

Managing Vocational Work, Achieving and Sustaining Work Performance: Support and Self-management amongst Young Autistic Adults in the Context of Vocational Support Interventions in Sweden

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Abstract

In this article, we explore experiences of support and self-management amongst young autistic adults in the context of vocational support interventions in Sweden. We analyse how young autistic men use different strategies to manage their vocational work and the support they need to maintain, achieve and sustain their work performance. Data consist of eleven interviews with 4 autistic young adult men in different work environments where vocational support interventions are implemented to different degrees. One finding concludes that the interviewees are affected by and try to adapt to neurotypical norms and expectations about working life and adulthood. Although individualised coping strategies can be helpful, it is important for employers and formal support persons to understand and acknowledge that individual emotional and problem-solving coping strategies are demanding and need to be combined with adaptations in the working environment. Another finding concludes how work managers act as gatekeeper in the vocational support system the young autistic men aspire to access and in which they need to manage their work performance. Thus, social workers must provide structured and well-coordinated formal work support by both involving the autistic clients' employers, work managers and informal networks.

Keywords: autism, coping, vocational support, young adults

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Introduction

Autism as a life-long condition pose intricate questions for social work. On one hand, autism as a life-long condition includes the need of life-long support and care. On the other hand, support and services are foremost aimed at children with autism and their families and caretakers (Milen and Nicholas, 2017). This stresses the need to understand experiences of support amongst autistic adults. Social workers are well equipped to engage in research and practice aimed at promoting full and meaningful inclusion in society as well as advocating for social and economic justice. However, for autistic people the social work profession has yet to take a leadership role in addressing the myriad of challenges that autistic people encounter across the lifespan (Bishop-Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2019). This calls for social work services that are both interdisciplinary and offers multiple modes of support based on the individual's lifespan (Mogro-Wilson *et al.*, 2014), as well as social work services that are 'autistic-centred'—based on autistic people's own formulations of their support needs and the support they have received (Bertilsson Rosqvist, 2019a)—aiming at creating more effective support for autistic people (Haney and Cullen, 2017). Exploring autistic people's own perspectives brings forward autistic people as agents in their own lives, instead of passive objects of interventions and support. Social workers needs to become 'frontline practitioners' (White, 2014) who both enable, listen to, and include autistic people and their lived experiences of social work services in both planning and offering support.

A neurodiversity approach to autism stresses 'diversity, not deficits', a 'broad diversity that exists in human neurobiology', with 'countless ways in which the human brain and mind can develop, both structurally and functionally' (Pellicano and den Houting, 2021, p. 6). A neurodiversity approach changes the focus on autism, from a narrow perspective of deficits, particularly concerning services and support, to a broader concern with human rights, social inclusion and quality of life, as well as offers an alternative autistic way of functioning (Mogro-Wilson *et al.*, 2014)—to be differently neurologically 'wired' (Singer, 2016). This includes the recognition of 'the varieties of neurodivergent intersubjectivity, with associated problems and potentials, and how those forms of intersubjectivity can be enabled to flourish, particularly in autistic-to-neurotypical encounters' (Heasman and Gillespie, 2019, p. 910). In line with this, Djela (2021) has argued that reasonable adjustments at workplaces should be made to enable the autistic employee to function in their autistic way, achieving results, stressing the need 'to change the deficit

narrative and redefine autistic strengths by autistic people themselves, to legitimise and normalise autistic way of functioning and adjust the managerial provisions, criteria and practices accordingly' (Djela, 2021, p. 86). In this article, we explore experiences of support and self-management amongst young autistic adults in the context of vocational support interventions in Sweden.

Mapping out research on autism and work life

Employment increases levels of well-being amongst autistic people (Schall et al., 2020). Despite the motivation and proven strengths and abilities of many autistic people (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020) rates of unemployment, early retirement and overeducation in relation to practiced occupation are high amongst autistic people (Frank et al., 2018). Central in the discussion about autism and work life is the idea of 'autism advantage' or 'autism competence', that is 'the idea that superior skills associated with autism (e.g. attention to detail) present a talent in employment' (Bury et al., 2019, p. 1607), where autistic people are associated with workplace productivity and improved quality of work (Nicholas et al., 2019). However, the autism advantage perspective has been criticized. For example, Bury et al. (2019) rather stress the importance of an individual difference approach, rather than 'highlighting certain stereotypes' stressing the importance of acknowledging 'the heterogeneity of autism' in order to not downplay support needs (Bury et al., 2019, p. 1607).

Several researchers have pointed out the key role that environmental factors play as barriers and facilitators in the employment of autistic people (Scott et al., 2019). Commonly barriers to success at the employment market for autistic people have been associated with an interaction between personal characteristics and environmental barriers (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2021). First, autistic traits such as interest characteristics (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020), including overcommitment (Siedler and Idczak-Paceś, 2021). Secondly, barriers in the work environment. Amongst them are social and communication characteristics in the workplace (Remington and Pellicano, 2019; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020; Romualdez et al., 2021; Siedler and Idczak-Paceś, 2021), occupational social demands (Remington and Pellicano, 2019), distracting or disruptive sensory environments (Romualdez et al., 2021) and lack of flexibility in work hours (Romualdez et al., 2021). Thirdly, work tasks and occupation characteristics (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020) such as a disconnect between interests and job tasks (Bross et al., 2021).

Some researchers have argued that many workplaces are not suited to autistic individuals' needs (Romualdez et al., 2021). There are places where autistic people get disabling experiences (Cooper and Kennady, 2021) and are at risk of high stress levels (Goldfarb et al., 2019; Siedler

and Idczak-Paceś, 2021), anxiety and mental health breakdowns (Remington and Pellicano, 2019; Djela, 2021; Siedler and Idczak-Paceś, 2021). From this perspective workplaces may be regarded as risky places for autistic people, where they might encounter managers and work colleagues with a poor understanding of neurodivergence (Cooper and Kennady, 2021; Djela, 2021; Romualdez *et al.*, 2021) who fail to recognize the autistic individual's strengths (Djela, 2021). Several researchers have pointed out risks of lacking adequate support (Djela, 2021; Bross *et al.*, 2021; Cooper and Kennady, 2021; Romualdez *et al.*, 2021) and experiencing stigma and discrimination (Djela, 2021; Romualdez *et al.*, 2021), including barriers to diagnostic disclosure in the workplace (Romualdez *et al.*, 2021) putting demands on autistic people to 'camouflage' or 'mask' aspects of their autism in order to conceal or compensate for their differences. Thus, the autistic individuals might appear to cope and, consequently, their needs for support or adjustments at work might be overlooked (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

A holistic approach is key in the support to autistic people in the employment market. This includes strong and consistent supportive systems including broader community resources, family support, workplace capacity building (e.g. employer, co-workers) and policy (Nicholas *et al.*, 2018). Several researchers have stressed the importance of 'matching': employers and employees (Goldfarb *et al.*, 2019), the workplace and the employee (Diener *et al.*, 2020) and special interests and job opportunities (Goldfarb *et al.*, 2019; Remington and Pellicano, 2019; Diener *et al.*, 2020). A holistic approach also calls for a different mindset in relation to autism and autistic people in line with a neurodiversity approach, which could be referred to as an autistic-centred approach to support. First, this includes a strength-based support, where support is provided based on the strengths and abilities of autistic people (Razali *et al.*, 2020), in order to increase self-empowerment (Bury *et al.*, 2019) and develop work-related skills in a supportive environment (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, this stresses the importance of increased self-awareness and self-reflexivity amongst autistic people, which in itself, may support increased empowerment and an ability to make clear plans for the future (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019a; Lee *et al.*, 2019). Thirdly, this means to question the one-sided idea of non-autistic people as support providers and autistic people as beneficiaries of support. Djela (2021) has stressed the importance of autistic coaching; supporting other autistic people to be role models for other autistic people (Djela, 2021; see also Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019a).

Data collection and analysis

This study was part of a larger research project with the overall objective of exploring different aspects of experiences of supported

employment interventions amongst autistic adults or adults with a learning difficulty. The whole data-set consisted of sixteen in-depth interviews with five men and three women who were recruited with the support from coaches at the vocational service intervention centre. Seven of the participants were in their twenties to thirties and one was in his early forties. All participants lived in or in the close vicinity of Stockholm, the capitol of Sweden. The sample included young adults from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds, where class is understood in relation to higher education. Six of the participants were born in Sweden and two were born abroad but migrated to Sweden in their early years. The interviews were conducted by author (H.B.R.) in Swedish and covered experiences or expectations of work life in the ordinary labour market, experiences of life outside of work life (including leisure, social and personal relationships) and experiences of support (including self-supporting strategies). The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min. This study has been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Umeå, Sweden [2017/43–31].

In this study, the data consisted of eleven in-depth interviews with four of the male young autistic men without learning difficulty. These interviews were conducted in pairs or individually and they took place at the office of the vocational rehabilitation service provider.

1. Lucas, in his twenties, holds a managerial position that involves customer responsibility: interviewed three times individually.
2. Hugo, in his twenties is responsible for the company's webpage and provides software support to colleagues: interviewed three times individually.
3. William, in his early forties has a solitary work which involves archiving: interviewed three times, amongst them two interviews in pair, and one interview individually.
4. Ben, in his twenties has a solitary work which involves archiving: interviewed two times, amongst them one interview in pair, and one interview individually.

Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to analyse the data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Initially, all interviews from the data-set were read several times by all authors to get an overall impression of the material. After reading through the whole data-set, four general themes emerged: functionality, support, strategies, learning and self-reflexivity. For this study data about support was analysed. During the thematisation of the data, we noted that the data about support only included interviews with four of the autistic male interviewees without a learning difficulty.

After thematisation we coded the data about support. The coding process was influenced by classical grounded theory, guided by the constant comparative method and memo writing. Individual line-by-line coding was performed separately by the authors, and discussions and

comparisons were made in relation to emerging categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Categories were compared and similar categories were merged into categories. In the findings, the categories are illustrated by quotations and examples from the data.

Findings

In our study, the men have a strong sense of work ethics, where managing the vocational work they are involved with is important to them. Hence, we identify the overall theme of their work managing strategy as ‘Achieving and sustaining work performance’. Amongst the informants a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies is utilised to manage vocational work. Two strategies, making up the overall theme of managing work through achieving and maintaining work performance, were identified: ‘Separating private life from working life’ and ‘Fulfilling their part in a joint responsibility’. By combining these strategies, the young men try to find individually adapted coping strategies that enable them to find a balance between their private life and their work. In order for the young men to feel confident and competent at work, there must be a willingness—for both employers and employees to take responsibility for and support their work performance and work situation in relation to their entire life situation (Figure 1).

Separating private life from working life

Separating private life from working life was one strategy utilised by the young men to achieve and sustain their work performance. Balancing one’s life situation consists mostly of problem-focused strategies to cope with demands both at and outside of work. To different degrees the informants asked for both practical support, specifically situation-specific strategies employed in relation to a certain stressor, as well as an individually adapted set of strategies used in different contexts that become part of their individual work management ‘toolbox’.

Separating working life and private life implies setting different types of boundaries for social interactions at work. Depending on the type of work tasks and type of functions they have at their workplace, they either choose to limit the time they spend in a social environment, such as the coffee room, or limit the type of topic and the degree of authenticity that they display in interactions with their colleagues. On one level it concerns not discussing private matters with co-workers and colleagues. For Lucas, who has a managerial position with responsibilities of motivating co-workers, the option to withdraw from social interactions is more restricted than for someone without supervisory responsibilities.

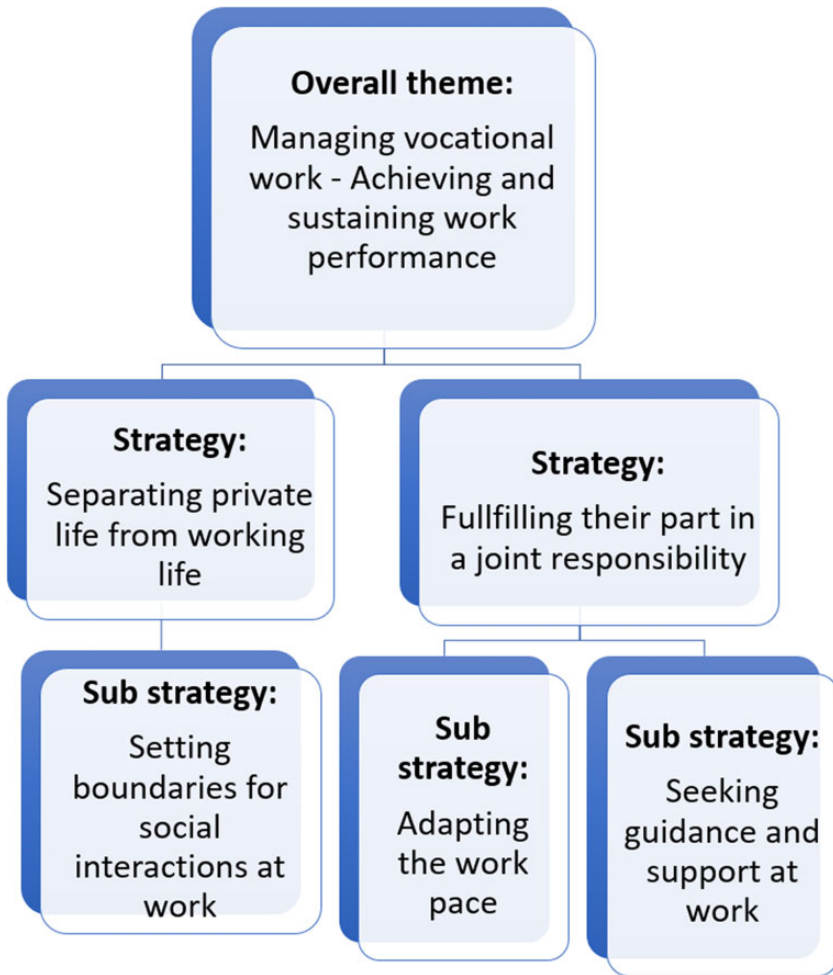


Figure 1: Managing vocational work: Strategies used by young autistic men to achieve and sustain their work performance.

For him, socialising means creating a work-persona, in which he carefully selects which parts of himself he wants to display to his workmates:

I'm not the same person in private as I am at work. If you're yourself everywhere you'll never be able to do everything, it takes a certain energy to maintain the mask but it never takes as much energy to maintain that mask than it does to like tell eight people that; this is awful, this way it feels ... Better that you have one or two people who understand how you feel when you tell it, than have eight people who don't. (Lucas)

For Lucas, it is important to clearly separate the professional self from the private self by putting on a mask. Although wearing a mask

demands a certain amount of energy, it saves more energy than trying to convey authentic feelings and standing the risk of being misunderstood by others (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019). For Lucas, his mask becomes what he shows of himself in the workplace, his professional self, whilst his non-masked, private self is what he shows at home. Through this separation of the professional and the private—with the help of masks—Lucas tries to handle the neurotypical demands placed on him as an employee; however, the separation also functions as a concrete way of managing his energy levels and protecting his integrity.

At work, other rules apply and some of the young men believe it is their duty to fulfil certain social obligations (cf. Remington and Pellicano, 2019). In certain situations, the young men are expected to socialise and get along with their co-workers:

During working hours, I'm a very social person, even though I may not always be like this in private. I have my so-called "click of friends", and perhaps we don't hang out that much outside of it usually. But during work hours, I'm paid to be there, and I must get along with my colleagues. So, it's an effort you make because it's not my [leisure] time anymore. (Lucas)

For Lucas it is important to separate socialising during leisure time from socialising at work. At work socialising is necessary to promote a smooth co-operation between co-workers, which is different from friendship, outside of the workplace, where one is authentic with ones' feelings and personality.

They're colleagues, nothing more. I'm the type who... I don't [socially] flirt with colleagues. I don't hang out with colleagues. At work you must be professional, stick to a certain ethical code, have a certain standard ... // What I do with friends I'm very careful not to share at work, because I don't spend time with them [the colleagues] in my spare time and will not do so either. They don't have to know about my private life. (Lucas)

At work Lucas considers it his duty to be able to socialise with everybody, thus, it is an important part of his job to get along with everybody.

You can talk about the weather, just talking to people. It's something that's expected of you in a workplace. If you work with a bunch of people, you should be able to say "hi, is everything ok?". Yeah, it's obvious stuff, that you do in your everyday life. It's just putting in an extra effort to be nice. (Lucas)

Socialising with co-workers during coffee breaks is considered as an important work-related social skill. It has a symbolic value of showing that one wants to belong in a workplace community, and it also signifies valuing other co-workers and showing an interest to contribute and being part of the group. William tends to find it boring to listen to the

same type of conversations, day in and day out, particularly if he does not have any common experiences or interests with those in control of the topics discussed. However, William who does not hold a managerial position, and in addition to a great extent works by himself, does not feel the same obligation to be social as Lucas. He has solved this situation, where he is expected to socialise with co-workers, by moving around between different groups of co-workers trying to engage in conversations with people whom he shares common interests with.

After a while, you get tired of the same people because you notice that the topics of conversation in the coffee room are almost constant ... After a while you learn what the topics of conversation will be and then you notice "here we go again, now it's here again" and then I think that if you do not want to listen, then you must go to another floor. (William)

For Ben, the challenge lies in regulating the intensity of social interactions with co-workers, since he has a tendency to either becoming too involved or too detached. Although his manager prefers that he joins his colleagues at lunch or for coffee breaks, her knowledge of Ben's interactive patterns has made her inclined to let him choose, on a daily basis, whether he wants to socialise or not.

[I have talked] with my supervisors that it takes a lot of energy to do my own job due to how I open up to other people and [that I] don't have any kind of wall or protection or whatever it is that stops what comes [out]. It's also meant that I haven't been able to do some work, because the employer doesn't take it into account. That's what they tell me, but either you go and help people, or you stop altogether. (Ben)

Based on previous experiences, Hugo's strategy is to avoid social interactions with co-workers. Hugo knows that he cannot cope in a busy environment and only feels comfortable with one-on-one interactions.

William, Ben and Hugo, unlike Lucas, do not have managerial positions and their work tasks do not involve teamwork which makes it less conspicuous for them to limit their social interactions with co-workers. The ability to minimise social interactions with colleagues provided them with enough energy to enable them to uphold their work performances instead of being exhausted by having to invest energy in social interactions, which neither entailed a meaningful exchange of experiences nor provided a replenishment of energy.

In different ways the informants express the need to separate working life from private life. By doing so they formulate and perform various forms of contextual sociality, which exemplifies situation-specific coping strategies. Being social is considered important both in the workplace and at home, but how to be social in those contexts are clearly different. Being social at work can involve small talk, drinking

coffee and having a break, but not necessarily being private and sharing information about your private life or socialising with colleagues outside of work hours. Being able to have informal conversations is a social skill that the young men believe that they are expected to master—a skill which they consider as challenging both in relation to normative expectations they place upon themselves and normative expectations that they perceive from colleagues. Sociality is performed in one way at work, whilst sociality is performed differently at home. This division seems to revolve around managing the informants' energy levels at work to cope with their work tasks and whilst still having enough energy for their leisure time. In other words, the informants avoid mixing private sociality with work sociality to avoid the risk of losing their energy. In this way the informants show skills in balancing neurotypical sociality with a neurodivergent sociality (cf. [Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019b](#)).

Fulfilling their part in a joint responsibility

Fulfilling their part in a joint responsibility between employees and employers to create a sustainable work environment was another strategy the young men utilised to achieve and maintain their work performance. Through this strategy the young men express their willingness and responsibility to work hard and do their job. However, in order for the employees to be able to perform their work the young men stress the employers' responsibility in both managing the employees and giving them the best opportunities to fulfil their work responsibilities. This strategy was made up of two sub strategies: 'adapting the work pace and seeking guidance and support at work'. These sub-strategies stress the joint responsibility between the employers and the employees where the employers play a key role as a gatekeeper.

Adapting the work pace

When you are new at work, it is important to find the right work pace. To feel secure and confident is important in order to be able to work in an individually adapted pace. To perform and be efficient is dependent on being able to do things right. However, if the pace is too high, there is a risk of failing to perform one's work duties.

The most important thing in the beginning [as newly employed] was to do the right thing. It doesn't matter if it takes time, if it was right [for you] you could be more efficient. Because you can't expect a person who has little work experience to be very efficient when it comes to learning something new. But if you learn everything [you need to know]

you can do it properly. You remember it. Then you can work up the pace, so that you have a high tempo in the end. But start by taking it a little easy, then [eventually] you learn everything. (Lucas)

Although it is the employee's responsibility to communicate when he or she needs to take a break, it is equally important for the manager to listen to the employee and acknowledge the expressed need, so it becomes possible to take a break or even leave earlier during the workday when necessary. In other words, to offer flexible individually adapted working hours based on work chores, rather than holding on to ideas of working hours based on a specific number of hours one needs to be at the workplace (cf. Bertilsson Rosqvist and Keisu, 2012).

It is important that both co-workers and managers do not demand that a certain task must be performed under time pressure since that can add to unnecessary stress and internal pressure. William talks about the importance of pacing: to find a pace that is neither too slow nor too fast in relation to the assigned task and overall workload. The employee should strive for a balance between being excessively meticulous and sloppy in performance of assigned duties. For some of the participants it has been helpful to have a list of work chores that can be performed over extended periods of time. For example, long-term goals to finish, during the course of one year, which do not require being finished at a certain time during that period. Avoiding a fixed deadline allows for both more flexibility for the individual in terms of when to finish the work duties, as well as allowing the individual to be in control of his/her workload and execution of the work duties.

Being able to work independently and not having to adapt one's pace or performance in relation to co-workers can contribute to finding one's own way of doing the job in a sustainable way. For Hugo who only works four hours per day, it is easier to work without taking a break, since taking breaks disrupts his workflow (cf. Bertilsson Rosqvist et al., 2020):

I almost never take breaks ... I don't know ... It feels easier for me to just keep on going ...// I think I'm bad at taking breaks and maybe it's because I go in for what I do and I think it's worse for me to be interrupted, since it wouldn't give me relief. (Hugo)

For others, pacing is about discovering that the workflow entails a rhythm in which work pace is more or less intensive in certain situations or related to certain work tasks, and take the time to relax when work chores are less hectic.

I've learned that even if you work, it's not always one hundred percent stress. Sometimes there are ten to twenty minute-gaps where you don't do much. It ends up with you having a cup of coffee ...// I had imagined that it would be work constantly. *Leisure during work*, it's more that there are gaps in the work pace, that is, moments where you unwind a

bit. There are times when you can take it easy apart from when you have lunch, break and the like. (Lucas)

Flexible working hours can also help to reduce pressure and stress, since some of the young adults' experience difficulties in regulating their circadian rhythm:

I could work at any time of the night and it still affects my [circadian rhythm]. I have problems with [my] circadian rhythm. I can notice that if I'm focusing, I don't get tired at all. I'm not that hungry for that matter either. Though I've gotten better over the years, at not giving in when it happens. It was a worse problem when I went to school and had to get up in the morning. Now, since I have very flexible working hours where I can start late it works. (Hugo)

The informants' pacing can be understood as a balancing act between adapting to norms on how to work and finding their own ways of working. In that way, pacing both highlights and criticises norms through possible alternative ways of doing work life and adulthood (cf. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Keisu, 2012). These ways can be compared to Halberstam's (2003) thoughts about heteronormative temporality and queer temporality. Heteronormative temporality refers to heteronormative notions of a person's development and lifeline, such as marrying a person of the opposite sex and having children within a certain age range. Queer temporality refers to alternative lifelines and ways of living one's life that deviate from the heteronormative temporality. This could be understood in terms of a neurotypical temporality, based on neurotypical functionality, and neurodivergent temporality, based on neurodivergent functionality. Pacing in a work context dominated by neurotypicals, thus, involves both a way of identifying and adapting to a neurotypical temporality whilst at the same time trying to find and live more in line with one's own neurodivergent pace (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, pacing as a neurodivergent temporality holds a possibility of challenging the taken for granted neurotypical temporalities and notions of functionality.

Seeking guidance and support at work

If there is a lack of external support or internal motivation, it can be difficult to get started with an activity. When there is no structural framework, it can be difficult to get anything done. For some of the young men it is easier to perform work chores when they are aware that their work performance affects their co-worker's ability to do their job:

I don't do much planning at work now but it's easier to do when you know that it [the work chore] should be ready [at] this time, for example because it affects another [co-worker] automatically and then I become,

I feel some sense of [responsibility of] doing it [work] in some way. I have a harder time seeing [what] when it just affects me ... (Hugo)

For some of the young men it has been valuable to have a manager who helps them structure their work. Difficulties with structuring and getting started with chores can for some of the young adults, be a pattern that occurs regardless of context, which is exemplified by Hugo:

I'm very bad at planning things. I never do it automatically. That's probably why it worked much better for me in school when everything was ready. When I had a schedule that I followed, and someone else already planned everything. And it still is ...// I have a hard time [planning]. I also notice it at home with cleaning and doing laundry and stuff like that. That if it's just up to me to do everything, I can't do it by myself. It never works. (Hugo)

In addition to getting help with structuring work tasks, it was important that managers acknowledged their strengths. Both William and Hugo have work tasks that take a lot of their energy. During his spare-time William likes to do genealogy which requires a sense of order, which is beneficial when he works with archiving. Hugo has an ability to hyper-focus when he finds a task interesting (cf. [Murray et al., 2005](#)), which he considers both as a strength and weakness, since he becomes task-oriented but without thinking about the negative consequences that occurs afterwards in terms of being drained of energy.

If I sit with something and I must figure it out, then I can sit very much like this... Tunnel vision and I sit longer than I should. I like it because I'm focused. I only get tired afterwards ... And it's probably both an advantage and a curse that you're so into what you're doing, so you don't get tired then. But it can be completely exhausted afterwards. (Hugo)

Furthermore, managers must be aware of the fact that handling social interactions at work can become problematic when the intensity of social interactions with colleagues is mismatched. Overtime, Ben has become aware that his interactions with other people can be perceived as intrusive when he unsolicited chooses to offer his help, and as a consequence he tries to be more sensitive towards his co-workers needs and separate them from his own needs.

I've learned that if someone has not asked for it or if someone has said no, then I let it be, no idea to waste my energy on it. But it has taken quite a long time for me to be able to learn in the small things [how] to protect myself in that way. I have done it in different ways, before I did [it] in an extreme way; turned off completely. But by shutting down my own empathy completely, I've become quite cold. (Ben)

Ben has told his manager that he can fall into this type of interactive pattern, where his socialising with co-workers can be perceived as too

intrusive, which can damage their work relationship. For Ben it is important that his manager understands and acknowledges difficulties that can occur in relation to social norms and other interactive patterns where the level of interaction is less intense and limited in its scope; how long and in-depth topics are being explored. When different signals are misread or needs are mismatched, there is a risk that social interactions with co-workers become jeopardised. There is a difference between engaging in a conversation as a way of signalling that you want to be part of a social community, rather than starting a conversation because you want to discuss a topic with the expectation of an exchange of subject knowledge. However, these two starting points are not mutually exclusive, but the frequency and motivation for choosing either, or both, starting point can differ in terms of being neurodivergent or neurotypical (cf. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019b).

Conclusions

The young men in our study utilise work management strategies to achieve and sustain work performance. The first identified work management strategy was ‘separating private life from working life’, which was made up of the sub strategy: ‘setting boundaries for social interactions at work’. Without the opportunity to have strategies for separating private life from their work the young autistic men would lack enough energy to either keep their job or to perform their work tasks at a level which they were content with. The need to separate private life from working life is not necessarily a need unique to autistic people. However, they tended to express that this separation was more crucial to autistic people than to neurotypicals due to autistic people’s challenges to maintain and rebuild their energy levels. Autistic people have smaller margins than neurotypicals, in which difficulties in time perception and energy budgeting may mean that there is no time and energy left for self-care activities. Thus, help with balancing private life from work life becomes more important for them than for neurotypicals.

The second identified work management strategy was ‘fulfilling their part in a joint responsibility’ which was made up of two sub strategies: ‘adapting the work pace and seeking guidance and support at work’. The former concerns finding one’s individual work pace and how the employer might adapt the work environment to match the individual work pace, such as being able to work independently, having clear instructions and reasonable goals. The latter involves the supporting role of the employers and the work managers by encouraging, giving advice and helping the young men to both structuring their work and understanding workplace sociality which was considered as necessary skills to help the men to sustain work performance without being exhausted after

work. Thus, the employers functioned as enablers and social translators (between different socialities) which enabled the men to be successful at work. In a long-term perspective, a joint responsibility is a crucial component in being able to retain their employment.

The informants show how they are affected by, and try to adapt to, neurotypical norms and expectations about working life and adulthood (cf. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019a). Although individualised coping strategies can be helpful, it is important for employers and formal support persons to understand and acknowledge that individual emotional and problem-solving coping strategies are demanding and need to be combined with adaptations in the working environment (cf. Scott et al., 2019). An available, individually adapted and flexible support structure is a key element in enabling a good work environment, which allows the young men to perform their work duties in a manner that makes them feel satisfied with their work performance. In relation to supported employment, the employers and work managers need to acknowledge and make individual adaptations in relation to different ways of functioning (cf. Bury et al., 2019). For example, mask-wearing functions as a concrete way of both trying to adapt to neurotypical work norms and to protect one's energy levels and integrity. In other words, neurotypical notions of working life and adulthood create, for the informants, feelings of failure, low energy levels and problems with coping with their private lives. At the same time, the informants highlight alternative neurodivergent ways of working and managing working life through strategic mask-wearing and strategies for how working life could be organised in a more neurodivergent way (cf. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, 2019a; Heasman and Gillespie, 2019).

Our results indicate that in order to manage vocational work, the following criteria has to be recognised; the type of functionality of each person has to be taken into consideration, where the needs and the distinctive qualities of the employee are directly connected to the type of work and work pace (cf. Bury et al., 2019). A continuous dialogue between employee and supervisor must be upheld since the capacity to perform work tasks can vary depending on the employee's position and if the work is solitary or based on collaboration with co-workers. It also has to do with the individual's capacity which can vary daily and is dependent on what occurs outside of work. Social workers need to provide structured and well-coordinated formal support at work, by both involving the clients' employers and work managers as well as the autistic clients' informal networks. This has great impact on the informants' life-trajectories (cf. Bishop-Fitzpatrick et al., 2019).

Limitations

The data are limited concerning the number of interviewees and interviews. However, the data are rich and in-depth and provide a nuanced

understanding of the interviewees experiences of support since they were encouraged to describe different work-related situations in which they experienced a need for support. Meeting each participants several times also gave them the opportunity to further develop or add something to previous discussions about support needs. In addition, this thematic analysis could be a good starting point for a more extensive grounded theory analysis in which the identification of participants main concern could add valuable information to provide tailored support interventions.

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