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Authors

Laciny, Alice
Carls-Diamante, Sidney
Silani, Giorgia

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Neurodiversity and anthropomorphism in social insect research

Alice Laciny
Konrad Lorenz Institute, Klosterneuburg, Austria

Sidney Carls-Diamante
University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

Giorgia Silani
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Abstract

When researching social insects, interpretations drawing parallels between behaviours and social systems of humans and animals are particularly prevalent. While these comparisons have value for illustrative purposes, failing to recognize them as metaphors can result in erroneous interpretations of data. Previous studies have found this anthropomorphic bias to be connected to extraversion and sociability. Autistic individuals are overrepresented in the life sciences, may be less prone to cognitive bias, yet still face significant stigma in the workplace. In this interdisciplinary study, we therefore surveyed an international sample of social insect scientists to explore the impact of autistic traits on their research. We herein present the first results of this study, and discuss them from the standpoints of cognitive science, philosophy of psychiatry, and entomology. We thereby hope to elucidate the role of neurodiversity and atypical modes of perception in science, and contribute to creating a more inclusive academic landscape.

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