noted that LMX theory may be a useful avenue to aid our understanding of it and ultimately help scholars learn how to improve workplace diversity and neuro-inclusion initiatives (Hurley-Hanson *et al.*, 2020). It is crucial, however, to approach the existing knowledge on LMX dynamics with caution. We should refrain from assuming that strategies effective in other diversity relationships are equally applicable to neurodivergent individuals (see LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023). For instance, high-quality leader–follower relationships are more likely to emerge when the subordinates are more extroverted (Nahrgang *et al.*, 2009). However, autistic individuals are often introverts (Schriber *et al.*, 2014) who prefer to collaborate over computer-mediated communication channels (Szulc *et al.*, 2021: 862). Email correspondence or brief text messages, in contrast to face-to-face meetings, can complicate the establishment of mutual trust and may be perceived as disrespectful, thereby hindering the quality of LMX (e.g. Anderson *et al.*, 2017). Fragmented research evidence in the area of leadership and neurodiversity also suggests that leaders have to expend a significant amount of emotional labor in setting up and maintaining a variety of reasonable adjustments targeted at their neurodivergent followers. Richards *et al.* (2019) highlight the importance of equipping line managers with the knowledge and skills necessary to collaborate effectively with dyspraxic employees in cultivating productive work habits and offering guidance in utilizing office equipment. Additionally, they emphasize the value of embracing adaptable work schedules and providing extra assistance to support employees with ADHD. They further recommend the implementation of personalized strategies for fostering the success of autistic followers and suggest that developing trusting relationships with dyslexic employees is crucial.

Given that neurodiversity encompasses a wide range of conditions and individual differences, LMX theory’s focus on personalized relationships seems to align with the need for leaders to customize their approaches to accommodate the unique needs and abilities of their neurodivergent employees. The model can also be used to assess how inclusive and diverse leader–follower relationships are within organizations. Exploring how neurodiversity is integrated into these relationships has the potential to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces and employee relations practices. Nonetheless, the

dynamics within the relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders within the organizational framework remain an area of limited comprehension, prompting a growing consensus for further research to explore this crucial aspect in more depth (see Doyle *et al.*, 2023; Hennekam *et al.*, 2022). Consistently, in this study, I seek to answer the following guiding research question: What particular aspects of the interaction between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders contribute to the cultivation of a positive working relationship between them?

Methods

This study is part of two larger research projects focusing on creating neuro-inclusive workplaces. In the first part of the study, 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted as part of the research focusing on neuro-inclusive job design specifically. During the study, when interviewing neurodivergent employees, a theme emerged relating to the important role of a leader and leader–follower relationships in a neuro-inclusive work environment. To further understand the emerging findings, a second stage of the study was set up. It included a workshop-style discussion in the form of an unstructured focus group with 15 experts in neurodivergent employment. The aim of the focus group was to cover the topic of the nature of neuro-inclusive leadership that emerged in the first phase of the study in more detail.

In the first stage, all interviews were conducted with purposefully sampled neurodivergent individuals who were in employment at the time of conducting the study (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Some snowball sampling was also used due to the neurodivergent community being a relatively hard-to-reach group. The choice of data sample was informed by the selection of information-rich cases that could be studied in depth. The selection criteria involved being employed and considering oneself to be neurodivergent. Interviews were conducted online via Teams software and lasted, on average, 58 min (shortest 32 min; longest 90 min). Overall, 692 min (totaling almost 12 h) were spent collecting data in the first phase of the study. The interviews were conducted between July 2021 and November 2022. A research assistant was employed to facilitate the data collection process.

In the second stage, the sample involved mature students on the “Neurodiversity at work” postgraduate diploma program – i.e. individuals with rich experience supervising neurodivergent individuals, neurodiversity champions and self-advocates (all participants were employed at the time of conducting the study; see Table 2 for sample characteristics).

ID	Interview lengths	Job role	Gender	Condition	Country of residence
P1	60	General manager	Male	Autism	UK
P2	55	Engineer	Male	ADHD and dyslexia	UK
P3	90	Project support	Female	ADHD	UK
P4	60	Engineer	Male	Autism	UK
P5	90	Life coach	Female	ADHD and autism	UK
P6	45	Trainee solicitor	Female	Dyslexia	UK
P7	32	HR manager	Female	ADHD, autism	UK
P8	55	Device innovator	Male	ADHD and autism	UK
P9	50	HR advisor	Male	Bipolar	UK
P10	35	Manager	Female	Dyspraxia	UK
P11	70	Driver and a Community volunteer	Female	ADHD	UK
P12	50	Hub lead and Trainer assessor	Female	ADHD and Irlen syndrome	UK

Source(s): Own analysis

Table 1. Sample characteristics: interviews

Table 2.
Sample characteristics:
focus group

ID	Gender	Job role	Country of residence
P1	Female	HR advisor	Poland
P2	Female	UX designer	Poland
P3	Male	Senior manager	Poland
P4	Female	Cyber security consultant	Poland
P5	Female	Project manager	Poland
P6	Female	Senior talent acquisition specialist	Poland
P7	Female	Audit manager	Poland
P8	Female	Psychologist and recruiter	Poland
P9	Female	CEO	Poland
P10	Female	Leader	Poland
P11	Female	HR people and business partner	Poland
P12	Female	Senior technical recruiter	Poland
P13	Female	HR business partner	Poland
P14	Female	Specialist	Poland
P15	Female	Head of HR	Poland

Source(s): Own analysis

Convenience sampling was used as the workshop took the form of an unstructured focus group that was conducted during the academic classes in February 2023. It lasted 60 min. The focus group was conducted by the academic teacher (the author) and was not part of the course credit. The focus group was recorded and transcribed. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Prior to interviews and a focus group, all participants were provided with an information sheet with details about the study and asked to sign a participant consent form. Interview questions were shared with participants ahead of interviews, as this is aligned with inclusive research practices (Szulc, 2022b). Focus group questions were more unstructured, but participants were informed about the broader topic of conversations in advance of the research taking place.

Template analysis (King and Brooks, 2017) was employed to examine interview transcripts. Initially, leader characteristics and behaviors were identified as *a priori* themes for in-depth exploration. Subsequently, the author crafted an initial coding template based on a subset of data, which was then systematically applied to additional data. The template underwent revisions in response to insights gained from each transcript, culminating in a finalized version. This refined template served as the foundation for interpreting the entire interview dataset and for articulating the study's findings. Additionally, as a continuation of the analysis, the refined template was further applied to analyze the findings from a focus group discussion. This extended application allowed for a comprehensive examination of both interview and focus group data, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the nature of a positive working relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders. As the sole author, the researcher took on exclusive responsibility for data analysis, but she actively sought regular consultations with a neurodivergent peer. This collaborative engagement provided invaluable feedback, contributing to an enhanced overall rigor in the analysis.

Findings

The reported study sought to examine the characteristics of a positive relationship between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders in an organizational context. A careful examination of participants' perceptions of the nature of such a relationship revealed several insights. First, the data gathered in this study points our attention to the role of empathy and understanding as essential attributes for a neurodiversity-inclusive leader. Second, it helps us understand how neuro-inclusive leaders should behave to aid in building

and maintaining positive relations with their neurodivergent subordinates. A delicate balance between workplace adjustments and inadvertent stigmatization is revealed and the importance of handling feedback with care is discussed. Finally, it is revealed how leaders should support themselves to build and maintain positive relationships with their neurodivergent employees. I turn to expound upon each of these dimensions in greater detail now.

(Lack of) empathy and understanding

The study's participants provided rich accounts of the attributes essential for a neurodiversity-inclusive leader. Almost every participant underscored the importance of empathetic qualities in such leaders. For instance, Participant 1 articulated that an informed and empathetic manager possesses the capacity to comprehend the challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum within a professional setting:

If a line manager could understand how an autistic person would deal with their problem within their role (. . .) It's a little bit more difficult for an autistic person to adjust because we're not quite so adjustable. But an aware and empathetic line manager could do that. (P1)

The findings from a focus group echo the significance of empathy in cultivating a supportive environment for neurodivergent employees, as elevated in the collective insights below:

Woman: This is the manager's role, to focus on the strengths.

Woman: I am slightly scared that managers are released from the responsibility and we keep emphasizing their rights and not their responsibilities. There will be more and more neurodivergent teams, right?

Woman: So you need to speak in a gentle, subtle, and sensitive way.

Woman: Yes.

Woman: This manager needs to be very empathetic.

Woman: Yes, this is a true leader.

Woman: (. . .) This is empathy in the broadest sense.

A leader who demonstrates an empathetic understanding of their neurodivergent subordinates is more likely to grasp their unique work-related needs, thus fostering enhanced work efficiency. As illustrated by one of our respondents, they recounted an example of their manager's remarkable empathy, exemplified by the manager's willingness to provide necessary accommodations to improve work efficiency:

I mean, honestly, my manager is incredible, so I just say "This is what I need." So, whether it's a physical thing, so I wanted a stand up desk, or I wanted a keyboard and mouse that I can use, or whether it be "Do you know what, I'm really feeling burnt out today, I'm gonna take a couple of hours this afternoon to just chill, and then I'll pick up the time." "Yeah, no problem." (P12)

The above example is not in isolation. Other participants also shared instances when their leaders showed great understanding of their specific needs and proactively tried to accommodate them (for instance, "She (manager) does great because she knows very well when I am stressed out and she would step in and say – hey, don't you need a little break here?" (P9).

Nevertheless, our data also revealed a multitude of instances where leaders failed to comprehend the intricacies of their neurodivergent subordinates' experiences. This is strikingly exemplified by Participant 1, who expressed the common occurrence of dismissive attitudes, often veiled in the phrase "but it doesn't matter," which he regards as a lack of genuine interest. He further elaborated that such dismissals often extend to being told that

they do not “appear autistic,” leading to an overarching sense of disregard. Similarly, an individual with dyslexia, as portrayed by Participant 6, shared their struggle with the lack of understanding, resulting in feelings of diminished intelligence (“I felt less intelligent,” P6). Participant 5 posited that this state of affairs could be attributed to “a lack of understanding or consideration.”

Adjustment versus stigmatizing

The study participants shared numerous instances where their leaders actively facilitated their daily work activities. While extant literature has already explored ways to support neurodivergent employees in the workplace (see [Weber et al., 2022](#)), our research uncovers additional insights. Notably, it reveals a delicate balance between workplace adjustments and inadvertent stigmatization. This concept began to crystallize when Participant 3 observed, “. . . you kind of get treated like your child sometimes . . . really patronizing.” Our focus group explored this theme further:

Woman: We are discussing the situation of creating a work environment for people who are aware of being neurodivergent and have needs. In other words, someone comes and says, “I have ADHD,” and we know, okay, we have a person with ADHD, we need to create something for them. But now, how do we work with leaders to help them recognize that they have such individuals in their teams, and how do we later talk to these individuals to suggest that something is going on?

Man: Exactly. (. . .) I will just think about what to do with it, because the problem is that I will probably start behaving differently toward that person, and that’s already bad in the sense that the person might say that because of my . . .

Woman: Your approach, right?

Man: Condition that I don’t know about, that I’m not really aware of, I have to behave differently, so it might lead to . . . to legal action, right?

Woman: I mean, the question is what you will do with it, right? Because we’re here to . . .

Man: But I have changed, I started behaving differently than before, towards other people.

Woman: To improve the work environment . . .

Man: It doesn’t matter, she has the right to report me.

Woman: Yes, discrimination due to . . .

Woman: I see.

Man: It’s already discrimination.

Woman: Oh, I see. So, I understand that you’re starting to treat her differently because you want to help her, but she may perceive it as if you’re starting to treat her . . .

Man: Yes, yes.

Woman: You’re stigmatizing her.

Woman: Yes, yes, yes. But it’s, well, the same thing.

Man: And it’s really slippery, it’s very difficult. It’s one thing that needs to be worked out.

Interestingly, the participants of a focus group acknowledged that the risk of inadvertently stigmatizing neurodivergent individuals may lead to potential legal implications for leaders, stemming from perceived marginalization. What emerged as an idealistic yet potentially viable solution to prevent stigmatization or patronization of neurodivergent individuals in

the workplace context was leaders fostering environments rich in advantages accessible to the entire workforce regardless of their neurodiversity:

Woman: In an ideal world or in an ideal organization, I would go a step further. We talk about the fact that someone gets diagnosed and someone doesn't get diagnosed and so on and so forth. But what if we created a work environment, realizing that some of them like to have things arranged and others like to be spontaneous. Some will like it and it benefits them, others don't need it. So in order to somehow survive in all of this, if we create a work environment that gives such flexibility that we don't have to think at all about who has a diagnosis.

Woman: That's exactly it!

Woman: A bit idealistic, but . . .

Handling feedback with care

The respondents in our study dedicated a substantial portion of their discussions to delineating the characteristics of desirable feedback from their leaders. Notably, an autistic participant emphasized the necessity for direct and unambiguous assessment, stating, "I need binary feedback, I just need the okay, this didn't work. We need to go again. (. . .) Be clear about it, be concise. If you're displeased, say it, mean it, be clear because I can deal with it either way, but don't dress it up" (P1). Such views were echoed by Participant 4, who opined that "I believe that being honest and direct is the best way."

Conversely, a different perspective emerged from Participant 10, who stressed the importance of clear feedback but advocated for its constructive and comprehensive nature, explicitly rejecting numeric assessments: "constructive and thorough, not numeric, I do not like working with numeric data." "Participant 10 further emphasized that feedback should steer clear of patronizing tendencies ("it also needs not to be patronizing, this is something that happens often with neurodiverse individuals"), an issue that resonates with our prior discussion concerning leaders who inadvertently adopt patronizing attitudes when informed of their subordinates' neurodivergence.

The quote below further highlights the importance of handling feedback with great care, especially in a neurodiverse context where emotions play a significant role. The emotional impact of feedback can be quite damaging for neurodivergent individuals, leading to feelings of rejection and being talked down to. It therefore appears crucial to understand that negative feedback or even the perception of it, can be highly debilitating:

I think people have to be very careful with feedback, and especially in a world of neurodivergent, where many people are very emotionally led, and I think that . . . it needs to be handled very, very carefully. Because it can be incredibly damaging. And I know from the WhatsApp group in fact, that I'm on, there are many people on there that get very upset about their bosses' view of them, or what their bosses said to them. They feel rejected, they feel talked down to, so it's definitely huge. I think that in an emotional world that neurodivergent people tend to live in, I think people need to understand that it can be very debilitating to be told you're not good enough in, in any particular way, or even . . . We need a lot of bigging up, we need a lot of encouraging, and a lot of . . . you know, making us feel good about ourselves rather than . . . You know, if people think that they are gonna get the better from me by telling me I'm not doing a very good job, I'm just gonna leave ha-ha. (P11)

As suggested by Participant 11, to support neurodivergent individuals effectively, there is a need for positive reinforcement, encouragement and making them feel valued rather than resorting to criticism, which may lead some of them to disengage or even leave their positions. Such views were also shared by Participant 12, who elevated the importance of recognition and receiving positive feedback. Even though she is aware of her leader's appreciation, she

needs to continuously prove herself and hence, positive feedback is particularly meaningful and valuable in reinforcing her self-worth and confidence:

The recognition that you're doing a good job - because alongside having ADHD I also struggle with rejection sensitive dysphoria. So, I really, I really struggle with kind of . . . I have to prove myself all the time, when actually I shouldn't, I shouldn't feel like that because I know that, I know my managers value me, but I do, so . . . being told that you're doing something well means a lot, it's really important to me that I'm recognized. (P12)

Supporting a neuro-inclusive leader

In our findings, a prevailing theme underscores the necessity for leaders aspiring to foster neurodiversity and inclusivity to acquire more comprehensive education in order to genuinely comprehend the nuances of neurodivergence. Respondents suggested the training should be a more profound activity than simply a tick box exercise ("Investing in a couple of hours of really quality training rather than just having to do a 30 min E-learning every year that people just rush through tick boxes," P2). Some suggested it can involve role play to potentially trigger feelings of empathy and enhance the understanding of "the full spectrum" of neurodivergence (P4).

It also appears of paramount importance to avoid singularly emphasizing the facilitation of support mechanisms for neurodivergent individuals, as this endeavor is reciprocal. Our research outcomes suggest that leaders also stand to gain significant advantages from support initiatives. In this regard, the work of [Richards et al. \(2019\)](#) has previously alluded to the emotional labor associated with managing neurodiversity, which may exact a substantial emotional toll. Our focus group respondents further articulated the perspective that leaders, as employees themselves, should be recipients of support, like any other employee:

Woman: We talk a lot about supporting employees in neurodiverse teams, but does it work the other way around.

Woman: I mean, I would relate here, the leader is also an employee.

As the conversation was continued, this aspect was discussed in more depth:

Man: From my experience, care should be given primarily to managers. This is because they get the do most things - all the time. And they have to switch every fifteen minutes from one side to the other. So they're actually the ones most likely to get frustrated. They give the worst marks to the company, they see the most, they pull the most on themselves, they hold up a lot of things, and they are just still required to be more aware, more available, and so on. And accessible to the employees, and accessible to their bosses, to the boards of directors and so on, and have to be the fastest, they have to be first at the finish line.

Woman: Yes, it's like with psychotherapists who have their own sessions with their therapists later on. You know, it's about being taken care of.

One of the leaders of neurodivergent employees who participated in a focus group emphasized that such support needs to be ongoing and that building effective relationships between leaders and neurodivergent counterparts is a long process that requires time:

Man: In my opinion this is a process because it's not going to be that tomorrow it's already set. For us it was almost two years and it's here all the time - building up.

Discussion

Despite the increasing body of literature on neurodiversity in the workplace in recent years ([Weber et al., 2022](#)), there still exists a lack of clarity regarding the particular preferences of

neurodivergent individuals in their professional settings and the characteristics of workplaces that are supportive of neurodivergence (Hennekam *et al.*, 2022). While it is clear that leaders are vital figures in the creation of inclusive work environments, we still do not exactly know what leaders should do in an attempt to create inclusive environments (see Roberson and Perry, 2022), specifically with neurodivergence in mind (Volpone *et al.*, 2022) and how they themselves should be supported in their endeavors. The aim of this study was, therefore, to better understand the nature of the relationship between neurotypical leaders and neurodivergent followers. More specifically, a question of what particular aspects of the interaction between neurodivergent employees and their neurotypical leaders contribute to the cultivation of a positive working relationship between them was sought to be answered. The emerging findings shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities within this specific leadership dynamic, providing insights into the overarching field of employee relations. It was found that leaders who are empathetic and understanding or willing to understand neurodivergent conditions, are more likely to effectively support their followers. Our findings further highlight the need to be flexible and provide certain adjustments to some neurodivergent followers; at the same time, they reveal a delicate balance between workplace adjustments and stigmatization. Diverse feedback needs were also discussed, with a common thread emphasizing the importance of avoiding patronizing tendencies. The significant role of feedback in reinforcing self-worth and confidence was emphasized, but it was also noted that mishandled feedback can be disempowering. Understanding how leaders can effectively support neurodivergent employees and how they can be supported themselves has the potential to enhance individual workplace experiences and inform the development of more inclusive employee relations practices that are mutually beneficial. These insights offer several theoretical and practical guidelines, which will be discussed next.

Theoretical and research contributions

This study expands the LMX theory to offer a novel perspective on the dynamics of relationships between neurotypical leaders and their neurodivergent followers. Recognizing the inadequacies of traditional leadership theories in accommodating the unique needs of neurodivergent employees (see Seitz, 2022), the reported research contributes to the theoretical landscape by adapting LMX to provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership exchanges in this specific context. Through empirical investigation, the study identifies characteristics indicative of a neuro-inclusive leader and outlines behaviors essential for building positive work relationships with neurodivergent followers. By extending LMX theory to incorporate the intricacies of neurodivergent-neurotypical interactions, this research not only enriches the existing theoretical framework but also offers valuable insights for organizational leadership, fostering a more inclusive and adaptive approach that accounts for the distinct requirements of neurodivergent individuals within the workplace (see, e.g. Roberson *et al.*, 2021; Volpone *et al.*, 2022).

Research-wise, while we observe a tendency to move away from focusing on privileged workers only to acknowledge the role of disabled employees in organizational contexts (Scholz and Ingold, 2021), relatively little is still known about the nature of neurodivergent employment (see Doyle *et al.*, 2023; Hennekam *et al.*, 2022). The discussion presented in this article therefore constitutes a vital step toward a better understanding of neurodiversity at work, which – despite its importance – is still largely an underdeveloped area (see Weber *et al.*, 2022).

Second, while the contribution of leaders to the success of their employees is widely acknowledged (e.g. Campos-García and Zúñiga-Vicente, 2019; Hoang *et al.*, 2021; Oruh *et al.*, 2021), existing literature on organizational leadership appears to overlook specific perspectives related to cognitive variance in all individuals. This oversight may lead to a distorted approach to producing knowledge about effective leadership practices. Indeed, LeFevre-Levy *et al.* (2023,

p. 14) have recently called for further exploration to understand what types of leadership are best suited to a neurodiverse workplace. The research reported in this article builds on this gap, and the findings explain how neurominorities may have very specific perceptions of and reactions to what may only seem like a universal leadership practice. In doing so, it contributes to the scattered nature of the field of research concerning neurodiversity and leadership and answers the calls for further research in this area that would apply to neurodivergent employees and would not come from the perspective of the “abled” organization (see [Seitz, 2022](#); [Volpone et al., 2022](#)). It also further addresses recent calls to move away from universal management as a simple route to positive employee outcomes ([Cafferkey et al., 2020](#); [Szulc et al., 2021](#)) and reinforces the call to stop treating employees as if they are all the same ([Jiang et al., 2017](#)). Ultimately, such efforts should result in a more accurate reflection of organizational reality for disadvantaged members of society ([Kinnie et al., 2005](#)).

Third, existing research on neurodiversity at work has been criticized for focusing on just one neurodivergent condition, such as autism (see [Burton et al., 2022](#)) and thus, superficially reducing the complexity of neurodivergence by not acknowledging that it is common for neurodivergent conditions to overlap and co-occur (e.g. a person may be autistic and dyslexic). In this research, the complexity of neurodivergence was acknowledged and a more holistic understanding of the wide spectrum of neurodiversity was provided, thus contributing to answering some of the recent calls (see [Volpone et al., 2022](#)).

Fourth, the reported research makes valuable theoretical contributions to the intersection of leadership and neurodiversity within the existing literature, thus contributing more generally to the discourse – ongoing within the human resource management (HRM) field – on organizational equality, diversity and inclusion. It is well established that experiencing inclusion at work partly depends on effective leadership ([Cottrill et al., 2014](#)). However, challenges associated with diversity in workgroups that leaders encounter were also highlighted, and calls have been made to conduct research focusing on leadership that can address such difficulties by promoting employee experiences of inclusion ([Randel et al., 2018](#)). I do so for a specific group of neurodivergent individuals. The reported findings may help leaders promote employee inclusion, which benefits all parties involved. This has further practical implications, which I discuss in the following section.

Practical contributions

The practical implications arising from this research are significant with respect to the establishment of inclusive workplaces that conscientiously address the requirements of neurodivergent employees while providing support for those in leadership roles. Specifically, the reported findings underscore the vital role of empathy and understanding in leaders, acknowledging that those who not only embrace but also actively seek comprehension of neurodivergent conditions are better positioned to effectively support their subordinates.

Given this imperative, it is essential for organizations to allocate resources toward training initiatives aimed at fostering leaders’ understanding of neurodiversity. Indeed, the findings from a large-scale report by [McDowall et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that line managers are not confident about being able to provide support to neurodivergent employees, and they fear getting it wrong because of their lack of knowledge of neurodiversity. Surely, such training necessitates a substantive commitment from leaders. An innovative approach could involve the utilization of simulators that immerse leaders in the sensory realm of individuals with neurodivergent conditions, such as autism ([Rogers, 2019](#)). Employing virtual reality headsets, leaders can undergo a comprehensive experience simulating hypersensitivity or sensory overload ([Shin, 2018](#)). In accordance with established social-psychological evidence (e.g. [Batson, 2011](#)), such an exercise can facilitate a profound understanding of the perspective of neurodivergent followers, thereby cultivating heightened empathy toward

them. The incorporation of such experiential methods elevates the training beyond mere theoretical instruction, with the potential to foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of neurodiversity among organizational leaders.

The reported study also highlights the need for being flexible and making individualized adjustments while avoiding the challenge of accidentally stigmatizing neurodivergent individuals. To prevent this from happening, it is essential that adjustments and supportive policies are clear and avoid language or actions that could be seen negatively. Such clarity can be achieved through training and awareness campaigns that aid in a more comprehensive understanding of neurodiversity. It is important to note that clear policies and procedures (see, e.g. [Hennekam and Follmer, 2024](#)) can also serve as proactive measures, promoting a culture of acceptance while simultaneously acting as safeguards against potential legal implications stemming from perceived discrimination or marginalization.

The findings presented in this study further underscore the pivotal role of feedback in bolstering self-development and confidence. It is crucial for leaders to steer clear of the assumption that one-size-fits-all feedback solutions will prove effective. Instead, prioritizing tailored feedback approaches seems essential. Encouraging open communication and providing various channels for feedback can cater to different communication preferences ([Hamdani and Biagi, 2022](#)). Rather than resorting to generalized or patronizing statements, leaders should undergo training to deliver constructive feedback.

Finally, our findings imply that leaders also stand to benefit from support initiatives. First, the emotional demands of managing neurodivergent employees should be recognized (see, e.g. [Richards et al., 2019](#)), and leaders should be provided with access to counseling services or emotional well-being workshops ([Dearborn, 2002](#)). Human resource departments or managers of those in leadership positions should be further mindful of leaders' workloads and recognize that managing neurodivergent employees may require additional time and resources (e.g. to develop tailored feedback). Consistently, they should ensure that leaders have the capacity to provide adequate support. Conducting regular check-ins with leaders to understand their needs may prove particularly effective, given the challenging task they face and the significant support they require themselves to navigate the complexities of managing others. Additionally, it appears that leaders must maintain a delicate balance between empathizing with others and upholding boundaries. While it is vital to be understanding, they also need to discern when to establish and enforce clear limits.

Limitations and future research directions

While it must be acknowledged that participants who are neurodivergent and in full-time work are considered to be a hard-to-reach research group, a key limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size that may not fully encompass the broad spectrum of neurodiversity. Different neurodivergent conditions were included in the sample (autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, bipolar and Irlen syndrome), but it is still primarily comprised of individuals with autism and ADHD, while certain conditions were not represented at all (e.g. Tourette's syndrome). Similarly, the research sample consisted of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those from the UK and Poland. While this diversity offers the advantage of variance, as it is not confined to a single culture, it is possible that these cultural differences may have influenced the study's findings. Larger and more varied samples in future research would enhance our understanding of neuro-inclusive leadership. Simultaneously, a more detailed examination of the perspectives of leaders themselves would be valuable, offering deeper insights into their experiences and practices. Adopting such strategies in future research can contribute significantly to advancing our understanding of neurodiversity in leadership and fostering a more inclusive discourse

around the diverse needs and experiences of neurodivergent individuals. This exploration is particularly crucial, as it underscores the pressing need for a new theory of neuro-inclusive leadership.

Finally, this study was solely interested in the relationship between the neurotypical leaders and their neurodivergent followers. However, it would be interesting for future research to extend its inquiry to encompass not only the relationships between neurotypical leaders and neurodivergent followers but also the intricate dynamics involving neurodivergent leaders and their diverse team members, including both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Indeed, recent conceptual investigations have started to emphasize that neurodiversity is a cognitive strength from which effective leadership may derive (see [Roberson et al., 2021](#)). However, research exploring neurodivergent leaders is still lacking.

Conclusions

This study contributes to recent calls to develop a more nuanced understanding of workplace neurodiversity, with a specific focus on neuro-inclusive leadership. The reported findings help establish inclusive and accommodating employee relations practices that conscientiously address the requirements of neurodivergent employees while providing appropriate support for those in leadership roles.

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