



Celebrating neuro-diversity in Irish workplace, enabling
support practices and disabling barriers

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Abstract

People with Autism face more challenges than an average person in workplace due to challenges they experience with social interaction and sensory sensitivity. In neuro-typical dominated workplace, societal mis-conceptions on the nature of the challenges they experience and on top of it, social and physical environment of the workplace that are not built for them are the main employment barriers. Neuro-diversity is not only viewed as a concept to recognize neurological differences as natural human variations, but also as a social movement that advocates to celebrate autistic forms of perceiving and striving in the world. Many argued with empirical evidences that there is inherent strength that lies in Neuro-diversity. There is a research deficit to explore disabling employment barriers and enabling vocational support practices that are underpinned by the concept of neuro-diversity for high functioning autistic adults in Irish society. The aim of the research is to fill this gap. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among vocational rehabilitation support staffs and neuro-typical employees who were closely working with high functioning autistic employees. IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) was applied to perform data collection and analysis.

There are two main findings emerged that were not found in Irish Autism literature. One is, it has been empirically proven the importance of acknowledging the individualistic nature of neuro-diversity. Fully embracing it has significantly helped vocational support professionals in Ireland to devise individually-tailored support that unleashed autistic individual's strengths and abilities in workplace. This finding supports the argument that the causes of developing mental health problems among autistic adults are complex and multifaceted. Lacking right support is one of the prevailing reasons for social exclusion. This finding challenges the existing finding that social skill deficits is the main reason in developing mental health issues for autistic population.

In conclusion, this study advocated that for building disability inclusion solidarity, celebrating neuro-diversity in workplace where a socially valued autism identity can be cultivated, is vital to win hearts and minds of the public from the bottom-up grassroots level.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its scientific and social evolution

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental condition which is present from birth. It is an "invisible" condition defined as "the name for a range of similar conditions, including Asperger syndrome, that affect a person's social interaction, communication, interests and behaviour" (National Health Service [NHS], 2018). And "changes the way people communicate and experience the world around them" (Autistica, 2017). Autistic people tend to have strong inclination in doing repetitive tasks and increased anxiety when exposed to sensory-stimulating physical environment. They also tend to have difficulties in understanding abstract concepts (Autism Spectrum Information Advice & Meeting Point [ASIAM], 2018). "High-functioning autism" and "low-functioning autism" are popular and controversial terms used to distinguish people with autism who have an IQ in the normal range (or above) from the rest of them with the condition (Baron-Cohen, 2002). It cannot be assumed that every autistic person has an intellectual disability. An autistic person may have separate diagnosis of an intellectual disability (Autism Spectrum Information Advice & Meeting Point [ASIAM], 2018). People with Asperger's Syndrome on the high functioning end of the spectrum, generally do not have speech and learning difficulties. They often tend to have very intense special interests (Autism Spectrum Information Advice & Meeting Point [ASIAM], 2018).

The prevalence of autism has been on the rise (Chen, 2015). In America about 1 in 68 children has been diagnosed with ASDs in 2017 (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). In Ireland in 2015 14,000 students have an autism diagnosis – that was one

in every 65 students or 1.5% of the school population ([NCSE], 2015). Over the past 40 years the scientific view on the cause of autism shifted from psychological factor incurred illness to biologically-based studies of autism, which in turn shifted the social perception of autism from being a mental illness to a genetically determined condition exhibiting certain social characteristics (Martin, 2012, p.162). With these shifts came the birth and rise of neurodiversity and self-advocacy movement.

1.2 Significance for building an inclusive, neuro-diverse workspace

In 2010, in Ireland employment rate among people with disabilities was at 33%, the lowest within other OECD countries. Furthermore, more than one in three of them lived in poverty: 37% compared to an OECD average of 22% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). According to quantitative analysis of the Irish National Disability Survey of 2006 (Watson, Banks and Lyons, 2015) nearly half (47 per cent) of those not in employment would be interested in entering employment if the circumstances were right. Only 16% of adults with ASD were found to be in full time employment in UK (The National Autistic Society, 2016). There are no official statistical data available in Ireland. It is estimated the statistics is even lower. Bertilsdotter, O'Dell and Brownlow (2014) argued that participating in workforce for building an active citizenship identity, is the primary enabling element of constructing a socially valued autistic adulthood, therefore there is a need for building an inclusive and neuro-diverse workspace. According to Cassidy et al. (2014) the risk of suicidal ideation for adults with ASD is much higher than general population In England. It was due to depression caused by social exclusion, discrimination and labour market exclusion. According to National Survey of Public Attitudes to Disability (National Disability Authority [NDA], 2017), only 18% of respondents believed that people with disabilities receive equal opportunities in terms of employment.

1.3 Prevalent disability models and debate on its application to disability research

Rioux (1997) explored four prevalent approaches to social construction of disability that shape disability policy development and drive research agenda formulation. The bio-medical approach emphasizes the individual's bio-medical abnormal conditions as the cause of the disability. The proponents of this approach believe medical abnormal conditions is the inherent human deficits which must be corrected and cured in order for the individual to live a normal and productive life. The functional-approach supporters hold the same view that the medical abnormal conditions are human "deficits", however, they believe through individual's functional capacity enablement and maximization of intervention, such as, rehabilitation program, occupational therapy and behaviour modification via reinforcement techniques, the individuals can function as independently as possible and resemble the lives of 'normal' people. Its focus is on the requirement of adapting individuals to a socially normalized and accepted environment through functional skills training.

On the contrary to the two individual-pathology based approaches, environmental approach supporters believe individuals are only disabled by the social environments in which structural and systemic barriers are prevailing. The goal of research driven by this approach is to adapt environments to barrier-free ones through adaptations of social policies, work policies and physical settings. The rights-outcome approach emphasizes on the role that wider society plays in marginalizing people with disability. The advocates of this approach believe that reducing civic inequalities through promoting economic, social and cultural human rights, is the solution to the marginalization.

Rioux (1997) raised the critical argument with the supporting empirical evidence that the disability research community were quite often adopting reductionist view by ignoring the relative nature of disability social construction found in different approaches. As the

consequence, the findings from research questions formulated with different approach alone did not contribute in improving the quality lives of people with disabilities.

1.4 Neuro-diversity movement and its impact

According to Jaarsma and Welin (2012), Judy Singer, a sociologist with Asperger's conditions, gave birth to the term 'neuro-diversity'. Neuro-diversity claim has two implications. One is to regard autism as a natural variant within the human species. The natural variations lie in the differences between how neuro-diverse (ND) people and neuro-typical (NT) people's brains are wired and function. Put simply, neuro-diverse people have different way of thinking, interacting with, and perceiving the world surrounding them. The other aspect of the claim has political and moral implication to it. Since 1990s an autistic high-functioning on-line group have led the political movement of neuro-diversity. They have been struggling against social discrimination and fighting for social inclusion and equalities.

A few of neurologists and social researchers have given empirical accounts to support and advocate for neuro-diversity movement. Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) empirically demonstrated that individuals with Asperger's condition possess more occupational strengths in the areas, such as attention to detail, logical reasoning, focus, visual skills and creative solutions, than neuro-typical people. Mottron, a neuroscience research lab director who has hired 5 high functioning autistic individuals in his lab, in his paper (2011) argued that working with outstanding autistic scientists has completely changed his perception on how he views autistic condition. He believes that if autistic people were given opportunity, right support and right environment they can excel in many spheres including science. He also supported adopting neuro-diversity approach to view autism and believed that autism is not a disease that needs to be cured. This finding is consistent with the empirical finding

that Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) derived. More importantly, he advocated that society on the whole needs to stop using stigmatizing deficit-centred language to label them as disabled.

As what have been reviewed, even though there are some empirical research conducted for supporting neuro-diversity movement and strength-focused philosophy for integrating individuals with Asperger's into mainstream vocational spheres, there is a crucial and substantial need in conducting rigorous research to explore how people and support organizations in Ireland are perceiving and turning neuro-diversity into practice for transforming neuro-typical dominated workplace into neuro-diverse workplaces. This research will fill this research deficit gap and add much-needed qualitative findings in this area.

1.5 Employment barriers and rationales of the research

According to the empirical findings, four prevailing interdependent barriers that significantly perpetuate labour market exclusion are discussed as follows. Firstly, Lake, Perry and Lunsby (2014) stressed that high functioning autistic adults without intellectual disability are exposed to the increasingly higher risk of developing mental health issues. They argued that social skills deficits for this population is the main cause for developing depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety. Mainstreaming traditional mental health service are failing to meet the real need of this forgotten and under-cared population. In Ireland high prevalence of mental health issues among high functioning autistic adults was highlighted in an NDA report (2017).

The second significant barrier is that neuro-typical employers and co-workers lack understanding on the nature of the challenges that high functioning autistic employees are facing in neuro-typical dominated workplace. The recurring theme that researchers discovered in the interviews with people with Asperger's was that employers don't expect

them to have issues at work, which is identified as the source of the struggles they experienced in workplace (Griffith et al., 2012). This finding was consistent with the finding drawn from Australian national survey taken by 130 adults with Asperger's (Baldwin, Costley and Warren, 2014). The stigma and stress resulted in the lack of understanding of "invisible" condition in workplace have made people decide not to disclose their condition (Werth, 2011). A cross-sectional study has suggested that autism disclosure is the major factor that contributed in gaining employment (Ohl et al., 2017).

The third significant barrier is people have struggles in workplace in order to cope with neuro-typical dominated social and physical environment. The main problems include sensory sensitivity issues with noise, lights and smell in the workplace, and daily physical and mental efforts required to socially fit in neuro-typical dominated workplace (Lake et al., 2014); (Griffith et al., 2011); (Murza, 2016). The inherent difficulties stem from their different way of interacting with and perceiving the world, as explained in the concept of neuro-diversity.

Fourthly, the most empirically supported structural barrier in Ireland was social welfare entitlement schemes that disincentivise people with disability to engage in employment. According to the "Make Work Pay" social welfare reform research report (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [Welfare], 2017), implementation of current social welfare schemes imposed real fear of losing access of Medical Card benefit and free travel entitlement on people with disabilities who experience poorer health on average and who are unable to take up full-time employment. Furthermore, according to the report (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [Welfare], 2017), there were two main issues identified regarding to the implementation of back-to-work incentive scheme Partial Capacity Benefit (PCB). The purpose of the scheme was to give people with disabilities adequate social protection while encouraging them to enter labour market. One

issue was people who were in employment were financially worse off than people who completely depend on disability allowance. The other issue was delays in processing PCB application due to administrative difficulties made people lose employment opportunities.

Despite that there is a strategic action stated in Comprehensive Employment Strategy, which is to support students with disabilities to transition from higher education to employment through providing individually-tailored disability and careers services (Department of Justice and Equality, 2015, p.52). A qualitative research was conducted by Nolan and Gleeson (2017) among students with disabilities in Irish third level institutions. The evidences showed that inadequate and poorer career support services delivered compared to the career service provided for non-disabled students. In supporting this finding, the conclusion derived from a qualitative research conducted among the students with Autism in UCC (University College Cork) was there is a huge gap between policy development and actual practice in supporting autistic students to successfully transition from college to employment (Slattery, 2012).

There is a research deficit in the area to explore the disabling barriers of employment for high functioning autistic adults in Irish society. This research was aiming to fill the gap with the focus on exploring the causes of barriers that are unique in Irish context.

The most applied Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs that were found in research literature include strength-based job matching, functional assessment of occupational skills and on the job coaching and support (Lake, Perry and Lunskey, 2014). Lee and Carter (2012) stressed three evidence-based support strategies that contributed in transitioning university students with high-functioning autism to a long-term career success. Firstly, individually tailored vocational support that reflect individual's unique needs, strengths, interests, and preferences is imperative. Secondly, cultivating close alignment between vocational

counsellors, autistic individuals and employer to establish on-going job-related communication for addressing specific workplace challenges that arise is a must. Thirdly, providing essential workplace survival skills including interview skills, workplace self-advocacy and problem-solving skills on how to request reasonable accommodations is critical.

Globally there is a research deficit in evaluating feasibility and efficacy of these supported employment programs. The final focus of the research was aiming to explore what are the specific enabling support practices that have worked in addressing the identified disabling employment barriers in Irish society. Furthermore, to explore the factors that are contributing to long-term career success for high functioning autistic adults in Ireland. There is no such research conducted in Ireland yet.

1.6 General research questions

This research aimed to explore three inter-related questions around neuro-diversity, disabling employment barriers and enabling support practices. The findings will be added to the Irish autism research literature to address the urgent issue for combating labour market exclusion for young high-functioning autistic adults.

1. How do professionals from autism employment support organizations and neuro-typical employees in Ireland perceive the concept of neuro-diversity to build an inclusive workplace?
2. What are the prevalent disabling employment barriers for high functioning autistic adults in Irish society?
3. What support practices have worked for addressing the identified disabling employment barriers in Irish society?

2. Method

2.1 Qualitative research framework

The foundation of the approach lies in utilizing both interpretive and constructionist approaches for seeking understanding of people's lived experiences of a less-understood social phenomena from their points of view (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, Ormston, 2014, pp. 11-12). With constructionist approach, it emphasizes that human knowledge and perception to the social reality is subjectively and actively constructed over the course of human history and it is subject to change over time, since it recognizes that psychological, historical and cultural factors which all play important roles in shaping human understanding of the social world (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014, p.13).

With interpretive approach, the data that researchers need to interpret are only based on research participants' lived experiences and their points of view are only valid insiders' view from which the interpreted meaning is derived. Researchers must not impose their views on a topic in any ways (Mason, 2002, p.56). Therefore, it implies it is a systematic, naturalistic and inductive approach well-suited for obtaining insights, meanings and theories from rich data collected from people who are experiencing a social phenomenon.

Hence, qualitative research approach was justified and well-suited for the nature of the research. It was about seeking meanings and perspectives on the phenomenon of neuro-diversity and neuro-diverse workforce inclusion that vocational rehabilitation support staffs and neuro-typical co-workers had experienced. Moreover, it gives a collection of different qualitative research methods to choose from for meeting different research needs. One of them is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was the chosen research method for conducting this research.

2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA consists of empirically-tested rigorous and systematic data collection and analysis procedures. Three theoretical components constitute IPA, namely, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith and Osborn, 2009).

As Pietkiewicz and Smith summarized (2012), phenomenological researchers are interested in obtaining how people perceive and make sense of a social phenomenon or concept experienced by them in day-to-day life. With hermeneutics, IPA values the active role that researchers play in making sense of participants' interpretation of the lived experience of a concept or phenomenon. In IPA there is a dual interpretation process in which participants first make sense of their subjective world they live in, then subsequently researchers need to decode their meaning-making from participants' perspective. With ideography, IPA requires in-depth case study of every individual participant's perspectives on a social phenomenon he/she experienced before generalizing any findings. In this way, researchers are interested in seeking meanings from narratives that each particular individual told.

IPA is the well-suited method for this research because through which the lived experiences that employment support staffs and co-workers had on the phenomenon of neuro-diversity and neuro-diverse workforce inclusion can be obtained and the meanings derived from those lived experiences can be explored. Detailed case study of every insider's personal account and their meaning-making gives profound and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under study. Moreover, it is suitable for analysing data collected from small sample size, such as this project in which it had very small number of participants.

2.3 Participants

Participants consisted of four people, two of them were vocational rehabilitation support staffs who support people with high functioning ASD in seeking and sustaining mainstream

employment, the other two were neuro-typical team buddies assigned to autistic employees who were closely working and supporting them in the same team.

2.4 Participant selection criteria

The criteria for selecting participants for the research were as follows:

1. Staffs were very experienced and worked in the role of employment support for at least three years.
2. Neuro-typical co-workers were closely working with autistic employees and supporting them in the same team for at least 2 years.

2.5 Data collection: Semi-Structured interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one face to face interview was chosen as the data collection method. As Smith and Osborne (2009) pointed out, most IPA studies were conducted using semi-structured interview. Since it is a very flexible data collection instrument for gathering rich and detailed personal account on a perceived phenomenon. As Richie et al. stressed (2014, p.184) that this technique combines structures and flexibility. A rough interview schedule before the interview was created which contained main thematic topics to be investigated. And the highly engaged interactive dialogue it offers gives both researchers and participants the opportunities to raise issues and shape the interview content. More importantly, the investigators are able to probe participants' responses and observe social cues and facial expression, which can dig untold meaningful data below the surface. Interviews were conducted at the agreed location and were digitally recorded for the purposes of transcribing and analysing data.

2.6 Data Analysis Method

Data analysis was performed rigorously and systematically according to the empirically tested IPA data analysis guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2009); (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

Nvivo 12 was used for making notes and identifying themes. The data analytical stages can be specified as follows. For every research participant a detailed case study was performed

stage 1: Immerse into the transcript and the interview recording by closely reading and listening to it multiple times.

stage 2: Making notes on the thoughts, questions and observations researchers have about the interview experience and its textual content.

stage 3: Transform notes into emerging themes.

stage 4: Clustering relating themes into major and sub-themes for the whole transcript.

stage 5: Continue the whole process onto next individual case.

stage 6: Compare and contrast themes across all case studies to seek for generalized findings.

2.7 Ethical considerations

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by DBS school of Arts research Committee. The proposal has specified measures for safeguarding participant consent processes, rights and well-being of participants, confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research. Interview consent form was handed out, reviewed and signed by every participant before starting interview. The consent form stated that participation is completely voluntary and if any of the questions do raise difficult feelings the interview may be discontinued. And participation is confidential and anonymous, every measures and precautions will be taken to ensure no ways that identifiable interview participants and organizations that can be found in the thesis.

3. Findings

The aim of the research is to firstly explore what perceptions professionals from autism employment support organizations and neuro-typical employees in Ireland have towards the concept of neuro-diversity for building an inclusive workplace. Secondly to explore in Irish society what are the disabling barriers which prevents people with high functioning autism from obtaining and retaining employment. And finally to explore what are the support practices which have worked for removing the identified disabling employment barriers in Irish society. IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) data analysis guidelines were used to analyse the data and this chapter reported the findings derived from the themes emerged from data analysis.

3.1 Perception of neuro-diversity

3.1.1 “There is a strength in neuro-diversity”

For all the interview participants who closely worked with autistic candidates for a long period of time, they acknowledged there is inherent strength that lies in the neuro-divergent way of thinking and perceiving the world around them. If they were given right type of work and were given right support and environment, they can unleash their unique strength and excel in workplace.

Jerry: whenever he is coming across problems it has to be fixed right now, certain time when that way of thinking provides challenge but at the same time I guess it is a strength in that, his standard of work is very high (...) there are several cases and scenarios where he offers more than a neuro-typical person would.

Smith: it is case that within their nature the person would be very fastidious, and they would like to spend 8 hours to doing this task (...) These core QA and system testers. They are conscientious, you know they are very rigorous, stick to the details.

3.1.2 “Everyone on the spectrum is very different and very individual”

For all the employment support staffs who participated in the interview, they believe in order for the society to flourish we need their citizens who possess divergent strengths and skills to

contribute as a team. What high functioning autistic individuals can offer is just that. They can be socially valued citizens by enabling them to unleash their full potentials in workplace. Tom and Mary both stressed that every autistic individual possesses unique neuro-divergent characteristics. Fundamentally, autistic people and neuro-typical people have different challenges and talents and pursue the same desires for being loved and being valued in society.

Tom: To me neuro-diversity just means we have a team of people with different strengths and skills (...) for example Say I have a pension company, yes I need an actuary, I know one person on a spectrum is, at the same time I wouldn't have him as a sales man, Asperger, autistic person maybe not a best person, because they may not have good skill of communication (...) Say people with autism, only 5 % is their autistic part, that is what I like to think about. 95 % is like you and I, you know.

Mary: Whereas reality is that everyone on the spectrum is very different, everyone is very individual, everyone has different needs, treat everyone as different. Cause every single person we work with on the spectrum has so many talents and challenges just as everyone else has as well.

3.2 Employment barriers in Irish society

3.2.1 “A danger in seeing the autism first, rather than seeing the person that is behind it”

There is the consensus among the participants that there is a societal misconception on what Autism is really about. And stereo-typing people with autism by the global mainstream media is the main contributing factor in promoting the mis-conception.

Mary: if you look at the TV at the moment, you are going to see Sheldon Cooper on the "big bang theory", everyone knew "rain man" as an example, there can be misconceptions that everyone on the spectrum is a genius in some way or form, or quite severely impaired. (...) there is a danger in seeing the autism first, rather than seeing the person that is behind it.

Tom: A lot of precondition for example from movie “rain man” and other movies (...) so people have built up mis-conception about autistic people (...)

3.2.2 “Teaching people and interviewers beyond that first label you see”

All employment support staffs participated in the interviews stressed HR professionals in Irish enterprises lack fundamental understanding on what Autism is really about. They call out the imperative need not only to educate HR professionals for more knowledge and understanding on Autism but also to devise innovative recruitment processes for unleashing their strengths, abilities and potentials.

Mary: interviewer needs to be educated in the area of autism, in order to understand how best to interview our candidates and how best to see their abilities (...) We see may be an alternative to the interview process or Autism friendly interview and maybe a "work trail". Teaching people and interviewers beyond that first label you see.

Tom: The other big barrier currently with employers (...) quite honestly, the majority, particularly HR functions, still have not got fundamental understanding about autism and how to get it accommodated right (...) perhaps assessing them through a project such as “Lego”. To use Lego as a project to see how they think and How do they get on with other people (...)

3.2.3 “People on the spectrum in general experience more challenges than the average person.”

There is the recurring theme that is best summarized by Tom. People with Autism have limited physical and mental capacities to coping with neuro-typical dominated social and physical environment due to the challenges they face with social interaction and sensory sensitivities. Understanding and acknowledging the inherent limitations is important in order for the employers to provide reasonable accommodations for autistic employees to fulfil their full potential in workplace.

Tom: People on the spectrum in general experience more challenges than the average person (...) They may have limitation, typically for autistic people they may only be able to work up to 80% of the work that people beside them can work (...) this person cannot take noise in a canteen probably not going to go to lunch with you. They are not being socially ignorant just cannot cope with it. (...) a lot of kids end

up in their bedrooms by themselves with no friends in autism because social interaction.

3.2.4 “The system needs to be made easier for people”

As what Tom revealed here, Irish disability policies do create structural barriers that discourage people with disabilities to take up employment. If policy makers do not fundamentally understand or intentionally ignore the limited physical or/and mental capacities that people with disabilities have, then the policies will not only become ineffective, actually become the disabling barrier. Disability policies in the areas of transitioning students with Autism to meaningful employment and social welfare protection have failed to build employment infrastructure in Ireland for autistic adults.

Tom: I think the system needs to be made easier for people (...) The other important thing is, the department of social protection which mainly responsible for disability allowances and unemployment benefits is also loosening up its rules. People with disability can now earn more money before their disability allowances is either reduced or taken away from them (...) typically for autistic people they may only be able to work up to 80% of the work that people beside them can work (...) maybe you do not become higher earner. Maybe do need some sort of social protection as well as low wages (...) College and education are under-funded. Particularly not enough thoughts, this is where we are particularly working on transitioning people with disability from school into employment and an independent life.

3.2.5 “Do not mix up mental health issue with Autism”

Tom has strongly articulated the need to separate mental health problem from Autism. They are two different things by nature. The causes of developing mental health problems among autistic adults are complex and multifaceted. As identified by other emerging themes, societal mis-conception about what Autism is really about is one of influential factors which creates a barrier for providing right supports that autistic adults need in order to unleash their potential

and abilities. Lack of right support is the prevailing reason for social exclusion. It is the root cause of developing mental health issues.

Tom: Autism and mental health often got mixed up together, but they are not the same. Autism people just learn things differently (...) I always saying to people don't be surprised autistic people getting depressed particularly if they have skills and abilities because they intend to become frustrated and into depression (...) because often they not get confidence in social situations. If that goes wrong way and they are excluded.

3.3 Enabling support practices that worked to remove barriers

3.3.1 “We prepare them for the world of work (...) therefore again reducing anxiety”

As vocational support staffs explained in the interviews, the fundamental support tasks they do on the daily basis include functional assessment of job skills, suggesting career and educational path based on assessed skills, strength-based job matching and on the job survival skills coaching. In addition, advocating for getting work environment accommodated and making suggestions on how autistic candidates can make reasonable adaptations to the working environment. The ultimate support goal for them to achieve is to reduce autistic candidates' anxiety and build up self-confidence in workplace.

Fundamentally what we do is to assess people, young adults come to us for their skills, right at the start we get to know them and build up their confidence and assess their skills, to see where we think they might work in the industry or perhaps what skills they need to get yet in terms of particular education in order to work (...) not only we prepare them for the world of work in terms of the work of ethics, the whole environment of work, how you survive on a day to day basis and therefore again reducing anxiety, also we work on the other side, the small, not too onerous accommodation that employers have to make so that the two meet in the middle.

3.3.2 “There is kind of culture developing here (...) that's been eye-opening”

Jerry, who closely worked with one autistic candidate in his team, reflected on his experience as 'an eye-opening learning process'. This process helped him to truly see the person behind

the Autism label and challenged his dispositions, assumptions and expectation that he used to have about people with Autism. His personal experience demonstrated the importance of transforming corporate culture into inclusive culture from the bottom-up grassroots level for making real social change. Having corporations committed to build up a supportive and inclusive employment infrastructure, such as the dedicated Autism At work program, provided the opportunity to foster an inclusive corporate culture. Support staff Tom also believes that increasing societal awareness about Autism nationwide from the grassroots level is the prerequisite for creating a cultural force that will challenge and re-shape policy decision making at political level.

Jerry: Here we had dedicated autism at work program so they bound to be more accepting more supportive, there is kind of culture developing here because the autism work program and the inclusivity that people here are striving for, that can only be a good thing (...) if you think of disability, you automatically going to think, it is disability so constantly you have to compensate for that, you wouldn't think there is going to be certain strength associated with this (...) He just does it themselves, that's been eye-opening, that is main learning (...) self-sufficient in their work, (...) autistic colleagues would be one of the best workers.

Tom: Certainly as a service we can help, however in general sense in a nation that Ireland is there needs to be increase in awareness nationwide (...) such as advocacy organisation like ASIAM (...) That is not such a scary thing (...) it goes back though also to society's accepting autistic people in a neuro-diverse way, if it becomes standard then for example, HR perhaps no problem in interviewing people hiring people with autistic, supporting them in work many years later.

3.3.3 “accommodating people is about keeping up communications”

There is the consensus across all employment support staffs participated in the interview that it is vital for them to be the intermediary advocates who connect and keep the communication on-going both with the supervisors and autistic candidates in order to catch and resolve any issues that might arise in work place as quick as possible.

Tom: One big thing I would say, accommodating people is about keeping up communications, if something is happening, almost back with mental health thing, our person stops communicating to the buddies and work mates, then there is a problem. we will try to follow that up.

Mary: we communicate both with a person on the spectrum and also with their buddy on the team and manager on the team. It gives us better idea how to step in.

3.3.4 “You have to build up a candidate-centric plan”

Every autistic individual is neuro-divergent in his/her own unique way, that is why support staffs in the interview all acknowledged building an individually tailored vocational support is vital to ensure the right support and accommodations are identified and provided. Furthermore, they applied both functional and environmental approaches to get accommodation capacity maximized to the optimal point for maximizing autistic candidates’ employability.

Mary: Whereas reality is that everyone on the spectrum is very different, everyone is very individual, everyone has different needs, treat everyone as different (...) Most of times we do what's called a sensory audit where before they start to work.

Tom: You have to build up a candidate-centric plan (...) as we get to know them better you might find out their specific challenges, specific abilities. One gentleman has Problem with fabric feel, he only wears track suits. The compromise there is black track suit so that it fits (...) also we work on the other side, the small, not too onerous accommodation that employers have to make so that the two meets in the middle so look like an employable person becomes quite employable.

3.3.5 “Some form of disclosure has to be done because we talk about neuro-diversity”

There is the consensus across all employment support staffs participated in the interview on supporting autism disclosure at right level. They acknowledged right level of disclosure has to be done in a very careful way, which is a very important contributing factor for seeking and retaining employment. Because only after right level of disclosure is done, that makes early

intervention possible, for instance autism friendly interview and other reasonable accommodations can be proposed.

Tom: Definitely autism disclosure can play a positive role in seeking employment (...) when they take work candidate from us they know they are coming under our organization brand so they know what they are getting so that helps a little bit (...) So disclosure at right level, have to be careful but I am fully behind disclosure, some form of disclosure has to be done because we talk about neuro-diversity, that implies there is a difference with employees how do we accommodate the difference fairly.

Mary: There needs to be more room for people to disclose. I think should someone disclose that they are on autism spectrum, autism friendly interview needs to be more common place.

4. Discussion

The aim of the research is to explore the employment barriers that high functioning autistic people experienced in Irish society and the enabling support practices that have worked to remove those barriers. In addition, to explore how professionals from autism vocational support organizations and neuro-typical co-workers of people with high functioning autism in Ireland perceive the concept of neuro-diversity. This chapter discussed the results presented in previous chapter with the focus on relating the findings back to the findings that were presented in the literature review chapter.

4.1 Perception of neuro-diversity

All participants acknowledged that their high functioning autistic colleagues offer more and perform better than their neuro-typical co-workers in certain work areas. Their work standards and work ethic are very high. They believe the reason for that is the intrinsic strength that lies in their individual neuro-diverse way of thinking and striving in the world. Their perception on how to views autistic condition is challenged and changed. Their accounts demonstrated if right support and right environment were given to them their unique strengths and abilities can be

unleashed in workplace. The above findings are very consistent with previous research in this area (Lorenz & Heinitz, 2014; Mottron, 2011).

Another aspect of neuro-diversity that emerged from the data that was not evidently present in the literature is the importance of acknowledging the individualistic nature of neuro-diversity. In other words, in what way neuro-diversity is embodied is dependent on each autistic individual. There is a popular saying that is well-spread among people in autism communities. If you have met one autistic person, then you have met one autistic person. Therefore acknowledging the individualistic nature of neuro-diversity is the foundation that underpins every support practise that must be individually tailored and person-centred.

4.2 Employment barriers in Irish society

People on the Autism spectrum face more challenges than an average person in neuro-typical dominated social and physical environment. This finding constantly surfaces in all emerging themes. Typical challenge they need to cope with is sensory sensitivity problem with noise, lights and smell in common workplace. In addition they require extra physical and mental efforts in order to socially fit in neuro-typical dominated workplace due to social interaction challenges. This finding concurs with many exiting literatures (Lake et al., 2014; Griffith et al., 2011, Murza, 2016).

In this regard, there is the consensus across all employment support staffs participated in the interviews that In Irish society general public and employers have a lot of misconceptions on what Autism is really about and lack understanding on the nature of the problem that high functioning autistic employees are facing. This finding is very consistent with previous research in this area (Baldwin, Costley and Warren, 2014; Griffith et al., 2012).

In relation to this finding, there are two new findings that emerged from the data which was not found in Irish autism support literature. One is participants believe stereo-typing people

with autism by the global mainstream media, such as in popular American TV comedy and Hollywood movies, is one of the influential factors to have promoted the mis-conception. The other finding is that In Irish enterprises HR professionals have not got fundamental understandings on what Autism is about. And participants advocated there is the need to educate HR professionals and introduce innovative recruitment processes, such as Autism friendly interviews, work trials and playing Lego in a team, for assessing skills and bringing out their strengths, abilities and potentials.

Support staff stressed two main structural barriers In Ireland which prevent people with autism from seeking and retaining employment. One is back-to-work social protection schemes which are supposed to encourage people with disabilities to take up employment actually act as a disabling barrier. This finding concurs with the finding that is found in the "Make Work Pay" social welfare reform research report (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [Welfare], 2017). One empirically supported reason for the policy failure that was not evident in existing Autism research literature is that policy makers do not grasp the reality that majority of people with autism are unable to take up full-time employment as the general working population would do because the limited physical or/and mental capacities they have. In addressing this reality policy makers need to propose policies that allow people to retain enough disabilities allowance as a solid way of social protection while taking up part-time work. The other finding emerged from the data gave solid evidence to support the existing Irish disability literature on the fact that there is significant disparity between policy development and governmental actions to support autistic students to transition from schools to employment (Slattery, 2012; Department of Justice and Equality, 2015, p.52).

One finding that emerged from the data which was not found in previous literature is acknowledging the importance of distinguishing between mental health illness and Autism. Mixing up Autism with mental health issue is the outcome of societal mis-conception about

what Autism is really about. The main cause for people with high functioning autism to have been exposed to the higher risks of developing mental health issues according to Lake, Perry and Lunsky (2014) was social skills deficits which resulted in developing depression and low self-esteem. The other finding that emerged from the data challenges this argument. Rather Lack of right support creates a barrier that prevents autistic person from unleashing their strengths and abilities. And hence creates social exclusion. According to Cassidy et al. (2014) social exclusion and labour market exclusion is the main cause for suicidal ideation for adults with Autism. What emerged from the data demonstrated that there are so many interwoven factors that contribute to developing mental health problems among autistic adults. It includes societal mis-conception of Autism, lack of right support, systemic and structural barriers.

4.3 Enabling support practices that worked to remove barriers

One finding that emerged from the data which was not found in Irish Autism support literature is that Autism vocational support organisation that was interviewed adopted most evidence-based vocational rehabilitation interventions that were found in research literature. For instance, job skills functional assessment, strength-based job matching, work environment accommodation and job survival coaching are the most applied vocational rehabilitation programs reported in many research papers, such as in (Lake, Perry and Lunsky, 2014; Lee & Carter, 2012).

Moreover, finding that emerged from the data strongly support the conclusion that Lee and Carter (2012) drew from the research that three evidence-based support strategies contributed significantly in transitioning college students with high-functioning autism from schools to long-term career success. Firstly, individually tailored vocational support that addresses autistic individual's unique challenges, needs, strengths and interests is provided, hence it gives them further clear guidance to ensure right support and accommodations can be identified and implemented.

Secondly, support practices that has worked well in Irish employment support organisation is to have kept clear and on-going communication with supervisors, autistic candidates and Human Resource professional for avoiding, catching and resolving the issues in workplace as soon as it may arise. Thirdly, employment support staffs provide essential interview training and workplace survival skills to the autistic candidates.

All employment support staffs participated in the interviews believe with supporting evidences that autism disclosure must be done at the right level with great caution in order for the necessary early interventions to be identified. This concurs with the literature that autism disclosure is one of the contributing factors in gaining and sustaining employment (Ohl et al., 2017).

The final important finding that was not evidently present in the autism literature is the importance of building up socio-cultural infrastructure to win hearts and minds of the public from the bottom-up grassroots level for building disability inclusion solidarity. With the case of fighting for labour market inclusion, it started from advocating and persuading individual corporations to make a commitment to develop a supportive inclusive employment infrastructure, such as the dedicated Autism At work program. What emerged from the data demonstrated that Autism at work program provided neuro-typical employees the opportunities to challenge their dispositions, assumptions and expectation that they used to have about people with Autism. It can be argued that when those mis-conceptions were successfully challenged, and positive perceptions got built, a socially valued and positive autism identity can be cultivated. As the outcome of winning the cultural war, policy decisions that are necessary to dismantle the employment barriers will be re-shaped.

5. Limitation of the study

There were several limitations to this study. It was a small scope study mainly due to time constraint. Firstly, participants sample size was very small. Secondly, organisation group (corporations or autism employment support organisations) from which the participants sample were drawn was not sufficiently wide and heterogeneous. Thirdly, due to the ethical consideration constraint required at the undergraduate level, Autistic individuals were not able to participate in the research. Unfortunately, not incorporating autistic people's perspectives and experiences into research data was the biggest limitation to this study. Unarguably, Autistic communities and autism researchers need to collaborate together on equal basis to conduct any autism research because the ultimate goal of any autism research is to improve the quality lives of people in Autistic communities. Having considered all the above limitations, future research is recommended as follows not only for increasing generalisation and validity of the finding but more importantly to add more autism research literature in the area of improving quality life of autistic adults in mainstream workplace.

6. Future research

The same research needs to be conducted with bigger and more representative sample size. Autistic participants sample need to reflect the demographics of autistic communities in Ireland. Neuro-typical participants who closely work with artistic employees need to be selected from diverse Irish enterprises. Employment support participants need to be drawn from diverse Autism employment support organizations. Among a few existing studies, majority of them evaluated the employment support program's efficacy by measuring wages earned and job retention rate (Schall et al.,2015); (Kaya et al., 2015); (Lawer et al., 2008). Future research needs to be conducted for evaluating employment support program's efficacy through other measurements of quality of life, such as social well-being and emotional well-being. Finally, there is no doubt more empirical research need to be conducted to explore what the structural

and systemic barriers are and to what extent they have played the role in preventing people with high functioning autism from labour market inclusion. With that said, there is research deficit in Irish society to explore to what extent self-empowerment, individual responsibility and the style of parenting that autistic individuals have had in playing the role to achieve long term career success despite of challenges they have faced with being autistic. Furthermore, what are the contributing factors that can foster and unleash the power of free will and social agencies. It can be argued that this type of research is equally imperative because the role of social agencies cannot be ignored.

7. Conclusion

The first question the study explored is how neuro-typical co-workers and employment support staffs in Ireland perceive the concept of neuro-diversity. Participants came to the same consensus that high-level work standards and work ethic of autistic candidates which neuro-typical colleagues observed challenged their perception on how they view autistic condition. Their accounts demonstrated that provision of right support and right type of work can unleash strengths and abilities that uniquely lie in every autistic individual's neuro-diverse way of perceiving and interacting with the world surrounding them. One finding that needs to be stressed is that every support practise they implemented is driven by person-centred philosophy hence individually tailored. The reason for it is based on the findings that support staffs profoundly acknowledged the individualistic nature of neuro-diversity. In other words, people in autistic communities often say if you have met one autistic person then you have met one autistic person.

The second question the research explored is in Irish society what are the prevalent employment barriers that autistic adults are experiencing. One fundamental barrier that participants have the consensus on is that autistic person face more challenges than an average person in neuro-typical dominated workplace because the social and physical environment is

not built for them. One challenge is sensory sensitivity problem they often encounter with noise, lights and smell in neuro-typical dominated physical environment. The other challenge is they need more physical and mental efforts than neuro-typical persons in order to socially fit in neuro-typical dominated workplace due to challenges they face with social interaction.

The second barrier that is prevalent in Irish society is a lot of misconceptions on what Autism is really about. Mis-representing and stereo-typing people in autistic communities by the global mainstream media played an influential role in promoting mis-conceptions. The other finding is in Irish enterprises HR professionals have not got fundamental understandings on what Autism is about. Therefore there are no common autism candidates recruitment enabling infrastructure, such as Autism friendly interviews and work trials, built in Irish enterprises.

Thirdly, structural barriers In Ireland created employment barrier. There are two main barriers derived from the findings. One is social protection schemes have disincentivized people with disabilities to take up employment. The other is greater disparity exists between policy development and governmental actions for supporting autistic students to transition from schools to employment.

Finally, the emerged finding stressed the importance of distinguishing between mental health issues and Autism. Moreover, it is argued with empirical evidences that the success that support staffs have had in enabling many more autistic young adults to engage in mainstream employment is due to the provision of right support that can unleash their strengths and potentials. It is the ultimate solution to combat social exclusion. Social exclusion is the main cause for autistic person to develop depression and anxieties.

The final question the study explored is what are the support practices that have worked for addressing the identified disabling employment barriers in Irish society? There are two support practices that are empirically proven to have unleashed their strengths and potentials. Firstly, a

candidate-centric plan must be created for every autistic candidate. Secondly, a proactive and regular on-going communication between supervisors, autistic candidates and employment support staffs must be sustained in order to identify real support needs that autistic candidates have and to meet the needs as soon as they may arise.

Moreover, autism disclosure must be done at the right level with great cautions from the very beginning of the support process. The most important argument that is derived from the finding is building disability inclusion solidarity must start from building up socio-cultural infrastructure through winning hearts and minds of the public from the bottom-up grassroots level. Emerged finding demonstrated that when corporations made a commitment to develop a supportive and inclusive employment infrastructure, such as the dedicated Autism At work program, it helped their employees to challenge mis-conceptions about Autism and a socially valued and positive autism identity can be cultivated as the result.

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Appendix 1:

Interview Schedule

Interview questions for employment support staffs:

Warming-up question

1. Could you tell me primary job roles that you have and why did you choose this career in supporting autistic adults seeking and sustaining meaningful employment?

Employment barriers

2. From your own experiences, what challenges and barriers have people with high functioning autism faced in engaging themselves in a neuro-typical dominated workplace? And how are those barriers created?

3. How do you think of mis-conceptions and stigma in the way how employers and co-workers perceive the autistic condition and are they existing from your support experiences? Could they play some roles in creating those barriers or not so much? Can you tell me why and more about it if you encountered this in your experience?

Support needs identification

4. What is the prevalent support needs that autistic people and their families have advocated to remove those barriers?

5. How did you identify their real needs in your experience and what are they?

Support practices

6. What actions did government take in helping remove those barriers? Has it done enough in this regard? If there were not enough actions were taken, what are the important areas in which government needs to take actions to tackle this issue?
7. What are implemented support strategies and practices that aimed to remove those barriers that we discussed and to meet the real needs we discussed as well? Did they work to some extent? Can you give such a story or two if you could think of?
8. Are there some of them due to any resource constraints, which cannot be able to put into support practices now and give some example? What are the underlying causes for the lack of resources?
9. How do you envision what right support, right workplace environment and workplace culture look like to enable autistic people to fulfil their full potential and improve their well-beings if there are no resource constraints attached? Who are the key players and driving forces to make it happen and how?

Perception of Neuro-diversity

10. What are your understandings and making sense of this concept of neuro-diversity and neuro-diversity movements led by high functioning autistic self-advocate community in relation to improving people's well-beings and transforming neuro-typical dominated workplace into neuro-diverse inclusive workplace?
11. Do you think to some extent this concept had some influences in developing those implemented supported practices and strategies or not so much? Why is so and give an example?

Interview questions for Neuro-typical co-workers:

1. Could you tell me what is your job like in here and what made you interested in becoming a buddy to autistic employees working and supporting them closely in the same team? And how long have you been in this role?
2. Have those experiences helped you to challenge and/or change the perceptions/understandings you had about autism and nature of the challenges that people with high functioning autism faced in engaging themselves in a neuro-typical dominated workplace? If they have helped, can you tell me more on how have those experiences helped in any ways?
3. Has the support that employment support staffs provided to you helped in any ways to challenge and/or change those perceptions? Could you tell such a story? Have those support changed the way how you used to perceive autism condition? And in what ways?
4. From your own experiences, what challenges have they faced in the workplace? What are the prevalent support needs that they have to overcome them?
5. What were the support that you received from employment support staffs that have helped you to better understand and support your autistic colleagues to overcome those challenges and difficulties? Could you give me such a story that you have experienced?
6. Is it important that the specialist support, knowledge and training that employment support staffs provided to you in helping you to provide right support to them? How so?
7. How did your roles as a buddy help them overcome those challenges and difficulties? What are the positive things have you learned about yourself and them through this experience?
8. What are the strengths and other valuable assets that autistic colleagues have brought to the team and workplace in your experiences that neuro-typical people cannot provide?

9. How has your experience as their buddy to your autistic colleagues given you different perspectives on including people with autism in workforce?

Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form

Celebrating neuro-diversity in Irish workplace, enabling support practices and disabling barriers

My Name is Le Li and I am conducting research that explores the enabling support practices and disabling barriers for celebrating neuro-diversity in Irish workplace.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact

Supervisor : Paul Halligan Paul.Halligan@dbs.ie or Le Li lile0329@gmail.com

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____