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Beyond the Autistic Strengths Narrative: How Autonomy, Anxiety, and Attention Constrain

Participation and Recognition in Neurodiverse Teams

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Abstract

Background

Strengths-based narratives of autism often presume that autistic individuals' expertise will naturally translate into better outcomes for the teams they work with. However, such perspectives overlook the fundamentally relational nature of collaborative work, in which teams infer, evaluate, and recognize members' knowledge and abilities through social interaction. When autistic communication and cognitive styles diverge from neurotypical teamwork norms, autistic individuals' expertise may remain unrecognized in team contexts.

Methods

Our data consist of semi-structured interviews with 35 autistic adults from a larger study and two newly collected serial focus groups with five additional autistic adults, all of whom had experience with team-based collaboration in academic or workplace settings. Using phonetic iterative qualitative data analysis (PIQDA), we identified recurring patterns in participants' lived experiences of teamwork.

Results

We identified three predominant structural barriers that limit autistic people's access to and participation in teamwork: (a) *autonomy*, reflecting a preference for independent work often arising from mismatches with dominant collaborative norms; (b) *anxiety*, shaped by lifelong experiences of stigma and neuronormative social expectations that constrain knowledge sharing; and (c) *attention*, referring to the cognitive, social, and sensory demands of teamwork that limit sustained engagement. Together, these barriers can operate incrementally, filtering out autistic individuals' contributions before teams integrate them into their collective knowledge.

Conclusion

These findings reframe autistic individuals' challenges in neurodiverse teamwork as structural rather than individual. By highlighting how neuronormative team environments constrain the visibility of autistic expertise, this study contributes to autism and organizational research as well as team cognition theory. The findings also suggest the need for structural changes in team environments that normalize diverse communication styles, work preferences, and approaches to collaboration in order to foster more neuroinclusive teamwork.

Keywords: autistic strengths, neuronormativity, team collaboration, expertise recognition, structural barriers

Community brief

- “Why is this an important issue?”
 - Many organizations and universities say they value the strengths autistic individuals bring. But autistic individuals still face barriers when working in teams – barriers that limit how much they can participate and whether their contributions get noticed.
- “What was the purpose of this study?”
 - We wanted to understand teamwork from autistic individuals' lived experiences, focusing on what makes it difficult for them to fully contribute their knowledge and have it recognized by teammates.
- “What did the researchers do?”
 - We analyzed interviews from a larger study involving 35 autistic adults with teamwork experience and combined these insights with newly collected focus group data from five autistic adults. Across two focus group sessions held two weeks apart, participants completed hands-on activities to reflect on positive and challenging experiences working in teams.
- “What were the results and conclusions of the study?”

- We found three barriers that can make it harder for autistic people to participate fully and have their contributions noticed in teams. First, many participants wanted *autonomy*, or more control over how and when they completed their work, which would create an initial hurdle to engaging in teamwork. Second, *anxiety* around change (e.g., new members) and being misunderstood often led participants to hold back ideas or participate less. Third, fast-moving team environments that demand constant *attention* can be exhausting and make it hard to stay engaged over time. We argue that these are not simply personal challenges stemming from autistic traits. Rather, common expectations about how teams should work (e.g., constant availability, thinking out loud, making small talk, adapting quickly to change) can make participation more difficult for autistic people.
- “What is new or controversial about these findings?”
 - This study shows that challenges autistic individuals face in teams are not just personal but they are built into how teams work. When every team member is expected to think and communicate the same way, autistic people can be left out, even when they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities the team needs.
- “What are potential weaknesses in the study?”
 - This study used a small sample, and most participants had lower support needs. It also focused on teamwork involving sharing ideas, solving problems, and completing academic or professional projects. The findings may not apply to all autistic people or all types of teams.
- “How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?”
 - These findings suggest that supporting autistic people requires changing how teams are designed and work, rather than asking autistic individuals to adapt or improve their social skills. Organizations and universities can create room for different ways of communicating and working. For example, teams can let people contribute at different

times, protect time for uninterrupted work, and switch between short team check-ins and independent work. Recognizing autistic strengths is an important first step. Meaningful inclusion also requires team environments where autistic people can contribute fully and be recognized for what they bring.

Beyond the Autistic Strengths Narrative: How Autonomy, Anxiety, and Attention Constrain Participation and Recognition in Neurodiverse Teams

Introduction

Teams are a common feature of contemporary social and institutional life, bringing together individuals with different skills and knowledge to accomplish shared goals.¹⁻³ However, the benefits of teamwork are not automatic, but they depend on team processes through which teams effectively pool and integrate the diverse knowledge and perspectives of their members.^{4,5} Despite growing recognition of neurodiversity as a valuable source of diverse knowledge and perspectives,⁶ autistic individuals continue to face barriers to full participation and recognition in team settings, even when they bring unique skills and expertise to collaborative work.

Existing scholarship on autism and adulthood has largely focused on broad issues such as access, hiring, retention, and belonging, as well as individual challenges in general social relationships and interactions.⁷⁻¹¹ Researchers have paid far less attention to the day-to-day granular processes of team-based collaboration, including how autistic people contribute their knowledge in real collaborative settings. A recent systematic review underscores this gap, identifying only three studies that specifically examined neurodiversity in team contexts.¹²

A deeper focus on neurodiverse teamwork that centers autistic individuals' lived experiences is needed. Higher education and workplaces provide two especially important contexts for examining these experiences because individuals in both settings rely on teamwork to learn, solve problems, create knowledge, and accomplish shared goals.^{2,13} In higher education, students frequently work in course-based projects, research teams, and other collaborative activities on and off campus that require them to coordinate with others and contribute to shared outcomes.¹⁴ Difficulties in these settings can affect not only academic performance but also

students' sense of belonging, access to learning and career-development opportunities, and relationships with peers. In workplaces, employees rely on teams to integrate diverse knowledge and coordinate interdependent tasks.^{2,4} Barriers to effective participation in team-based collaborative work can therefore affect employees' performance, access to professional development and advancement, and broader organizational life. These stakes may be especially consequential for autistic people, who continue to experience substantial marginalization in both higher education and employment.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Yet, research focused on broader educational and employment outcomes among neurodivergent adults does not fully capture the interpersonal, cognitive, and sensory frictions that arise in everyday collaboration process. For example, the prevailing norm of the so-called "ideal team player," often characterized by neurotypical communication styles and personality traits (e.g., agreeable, caring, enthusiastic), constant availability, and seamless interaction and coordination with others,^{18,19} may stand in tension with autistic ways of thinking, communicating, and regulating sensory input.¹¹ Teammates may interpret autistic people's relatively limited use of neurotypical nonverbal cues (e.g., eye contact, high volume and tone of speech) as rude or lacking warmth,²⁰ and may view a strong preference for predictability as inflexibility in fast-paced team environments that emphasize adaptability.²¹ Such misalignment can lead autistic traits to be interpreted not as valuable differences but as deficits in team-based collaborative work,²⁰ potentially limiting access to teamwork, meaningful participation, and recognition of their contributions.²² Thus, autistic workers' perceived employability or fit is not a static attribute determined at the point of entry; rather, these judgments are continuously negotiated and constituted through micro-level, everyday interpersonal interactions. Examining autistic people's lived experiences in teamwork can illustrate how barriers persist beyond access

to education or employment and become reproduced through everyday collaborative processes.^{23–25}

Autistic Strengths and Teamwork

A common argument for including autistic individuals in collaborative settings emphasizes their competitive advantage, often framing autistic people as an “untapped talent pool.”⁶ For example, research has shown that, compared to non-autistic individuals, autistic people show stronger attention to detail, more locally oriented information processing (as opposed to global processing), deep focus, and creativity.^{26–29} This strengths-based perspective reflects the broader neurodiversity paradigm, which reframes neurodevelopmental conditions as natural human variations and valid ways of being.^{30,31} Across educational and workplace settings, scholars, educators, employers, and practitioners have increasingly emphasized capabilities associated with autism, such as pattern recognition, memory, and mathematical reasoning and have sought to create opportunities that build on these strengths.^{9,32} Yet, institutional priorities have often shaped how researchers and practitioners define and value these capabilities. As a result, prevailing notions of autistic strengths often reflect educational, organizational, or broader societal expectations of competence and productivity more than autistic people’s own understandings of their capabilities and contributions.

Although this strengths-based perspective represents an important shift away from deficit-based views of autism, it also raises several limitations for understanding the realities of neurodiverse teamwork. First, scholars and autistic self-advocates caution that strengths-based discourse often collapses the vast heterogeneity of abilities within the autistic population³³ into a narrow set of STEM-centric stereotypes, savant narratives, or “superpower” tropes, reinforcing reductive stereotypes and creating unrealistic expectations.^{27,34} And by emphasizing exceptional

strengths as the primary basis for inclusion, strengths-based discourse may inadvertently perpetuate inequities by suggesting that autistic individuals must justify their value through extraordinary abilities rather than being recognized as equally deserving of meaningful participation and opportunity. Second, the focus on strengths, while facilitating access to educational and employment opportunities, can obscure the persistent challenges and structural barriers autistic individuals face in these institutions in their everyday lives.³⁵ Some scholars call this a “neurodiversity lite”³⁵ approach, referring to the tendency to adopt strength-affirming rhetoric and performatively celebrate difference while remaining reluctant to enact systemic change. And finally, the strengths-based approach tends to treat cognitive resources such as skills and expertise as innate, objective properties held by individuals, while overlooking the fundamentally relational nature of collaborative work. In team settings, the value of expertise depends not only on what individuals know but also on how others interpret and evaluate it through judgments and social interaction.^{36–42} Attending to the social, relational, and communicative construction of autistic strengths shifts the focus from what autistic individuals inherently possess to the conditions under which their expertise becomes visible and valued in collaborative contexts.

Autistic Individuals’ Barriers to Participation and Expertise Recognition in Teams

Although strengths-based narratives often presume that autistic cognitive assets will translate into gains in team or organizational performance and generate the so-called “competitive advantage,” research on group processes suggests a more complex picture. For individual expertise to contribute to collective team knowledge, members must first express what they know in ways that make it available to the team, and other members must then recognize and integrate those contributions.^{43–45} However, teams are rarely neutral sites of information

exchange. Research shows that group members disproportionately focus on information they already share or that dominant members contribute, while they give less attention to unique or dissenting insights and information from lower-status members.^{5,46–49} Unlike manual or action-oriented teamwork where competence is often directly observable through task performance and outputs, expertise in knowledge-based collaborative work is rarely directly observable to teammates; instead, teammates infer others' expertise through stereotypes, behavioral cues, communicative signals (e.g., talkativeness, dominance), and conformity to interactional norms.^{36,37,40,42,50} Thus, recognition as a competent team member with expertise is relational, contextual, and emerges through ongoing interactive dynamics.³⁶

These dynamics have important implications for neurodiverse teamwork. Normative ideals about effective communication, such as fluency and eloquence in oral speech and sustained, interactive dialogue,⁵¹ can disadvantage autistic team members whose ways of expressing expertise diverge from dominant communicative cues used to signal competence. The double empathy problem, which posits that misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people arise within “the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors” rather than from deficits within autistic individuals,^{52(p884)} suggests that the expression and recognition of expertise for autistic members may be particularly challenging in cross-neurotype team interactions. Research shows that, consistent with the double empathy problem, autistic participants share information effectively and demonstrate high rapport within autistic-only groups.^{53–55} These efficiencies may dissipate in typical organizational and educational settings, where neurodiverse teams—comprising members of different neurotypes—are more common than same-neurotype teams.⁵⁶ In such environments, team members may overlook autistic people's expertise when they express it outside normative performances of expertise, such as speaking

frequently, expressing high confidence, and exerting control over the conversational flow.^{41,42} Field research highlights that knowledge workers are viewed as experts when they engage in practices such as transcending established work procedures (e.g., ignoring existing instructions, creating new procedures flexibly and adaptively for new client needs) or managing large volumes of information fluidly across multiple technological tools simultaneously.³⁶ Even when autistic people possess relevant expertise, these differences in expertise signaling may lead their contributions to be unrecognized or undervalued.

Although prior research has shown that teamwork often assumes neurotypical communication styles and interactional norms,⁵⁷ we know much less about how these norms constrain autistic individuals' participation and recognition as holders of valuable expertise. This study examines structural barriers in autistic individuals' teamwork experiences, particularly those rooted in neuronormative expectations embedded in team processes. By identifying these barriers, we aim to advance theorizing on neurodiversity in team cognition and inform more neuroinclusive forms of collaboration.

Methods

Study Design

Our study draws on data from 35 semi-structured individual interviews and two rounds of serial focus groups involving five individuals. The interviews are part of a larger project examining autistic adults' organizational socialization in higher education and workplaces. In a separate publication, we previously analyzed a subset of these data—31 interviews with autistic individuals with work experience—to develop the concept of *assimilation labor* and identify the structural conditions that shape autistic workers' effortful adaptation to neuronormative expectations in organizational environments.²⁰ During that analysis, we noticed a recurring

pattern outside the primary focus of the earlier study: participants frequently described *substantial difficulty sharing their knowledge and engaging in collaborative work* with others (see Supplemental Material S1 for a detailed comparison of the two studies).

These preliminary insights shaped the subsequent focus group design in several ways. Interviewees often situated current collaborative experiences within broader narratives about autistic identity, stigma, and earlier group experiences; accordingly, the focus groups provided time to reflect on identity and past team experiences before turning to participants' current teamwork. The interviews also revealed variation in how participants recalled and shared specific experiences, prompting us to incorporate structured, multimodal elicitation activities into the subsequent focus groups (described in detail under Procedure). Finally, we selected a focus group format to examine teamwork experiences in greater depth and to enable participants to collectively reflect on, compare, and build upon one another's teamwork experiences in a supportive environment. These within-group interactions generated deeper insights into the challenges and dynamics of neurodiverse teamwork that were less accessible through individual interviews alone.⁵⁸

Because many autistic individuals report discomfort in unfamiliar group settings,⁵⁹ we took care to create a supportive environment for participation. We used small groups of two or three participants to reduce overstimulation and support rich interaction.⁶⁰ We also adopted a *serial focus group* design,⁶¹ with the same participants attending two sessions, two weeks apart. This format allowed rapport and reflection to develop across sessions, resulting in more nuanced and elaborated accounts in the second meeting. Because membership remained constant, we analyzed the two sessions as a single extended focus group dataset for each group.

We approached the research with reflexivity and collaboration with the autistic community. Three autistic consultants provided feedback on the interview protocol. Nine autistic or neurodivergent undergraduate research assistants contributed to protocol refinement, recruitment, transcription, coding, and analysis; they received academic course credit for their work and three are coauthors of this paper. The first author also presented preliminary findings in academic and community settings, where autistic individuals provided substantive feedback on our interpretations and conceptual frameworks. Although we did not recontact study participants to offer the opportunity to decide whether they wished to review transcripts or contribute directly to data interpretation through member checking due to concerns about additional emotional and time burdens,^{62,63} the iterative collaborations helped us identify and reflect on our biases and assumptions.

Participants

We recruited 35 interview participants through purposeful sampling. Recruitment targeted adults who identified as autistic, through a medical diagnosis or self-identification, and reported part- or full-time work experience (see Supplemental Material S2 for additional information about the inclusion of self-identified autistic participants and the rationale for this eligibility criterion). Five additional participants took part in two serial focus groups of two and three participants, each meeting twice. Because we designed the focus groups to examine emerging teamwork-related patterns in greater depth, we recruited focus group participants who were adults who identified as autistic and were currently engaged in a team-based project. We provide further details about the small focus group sample, along with our reflections and recommendations for future research involving autistic participants in the Supplemental Material S3. Participants represented diverse identities and backgrounds (Table 1).

While interview participants had work experience, focus group participants were undergraduate students. We considered this population appropriate because undergraduate students frequently engage in sustained, team-based course projects, and our analytic focus was on the social and interactional processes of teamwork rather than features unique to employment. Although student and professional work teams differ in task complexity, incentives, duration, and resources, they also share core features, such as bounded membership, interdependence, and social relational processes,⁶⁴ and many influential team theories and concepts have been developed using student teams.^{65,66} These shared features made both settings relevant to our analysis of barriers to participation and recognition arising from the social and relational nature of team collaboration.

Procedure

We recruited participants through offline and online channels. We recruited offline at a public university campus on the U.S. West Coast and online through Discord servers and social media groups for autistic individuals. Following person-oriented ethics for autism research,⁶⁷ we allowed interview participants to choose among in-person, Zoom (video, audio only, or text), and email. We conducted focus groups in-person to facilitate the moderation of interaction dynamics and support participants' attention in a structured setting.

The interview protocol addressed autistic identity and work experiences, including the challenges they experienced and how they responded (see Supplemental Material S1). We developed separate protocols for the two focus group rounds (see Table 2 for a comparison of the purpose and key questions for each round). In Round 1, we focused on autistic identity and past group or team experiences; in Round 2, we focused on current teamwork. To facilitate recall and discussion, we incorporated structured activities into the focus groups. In Round 1, we asked

participants to list on paper teams that evoked predominantly positive or negative feelings and then discuss differences in their roles, communication, sense of inclusion, and comfort sharing ideas and concerns. In Round 2, we used a team journey mapping activity adapted from patient journey mapping techniques.⁶⁸ Participants created a visual timeline of a current team experience, marking key events, emotions, and team dynamics from team formation to the present (see Figure 1 for a participant drawing from this activity). We used visual elicitation because graphic methods can support recall and reflection on emotionally complex experiences, such as teamwork, and visual supports can help autistic individuals process complex information or experiences.^{69,70} The activity also normalized drawing and doodling as forms of engagement and self-regulation.⁷¹ Indeed, several participants continued to draw or doodle while listening to others.

In-person and Zoom interviews averaged 78 minutes (range: 28–101), and each focus group session lasted approximately 90 minutes. Immediately after data collection, we labeled and stored audio files using assigned pseudonyms. We used Otter.ai for generating initial transcripts, which the first author reviewed to replace real names with pseudonyms and remove identifying information. Two trained research assistants subsequently checked the transcripts against the recordings and corrected errors, consulting interviewers or focus group facilitators as needed. The first and last authors conducted a final review before analysis. Interviews yielded 729 pages of single-spaced transcripts, and the focus groups generated an additional 95 pages. Interview participants received a \$40 gift card; focus group participants received two gift cards totaling \$120 for completing two 90-minute sessions.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis (PIQDA),⁷² an interpretive analytic approach influenced by grounded theory but distinguished by its explicitly iterative and praxis-oriented nature. PIQDA allows researchers to move between data, existing theoretical frameworks, and emerging interpretations. This approach fit our goal of identifying structural barriers to autistic individuals' participation and expertise recognition while developing implications for more neuroinclusive collaboration.

We analyzed the interview and focus group data sequentially and iteratively. As discussed above, through initial analysis of the interview data, we identified recurrent patterns related to autistic participants' difficulties engaging in collaborative work, which informed the teamwork-focused focus groups. We then immersed ourselves in the full focus group data through repeated reading, memo writing, and team discussions, attending both to patterns previously identified in the interviews and to new insights emerging from the focus groups.

Using Atlas.ti, we then conducted primary-cycle (open) coding of the entire focus group data and 20% of the interview data, focusing on accounts of teamwork, coworker interactions, and task-related communication in collaborative contexts. We assigned descriptive codes and refined them through constant comparison. During the following secondary-cycle (axial) coding, we developed higher-level codes by grouping conceptually related first-level codes. For example, we consolidated codes reflecting preferences for working alone, controlling tasks, or working at one's own pace into *autonomy*; codes reflecting persistent worry about being misunderstood and hypervigilance during social interactions into *anxiety*; and codes reflecting cognitive load and sensory input in team settings (e.g., noise, lighting, rapid communication), into *attention*. We then developed a codebook from these second-level codes and applied it to code the full interview and focus group datasets. Throughout this process, we met weekly as a

research team, updated analytic memos, and engaged relevant literature to refine our interpretations. We elaborate on our findings in the next section with illustrative participant quotes identified by pseudonym and data source (I = interview; FG = focus group).

Findings

Overall, participants described their typical behavior in team settings as cautious, peripheral, and often oriented toward observation rather than active participation. For example, they recalled “stepping aside and observing” (Ana, FG1), “sitting in the corner” (Ian, FG1), “taking on support work” (Samuel, FG2), and being “focused on listening and reacting the way that they think I should” (Dina, I). While one might interpret these behaviors as disengagement or lack of proactivity, participants’ accounts reveal several powerful demands embedded in neurodiverse team collaboration that constrained their ability to participate more fully. Across the data, three barriers related to *autonomy*, *anxiety*, and *attention* emerged, each shaping different aspects of autistic individuals’ participation in teams and influencing how their cognitive resources were recognized and valued.

To organize our findings, we draw on a central metaphor generated organically by our focus group participants when asked what it feels like to work in a team with predominantly neurotypical people: *driving a car*. Notably, nearly all focus group participants independently invoked driving as a way to describe their experiences of team collaboration. For instance, they likened losing autonomy in teamwork to driving a “car that stalls,” capturing the sense of being interrupted or prevented from moving forward at their own pace. They compared persistent anxiety to the heightened vigilance required to avoid “hitting other people while driving,” reflecting constant monitoring of social cues and fear of mistakes and negative judgments. They also compared the exhaustion associated with managing attention in cognitively, socially, and

sensorily demanding environments to “paying attention to so many different things at once” while driving, such as traffic, road conditions, signals, pedestrians, and navigation. This metaphor illustrates how neurodiverse teamwork, from autistic people’s perspectives, can feel less like collaborative coordination and more like navigating a high-stakes environment that requires continuous, effortful regulation and vigilance. Our data suggest that these barriers can disrupt the pathway through which autistic expertise becomes shared and integrated into collective team knowledge, as Ian (FG1) articulated: “I guess it might be easier to focus on solving and coming up with ideas for how to solve a problem by just focusing on it more. I guess [my autism] would make it harder to share the ideas with others.” Figure 2 presents a tentative, illustrative model of these barriers, which we elaborate on below.

Autonomy: “My brain is like a car that stalls.”

Many participants expressed a strong preference for working alone rather than with others, which limited their opportunities to engage in teamwork from the outset. For example, Ana, an international student majoring in computer science, shared during a focus group: “I was the smart kid, so I just ended up doing most of the work alone.” She added that her drive to work independently, coupled with her perfectionism, “pushed other people aside.”

At first glance, such accounts may echo early characterization of autistic children as “happiest when left alone” and paying “no attention to persons.”⁷³ Recent scholarship, however, suggests that autistic sociality is different, not less, and that autistic individuals express a desire for connection in their own ways or in ways that diverge from neurotypical norms.^{52,74} Research in team contexts found that autistic students value cohesive collaboration and social connection with teammates.⁷⁵ Similarly, our data suggest that participants’ preference for solo work does not simply reflect a lack of social interest, but rather a perceived disconnect or mismatch between

their ways of working and what they described as “other people’s ways,” which motivated them to develop their own systems and structures.⁷⁶

Specifically, we identified two predominant ways participants pursued autonomy in collaborative contexts. First, many sought autonomy over *process*, that is, control over how they planned and executed their tasks. Casey (I), a college student, described having “unconventional methods of organization” that her peers perceived as “different.” Similarly, Lauren (I) explained that she often had “a vision of how I want the task to go,” which she felt was less exhausting to realize when working alone. When participants’ preferred approaches diverged from their teammates’, collaboration became cognitively and emotionally taxing. Emily (I) described working with others who were “not at all on the same wavelength,” requiring her to think not only about how to solve the problem but also “how to show this person how to solve a problem.” Although differences in mental models are common in teamwork,⁷⁷ participants experienced their divergence as more pervasive and persistent, often feeling that their way of conceptualizing and doing tasks differed fundamentally from dominant team norms, which introduced an additional layer of work to adapt to others’ mental models while attempting to preserve their own approach.

A second way participants pursued autonomy concerned control over *time*. Many described a strong need to self-regulate when to take breaks, how quickly to move through tasks, and how long to sustain momentum and to be able to “enjoy the process of working by myself” (Anton, I). Collaborative settings, however, often disrupted participants’ ability to regulate their own time and flow.⁷⁸ During a focus group, Chloe described her experience, which other participants enthusiastically affirmed, using the car metaphor:

Doing a project with a bunch of other people is kind of like the car, my brain is a car, and it gets rolling on this project, and then okay, the meeting’s over. Like, the work time is

over. Everyone goes home and we don't work on it. But for me, I need that momentum. I just want to do that, and I can't because I'm waiting on other people, or it's not time to do that yet. Yeah, and it's also because I'm just particularly very excited about the project and the topic. I just want to spend all my time doing that, and I feel that's a good thing, because I put a lot of work into it, and it benefits everyone.

Similarly, participants described experiences of “task paralysis,” where starting and stopping disrupted routine and created emotional tension. For them, autonomy over time was not merely a personal preference but a regulatory strategy tied to motivation, focus, and emotional stability.

When collaboration processes constrained their ability to control pace or sequencing, teamwork became burdensome and “exhausting” (Nadia, I). As a result, unmet needs for autonomy in neuronormative team processes often led to reduced engagement, or explicit and quiet withdrawal from collaboration. This pattern echoes prior research showing that having a high level of autonomy over how, when, and where they work was crucial for autistic employees’ retention and sustainable work, as it enables them to manage energy, well-being, and productivity.^{76,79,80} In our data, similarly, participants described “giving up” on teamwork, “completely separating myself from the project” (Naomi, I), or contributing only the minimum when the team dismissed their preferred workflows or when they could not control their own pace—experiences often accompanied by dysregulation or strong feelings of irritation.

Anxiety: “I don’t want to hit other people while driving.”

Words such as “anxious,” “nervous,” “worried”, and “stressed” were among the most frequently used descriptors of teamwork experiences across interviews and focus groups, consistent with prior research on group work for disabled students.⁸¹ This is not surprising given that differences in social communication are one of the main autism diagnosis criteria⁸² and that clinical anxiety is one of the most common co-occurring conditions among autistic individuals.⁸³ While we cannot disentangle whether participants’ experiences of anxiety in team settings reflected autism-related communication differences, co-occurring clinical anxiety, or the

interaction between the two, we found that several features of collaborative work consistently triggered anxious responses that limited deeper engagement.

First, participants described anxiety arising from rapid transitions and constant exposure to new people and tasks—conditions extremely common in contemporary teamwork—that often produced fear and silence.^{21,84} As Samuel (FG2) explained, feeling “scared” with regard to interacting with new members in existing team settings led him to “not really want to say anything.” Taylor (FG2) similarly described how last-minute changes or uncertainty about her role caused “really horrible anxiety.” Nova, in her email interview, shared that unpredictability in how other team members might respond often led her to avoid interaction altogether to prevent unexpected outcomes from happening. Chloe (FG2) noted that frequent membership change in class team projects heightened anxiety because brief interactions could define her in lasting ways: “If I did one weird thing one day, that’s the only interaction we ever had.” In contrast, she felt safer in longer-term relationships because they provide “a whole other database of interactions” through which impressions could be updated.

Beyond uncertainty, participants reported high levels of anxiety about being misunderstood, particularly by presumed neurotypical teammates. Many attributed miscommunication to their own “social errors” or “messaging up” (Robert, I) and felt constantly anxious and vigilant while working with others. Ana (FG1) compared teamwork to driving: “You don’t want to hit other people, you don’t want to get too slow, because [otherwise] you are going to bother other people.” (Ana, FG1). This metaphor captures the heightened monitoring participants described, which involves carefully regulating speech, pace, tone, and behavior to avoid negative reactions.

Such anxiety appears rooted not only in individual disposition but also in deep, internalized stigma associated with occupying a non-normative and marginalized status.^{85,86} Although recent scholarship on the double empathy problem suggests that miscommunication and misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people are mutual and empirical work shows autistic individuals often communicate more effectively with other autistic individuals,^{54,55} participants tended to attribute miscommunication in teamwork to personal inadequacy. As Samuel (FG2) reflected, “I have ideas in my head, but I don’t necessarily know how to get them out in a way that everyone can understand in the group.” Others described consciously performing neurotypical communication styles “to make sure I’m being perceived as normal,” which was “super draining” (Sophie, I).

Due to heightened stress and anxiety over meeting normative expectations, autistic individuals often continued to participate in teamwork, but in more limited forms and to a lesser extent. Chloe (FG2) described how, in her recent teamwork, she did her own intensive work in a separate document and only shared a version of it at the last minute to avoid showing her joy, excitement, and passion: “I don’t want to pressure them or rush them...I’m trying to be more like doing it their way.” This vividly illustrates how autistic individuals’ anxiety became a barrier to active, authentic, and meaningful participation, limiting the integration of their expertise into collective team knowledge.

Attention: “I have to pay attention to so many different things at once.”

A third demand shaping autistic individuals’ teamwork experiences concerned attention. Participants described collaboration as requiring continuous, all-encompassing alertness, which involved monitoring not only task-related information but also social cues, changes in deadlines and workflows, and sensory inputs, similar to watching the traffic, road conditions, signals, and

navigation while driving a car. This sustained attentional regulation involved managing what one participant described as an “aggregate of many small things” and an “endless checklist” of what is allowed and what is not (Ana, FG1).

Attention management was particularly challenging due to a mismatch between autistic traits associated with attention and typical team environments, which are often saturated with various stimuli. Autistic people’s “stimulus overselectivity,” or the tendency to respond to a limited number of cues in the environment,^{87,88} along with their deep, narrow focus,²⁸ helps explain how navigating dynamic, multi-input team settings can become taxing. Participants frequently struggled to filter and sort multiple sensory inputs, such as lighting and sound from background noise and constant, overlapping conversations.⁷⁶ They also characterized many team tasks as ambiguous and insufficiently structured, which further intensified attentional demands. Taylor (FG2), for example, described how the lack of structure in tasks would cause her mind to “do a million things at once,” simultaneously attempting to generate solutions, anticipate next steps, and assess what others do.

In-person team meetings typically involved intensive real-time collaborations and informal social interaction, creating an experience that most participants found extremely overwhelming. Naomi (I), for example, explained that she can “crumble pretty easily” and “make mistakes and errors” when required to manage several demands at once, including performing her task and continuing conversations with teammates, while also “making it seem like I’m actually interested” in what others are sharing even when she is not. Her account illustrates how meetings can impose multidimensional demands that extend beyond task performance to include sensory regulation, divided attention, monitoring, and masking. Because

masking itself requires substantial effort and has been associated with exhaustion, these combined demands may further intensify the attentional burden of teamwork.^{20,89}

To cope, participants developed regulatory strategies, often at the expense of collaborative engagement. Raven (I), who had worked in a fast-food chain, described performing attentiveness for customers, putting on a “fake, very happy voice” and constant visible engagement, only to find that sustaining this performance left them unable to focus on the task itself. Others minimized interaction altogether. Phoenix, via an email interview, wrote:

In the workplace I very rarely speak if not spoken to, reserving all of my energy for work and often don't speak for four hours at a time. I am very efficient in how I streamline my work, keeping many windows open on my desktop at a time and cutting out time that could otherwise be wasted.

So, while these strategies helped regulate sensory and cognitive load, they did not increase participation in collaborative processes. Instead, the cumulative demands might deplete resources, functioning as a barrier to sustained engagement in team collaboration.

Discussion

This study advances understanding of why a seemingly positive, strengths-affirming discourse remains insufficient for achieving genuine neuroinclusion in collaborative work and realizing the potential of neurodiversity in teams. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 35 autistic adults and two serial focus groups with five additional autistic adults, we identified three barriers related to autonomy, anxiety, and attention that constrain autistic individuals' participation and recognition in neurodiverse teamwork. Our findings demonstrate that although autistic people often possess specialized expertise, organizational skills, deep focus, and strong motivation, these barriers may disrupt the pathways through which their strengths are surfaced and recognized. Based on our findings, we tentatively propose that the three barriers operate like a funnel (see Figure 2), incrementally filtering out autistic team members' potential expertise and

leaving relatively little knowledge ultimately integrated into the team's collective resources.

Our data suggest that these barriers are *structural*, rooted in the neuronormative architecture of modern team-based work within academic and organizational settings. First, the pursuit of autonomy over work processes and pacing is not merely an autistic trait; rather, it appears to emerge from a mismatch between autistic cognitive styles, which prioritize deep, narrow focus,²⁸ and typical collaborative environments that take fast-paced, multi-tasking interactions for granted. This finding echoes a recent study comparing autistic-only and mixed-neurotype groups in collaborative building-block tasks, which found more isolated activity in mixed groups and better coordination in autistic-only groups.⁵⁵ In other words, under the pressure of navigating neurotypical collaborative structures, autistic individuals may withdraw from interdependent work or be pushed toward the periphery, leaving their strengths unshared and therefore unrecognized.

Similarly, participants' pervasive anxiety in collaborative settings reflects struggles in navigating collaboration environments replete with uncertainty and adapting to neurotypical interactional norms. Although clinical anxiety and autism frequently co-occur, our data suggests that the anxiety experienced by autistic people in collaborative work may be structural in that stigmatizing environments may intensify it, whereas settings that value and accept autistic communication may mitigate it. Participants described feeling greater comfort and less need to mask in the community of similar others, consistent with the double empathy problem and recent supporting evidence that autistic individuals experience stronger rapport in autistic-only groups.^{52,54,55} However, because contemporary teamwork remains governed by neurotypical standards, autistic members may remain anxious and vigilant regarding uncertainty and potential negative judgment, which limits both the frequency and authenticity of their participation and

knowledge contributions in teams.

Finally, the attentional demands of teamwork function as a structural barrier, as the cognitive, social, and sensory demands of team-based collaboration conflict with autistic modes of allocating attention. Organizational scholarship highlights that rapid organizational and technological change has increased stimulus overload across multiple contexts, forcing individuals to constantly make decisions about “what” to focus on (cognitive overload) and “whom” to focus on (relational overload).⁹⁰ In addition, neurodevelopmental differences such as autism fundamentally alter the baseline of attentional strategies—the “how” to focus. The autistic attention allocation style is often characterized by monotropism: a deep, singular focus that is highly charged with affect (“either passionately interested or not interested at all”).^{28(p140)} While this enables the development of specialized expertise, it is likely penalized in typical collaborative environments that mandate a “polytropic” distribution of attention across fragmented tasks, various deadlines, social cues, and sensory inputs. Our data suggest that, without appropriate accommodations, navigating this overload depletes autistic individuals’ cognitive and emotional resources, often leading them to withdraw from teamwork or take restorative breaks. In turn, these interruptions can create another point at which teams lose access to their potential expertise.

This study also advances team cognition research by identifying structural barriers to participation, with direct implications for information processing and expertise recognition.⁹¹ While classic models emphasize information distribution structure and social psychological factors as mechanisms for pooling knowledge,^{5,46,92} our findings show that structural demands, disproportionately placed upon non-normative, stigmatized members, can constrain participation itself. These barriers appear to operate across the entire collaborative lifecycle: autonomy shapes

entry into collaboration, anxiety disrupts *active participation*, and attentional demands make it difficult to *sustain engagement* over time. Through this progressive filtering process, teams may never access some potentially valuable knowledge, may receive it only partially, or may fail to recognize and integrate it into their collective knowledge. Thus, expertise contribution and recognition are not solely cognitive processes but are structurally conditioned by cognitive, social, and sensory normativity, which can render the social construction of expertise³⁷ difficult and exhausting for autistic members. With these structural barriers present, neurodiversity may remain a latent team resource. We note that the ordering of the three barriers identified here do not necessarily unfold in a rigid sequence; rather it offers a conceptual sketch of how barriers salient at different points in participation can cumulatively narrow the team's cognitive resources.

Although this study focused on team contexts, its implications likely extend beyond the team itself. Groups and teams constitute the primary context through which members learn about and cultivate relationships, identify with their schools, organizations, and communities, and develop and demonstrate their skills and expertise.⁹³ When barriers to meaningful participation and recognition persist at this micro level, the consequences are likely to be broad, undermining their sense of belong, well-being, and commitment to their educational and professional goals. Such barriers may also limit institutions' ability to fully leverage the diverse knowledge and expertise their autistic members bring. Future research should examine whether neuroinclusive team environments not only improve team functioning but also shape more equitable long-term experiences for autistic individuals in both educational and workplace settings. In higher education, this means asking whether inclusive team design in courses affects not only academic performance but also sense of belonging and career readiness for autistic students. In

organizational settings, research can explore whether the absence of neuroinclusive team environments contributes to the well-documented patterns of underemployment, burnout, and attrition among autistic workers.^{16,25}

Practically, we propose moving beyond inclusive recruitment and access toward structural redesign of collaboration processes in both educational and organizational settings. Specifically, teams can support autonomy through task designs that allow intermittent coordination rather than always-on synchronous communication⁹⁴ as well as bursty collaborative cycles followed by independent work or breaks.⁹⁵ Flexible pacing and asynchronous collaboration tools can reduce forced synchronization that disrupts flow and momentum. To mitigate anxiety tied to structural stigma and neuronormative social expectations, team leaders and instructors can foster psychological safety^{96,97} while actively interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about “good communication” and explicitly normalizing diverse communication styles. To support attention management, teams should consider environmental changes (e.g., dimmable lights, designating quiet space and time, allowing hybrid participation options), increasing structure in task instructions and meetings (e.g., giving timelines and roadmaps in advance, providing step-by-step instructions), and diversifying communication modalities in team communication (e.g., written follow-ups, asynchronous coordination). Allowing multiple communication modalities can also broaden avenues for expressing expertise.

Our study has several limitations. First, it is limited by its sample, which primarily reflects the experiences of autistic individuals with lower support needs and does not capture those with higher support needs or co-occurring intellectual disabilities. The relatively young age profile of our sample also limits the scope of the findings. Younger participants may have had less extensive work experience, organizational authority, or opportunity to develop strategies for

navigating teamwork expectations, which may shape how they experienced the barriers identified in this study. We encourage future research to examine whether and how these barriers vary across age groups, tenure, status, and position. Furthermore, the focus groups included only five participants, as recruitment for multiple in-person sessions involving unfamiliar group interaction proved challenging. This small sample limits the breadth of perspectives represented; we discuss and reflect on recruitment and accessibility in greater detail in Supplemental Material S3.

Second, we acknowledge that the interview and focus group data represent different collaborative contexts. We ground claims concerning workplace collaboration primarily in the employment-based accounts of interview participants, whereas the focus group data illuminate autistic university students' experiences of course-based teamwork. Although similar social, relational, and interactional norms may influence participation and recognition in both settings, features unique to employment, such as compensation, hierarchy, and accountability for performance outcomes, may complicate teamwork in ways not fully captured in this study. We encourage future research to examine how the barriers affect teamwork and autistic members' experiences differently across educational and workplace settings.

Finally, we did not involve participants in data review or interpretation through member checking or another participatory research process. We made this methodological choice partly out of concern that recontacting participants after the study could impose additional emotional and time burdens.^{62,63} Nevertheless, a more collaborative process, particularly one that involved participants in meaning-making and analysis, might have contributed to diverse perspectives or helped identify gaps in our interpretations. Future research should prospectively plan such process, incorporate it into the study design and informed consent process, and perform it

through ongoing collaboration.⁹⁸

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that realizing the potential of neurodiverse teams requires more than validating autistic strengths; it requires addressing the structural conditions that shape team participation and expertise recognition. We show how barriers related to autonomy, anxiety, and attention can incrementally constrain autistic members' participation, filtering out potential expertise before teams can incorporate it into their collective knowledge. By framing these challenges as structural misalignments, this study highlights how neuronormative team architectures render autistic expertise latent and calls for a redesign of collaborative work that integrates diverse styles of information processing, communication, and self-regulation.

Institutional Review Board Approval Statement

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of California, Santa Barbara approved two protocols used in this study: Protocol 6-24-0267 (interviews) and Protocol 7-25-0604 (focus groups).

Author Contribution Statement

Young Ji Kim: Conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

Anusha Srinivas: Formal analysis, investigation, writing – review & editing. **Ella Cabigting:** Formal analysis, investigation, writing – review & editing. **Rebecca Foster:** Formal analysis, investigation, writing – review & editing. **Margot Plunkett:** Formal analysis, investigation, writing – review & editing.

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Online Supplemental Material

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Table 1
Participant Profiles

Data Source	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Diagnosis	Modality
Interview	Abby	33	Female	White	Self-identified	Zoom (audio)
	Alberto	21	Male	Hispanic White	Self-identified	In-person
	Allison	22	Female	Asian	Self-identified	In-person
	Ann	22	Female	White & Chinese	Medical	In-person
	Anton	20	Male	White & Eastern European	Self-identified	In-person
	Belinda	19	Female	Asian	Self-identified	Zoom (audio)
	Casey	20	Nonbinary	Hispanic & Middle Eastern	Self-identified	In-person
	Dina	23	Female	Asian	Self-identified	In-person
	Elena	18	Female	Central American	Medical	In-person
	Ellie	19	Trans woman	White & Eastern European	Self-identified	Zoom (audio)
	Emily	20	Trans woman	White	Medical	In-person
	Eric	21	Male	Asian & White	Self-identified	Zoom (video)
	Eunice	20	Female	Asian	Self-identified	Email
	Jacqueline	23	Female	White & Mexican	Self-identified	Zoom (video)
	James	26	Male	African American	Self-identified	Zoom (text)
	Jason	20	Male	Asian	Medical	Zoom (audio)
	Joel	21	Male	White	Medical	Email
	Kelly	20	Agender	White & Latine	Therapist suggested	In-person
	Kimberley	25	Female	Black	Medical	Zoom (audio)
	Lauren	20	Nonbinary	White	Therapist suggested	In-person

	Leila	31	Female	Asian	Therapist suggested	Email
	Mable	21	Nonbinary	White	Self-identified	Zoom (video)
	Maya	21	Female, genderfluid	White	Self-identified	Zoom (video)
	Melinda	26	Nonbinary	Hispanic	Self-identified	Email
	Nadia	23	Xenogender	White	Medical	Email
	Naomi	19	Female	White	Medical	Zoom (video)
	Nova	20	Nonbinary	Asian	Self-identified	Email
	Phoenix	18	Trans man	Asian & Hispanic	Therapist suggested	Email
	Quinn	19	Gender non- conforming	Asian	Self-identified	In-person
	Raven	19	Nonbinary	White	Self-identified	In-person
	Robert	22	Male	Asian	Medical	In-person
	Robyn	21	Nonbinary	Hispanic & White	Self-identified	In-person
	Sage	21	Genderqueer	Indigenous & White	Medical	In-person
	Sophie	20	Female	Asian	Self-identified	In-person
	Teo	20	Trans man	White & Latino	Self-identified	In-person
Focus Group	Ana	19	Female	Hispanic or Latino; White	Self-identified	In-person
	Chloe	21	Female	White	Medical	In-person
	Ian	21	Male	Hispanic or Latino; White	Self-identified	In-person
	Samuel	18	Male	Hispanic or Latino	Self-identified	In-person
	Taylor	37	Female	Black	Self-identified	In-person

Table 2*Overview of Interviews and Serial Focus Group Design*

	Interviews*	Focus Group Round 1	Focus Group Round 2
Participants	35 autistic adults with work experience	5 autistic adults currently participating in a team-based project	The same five participants returned two weeks later (100% retention)
Data Collection Format	In-person, Zoom (video, audio-only, text chat), or email	In-person in a conference room; snacks, drinks, and fidgets provided	Same setting as Round 1
Primary Focus	• Autistic identity and disclosure • Past and current work experience • Accommodation and support	• Building rapport • Autistic identity • Reflecting on past team experiences	• Current team experiences • Imagining neuroinclusive teamwork
Illustrative Questions	• When and how did you learn that you are autistic? • Can you describe your job search process? • Thinking about your “newcomer” stage, what aspects at your workplace seemed most unclear or uncertain to you? What did you do to resolve uncertainty? • What accommodations or supports would have helped you adapt to your workplace?	• Have you disclosed your autistic identity to your teammates when working on a team project? • (After listing positive and negative team experiences from the past on a sheet of paper) what made the positive team experience feel good for you? What made negative teams difficult or frustrating? Do you notice any patterns?	• (After completing the team journey mapping activity), can you walk us through your team’s journey? Please share the key events or turning points, the feelings you had at those times, and what was happening in your team during those moments. • Imagine your ideal team. What would ideal teamwork feel like and look like for you?

		• Can you complete this sentence: “working with teams feels like _____” (use metaphor)	• What kinds of support would make teamwork easier and more effective for you?
Contribution to Current Analysis	Provided rich descriptions of autistic individuals’ broader workplace experiences and initial insights into challenges of neurodiverse teamwork from autistic perspectives	Provided detailed accounts of autistic individuals’ past teamwork experiences, helping identify recurrent patterns and themes through participants’ reflection across multiple teams	Provided participants’ illustrations of the dynamics of their current team experiences, enabling us to refine our emerging interpretations of structural barriers to teamwork. Collective brainstorming on ideal teamwork and desired supports also helped illuminate the conditions that currently disrupt autistic people’s participation and expertise recognition in team contexts.

*Note: The interview data are part of a larger project on autistic workers’ organizational socialization.

Figure 1

An Example of Team Journey Mapping Activities from Focus Groups

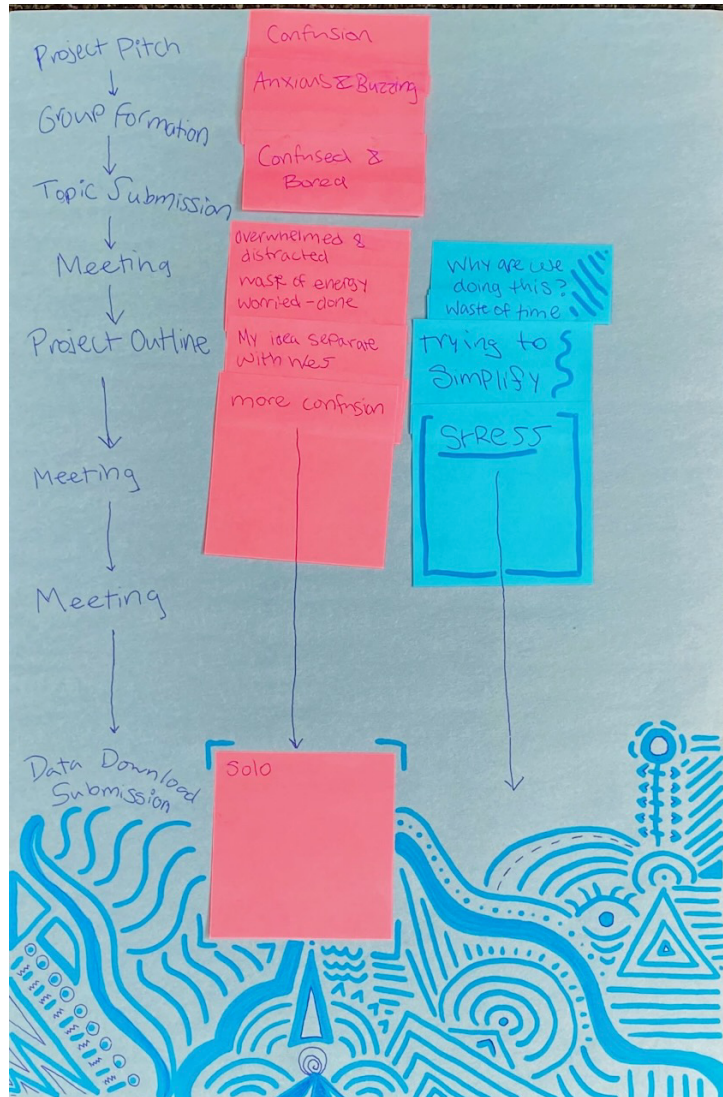


Figure 2

A Model of Structural Barriers to Participation and Expertise Recognition in Neurodiverse Teams

