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## **Towards more inclusive qualitative research: The practice of interviewing neurominorities.**

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## **Towards more inclusive qualitative research: The practice of interviewing neurominorities.**

Management scholars increasingly focus their efforts on the development of neurodivergent human capital and the promotion of inclusive employment and decent work. However, it may be argued that existing research still suffers from the lack of a comprehensive appreciation of what neurominorities may find difficult in the research process or how they interpret what the researchers are doing. In the light of only fragmented advice about how qualitative research with neurominorities should be conducted, this short research note aims to promote effective and inclusive qualitative research that ensures that the specific needs of neurominorities are taken into account throughout the entire research pathway. Building on the existing literature and my own reflections, I call qualitative management scholars to engage in research that is truly impactful at multiple levels by re-considering how they make impact on those who traditionally have less voice or power.

Keywords: qualitative research; management research; inclusion; neurodiversity; reflexivity

Interviewer: *Thanks so much for agreeing to see us. Your contribution to this research is very valuable.*

Participant: *Ironically, we're going to talk about accommodations for us, yet an online interview is perhaps the least ideal way to communicate.*

### **Introduction**

I spent the last two years looking at accommodations at work that would help us create more inclusive workplaces and enable all individuals to thrive. How could I have not realized that while looking for more inclusive workplace strategies, I was conducting research that, paradoxically, was not inclusive? This is well evidenced in the opening quotation above which reflects a pre-interview conversation with one of my research participants. It suggests that some interview practices may not be ideal from the perspective of neurominorities yet they are still widely used by (unaware) researchers.

Neurodiversity refers to the cognitive diversity in all humans (Chapman, 2020), whereas neurominorities are an umbrella term for the subset of neurodivergent conditions, such as

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyspraxia, and dyslexia (Singer, 1999; see also: Doyle, 2020, Walker, 2012). While, statistically, 1 in 7 of us is likely to be neurodivergent (CIPD, 2018), individuals identified as having a different cognitive functioning to what is treated as typical are often barred from work opportunities and experience significant levels of employment exclusion (Krzeminska and Hawse, 2020).

The topic of neurodiversity, indeed, attracts growing attention from qualitative management researchers (Szulc *et al.*, 2021; Tomczak *et al.*, 2021). However, only fragmented advice about how such research should be conducted in general is provided (Gowen *et al.*, 2019; Grant and Kara, 2021) with no clear focus on management research specifically. Interviewing neurominorities may, however, bring certain challenges. For instance, neurotypical researchers may experience difficulties in understanding concerns and experiences of neuroatypical participants, which could then lead to a lack of appreciation of what research participants might find difficult in the process or how they interpret what researchers are doing. This, in turn, means that neurotypical researchers should take extra care when it comes to planning, recruiting, and conducting research with neurominorities if they are to ensure they are inclusive in their practices.

Building on my own experience of conducting research with neurominorities as well as resultant reflections on this process and an integration of the fragmented literature on the topic, I therefore seek to answer the following question: How should qualitative management researchers conduct research with neurominorities in an inclusive way? In doing so, I provide some timely advice to scholars interested in conducting qualitative research with neurominorities. I focus on the practical issues in recruiting participants and in the practice of conducting research. Through sharing my reflections, I hope to encourage neurotypical researchers to think preemptively about the issues specific to research involving the neuroatypical community to ultimately increase involvement and collaboration as well as the quality of the research process and its outcomes.

### **Research on neurodiversity at work**

Neurodivergent individuals often possess unique abilities that make them excel in professional settings (Austin and Pisano, 2017). However, many organisations still unintentionally exclude neurodivergent talent (Scott *et al.*, 2019). Not only is this group of individuals often barred from work opportunities and experience significant levels of



employment exclusion (Knapp *et al.*, 2009). Those who secure employment frequently experience isolation (Hedley *et al.*, 2018), biases (Maroto and Pettinicchio, 2015; Muller *et al.*, 2003) and disappointing employment outcomes (Tomczak, 2021). The statistics demonstrate that only 29% of autistic individuals are in full time employment (Sparks *et al.*, 2021) and 51% of those who secure employment have higher skills than the job requires (Baldwin *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, the rate of employment for dyslexic individuals is only 60%. Being diagnosed with ADHD in childhood, in turn, reduces employment in early adulthood by 10 per cent and earnings by 33 per cent (Fletcher, 2014).

Given that overwhelming majority of human resource professionals do not consider neurodiversity in their practices (CIPD, 2018), increasingly more research attention among management scholars is being paid to the inclusion of neurominorities into employment (e.g., Patton, 2019; Priscott and Allen, 2021; Richards *et al.*, 2019). Within the field of management, most of such research is conducted qualitatively (Scott *et al.*, 2019; Szulc *et al.*, 2021; Tomczak, 2022). This may be associated with the emphasis that qualitative research places on the contextual and social influences which, in turn, allow researchers to produce rich accounts of the explored phenomena (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). The most popular methodical choice is one-to-one interview (Dreaver *et al.*, 2020) both in traditional, stationary settings (Krieger *et al.*, 2012) as well as phone (Parr *et al.*, 2013) and online interviews conducted by means of a software such as Microsoft Teams (Szulc *et al.*, 2021). Focus groups are also used (Hedley *et al.*, 2018; Koffer Miller *et al.*, 2019) and some examples of dyadic interviews involving two research participants interviewed simultaneously are noted (Tomczak *et al.*, 2021; see also: Szulc and King, 2022). To the best of my knowledge, however, none of these studies engage in discussions in relation to the methodological concerns that scholars interested in the topic of neurodiversity should consider in the research process. Indeed, I have written elsewhere (Author, 2021a, b, c) that it is important to recognize that distinct groups of employees have different needs and they require specific human resource practices to be able to contribute to organisational performance. Analogically, distinct groups of research participants may have different needs and they require specific considerations during the study to enable them to effectively contribute to the research process. My discussion turns to these now.

## Conducting qualitative research with neurominorities

At an individual level, neurominorities are described as having cognitive functioning different from what is seen as typical (Doyle, 2020). It is, of course, important to acknowledge that not all neurominorities are the same and there may be differences in the functioning or feelings of the same individual but at different points in time (Kirby and Smith, 2021). However, it is generally accepted that there are common characteristics and behaviours for each group. We should be mindful of these if we are to see each other as inclusive scholars. I therefore now turn to some recommendations to be taken under consideration at each phase of conducting research. These are also summarized in Table 1 below.

-Insert Table 1 about here-

### *Recruitment*

Just as Tomczak *et al.* (2021) suggested that recruiters aiming to facilitate the process of applying for jobs for autistic candidates should create a neurodiversity-friendly job advertisement by using plain language, avoiding jargon, and providing clear information on the role, so it appears logical that any advertisement to take part in the research targeted at neurominorities should be clear about the research and its goals, participant's role in the process, the scope of activities, and benefits as well as risks associated with taking part in the research. It is therefore essential that when advertising the study, key information should be included about what could be expected: a) when and where is the research taking place (i.e., providing details about the physical environment), b) who will conduct the interview (and if anyone else may attend the interview), c) how long it will last, and d) what sample questions an interviewer may ask. As suggested by Gowen *et al.* (2019), to facilitate transparency and familiarise participants with the researchers, introductory information about the researchers in the form of a link to a website or a section in the participant information sheet may involve photos and short biographical sketches of the researchers involved in the process. If a poster is used to attract participants, its layout should be simple and not distracting (e.g., with flashy colours) and the content should be precise and understandable. Since complicated fonts might be particularly confusing for autistic participants, researchers should consider using simple and plain fonts like Arial in a size range of 12-14 for convenient apprehension (Omar & Bidin, 2015).

## *Planning*

When preparing for an interview, it is essential to carefully consider the interview venue. It is generally recommended that interviews are conducted at a convenient time and setting so that they are free from potential disruptions and noise (McGrath *et al.*, 2019). This becomes of particular importance when conducting research with individuals with ADHD or autism who may face difficulties with maintaining focus and attention (Howlin *et al.*, 2008; Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2017). Researchers should also be mindful of various sensitivities to heat, cold, or glare which are relatively common for autistic individuals (Robertson and Baron-Cohen, 2017) and ensure that an interview venue is free from such distractions. If an interview is to be run online, care needs to be taken when setting up the video background. According to Das *et al.* (2020), virtual backgrounds could be potentially distracting for neurominorities, especially when these are bright and moving. Importantly, neuroatypical individuals present with unique strengths as well as difficulties and they experience these in different ways (Flannery and Wisner-Carlson, 2020). This means that certain accommodations may work for some, but not for others. I therefore suggest that, in the planning stages, it would be useful to ask our research participants if there is anything else we could do to facilitate the process of conducting research so that we are able take their individual and specific needs into account.

## *Conducting interviews*

Interview style is vital for creating a non-invasive and open dialog with interviewees and it is generally agreed that esoteric jargon should be dropped for layman's language (McGrath *et al.*, 2019). Again, this appears even more important when conducting interviews with neurominorities. In addition, existing research suggests that some neurodivergent employees may find it difficult to pay attention at the meeting if they do not receive an agenda in advance (Szulc *et al.*, 2021). Providing research participants with an agenda and interview questions in advance may thus avoid potential anxiety and can contribute towards more effective communication (see also: Mellifont, 2022). This is because knowing the questions in advance is likely to help them with maintaining concentration (Howlin *et al.*, 2005; Prevatt and Yelland, 2013), while the research agenda is a way to maintain a routine (Katz *et al.*, 2015) and to keep more effective time management (Doyle and McDowall, 2015). This may be further enhanced through signposting throughout the interview, e.g., 'this is question 5 out of 10 today'. It may also be a good idea to allow research participants extra

time during the interview as an opportunity to think about their answer as well as to offer a short comfort break during the meeting so that an individual has time to desensitize. If an interview is conducted remotely, participants should be given freedom with regards to having their cameras off to avoid distraction and thus reduce anxiety and cognitive load caused by self-presentation related worries (see: Zolyomi *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, neuroatypical individuals present with unique strengths as well as difficulties and they experience these in different ways (Flannery and Wisner-Carlson, 2020). This means that certain accommodations may work for some, but not for others. I therefore suggest that, on top of the somewhat ‘universal’ accommodations that we could employ, it would be useful to start an interview with asking our research participants if there is anything else we could do to facilitate the process of conducting research and take their individual and specific needs into account. Finally, it is vital that as researchers, we keep things open during our interview interactions and allow our participants to share their experience without asking them to fit into the existing and predetermined categories or ways of thinking (see: Doyle and Waseem, 2022).

#### *Post-interview*

In terms of after-study considerations, Gowen *et al.* (2019) elevate the importance of providing a full debrief immediately after the research is conducted. Participants should be informed on what would happen to the findings and when they can expect to hear about the outcomes of the study. Indeed, the cited authors found that research involving neurominorities often suffers from unsuccessful communication from the researchers following the study. Dissatisfaction with their treatment as research ‘subjects’ by ‘experts’ should, however, trigger greater inclusion at all stages of conducting research (Nind, 2014; 2017). Indeed, Grant and Kara (2021) demonstrate that research is frequently *on* neurodivergent people, not *with* or *by* them (italics added) and they further suggest that neurodivergent participants who do not adequately feel included in the research process may feel simply as ‘guinea pigs’ (p. 592). I therefore join the calls of Grant and Kara (2021) to develop more research that actually engages participants not only as the researched but as active actors in the research process.



## **Concluding discussion**

Engaging in valuable, significant and inclusive research is not always straightforward. As is the case with all types of methodological innovations, changing practice around inclusivity in research requires being prepared to venture into new territories to allow the voices of people previously excluded from research to have their say and to be heard.

Some neurodivergent people can participate in a research without any accommodations. Others, in turn, need accessible environments to fully engage in a study. I therefore call for more awareness among neurotypical scholars and for more inclusive research. The concise, practical guidance introduced in this article covers the considerations that we should take into account when conducting research with the neurodivergent community to ensure they are supported through the entire research process.

At the recruitment stage, key recommendations include the need for clear communication around the background of the research and scholars involved in undertaking it. I also point out that there is an urgent need for a careful consideration of a research venue that is free from disruptions. Interview agenda should ideally be shared with research participants in advance of an interview. It is vital that we stick to the original plans and do not introduce unanticipated changes during the actual research. We should also be aware of additional difficulties that conducting interviews in remote settings may bring. Upon completion of a study, research participants should be fully debriefed about the findings to trigger greater inclusion also at the final stages of the research.

My aim with this short article was to promote effective and inclusive research and ensure that the needs of neurodivergent participants are taken into account through the entire research pathway including pre-, during and post-study stages. Only through respecting individuals' differences and specific needs, will we be able to engage in research that is impactful for individuals, organisations, and society through addressing some of the major problems faced in the world around us. The presented discussion is very much context-dependent, it engages us to reflect on the way in which we undertake research and how we engage with participants. It also makes us consider how we make an impact on those who traditionally have less voice or power and how they can be engaged not only as the research subjects but as active actors in the research process. I hope that with our future

research endeavours, our scholarly community can collectively create a more equitable research landscape.

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Table 1. Key recommendations for inclusive interviews

<b>Research stage</b>	<b>Key recommendations</b>
Recruiting for interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When advertising the study, include key information about what to expect: when and where the research takes place, who is tasked with conducting the interview, what the expected length of the interview is, what the sample interview questions could be.</li> <li>- Share information on the research team involved in the process of data collection (including pictures and short biographical sketches).</li> <li>- If a poster is used to attract attention, its layout should be simple, flashy colours should be avoided, the content should be precise with no jargon, and fonts should be simple and plain (e.g., Arial, size range 12-14).</li> </ul>
Planning interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Find a convenient time and appropriate venue.</li> <li>- Eliminate potential disruptions - focus on appropriate temperature, level of lighting, background noise; avoid bright and moving video backgrounds in online interviews.</li> <li>- Ask research participants for any specific accommodations that they may need.</li> </ul>
Conducting interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Share a meeting agenda and sample interview questions in advance of the interview.</li> <li>- Use layman’s language as opposed to academic jargon.</li> <li>- Regularly signpost throughout an interview.</li> <li>- Allow research participants extra time.</li> <li>- Offer short comfort or desensitization breaks if needed.</li> <li>- Ask participants about their preference for the use of cameras during an online interview.</li> <li>- Allow research participants to openly share their experience without pre-emptive assumptions.</li> </ul>
Post-interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide a full debrief immediately after the research is conducted – inform the research participants about the timeframes for the outcomes of the study.</li> <li>- Where possible, engage participants as active actors in the research process.</li> </ul>