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Neurodiversity and inclusive social value management practices

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Abstract

The neurodiversity movement takes a societal view of individual differences by suggesting that people should be respected and not necessarily medically treated based on personal attributes. This commentary article discusses how human differences in intellectual capacities should be considered as another form of diversity with the requirement for medical intervention needing to be considered in terms of overall social change. As a significant portion of the overall workforce could be considered as people with some form of neurological disability this article analyses how co-creation processes occur meaning neurodiverse individuals should be accepted in society regardless of their differences. This article contributes to societal discussions around managing diversity as in society the socio-demographic categories such as age and gender are well established, but newer categories such as neurodiversity are required.

Keywords: Neurodiversity; inclusive management; diversity management; social value; management practices

Introduction

In management discourse, it has become important to consider issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ali, Grabarski, & Baker, 2024a). These terms are commonly used to refer to a range of factors that focus on inclusiveness, which is increasingly being prioritised by managers. This means by convention the order of the words is diversity, equity, then inclusion, but this order does not necessarily refer to their level of importance (Ciuk, Śliwa, & Harzing, 2023). Organisations are regularly making statements about diversity to position themselves in the marketplace. This enables organisations to highlight their relevance in society based on social norms. Diversity refers to human differences based on different factors such as age, culture, ethnicity, gender, political beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, and social class (Roberson, Avery, & Leigh, 2024). Inclusion refers to recognising all people regardless of their personal beliefs and/or characteristics. It recognises that all people have an inherent worth that should be recognised by society. Equity is a concept that refers to fair treatment of others. This means being impartial in terms of perceived stereotypes.

Organisations can adopt different diversity perspectives such as integration-and-learning, access-and-legitimacy, and discrimination-and-fairness (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Integration and learning mean organisations acknowledge that by integrating diverse points of view they can increase their learning effectiveness. This means people from diverse backgrounds can bring new insights and knowledge (Sieweke, Bostandzic, & Smolinski, 2023). Access-and-legitimacy refers to how diversity can lead to better standing of an organisation in the community. This means the organisation is viewed as being more trustworthy and credible due to its diversity policies. Discrimination-and-fairness refers to how an organisation by eliminating discrimination can be perceived as being more

justice based. Managers can then make decisions because of equity reasons and acknowledges that it needs to eliminate biased decision-making.

More organisations are employing neurotypical workers due to the benefits of diversity in a workplace setting. Neurotypical individuals are a minority in society but still an important component. Doyle (2020: 109) defines a neurotypical person as 'someone whose cognitive scores fall within one or two standard deviations of each other, forming a relatively "flat" profile, be those scores average, above or below'. Less research has focused on neurodiversity compared to other minority groups that are based on gender, sexual, or sociodemographic factors. Neuratypical individuals are defined as 'individuals whose neurological functioning is at the tail ends of the distribution of naturally occurring variation' (LeFevre-Levy, Melson-Silimon, Harmata, Hulett, & Carter, 2023: 1).

The word neurodiversity emerged from thinking about the need to conserve all species regardless of their differences (Houdek, 2022). This means a high level of difference between people is needed for society and workplaces to function properly. Society benefits from recognising differences as desirable rather than as limitations. Previously, weaknesses were the focus of much research that led to an emphasis on normal cognitive functions of individuals. Recently, normality is not the focus as there is a niche area on individualistic specific advantages. It is important to ask individuals what term they prefer to be called regarding the use of neurodiversity due to having a first-person experience of neurodiversity giving the term more meaning.

The umbrella term neurodiversity is a way to incorporate a wide range of meanings (Walkowiak, 2021). There has been a grass roots movement in using the term neurodiversity to include a range of conditions. Most diagnoses of neurodiversity refer to attention deficit disorder, autism, and dyslexia although other conditions can be included (Doyle & McDowall, 2021). The neurodiversity term promotes an appreciation of differences in order to decrease discrimination and stereotypes, which means breaking down the structures of exclusion that may limit the potential of neurodiverse people (Wen, van Rensburg, O'Neill, & Attwood, 2024). More people are becoming familiar with the talents and intellectual intelligence of neurodiverse people (Walkowiak, 2024). This enables better social support mechanisms to be used to support neurodiverse people.

This article is structured as follows. First, the literature about diversity, equity, and inclusion is discussed that leads into a focus on neurodiversity and neurodevelopmental conditions. Next, the role of inclusive leadership and social intelligence in managing neurodiversity in the workplace is addressed. This helps to build an understanding about the role of social value co-creation in fostering neurodiverse individuals in organisations.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is defined as 'the specific programmes, policies, and practices that organizations have developed and implemented to manage a diverse workforce effectively and to promote organisational equality' (Dennissen, Benschop, & van Den Brink, 2020: 220). Diversity practices are linked to sustainability policies particularly with regards to environmental, social, and governance goals. Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are relevant to everyday life, and the literature on diversity has universal relevance to most areas of management studies. Diversity is a term that can be applied to a variety of contexts and is part of the English language lexicon (Waldman & Sparr, 2023). It originated from discussions on ethnicity and civil rights regarding opportunities. This means whilst historically it has been relevant for a long time, in recent history it has gained prominence due to the civil rights movement that particularly focused on racial identities. This corresponded with more attention being placed on gender equity and resulting economic opportunities. Affirmative action guidelines have made the topic important in advancing equal societal rights. Related to diversity is more advocacy for multiculturalism in society that values different cultures and respecting different cultural identities.

The main diversity facets are variety, separation, and disparity (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Variety diversity refers to category differences such as ethnicity and religion. Separation diversity means that

there are differences with regards to attitudes such as religious beliefs and political ideologies. This means people have different values based on their prejudices. Disparity diversity refers to differences in resources that can include financial and non-financial means (Umeh, Cornelius, & Wallace, 2023). Financial resources can include a person's monetary ability to pay that links with a person's status in society. Non-financial resources refer to geographic position or access to services.

Organisations need to care about diversity because it affects their competitiveness and performance. The moral reason for diversity is based on it being the right thing to do. This means organisations need to invest in diversity in order to advance society (Greene & Kirton, 2024). A more inclusive workforce fosters innovative thinking that facilitates better problem-solving abilities. This improves engagement with stakeholders and is an integrative way organisations can improve their social responsibility initiatives. Due to historical factors, it can be a challenge to increase diversity rates (Dwivedi & Paolella, 2024). Ethnic segregation remains a concern within organisations due to the predominance of certain ethnic groups in industries. There can be an underrepresentation of ethnic groups based on employment status. Efforts to address diversity initiatives can be a challenge due to unsupportive work environments. Ethnic stereotypes regarding work allocation and biased recruitment practices can affect diversity initiatives.

Diversity initiatives are normally voluntary but can be mandated by law. They are tied to an organisations sense of public responsibility and are part of its management functions. The concept of diversity constantly changes based on contextual factors (Ferrary and Déo, 2023). Workplace equality laws such as employment equity followed the expansion of civil rights. The E in diversity, equity, and inclusion normally refers to equity but can be called equality in terms of giving everyone equal rights. Equity in a formal sense means inclusion but can refer to the redistribution of resources. Organisations are implementing targeted inclusion programmes that encourage neurodiverse individuals to apply.

Neurodiversity

Diversity plays a leading role in the development of the neurodiversity field due to differences being emphasised as a unique characteristic in individuals (Hennekam & Follmer, 2024). The term neurodiversity has grown out of the existing literature and was not developed for a specific usage (van Rijswijk, Curşeu, & van Oortmerssen, 2024). Rather it was a way to consider opposing or alternative viewpoints regarding diversity. Due to more interest generally on diversity initiatives, it is natural that the word would be attached to other studies. The ideas associated with neurodiversity are linked to other minority groups that are diverse. The 'neuro' addition to the word emphasises intellectual or human brain functions. An important discovery from the adding of neuro to the diversity term is that human thinking capabilities can differ amongst individuals (Botha et al., 2024). This neurodiversity is evident in how people communicate in a verbal and nonverbal way. Thus, the diversity is evident in how new ideas are advanced in society. This enables different forms of artistry and technological development to emerge.

Some words related to neurodiversity are legacy concepts. A substantial proportion of the overall population is neurodiverse. The way neurodiversity is measured may change in the near future. Neurodiversity is both a burden and advantage depending on the situation. Some view it as a superpower, but this may be unrealistic and based on stereotypes of a few neurodiverse individuals. In addition, neurological illnesses can develop due to a health condition. The terms neurodiversity, neurodivergent, and neurotypical are used interchangeably in the literature (Ali, Grabarski, & Baker, 2024b). Only recently have these terms been used to describe individuals with a different kind of neurological functioning to the majority of the population. Previously, the wording intellectual disability was used to describe people with a neurological disorder. This meant the focus was on their developmental disability and the wording has a negative connotation. By highlighting the diversity, it helps to bring a more positive connotation to the term. Neurodiverse people have different kinds of skills

that can add value to an organisation. The recognition of them as having distinct abilities can make it easier for them to integrate into the workplace.

The term neurodiversity emerged in the late 1990s as more research focused on autism spectrum rights. Blume's (1998) seminal writing on neurodiversity acknowledges the term in the context of disabilities. This resulted in an idea that disability can be a result of neurological functioning but describing it as a disability might be false as the condition can lead to an individual having distinct advantages compared to others. Thus, neurodiversity is a natural part of human development. People who are neurodiverse are considered outside the norm of other people. Instead of thinking about neurological differences, it can be a strength in having certain abilities. Most viewpoints of neurodiversity have a negative connotation without understanding the holistic experience. Each neurodiverse person will have their own strengths and weaknesses. This means the intensity of neurodiversity will differ in people.

In the early 2000s, there was an emphasis on learning difficulties in people that has been replaced with the term neurodiversity. An individual's ability to learn in social situations affects their role in society. This meant under the learning difficulties paradigm, emotional awareness of others was paramount. Learning disabilities can be acquired at birth or change during a person's life. This means mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression may affect learning. Mental health conditions can be transient in response to the environment. Neurodiversity as a concept has many conflicting definitions that make it hard to understand. Overlapping symptomatology means that there are confusing definitions about its practical meaning.

Neurodevelopmental conditions

Neurodevelopmental conditions have existed in individuals for a long time and are caused by a range of factors. The term 'atypical' can be defined in different ways based on what 'typical' means in society. Being considered normal in society is open for interpretation. It is based on experiences and thinking around normality. The place and time in which normalcy is defined needs to be considered. Individuals have diverse but often complementary skillsets. This enables survival advantages but recognises individuality. Some people are generalists being able to do a range of tasks whilst others are specialists. Being neurodiverse is a way for a group of people to gain acceptance and self-advocate. Neurodivergent people have different types of cognitive abilities. This means their neurological presentation can differ to other people.

Neurodiversity is not a simple term as it has multiple meanings. The field has developed based on a sociological view of the autistic community. Neurodivergent individuals can include people with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder occurs when a person experiences persistent inattentiveness or hyperactivity and has difficulty concentrating on one task. The symptoms mean the person cannot function in the same way compared to others. This may mean they have impulsive behaviours without thinking about the consequences. It can also result in being more creative compared to others. Dyscalculia is defined as 'difficulty in conceptualizing numerosity which affects maths but also estimation of size, speed and magnitude' (Doyle, 2024: 17). People who are diagnosed with dyscalculaia have difficulties in comprehending the difference between numbers or patterns. Autism involves deficits in communication and interaction behaviours. This makes it difficult for diagnosed individuals to interact in a normal way with others. The stereotype of autistic individuals is that it is a disabling condition. However, there are different levels of autism in people that affect their ability to function properly in society This means low functioning autistic individuals may have specific preferences but can still be good members of society. High functioning autistic individuals may have more needs that limit their ability to interact with others. Thus, there are polarised perspectives about autism that can make it a discriminatory word to use. In addition, some autistic individuals have superpowers such as numerical abilities that are useful. Therefore, autistic individuals should be treated according to their personality and on an individualistic basis. This will enable their rights to be asserted and for their voices to be heard.

Much of the groundwork for neurodiversity thinking is from existing studies but has been extended to suit contemporary circumstances. The field is flourishing as it is interdisciplinary in nature. Pioneering activists have raised interest in the field to fuel its further development. Stereotypes around marginalised groups are well established in society. This means marginalised groups tend to be treated less favourably than other groups. By virtue of their characteristics marginalised groups may have difficulty in accessing services. Societal power imbalances further exacerbate the discrimination felt by minorities. This is due to social categorisation of individuals based on social identities occurring in society. Members of these groups are likely to share similar attributes. This helps others support each other and by extension increase their strength. By including others then the connection can foster engagement.

Privilege is a sense of entitlement that a person feels in society. It is linked to certain advantages being available to them in terms of opportunities. Dominant groups can seek to not change the existing status quo. Identity biases can be embedded in conceptualisations of privilege. Thus, historically developed norms further increase disparate treatment. More effort is required in order to garner support for minority groups. This can include activism and consequent change. To disrupt societal inequalities can be difficult. Societal must move beyond labelling others as minority groups. This means commitment to change and continuous evolution of ideas. Inequalities can be perpetuated based on the response of others. An essential aspect of work organisations is integration of neurodiverse people.

Diversity management and neurodiversity

The theorising of neurodiversity has significantly evolved over the past decade as more research funding and attention has been devoted to this area. The narrative regarding the origins of neurodiversity is that diversity is good. The term has been collectively used by a range of people participate in the autism community to convey more appropriate wording of people who have different skillsets. It is useful to understand the past in order to progress future research. This can strengthen the field by emphasising historical understandings but acknowledging the concepts complexity.

Diversity management ideas are highly influential on other areas of management practice including strategy and innovation. Kandola and Fullerton (1998: 7) state 'diversity consists of visible and non-visible differences which will include factors such as sex, age, background, race, disability, personality and workstyle'. The idea for managing diversity is that it will create a better environment that values everyone regardless of personal factors. This means business goals can be met by focusing on talents of all individuals. Arredondo (1996: 17) defines diversity management as 'a strategic organizational approach to workforce diversity development, organisational culture change, and empowerment of the workforce'. Diversity management programmes are a way to address disparities amongst employees in an organisation. They have a range of objectives namely to increase representation rates of different socio-demographic groups such as ethnic minorities and women. More broader goals include the improve career prospects and job advancement. The meaning of diversity management has been queried in response to business practices. This is due to the word diversity meaning different things depending on the context. In current management, practices diversity management is a way to enhance productivity by emphasising the benefits of having a diverse workforce.

Some people critique the diversity management approaches due to it focusing on differences rather than similarities. This means diversity management is viewed by some as having negative rather than positive effects. By categorising people into specific groups such as males or females it can create divisions in society rather than creating joint benefits. This means it is universally acknowledged that there are differences between people for a range of reasons, but these differences do not need to be accentuated.

Diversity management tries to reflect how people have unique abilities that if organised in the right way can produce good results. This means viewing differences in a positive way in terms of impacting organisational performance through creative change. Diversity is a fact that is identifiable in human practices. It sets people apart from others but can be desirable in producing different thought

processes. Diverse sections of society including underrepresented groups have begun to receive more attention in the management literature. Despite this growth, prejudices still exist in terms of including diversity in management practices.

Conversations about how neurodiverse people are increasing are still difficult for many organisations to embrace diversity. Work should correspond to an individual's abilities that include their skills and knowledge. Beyond communication differences, neurodiverse people are often skilled in other areas. This includes being intelligent in specific areas including perceptual and numerical areas. Neurodiverse people can add value to organisations by being authentic, honest, and reliable. It is important that organisations fulfill their diversity goals by recognising the learning challenges amongst some neurodiverse people but acknowledging their innovation and resilience. This will enable neurodiverse people to flourish at work by being respected.

Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leadership involves trying to incorporate diversity in decision-making processes (Nakamura & Milner, 2023). Diversity has many benefits such as differing perspectives but can be hard to manage due to cultural biases and interpersonal conflict limiting its usages. To make diverse individuals feel part of an organisation, their views should be incorporated into decision-making processes. This will balance the need for a sense of belongingness whilst acknowledging the uniqueness of individuals. To reap the benefits of diversity, leaders should take an inclusive point of view in order to be more effective (Russen & Dawson, 2023).

Inclusive leadership occurs when leaders appreciate the uniqueness of follower's differences, which enables people to collaborate regardless of their status differences (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). This fosters high quality and good relationships between a leader and their followers. Inclusive leadership can be considered as having three main components: openness, availability, and accessibility (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). Openness refers to the amount of information that is shared by a leader. This can include sensitive information that could be considered as potentially confidential. By being open with the content and type of information disseminated, it can help others feel more comfortable (Shakil, Memon, & Ting, 2023). Although potentially giving too much information can make it confusing for others. Openness is also considered a form of transparency in terms of making sure others have access to information. This is important in making considered and timely decisions. Availability means that leaders have time to discuss issues with others. This means they are willing to foster conversations regarding important issues. Accessibility refers to leaders making it easy for others to discuss issues. This can include direct communication mechanisms instead of going through other people. It is pertinent that followers feel comfortable in talking to a superior. This can include leaders and followers having mutual respect towards each other.

Inclusive leaders focus on facilitating participation by recognising the need for others to have their say and are employee centred but know followers may want to demonstrate their individuality (Yasin, Jan, Huseynova, & Atif, 2023). This means inclusive leaders provide opportunities for others to talk. Inclusive leaders make followers feel they are treated equally, which allows them to voice opinions. This empowers followers and increases their overall wellbeing. Inclusive leadership is an approach and way of leading people. Not everyone does inclusive leadership in the same way so there can be differences in terms of how it is conducted. To be considered as an inclusive leader it should be evident over time that a person is actively seeking ways to involve others. This can be through their leadership style that engages with others and considers their suggestions. Inclusive leadership can be taught through education programmes.

Social intelligence

The field of intelligence is constantly changing as new ways of defining the concept emerge in the literature. Generally, intelligence refers to some kind of mental ability that can be measured in

different ways (Emmerling & Boyatzis, 2012). The idea of intelligence means that a person has the capacity to analyse information and decipher its meaning. This means it emphasises problem solving and complexity. An intelligent person will be able to process information in order to accord its meaning. This can involve computational mechanisms that are based on the context.

Social intelligence involves knowledge about others that depend on the context, which means emphasising interpersonal communication that can take verbal and nonverbal formats (Stone & Woodcock, 2013). Interpersonal intelligence involves analysing other people's sentiments such as their mood and behaviour. It is a way to understand a person's mental state in terms of their emotional feelings. This contrasts to intrapersonal intelligence that involves accessing your own feelings in order to help manage contextual behaviour (Williams, 2008). This can be done by getting a sense of what feels right for your given the situation. Social intelligence helps a person act in a wise and reasonable way. It helps a person fulfill their goals in society. Most view it as being intelligence in relationships but can also mean reading a situation in the right way. Social intelligence involves an individual's ability to understand other people in a social situation. It means that a person can act wisely based on analysing social cues.

Emotional intelligence is a newer form of intelligence in the literature due to its emphasis on mood regulation. This means previously it was considered a subcomponent of other forms of intelligence such as social intelligence. The idea of emotional intelligence is that it involves understanding one's own and others emotional state. This means perceiving other's emotions and then adapting to suit the environment. It is a set of skills that help a person succeed in society. This means focusing on how to express emotions and to react with emotions. This can be difficult to do due to the need to use feelings to plan actions.

Social value co-creation

Social value is a way to evaluate the results of a project or interaction by focusing on the societal gains. This means the activities done are listed in terms of social outputs. This helps to determine the long-term effects of a programme and the real changes. In general, social value refers to the non-financial outcomes of an intervention but can include financial outcomes. Sometimes social value is viewed as a soft outcome as it is difficult to measure whereas hard outcomes relate to more defined specific quantifiable outcomes.

Providing a cost–benefit analysis is a technique used to measure social value. This involves analysing the amount of money involved in a project then assessing the outcomes. By doing so, it provides a way to justify the expenditure on a project and puts a monetary value on the benefits. If the benefits exceed the costs, then the project is deemed to have social value. Although it can be difficult to measure outcomes as they may be non-financial. This means comparison periods such as before and after can be used to compare the conditions.

The costs of a project normally involve time and resources spent that can be compared to other projects. Time is hard to ascertain depending on how it is measured. Costs can include a range of factors such as wages and marketing. The benefits of a project can have specific goals such as a reduction in pollution or an increase in awareness. The benefits can be difficult to ascertain in a monetary way as they can include educational aims.

Value co-creation refers to entities coming together to co-produce value. Successful forms of value co-creation means joining production that results in reinventing the concept of value. Co-production is a way entities can work together to learn better. This process should result in more value being created compared to a traditional process. Sometimes this is done via profit generating systems that include the involvement of customers. By accessing the knowledge of customers, a more iterative way of working develops. This means the process is dynamic and fluid based on mutual interactions. By involving others in this process, more information can be obtained and discussed. This then leads to joint value creation with value co-produced by multiple entities.

Co-production involves the emotional engagement of people through joint activities. Workplaces are increasingly active players in the coproduction process rather than passive audiences. This is due to value emerging from personal experiences and interactions. Knowledge can include propositional forms that incorporate generalised information and prescriptive forms based on techniques (Mokyr, 2002). The process of value co-creation involves the use of knowledge in terms of processes and experiences. More employees are wanting to shape the experiences they have with organisations. This means they are providing input that provides more personalised experiences that go beyond a traditional dyad arrangement. The basis of unique co-creation is acknowledging the engagement of individuals in the process. This means utilising networks to facilitate the flow of information. This knowledge created can improve collaboration and result in value created. Collaboration can be done in a formal or informal way by sharing information that results in innovation.

Conclusion

Neurodiversity is a relatively recent topic in diversity management studies but has important practical implications. For this reason, this commentary article has discussed ways to manage neurodiverse individuals by emphasising their positive contributions to workplaces. This helps to build more analytical frameworks around inclusive management practices that incorporate social value. Due to more organisations wanting to harness the capabilities of their workforce, it is useful to have a neurodiverse perspective particularly around work/life balance. This will facilitate co-creation between individuals based on their strengths and contributions to management.

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