

Between Communication and Participation: Autistic Employees in Neurotypical Work Environments

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Abstract

This study examines how autistic employees sustain participation in formal work settings by focusing on the role of coping mechanisms in navigating workplace communication and job demands. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 formally employed individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Indonesia and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that workplace participation is shaped by ongoing interaction between communication practices, job demands, and individual working styles. Communication ambiguity and implicit expectations create challenges in understanding and coordination, while misalignment between environmental demands and cognitive and social processing styles increases work pressure. In response, coping mechanisms such as masking, task structuring, and self-regulation function as continuous strategies that enable employees to sustain performance. However, these strategies carry cognitive and emotional costs, particularly under intensified work demands. Supportive communication and flexible work practices help reduce these challenges, although their application remains inconsistent. The study highlights the importance of improving communication clarity, task structure, and work flexibility to enhance alignment between employees and their work environments and support more sustainable workplace participation.

Keywords: autistic employee, coping strategy, workplace communication, equality

1. Introduction

The increasing focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in contemporary workplaces has led to a growing recognition of neurodiversity as a significant dimension of organizational diversity (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Ali, 2025). Within this discussion, individuals on the autism spectrum are continually recognized for their distinctive cognitive strengths, including attention to detail, analytical reasoning, and sustained focus, and are gradually entering a wider range of workplace settings (Grant & Kara, 2021). Employment, in this regard, acts not only as a source of income but also as a central domain through which identity, autonomy, and social participation are achieved (Thorpe et al., 2024). Yet, autistic individuals remain

underrepresented in the workforce, with rates as low as 14%–29% in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, versus more than 80% for non-disabled people (Bury et al., 2024). Many who work still struggle to keep jobs or progress in their careers. These patterns show that a growing presence of autistic workers does not always mean real inclusion but instead reveals a structural gap between recognition and actual participation.

This tension highlights a misalignment between ideals of inclusion and daily work practices. While organizations promote inclusion, they follow neurotypical norms for communication, interaction, and coordination (Archibald & Spoor, 2025). These norms depend on implied understanding, rapid social exchange, and adaptable task interpretation, favouring those who thrive in ambiguity (Sasson et al., 2017). As a result, autistic workers face communication, social interaction, and sensory processing challenges. Despite this, research frequently frames these challenges as individual limitations, placing the responsibility on individuals to adapt (Botha & Frost, 2020; Doyle, 2020).

This perspective overlooks how workplace challenges are shaped by relationships and context. The Double Empathy Problem shows that communication problems between autistic and non-autistic people stem from their differing interpretations of social cues, not solely from autistic individuals' deficits (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020). Misunderstandings result when both parties struggle to align expectations (Crompton et al., 2020). In workplaces, communication is pressured and often relies on implicit meaning. These differences frequently lead to misalignment in activities such as giving instructions, providing feedback, and coordinating (Kapp et al., 2019; Nishith et al., 2025).

Person–Environment Fit Theory state that work outcomes depend on how well individuals match an environment's expectations (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Problems at work are not just about individual skills, but also about organizational structures that favor certain behaviors. Most workplaces assume neurotypical communication as the norm, making other approaches less visible and unsupported (Doyle, 2020). As a result, misfit becomes routine, shaping autistic workers' experiences.

Within this context of persistent misalignment, coping functions as a central yet underexamined aspect of autistic workers' experiences. Existing research conceptualizes coping as an individual strategy for coping with stress or responding to specific challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1988). This approach frames coping as a supplementary response that individuals use when difficulties arise. However, when misalignment remains across communication, interaction, and organizational expectations, coping becomes embedded in everyday work practices. Autistic workers continuously engage in activities such as managing communication, making sense of ambiguous expectations, and regulating responses to overstimulation to maintain participation (Botha & Frost, 2020). These compromises remain largely invisible within formal organizational processes, yet they play a central role in sustaining workplace participation. Specifically, participation in work encompasses not only the completion of tasks but also the ongoing management of social expectations and situational demands, and the maintenance of alignment with implicit workplace structures.

This study examines how autistic individuals experience and enact coping at work, arguing that coping is shaped not only by personal adaptation but by the interplay of social processes and organizational factors. By analyzing lived experience, the study clarifies that coping practices arise from workplace communication, interaction norms, and structural organization. This framework centers the role of work conditions in shaping and necessitating coping, moving beyond viewing it as a personal adjustment.

By integrating the Double Empathy Problem and Person–Environment Fit perspectives, this study contributes to research on neurodiversity and work in several ways. It reframes communication difficulties as relational phenomena, highlighting how differences in understanding emerge through interaction rather than as individual deficits (Crompton et al., 2020). It extends the concept of fit by showing how everyday workplace practices generate alignment or misalignment, rather than treating fit as a static outcome (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, it reconceptualizes coping as a continuous, contextually embedded process driven by the need to navigate environments that do not fully accommodate neurodivergent ways of functioning.

From a practical perspective, this calls for reconsidering how inclusion is understood and implemented. If contribution depends on continuous adjustment, then inclusion cannot be evaluated solely in terms of access or representation (Doyle, 2020). Instead, organizations need to consider how work is structured, communicated, and experienced in everyday practice. Greater clarity in communication, reduced reliance on implicit expectations, and increased awareness of diverse interaction styles can reduce the need for continuous coping and support increased sustainable participation (Nishith et al., 2025).

As organizations continue to advance inclusion agendas, understanding the conditions under which participation happens becomes increasingly important (Alammar et al., 2025). Inclusion does not involve only enabling entry into the workplace but also developing environments in which individuals participate without disproportionate effort. By examining coping within this broader dynamic, this study provides a better understanding of how workplace systems shape participation and how they can better accommodate diverse ways of functioning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Workplace Inclusion and Autistic Employment*

The increasing emphasis on workplace inclusion positions neurodiversity as a critical dimension of modern organizational diversity (Doyle, 2020; Nishith et al., 2025). Within this discourse, autistic individuals are framed as a valuable yet underutilized workforce, with cognitive strengths such as pattern recognition and sustained focus (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Hartman & Hartman, 2024). However, empirical evidence consistently indicates that employment outcomes for autistic individuals remain significantly unequal (Scott et al., 2019; Ohl et al., 2017). This inequality persists not only in initial recruitment but also in the ability to sustain long-term participation (Remington et al., 2022).

Recent longitudinal research demonstrates that autistic employment is characterized by

instability and heterogeneity rather than linear progression (Bury et al., 2024). Autistic workers frequently navigate fluctuating trajectories, including transitions between underemployment and involuntary unemployment (Solomon et al., 2023). These patterns suggest that inclusion must move beyond "access" to consider the conditions under which work is sustained (Nishith et al., 2025; Doyle, 2020). Despite these disparities, previous literature continues to adopt an individual-centered perspective that emphasizes social communication deficits (Scott et al., 2019).

Individual perspectives often result in interventions focused on behavioral change or skills training (Dwyer et al., 2025). These approaches can be practical but may reinforce the idea that challenges are internal (Botha & Frost, 2020). Recent studies contest this, showing the importance of relational and structural workplace factors (Kapp et al., 2019). Many organizations favor neurotypical behaviors, creating environments that put autistic workers at a disadvantage (Crompton et al., 2020; Milton, 2012). Consequently, workplace challenges are now often seen as arising from the relationship between people and their environments (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

2.2 Double Empathy Problem in Workplace Contexts

The Double Empathy Problem provides a critical framework for re-evaluating communication challenges experienced by autistic individuals. Proposed by Milton (2012), this theory argues that interactional difficulties arise from a mutual breakdown in understanding between different neurotypes (Ekdahl, 2024). Empirical studies support this by demonstrating that communication is often more effective when individuals share similar social-cognitive styles (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019; Burbach, 2025). These findings challenge organizational assumptions that attribute communication failures solely to the autistic person's "social deficits".

Professional communication often uses implicit norms and indirect language and instructions are sometimes not detailed. Performance feedback is often given through subtle social cues. These practices assume everyone can interpret messages in the same way. For autistic workers, this can lead to ongoing confusion about unspoken expectations (Nishith et al., 2025; Thorpe, 2024). Crucially, the Double Empathy Problem suggests these challenges stem from different ways of constructing meaning rather than individual incompetence (Milton, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2021). However, organizational communication norms remain largely static, placing the burden of resolution on the autistic employee (Botha & Frost, 2020). This creates a one-sided adaptation process where autistic workers must modify their natural style to survive.

2.3 Person–Environment Fit and Structural Misalignment

Double Empathy explains interactional friction. Person–Environment (P-E) Fit Theory shows how misalignment is embedded in broader systems. This theory states that satisfaction and performance depend on alignment between personal traits and environmental demands (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). For autistic workers, "misfit" often stems from social and organizational expectations, not a lack of task-related skills (Doyle, 2020; Botha & Frost, 2020).

Workplace structures often demand high tolerance for ambiguity and rapid social coordination. Research shows that even skilled employees can face obstacles if their environment does not suit their sensory or cognitive needs (Hedley et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2019). This shows misfit results from strict organizational rules (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Many workplaces treat neurotypical behavior as the standard. This means autistic individuals must always adjust to stay employed.

2.4 Coping as a Condition of Participation

In these workplaces, coping is key to staying employed. Traditional studies see coping as a response to short-term stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). But coping is different when misalignment is constant. Autistic workers constantly regulate their behavior and manage social rules as part of their jobs (Davies et. al., 2022).

These efforts involve "masking," or hiding natural behaviors to meet social norms (Kapp et al., 2019; Thorpe, 2024). Because workplaces rarely change, autistic employees end up responsible for dealing with the misfit (Doyle, 2020; Botha & Frost, 2020). Coping becomes a job requirement instead of just a response to stress (Crompton et al., 2020). This view shows that coping is shaped by tough environments. Seeing coping this way shifts attention to the systems that cause these challenges. This new focus helps rethink inclusion by focusing on fixing the environment, not just individual adjustment (Nishith et al., 2025; Doyle, 2020).

3. Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how autistic individuals experienced and managed workplace environments, with particular attention to the coping mechanisms they employed to sustain participation in formal employment. A phenomenological design was appropriate to examine lived experiences that entailed complex social interactions, personal interpretations, and ongoing adjustment processes within organizational contexts (Creswell, 2017). By prioritizing the individual's perspective, this approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of how participants made sense of their professional lives, moving beyond the limitations of predefined variables to capture the nuanced reality of neurodivergent labor.

3.1 Data collection

The participants recruited for this study were individuals residing in Indonesia, a context where attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), particularly neurodiversity, is emergent but gradually gaining institutional and public recognition. While global discourse on workplace inclusion increasingly highlights neurodivergent populations, including autistic individuals (Doyle, 2020; Bury et al., 2024), such dialogue in Indonesia remains relatively nascent. Existing studies and policy discussions suggest awareness of autism has historically centered on educational and clinical domains, with limited integration into employment systems and organizational practices (Tucker., 2011; Margaretha et al., 2025). As a result, workplace structures often continue to operate on neurotypical norms, particularly communication styles, social interaction, and performance expectations.

Recently, disability inclusion has gained recognition in Indonesia, including new policies and advocacy efforts aligned with global frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Bappenas, 2022). Still, real changes in employment are slow. Inclusive practices vary and are often informal (Fauziyah et al., 2025). This makes Indonesia a relevant location to study how autistic workers handle work challenges and keep their jobs.

Participants were recruited using purposive followed by snowball sampling to access individuals within relevant networks. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) have a formal diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and (b) be currently employed in formal organizational settings. Snowball sampling was especially appropriate given the limited visibility and disclosure of autism in workplace contexts, enabling access to participants who may not be reachable through formal institutional channels.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and explored participants' workplace experiences, including communication practices, job demands, social interactions, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participant preference and accessibility considerations. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, identifying information was removed and replaced with coded identifiers. The final dataset comprised 13 participants from diverse occupational backgrounds, providing a heterogeneous representation of autistic workers' experiences in the Indonesian employment context.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allowed for the identification of patterns of meaning across qualitative data while remaining open to inductive interpretation grounded in participants' narratives. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were then generated by identifying meaningful units related to participants' experiences of workplace participation. These codes were developed inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance. The codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories through iterative comparison, enabling the identification of patterns and distinctions across participants. These categories were further refined into axial themes that captured relationships between different aspects of the experience, particularly the interaction between environmental demands and adaptive strategies.

NVivo software was used to support the organization and management of the data. The software facilitated systematic coding, efficient retrieval of data segments, and comparison across cases. However, the interpretive process remained grounded in the researchers' analytical judgment. Trustworthiness was ensured through careful and consistent coding, depth of interpretation, and close alignment between data and themes. The use of verbatim transcripts and iterative analysis enabled a comprehensive representation of participants' lived experiences, resulting in a set of interconnected themes that reflect how autistic workers navigated their workplace.

environments and employed coping mechanisms to sustain their roles.

4. Finding and Discussion

Four main themes emerged: (a) communication as a site of ongoing negotiation, (b) misalignment between workplace demands and individual working styles, (c) coping mechanisms for sustaining employment, and (d) workplace support and conditions for reduced coping. These interconnected themes reflected how autistic workers experienced workplace participation as an adaptive process. Direct quotations illustrate participants' perspectives.

4.1 Communication as a Site of Ongoing Negotiation

The first theme reflected that workplace communication was a central challenge in participants' employment experience. This theme consisted of three subthemes: (1) ambiguity in task-related communication (42 citations/12 participants), (2) hesitation in seeking clarification (27 citations/10 participants), and (3) difficulty in informal social interaction (31 citations/11 participants).

Participants consistently described that instructions were often delivered too quickly, vaguely, or without sufficient detail. This created uncertainty in task execution and required additional effort to interpret the meaning. This difficulty with clarity in task-related communication formed the first subtheme.

For instance, Informant 1 stated:

"Sometimes I find it difficult to understand instructions when they are delivered too quickly, so I need to ask for clarification to avoid making mistakes." (Inf-1)

Participants emphasized that the problem was not the task itself but how it was communicated. Transitioning to another subtheme, similar concerns were agreed by Informant 3, who described hesitation in asking for clarification:

"I usually have to ask again, but sometimes I worry that people will think I don't understand." (Inf-3)

This hesitation reflected a tension between the need for clarity and concerns about social perception. As a result, participants often developed compensatory strategies, such as taking detailed notes or reorganizing the instructions in their minds.

In addition to task-related communication, participants reported difficulty with informal interaction. Specifically, while task communication followed predictable patterns, casual conversations and spontaneous discussions were described as unpredictable. Many found these informal exchanges difficult to navigate.

Informant 5 explained:

"Casual conversations are actually more difficult, because I don't know how I'm supposed to respond." (Inf-5)

These experiences led some participants to limit their engagement in informal interactions to

reduce misunderstandings and discomfort. Overall, communication was not experienced as a neutral exchange of information, but as an ongoing process requiring active negotiation and interpretation.

4.2 Misalignment Between Workplace Demands and Individual Working Styles

The second theme captured the mismatch between participants' preferred ways of working and workplace expectations. This included three subthemes: (1) mismatch in processing speed and workload demands (38 citations/11 participants), (2) implicit social expectations (29 citations/10 participants), and (3) under-recognition of abilities (24 citations/9 participants).

Participants often said they could complete tasks but needed more time to process information and organize their work.

Informant 2 stated:

“Actually, I can do the task, but I need more time to understand it first.” (Inf-2)

However, workplace environments often require rapid responses and multitasking, which creates pressure and fatigue.

Informant 1 explained:

“When there are many tasks at once, I feel quite exhausted because I have to think quickly all the time.” (Inf-1)

This mismatch was also evident in expectations about social behavior. Transitioning to the subtheme of behavioral norms, participants reported that they were expected to behave in ways that felt unnatural or effortful. Examples included maintaining certain expressions or engaging in small talk.

Informant 6 described:

“I have to adjust the way I speak and my expressions so that I appear normal.” (Inf-6)

These expectations were rarely made explicit. However, they significantly shaped workplace evaluation. Participants reported that their abilities were not always fully recognized or used appropriately. For example, sometimes they were given tasks that did not match their strengths. In other cases, their need for structured work was misunderstood as inflexibility. These experiences highlight a lack of alignment between individual strengths and workplace expectations. Overall, this theme highlighted that workplace challenges emerged from the interaction between individual working styles and organizational expectations.

4.3 Coping as a Continuous Strategy for Sustaining Employment

The third theme showed how participants used coping mechanisms to maintain employment. This theme included three subthemes: (1) behavioral adjustment and masking (41 citations/12 participants), (2) structured work strategies (33 citations/11 participants), and (3) fatigue and burnout as consequences of coping (36 citations/12 participants).

Participants described modifying their behavior and communication to fit workplace expectations. Masking was a common strategy.

Informant 6 stated:

“I have to control how I speak and how I react so that I don’t appear different.” (Inf-6)

This adjustment went beyond social interaction and marked a transition to how participants managed their work processes. Many developed structured routines to reduce uncertainty and maintain control.

Informant 4 explained:

“I usually create my own sequence of tasks so that I don’t get confused.” (Inf-4)

To transition to managing sensory and emotional demands, participants used strategies such as taking breaks or temporarily withdrawing from interaction.

Informant 1 noted:

“Usually I take a short break when I start to feel too tired.” (Inf-1)

While these strategies enabled participants to continue working, they were associated with high cognitive and emotional costs. Participants frequently described fatigue, particularly in situations involving high workload or repeated revisions.

Informant 7 stated:

“If there are too many revisions, I can feel very mentally drained.” (Inf-7)

This fatigue reflected the cumulative effect of continuous adaptation. It was not just a result of isolated work demands.

4.4 Workplace Support and Conditions for Reduced Coping

Another pattern that emerged concerned the role of workplace support in reducing coping demands. Two subthemes were identified: (1) supportive communication practices (22 citations/9 participants) and (2) flexible work arrangements (18 citations/8 participants).

Participants reported that clearer, more structured communication from colleagues significantly improved their work experience.

Informant 1 stated:

“My coworkers are quite helpful, they explain things again more slowly and in more detail.” (Inf - 1)

Flexible work arrangements also helped participants manage their workload.

Informant 8 explained:

“Flexible working hours really help me manage my own work rhythm.” (Inf-8)

Such support was often informal and depended on individual relationships rather than

organizational systems. As a result, access to supportive conditions varied among participants.

Autistic workers experienced participation as an ongoing negotiation between communication demands, environmental expectations, and individual capacities. Communication ambiguity and structural misalignment led to continuous coping, enabling participation but increasing cognitive and emotional burdens. These findings highlight that workplace inclusion still depended on the individual's ability to continuously adapt. It was not yet built into organizational practices.

4.5 Discussion

Previous research has increasingly recognized that employment participation holds significant meaning for autistic individuals, contributing to financial independence, identity formation, autonomy, and social participation (Doyle, 2020; Thorpe, 2024). Despite heightened awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace, structural inclusion remains inconsistent, and many autistic employees continue to face challenges in sustaining employment and achieving long-term career advancement (Bury et al., 2024; Nishith et al., 2025). Much of the existing literature has examined these issues through either an individual deficit lens or accommodation-based frameworks focused on discrete interventions. This study builds on prior work by examining autistic workers' experiences as shaped by the dynamic interplay among communication practices, workplace expectations, and adaptive coping strategies.

The findings indicate that workplace participation for autistic individuals is not a fixed outcome of inclusion but an ongoing process of negotiation. Communication is central to this process, with participants consistently characterizing it as ambiguous, implicit, and fast-paced. These results support the Double Empathy Problem, which frames communication breakdown as a reciprocal mismatch in understanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals, rather than a one-sided deficit (Milton, 2012; Crompton et al., 2020). In this study, communication challenges arose not from a lack of task comprehension, but from workplace communication's reliance on implicit norms, shared assumptions, and socially embedded expectations. This supports recent evidence that miscommunication in neurodiverse interactions is relational and context-dependent (Botha & Frost, 2020; Heasman & Gillespie, 2019).

The findings further extend the Double Empathy framework by situating it within everyday organizational practices. Communication challenges were not confined to interpersonal misunderstandings but were evident across routine processes such as instruction delivery, feedback mechanisms, and informal interactions. Consequently, communication functions as a structural element of work organization that privileges neurotypical interaction styles. In this environment, autistic workers must engage in ongoing interpretation and adjustment, underscoring that communication breakdown is institutionally patterned rather than solely interpersonal.

The study also identifies a persistent misalignment between individual working styles and workplace demands. Participants consistently reported competence in task performance but experienced difficulties with the conditions under which tasks were to be completed,

particularly regarding speed, multitasking, and social responsiveness. This observation aligns with Person–Environment Fit theory, which posits that work outcomes depend on the compatibility between individual characteristics and environmental demands (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Edwards, 2008). The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that misfit is a continuous condition embedded within daily work structures, rather than a temporary mismatch.

Workplace environments examined in this study were primarily structured around implicit expectations of rapid processing, flexible adaptation, and intuitive social interaction. These expectations reflect dominant organizational norms that frequently go unexamined yet serve as baseline criteria for performance (Doyle, 2020; Hedley et al., 2023). Consequently, autistic workers experience systematic misalignment between their approaches to information processing, task structuring, and social engagement, and the prevailing expectations for work performance. This misalignment stems not from incapability, but from the mismatch between diverse cognitive styles and standardized workplace practices.

In this context, coping emerges as a central mechanism enabling workers to bridge the gap between individual needs and workplace demands. The findings indicate that coping is not episodic or reactive, but is continuous and embedded within daily work practices. Participants reported employing strategies such as masking, structuring tasks, regulating interactions, and managing sensory input to maintain participation. This extends previous research on masking and camouflaging, which has primarily focused on social behavior, by demonstrating that adaptive strategies also function in task management, communication processing, and environmental navigation (Hull et al., 2017; Botha & Frost, 2020).

This study advances the understanding of coping by reframing it as a structural requirement rather than an individual choice. In environments marked by persistent misalignment, coping becomes essential for sustaining employment. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from individual adaptation to the structural conditions that necessitate such adaptation. Thus, coping is not merely a personal resource, but a response to unaccommodated structural demands.

The findings also underscore the substantial cognitive and emotional costs associated with continuous coping. Participants consistently reported experiences of fatigue, mental exhaustion, and, in some cases, burnout. These outcomes align with emerging literature on autistic burnout, which connects prolonged adaptation and masking to reduced well-being and functional capacity (Botha & Frost, 2020; Raymaker et al., 2020). The present study contributes by demonstrating that these adverse outcomes result not only from workload intensity, but from the cumulative effort required to maintain alignment in environments that lack inherent accommodation.

Additionally, the findings highlight the moderating role of workplace support in these dynamics. When communication was made more explicit, flexibility was introduced, and colleagues demonstrated understanding, participants reported reduced stress and improved performance. These observations are consistent with Person–Environment Fit literature, which suggests that modifying environmental conditions can enhance alignment and reduce strain

(Edwards, 2008; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Similarly, from a Double Empathy perspective, clearer and more structured communication narrows the gap in mutual understanding, facilitating more effective interaction.

However, the study also reveals that such support is often informal and inconsistent, relying on individual relationships rather than institutionalized practices. This suggests that inclusion remains contingent rather than systemic. Although individual accommodations may alleviate immediate challenges, they do not fully address the underlying structural conditions that generate misalignment by integrating relational and structural perspectives on workplace inclusion. By combining the Double Empathy Problem and Person–Environment Fit theory, it demonstrates that autistic workers’ experiences are shaped by both interactional mismatches and systemic misalignment. Most importantly, it positions coping as the mechanism through which these two dimensions are negotiated in practice.

From a practical standpoint, the findings indicate that current approaches to workplace inclusion are limited when they rely primarily on individual adaptation. If participation requires continuous coping, inclusion remains inherently partial. Organizations must move beyond accommodation as a reactive strategy and address the structural conditions that produce misalignment. This entails rethinking communication practices, making expectations explicit, and designing work environments that support diverse cognitive styles.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that autistic workers do not merely adapt to the workplace; they continuously negotiate their position within systems not designed for their needs. Recognizing coping as a structural condition of participation offers a more accurate and nuanced understanding of workplace inclusion and suggests new directions for both theoretical development and organizational practice.

5. Conclusion

Given the growing attention to neurodiversity in contemporary workplaces, this study examines how autistic employees sustain participation in formal work settings. Grounded in the Double Empathy Problem and Person–Environment Fit theory, the findings show that workplace experiences are determined by ongoing interactions among communication practices, job demands, and individual working styles. Communication functions as a key challenge, as ambiguity and implicit expectations create misunderstandings that require additional effort to manage. At the same time, a persistent misalignment between environmental expectations and cognitive and social processing styles puts pressure on employees, even when they can successfully perform work tasks.

In this context, coping functions as a continuous strategy. It enables employees to maintain participation in everyday work. Coping mechanisms are not limited to task management. They also help personnel navigate communication expectations, social interaction, and sensory challenges. Participants describe masking, structuring tasks, regulating interaction, and managing workload as practical ways to sustain performance. These strategies carry cognitive and emotional costs, especially as workplace demands intensify. Supportive communication

and flexible work arrangements can help reduce these challenges. However, their uneven application illustrates the importance of more consistent practices. Overall, the findings suggest that improving transparency in communication, task structure, and work flexibility can improve alignment between employees and their work environments. This supports more sustainable participation.

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