IPED: Interdisciplinary perspectives on equality and diversity
Vol. 1, Issue 1, p-p.

Asperger syndrome and employment inclusion: Towards practices informed by theories of contemporary employment

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Abstract

Asperger syndrome is yet to find its way into critical research surrounding contemporary work and employment. The extant literature is typically over-characterised by psychological perspectives of Asperger syndrome and an overly descriptive and atheoretical employment framework. The main purpose of this paper, however, via discussions of the main psychological theories surrounding Asperger syndrome and key themes of labour process analysis, such as, new ways to organise work, teamworking and fun at work initiatives, is to propose a more holistic means to minimise discrimination and at the same time improve inclusion employment rates for people with Asperger syndrome. The main finding from the proposed paper is to suggest practices to increase employment rates and the quality of working life for prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome must more accurately reflect the nature of contemporary employment. In practical terms this suggests experts on contemporary work and employment, for example specially trained trade union representatives, need to be far more central to the design and implementation of employment diversity management practices.

Key words: Asperger syndrome, employment, inclusion, theories of Asperger syndrome, labour process analysis

Introduction

According to the National Autistic Society (2015), a person with Asperger syndrome[1] is likely to have problems making sense of the world, processing information and relating to other people. One of the most evident and defining features of Asperger syndrome is said to be

[1] Terminology surrounding Asperger syndrome is controversial. The term "with" Asperger syndrome is widely applied in academic disciplines aligned with disability studies (e.g. Wheeler, 2011; Rosqvist, 2012) and is used in this paper. However, it is acknowledged that using the term "with" is controversial as goes against an emergent view of Asperger syndrome as a natural variation among humans, i.e. a difference and not impairment (e.g. see Runswick-Cole, 2014).

the presence of marked deficiencies in social interactions, communication and behaviours (Higgins et al., 2008). It has been said, however, many of the problems associated with Asperger syndrome become more evident when the individual experiences stress or change (Attwood, 2007). Despite Asperger syndrome being covered by disability legislation (e.g. The Equality Act 2010 in the UK), as well as falling within practices associated with the management of diversity in organisations, many prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome[2] appear to face very high levels and widespread incidence of discrimination in relation to employment. Indeed, one study suggests only 15 per cent of autistic adults are in full-time employment (Redman et al., 2009). This is a very low figure when compared with the unemployment rate of 12 per cent for the wider disabled population (Nomis, 2013) and the current UK unemployment rate of 5.8 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2015). It should also be noted, however, that difficulties finding employment and coping with employment is not a problem unique to prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome or the wider disabled population. As Noon et al. (2013) suggest, all employed people at some time or other have to learn to cope with the uncertainty and stresses of navigating employment markets, as well as the need to find ways to cope with the pressures, monotony and powerlessness nature of contemporary employment. Taking this viewpoint it suggests the harsh realities of employment, particularly in the form of unlawful discriminatory practices, should not be ignored when looking to reduce the discrimination faced by prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome.

In recent times there has been a small yet noticeable rise in literature dedicated to Asperger syndrome and employment. While such literature draws attention to the many positives of employing people with Asperger syndrome, such as, audit and scrutiny skills, or programming and testing skills (Austin et al. 2008; Hendrickx, 2009), the majority of such literature tends to focus on the many employment problems faced by prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome, often at the expense of any significant emphasis on employer discrimination or the failings of diversity management initiatives. Examples of employment problems identified in the literature, however, are wide-ranging and tend to present a negative view of Asperger syndrome in relation to employment. For some the problems with employment begin with discrimination or mismanagement in relation to the transition from full-time education to employment (e.g. see Patterson and Rafferty, 2001; Jennes-Coussens et al., 2006) Even if transition is conducted effectively a further layer of discrimination takes over with problems with appropriateness and availability of support for adults with Asperger syndrome. For example, there is a chronic lack of specialised external support workers to help people with Asperger syndrome deal with discriminatory practices related to securing and remaining in employment (e.g. Nesbitt, 2000; National Autistic Society, 2005; Beardon and Edmonds, 2007). Meyer (2001), moreover, argues discrimination is not restricted to managers and employers, as employees with Asperger syndrome can face poor treatment because they are often viewed by colleagues as

[2] It should be noted that the little research that exists in Asperger syndrome and employment tends to focus on individuals diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, i.e. very little research has considered employment prospects for employees who have received a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome later in life.

arrogant, not asking for help and lacking assertiveness. However, most aspects of the discrimination process appear to stem from employer diversity practices not extending to reflect the needs and interests of people with Asperger syndrome. For example, many employers see people with Asperger syndrome as unemployable (Austin et al., 2008), screen out prospective candidates who have declared their condition (Meyer, 2001), employ too many intolerant line managers (Grandin and Duffy, 2004) and too readily claim ignorance or shy away from making "reasonable adjustments" under disability and equality legislation. A further perspective to the discrimination process is that rules surrounding social security militate against people with Asperger syndrome taking temporary jobs, which may help individuals in the process of gaining valuable experience of employment (Ridley et al., 2005; Aylott et al., 2008).

Despite a growth of literature concerning attempts to reduce discrimination against prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome the literature is noted by one universal problem. While the texts are evidently written by professionals and lay people who have a thorough knowledge of Asperger syndrome, it is also equally if not more evident, as Roulstone (2005) suggests, such writers seem unaware of the limitations of their ideas. For instance, such literature often takes an apolitical and atheoretical approach to employment and fails to critique popular management axioms. Further, little attention is given to the realities of employment markets, the key role of employers in inclusionary employment practices and how employers may have a very different view on employment. As such, the main direction of this paper is to suggest attempts to consider what can be done to address the discrimination faced by prospective employees and employees with Asperger syndrome in relation to employment will be limited unless recognition is given to theories related to the realities of employment.

To attempt to do this the following will be done. First, there is a discussion of the dominant and pervasive psychological theories of Asperger syndrome. Second, is a discussion of theories related to the realities of employment, or the context for discriminatory and non-inclusive employment practices. A third and final section brings together previous sections by discussing all the key points and making suggestions about what can be done to decrease discrimination and more closely integrate employees with Asperger syndrome into diversity management practices.

Theories of Asperger syndrome

While it is widely known and acknowledged that Hans Asperger should be credited with initial attempts to theorise Asperger syndrome, discussions in this section begin and advance on from the work of Lorna Wing emerging circa 1980. Indeed, an early major contribution of Wing (1981) was to go beyond highly descriptive accounts and set out new diagnostic criteria for Asperger syndrome, as well as promote the idea of Asperger syndrome being part of a wider spectrum of autistic disorders. As such, since the early 1980s it has been common to theorise Asperger syndrome being based on a "triad of impairments", or life-long problems with social interaction, communication and imagination. Using the lens of psychologists, Asperger syndrome is widely viewed as being at the "high

functioning" end of a wider spectrum of autistic conditions. Despite the identification of commonly identified traits and the use of such traits to diagnose Asperger syndrome in individuals, Asperger syndrome affects people differently and to different degrees (Attwood, 2007).

Wing's work, however, has been further developed by writers such as Gillberg (1991) who developed an expanded diagnostic criteria involving social impairment, narrow interest, compulsive needs for introducing routines and interests, speech and language peculiarities, non-verbal communication problems and motor clumsiness. According to Attwood (2007), Gillberg's diagnostic criteria have become the choice for many experienced clinicians.

However, more recently, attempts have been made to question psychological theories of Asperger syndrome, mainly because of the negative and largely unchallenged terminology associated with Asperger syndrome, such as constant reference to "disorder" and "difficulty". The psychological views of Asperger syndrome are also widely criticised for emphasising the problems of the individual and under-emphasising the contribution of social context to the problem. For instance, Beardon (2007) argues experts should think carefully about applying the term "disorder" to people with Asperger syndrome, as disorder may actually be a widely unacknowledged "difference". Indeed, such views align themselves with the emergent notion of "neurodiversity", where neurological conditions, such as Asperger syndrome, are conceptualised as alternative forms of human difference (Armstrong, 2010). However, while it is evident new ideas surrounding disability are emerging (e.g. see Tregaskis, 2002; Terzi, 2004; Oliver and Barnes, 2010), it appears the means by which the majority of health and educational professionals come to understand Asperger syndrome is heavily reliant on a range of theories that emphasise and often reinforce negative aspects of this condition.

Theory of mind

The first of the main psychological concepts involves ideas surrounding "theory of mind". In this instance it is believed people with Asperger syndrome tend not the feel the same range of emotions, or do not recognise they feel the same range of emotions, as the wider population. An important outcome from this situation is people with Asperger syndrome may struggle with the idea of others having thoughts and feelings different from their own (Fast, 2004). In an employment situation this could mean an employee with Asperger syndrome having a problem with a dishonest customer, colleague or manager because they know themselves to be honest and rule-abiding (Hawkins, 2004). Another example of where theory of mind comes into play involves explaining why an employee with Asperger syndrome may not appreciate colleagues having their own thoughts and feelings, resulting in the employee with Asperger syndrome making open, personal and possibly offending comments about a colleague. As Hendrickx (2009: 15) emphasises, employees with Asperger syndrome may struggle and need help to "silence this inner voice".

Executive function

A second means to theorise Asperger syndrome involves the "executive function". According to Attwood (2007: 234), executive function is another widely used psychological term related

to organisational and planning abilities, working memory, inhibition and impulse control, self-reflection and self-monitoring, time management and prioritising, understanding complex or abstract concepts, as well as using new strategies. It is said people with Asperger syndrome may be prone to poor executive functioning and as a result struggle to focus on more than one thing at a time. While in some instances the ability to focus intensely on one task, such as software testing (Austin et al., 2008), would be a massive advantage in a growing range of employment situations, Bissonnette (2008), for example, believes prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome may find jobs requiring "multi-tasking" difficult to master and likely to require some level of support organising time and tasks. Hendrickx (2009), moreover, believes problems with executive functioning may lead to employees with Asperger syndrome having a tendency towards black and white thinking and if some part of the job is not done perfectly then this is seen by the employee with Asperger syndrome as some sort of failure. As such, a line manager or a colleague may get concerned when anxiety levels of the employee with Asperger syndrome unexpectedly surface.

Central coherence

A third key psychological concept used to theorise Asperger syndrome is "central coherence", or how people generally process information. For instance, people with Asperger syndrome often have great strengths in terms of memorising masses of facts, yet may have problems making sense of all the facts (Gillberg, 2007). Further problems may also emerge when trying to process "social" and "emotional" facts (Attwood, 2007). This may not be a major problem in many employment situations, yet it could be a serious problem where an employee needs to see the "bigger picture" (Bissonnette, 2008). An example of how central coherence relates to employment is provided by Graham (2008), where an employee with Asperger syndrome understands his/her specific individual role very well, yet struggles to grasp how the individual fits in with the wider agenda and functioning of their allotted team.

Over-sensitisation

A further key concept concerns people with Asperger syndrome tending to have a higher propensity compared to the wider population to be overloaded by light, textures, tastes and smells, sometimes leading to a temporary breakdown in the nervous system (Meyer, 2001). Indeed, people with Asperger syndrome may have problems with sound sensitivity, tactile sensitivity, sensitivity to taste and smell and visual sensitivity (Attwood, 2007). Below Grandin and Duffy (2004: 11-12) explain how everyday sounds, often typical to the workplace, can make life very difficult for the person with Asperger syndrome:

> *Sounds such as those coming from a smoke alarm hurt like a dentist drill hitting a nerve. That is, in most individuals with autism spectrum disorders the sensory system does not work in an organized fashion. Instead, sensory message may course through the nervous system, bombarding the brain with an overload of information, or too little information, which can be just as bad…The result can be*

> *a lot of anxiety, confusion and subsequently upset or irritable behaviors for both children and adults with autism.*

According to Attwood (2007) there are three types of noise people with Asperger syndrome may find unpleasant: sudden and unexpected noises, high pitched continuous noises and complex or multiple sounds typical of social gatherings. In the employment setting this is equivalent to forcing an employee with Asperger syndrome into an unsuitable environment and over time threatens the employee's mental health and emotional stability (Edmonds and Beardon, 2008). What is more, as Hendrickx (2009) notes, sensory problems do not begin and end in the actual employment setting. Indeed, employees with Asperger syndrome may end up with a lateness problem after becoming over-sensitised travelling to the place of employment by a crowded bus or train.

Contemporary employment: New challenges for employees with Asperger syndrome?

In amongst and central to the mass of social science literature on the realities of contemporary employment is labour process analysis (LPA). LPA is an approach to studying employer organisations emphasising employer control over labour as a response to less controllable external market pressures (Thompson, 1989). In more recent times the rationale for employers to introduce new forms of control over labour is said to centre on measuring qualitative aspects of performance, even at the higher value-added end of organisational operations (Thompson and van den Broek, 2010).

A key strength of LPA is it is not an approach centred on providing a constant stream of advice and solutions to managers (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). It is an approach that disproportionately recognises the role and interests of the employee in the generation of company profits or reaching non-profit-related organisational targets (Delbridge, 2006). It is generally applicable, yet appears particularly relevant in the case of prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome because, as Watson (2011) informs, it is pre-supposed in LPA that employers operating in competitive markets retain a propensity to constrain the employee's potential for self-realisation. Indeed, it would be quite reasonable to argue how very low levels of employment and high levels of under-employment is clear evidence of employers constraining the potential of prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome. However, space for discussing LPA in relation to Asperger syndrome is limited and therefore what follows is concentrated on a limited range of themes associated with contemporary labour process debates. Labour process themes to be discussed include debates about new forms of work organisation and emergent forms of employer control.

Contemporary forms of organisation

It is reasonable to suggest mass production approaches to the organisation of work, such as Fordism and Taylorism, were widely embraced in the industrial world, in the twentieth century (Watson, 2006). However, towards the end of the twentieth century, many thought

scientific management approaches to organising work to be inflexible and incapable of delivering on the demands of mass markets and more sophisticated forms of consumerism (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). Further, there is also significant evidence to suggest Fordist and Tayloristic modes of organising work created excessive and difficult to control levels of industrial conflict and absenteeism, mainly because work activities were often highly segmented, allowed the employee little discretion and employment performance was closely monitored (Noon et al., 2013). Indeed, the 1980s saw debates about whether the industrial world was witnessing a fundamental and permanent change in the nature of work organisation, in that the dominant mode of organising work was steadily being replaced by practices entitled "neo-Fordism" and "post-Fordism". As such, a key rationale for the development and introduction of new forms of work organisation is to create a new division of labour, based on fully flexible and interchangeable labour, to meet the needs of increasingly fragmented product and service markets (Thompson and McHugh, 2009).

Understanding the distinction between neo-Fordism and post-Fordism is important. Grint (2005: 302), for example, clarifies the difference between old and new forms of work organisation as follows:

> *Fordism represents the archetypal assembly line production system with extensive division of labour and isolated workers using limited skills; neo-Fordism represents a transitional form in which workers are required to become flexible through the use of multiple skills and multiple tasks; post-Fordism, or flexible specialisation, occurs when these multiply-skilled and flexible workers are engaged in productive systems which depend upon teamworking rather than isolated individuals, and involve a reduction in the division of labour and some flattening of hierarchical authority, that is, developed responsibility for decision-making (e.g. semi-autonomous work groups).*

While this definition is not presented to give an impression that prospective employees and employees with Asperger syndrome are only suited to factory line roles, especially as research highlights how employees with Asperger syndrome can be found in a wide-range of occupations (e.g. see Johnson, 2005; Edmonds and Beardon, 2008), the value of this definition is it presents a general basis for conceptualising the vast majority of contemporary employment. In other words, in the past 30 years or so, there have been significant changes in the nature of work and employment and an important consequence of this change is contemporary employers demand a more varied range of skills from prospective and current employees, as well as more likely to adopt even more sophisticated forms of control than under pre-existing models of work organisation. In theory, this may suggest an end or a significant and permanent decline in jobs suited to prospective employees or employees with Asperger syndrome – that is, jobs characterised by high-levels of certainty, where there is less need to be overly concerned with the "bigger picture" and less need to negotiate social situations.

Teamworking and Asperger syndrome

At the heart of the widening of employee skills to meet the demands of evolving forms of work organisation is the increased emphasis on semi-autonomous "teamworking". According to Attwood (2007), there is good reason to believe employees with Asperger syndrome can cope if not flourish under teamworking initiatives. However, there is also reason to believe such practices may well present a major cause of ongoing problems for employees with Asperger syndrome, mainly because there appears to be a rather large gap between the appealing rhetoric of teamworking and how teamworking may be experienced in reality.

The realities of contemporary teamworking have been explored extensively by critical researchers. For instance, the rise of teamworking since the 1980s is said to have been on the basis of a clear shift from a top-down allocation of fragmented tasks to a broader specification of tasks required by the employer, with the team "empowered" to exercise collective wisdom to establish how a particular task should be executed (Procter et al., 2009). However, there is some debate about the evidence for such a deep-seated change to one particular aspect of work organisation, particularly in terms of the amount of power and discretion actually ceded to semi-autonomous work groups. Indeed, evidence for a wholesale shift and employer reliance on forms of work organisation strongly characterised by socially organised, semi-autonomous teamworking, who have more humanised experiences of work, is hard to find. What is easier to find is evidence to suggest the contrary. For instance, while the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations (WERS) survey suggested more than 70 per cent of British workplaces organise core employees into designated teams, only six per cent of teams are autonomous to the point where the team can appoint its own leader (Kersley et al., 2006). This suggests teams and team leaders are actually new terms for old practices related to work groups and supervisors, with employers pretending to follow new principles of autonomy, inter-dependency and co-operation, yet in reality adhering to the top-down, fragmented and individualised principles of Taylorism and Fordism (Fulop and Linstead, 2009). The WERS findings also link well to the earlier work of Harley (2001) who argued teamworking does little if anything to challenge the dominant power structures in most work organisations. Many labour process studies, in effect, point towards employees having to abide by the ideals of teamworking, yet typically end up feeling disillusioned and complaining of abuse of flexibility or intensification of work pressures (Findlay et al., 2000).

This in one sense points to broader difficulties for employees, yet more importantly may point to specific and new problems for employees with Asperger syndrome. However, the problem though does not concern the ability of employees with Asperger syndrome to understand the openly declared details of teamworking and to apply this knowledge in a social situation as previously suggested. Instead, the concern is it may not be easy for employees with Asperger syndrome to make sense of the many conflicting and hidden details of teamworking. Such a scenario was the centre of an Employment Appeal Tribunal (Hewett v Motorola Ltd - UKEAT 0526_03_1602) where an employer contested the expectation of reasonable adjustments to be made for an employee with Asperger syndrome:

> *Were Mr Hewett expected to socialise, take part in small talk, initiate and sustain conversations, answer questions in a reciprocal manner, expected to form and maintain relationships at a level beyond the concrete tasks that sustain him, manage people or lead a team, he would very likely, be inept. People with autistic traits are socially inept to a varying degree. They have some primary social deficits; they are inflexible, unyielding and stubborn. However, were his duties to be solitary, not requiring social interaction at a subtle level, clearly outlined and communicated in concrete, non ambiguous terms, and were he allowed to use his initiative and inventiveness, he should not have much difficulty.*

As such, "teamworking", unless it involves small and consistent teams, may have the potential to add a layer of stress to employees with Asperger syndrome (Hawkins, 2004).

Emergent forms of employer control

A further central dimension to LPA involves critiquing new and emergent attempts by employers to control how employees behave in order to meet primary organisational objectives, such as profit making or achieving not-for-profit targets, such as hospital waiting times. In such instances advocates of LPA tend to display little regard for official accounts of employer control initiatives and are far more interested in what goes on in practice (Bolton, 2005). In this part of the discussion further attention is given to the "devil in the detail" of three new and emergent forms of employer control - advanced forms of selection, the physical working environment and "fun at work" initiatives, all of which are likely to create different problems for employees with Asperger syndrome.

Selection and Asperger syndrome

It is evident that, in line with new forms of general work organisation and task allocation, employers have also taken to using more advanced forms of selection to screen out applicants less suited to, for example, working in a team or on the interface between employee and customer. While selection processes are commonly discussed as potentially being highly problematic for prospective employee with Asperger syndrome (e.g. see Nesbitt, 2000; National Autistic Society, 2005; Beardon and Edmonds, 2007), such texts rarely theorise the difficulties associated with attaining reasonable adjustments in relation selection practices. Further, advanced selection methods tend to be described in such texts rather than being conceptualised as part of a wider organisational or market-based context. This is not the case with LPA, as contemporary forms of selection – such as, competence based interviews and personality testing, are typically seen and understood as sophisticated control mechanisms (Thompson and McHugh, 2009) and culturally bound to the values and beliefs and norms of the dominant organisational culture (Noon et al., 2013). Watson (2006), moreover, suggests it is important to note how all parties to selection practices rarely question the broader agenda of selection processes. Taken together, it seems reasonable to suggest future consideration of Asperger syndrome and employment needs to be more wary

of official and managerialist justifications for increased use of advanced selection processes. Without this consideration it seems likely advanced selection processes will continue to have the potential to be highly problematic for prospective employees with Asperger syndrome.

The physical work environment and Asperger syndrome

It is also apparent in the existing literature on Asperger syndrome how the physical working environment is problematic for the employee with Asperger syndrome, particularly in terms of increasing the chances of over-sensitisation as a result of, for example, background noise and bright lights. However, as is the case with advanced selection processes, the existing literature on Asperger syndrome is limited in developing a critique of the contemporary physical working environment. Indeed, instead, there appears to be a naïve optimism characterising such texts in how employers need only be informed or educated about physical environments leading to sensory overload for many employees with Asperger syndrome. It is also to suggest the contemporary physical work environment is largely an inadvertent or benign phenomenon and therefore employers are unlikely, as was evident earlier in relation to teamworking, to respond favourably to requests for reasonable adjustments in relation to the physical working environment.

Advocates of LPA, however, increasingly see the contemporary physical working environment as "contested terrain". This is typically done by critiquing the rhetoric of employer accounts of the introduction of, for example, "state-of-art" working environments. For instance, Barnes (2007) believes no feature of the contemporary building structure should be exempt from LPA. This is particularly the case with increasingly common open plan offices and the décor of brightly lit, glass panelled, air conditioned call centres. Furthermore, Houlihan (2002) suggests employers increasingly use state-of-art working environment to shape and control employee values. How this helps us with the problems associated with the exclusion of employees with Asperger syndrome is as follows. Firstly, it seems possible the more an employer puts into designing a physical working environment the more an employer is likely to resist attempts to accommodate the needs of the employee with Asperger syndrome. Secondly, there is the question of how well informal and formal advocates of employees with Asperger syndrome are versed on the subtleties of, and the many hidden agendas behind, the contemporary physical working environment. Finally, the subtleties and many hidden agendas of the contemporary environment may also cause a level of confusion for the employee with Asperger syndrome. For instance, unless appropriately supported, there is clear potential for the employee with Asperger syndrome to take a failure to do well in a state-of-art facility as a personal failure.

Fun at work and Asperger syndrome

"Fun at work", "fancy dress" or "wild and wacky" workplace activities are barely discussed in the extant literature on Asperger syndrome, yet such practices are increasingly common in many work settings and likely to create unique problems for employees with Asperger syndrome. Where such activities are mentioned in the extant Asperger syndrome literature there are reports of individuals with Asperger syndrome being completely exhausted by such activities (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007; Hendrickx, 2009), when the wider sentiments of

employees is often one of indifference or cynical attitudes to such practices. The impression given in the extant literature, as is the case in previous examples, is such practices are somehow benign, faddish and without any deep-seated or strategic purpose, and therefore employers, as argued earlier in relation to teamworking, are unlikely to be receptive to employee requests for reasonable adjustments surrounding such activities.

However, even early studies on organisational fun seem to suggest such practices are not ill-conceived and in reality specifically designed to be non-optional ways for employers to quell employee criticism and resistance to control (Bate, 1994), even though many employers insist such practices are harmless or natural. It has also been suggested fun at work concerns the camouflaging of factory-like call centre employment (Kinnie et al., 2000). More recently studies have revealed further hidden agendas of fun at work practices. For instance, Bolton and Houlihan (2009) believe fun at work practices to be new ways for employers to get employees to work harder, conform and "act the part". What this means in practice is as follows. Firstly, inclusion in such practices may result in employees with Asperger syndrome being unable to focus on their main duties at the same time as having a "laugh" and "joke" with colleagues and playing out a costume-defined role. Secondly, many employers are unlikely to be receptive to requests for employees with Asperger syndrome to be allowed to opt out or experience scaled down versions of such activities. This is because it is likely to be difficult for employers to make certain control strategies optional, even for a minority of employees, when such practices are central to organisations meeting primary objectives. Finally, where employees with Asperger syndrome are allowed to opt out of such practices there is the risk of wider conflict as fellow employees may be resentful of what could be viewed as favourable treatment.

Discussion and conclusions

Essentially, this article is an attempt to bring together theories of Asperger syndrome and theories related to contemporary forms of work organisation and employer control in order to address employment-related discrimination faced by people with Asperger syndrome. Despite the fact employment-related discrimination of this kind is widely documented in the extant literature on Asperger syndrome and employment, the view taken in this article is that steps taken to address employment-related discrimination against people with Asperger syndrome are unlikely to be effective unless existing anti-discriminatory practices equally consider theories reflecting the harsh realities of contemporary employment and organisation of work. Support based entirely on psychological theories of Asperger syndrome is as such likely to lead to situations where individuals with Asperger syndrome are expected to be trained to fit in with existing workplace rules, norms and expectations.

In the first section the main psychological theories used to explain Asperger syndrome were discussed. This involved a discussion of concepts such as theory of mind, executive function and central coherence. Combined, the three psychological concepts allow health and educational professionals, as well as informed lay people, to provide one level of understanding of Asperger syndrome. A further discussion considered how people with Asperger syndrome may become over-sensitised by busy or noisy environments, such as

public transport or an open plan office. Linked to repeated over-sensitisation, is a further possibility of developing secondary mental health condition. However, it was evident from the discussion of theories of Asperger syndrome that to rely on such theories alone is likely to lead to a limited range of support for employees with Asperger syndrome.

With such limitations in mind, the following discussion shifted to concentrating on the sociology of contemporary employment, with the application of key LPA themes to the issue of employment and Asperger syndrome. More broadly, this involved moving from the consideration of Asperger syndrome in itself to a consideration of the context of being an employee with Asperger syndrome. The discussion about the realities of contemporary employment provided insights into the problems faced by almost every person reliant on paid employment, yet the discussion also led to suggestions about how contemporary employment could seriously undermine the employment experiences of people with Asperger syndrome. At the heart of such discussions was a suggestion that work is now increasingly organised in a very different fashion than it was just a generation or so ago. Further important issues also arising included how contemporary employment could be said to be made up of new and innovative control practices, yet also, typically omitted from official or formal discourses of contemporary employment. A key issue here is how experts on the theories of Asperger syndrome are unlikely to be experts on theories of contemporary employment and work organisation. The most likely scenario is that experts on Asperger syndrome may unwittingly do little to reduce discrimination against employees with Asperger syndrome if contemporary management practices are taken at face value.

In terms of recent employer innovations in employer control, a range of other noteworthy and generic issues related to Asperger syndrome and employment emerged too. For instance, employers seem to be increasingly interested in nurturing corporate cultures through the use of sophisticated selection processes, physical working environments and employee engagement activities. However, important details of such practices are rarely communicated to employees, the practices are designed to foster sameness and unquestioning attitudes in employees, and the practices are designed to minimise employee or third party criticisms of such practices. Based on the theories of Asperger syndrome, this is potentially problematic for people with Asperger syndrome who are seeking to take part in competitive labour markets and it problematic for third parties working towards improving the inclusion employment rates for people with Asperger syndrome. This is mainly because employment, according to theories of contemporary employment and work organisation, is an increasingly abstract, contradictory and complicated social affair. What this means in the broadest terms is, as is the case with an over-reliance on theories of Asperger syndrome, attempts to reduce employment-related discrimination against people with Asperger syndrome should not be overly informed by uncritical accounts of contemporary employment.

So, what does all this mean in practical terms? Primarily, it needs to be recognised by all parties to reducing employment-related discrimination towards people with Asperger syndrome that good practice may involve the following. First, the theories of Asperger syndrome are required to understand the individual person with Asperger syndrome. Such theories should be used to understand the strengths and limitations of the individual person.

Second, using theories of contemporary employment and work organisation, an assessment is required of the employment environment the individual will be working in or is currently working in. Third, a co-ordinated plan, using both sets of findings, is required in order to identify where discrimination is likely to occur (or is occurring) and where some sort of reasonable adjustment is required. However, a key issue remains in that there is likely be very few if any people, even in large corporate HRM or occupational health departments, who could currently take on such a role.

What could be done, however, is as follows. In smaller organisations that are highly likely to rely on external support workers in such matters, is for external support workers to be trained in critical views of contemporary work organisations and employment. Funding for such ventures, as discussed earlier (e.g. Nesbitt, 2000; National Autistic Society, 2005; Beardon and Edmonds, 2007), is limited, yet such recommendations should result in a scarce, yet more effective supply of external support workers. In larger organisations, especially organisations that recognise trade unions or have non-union forms of employee representation, employee representatives could be given specialised training in Asperger syndrome and critical perspectives on work organisations and employment. Indeed, it has been argued by Booth (2014) that autism should be a trade union issue. The Transport and Salaried Staffs' Association, for example, currently trains employee representatives on how to better support employees with Asperger syndrome (and other neurodiverse conditions, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD) in relation to workplace development and learning (TSSA, 2015). Further, there is the potential to train Equality Representatives (e.g. see TUC, 2010) or Disability Champions (e.g. see Bacon and Hoque, 2015) to be active in the field of Asperger syndrome. Generally, however, such recommendations fit well with wider diversity management agendas, especially recent trends that have seen key actors in the discriminatory practices - line managers - increasingly involved in such practices (Riach, 2009).

Despite such recommendations a range of legal and practical limitations remain in relation to Asperger syndrome and employment. For instance, disability/equality representatives currently have limited statutory rights in the UK and this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. Employers, moreover, have in recent decades increasingly expressed a preference for individualised over collective approaches to managing employment and people management issues. As such, the onus appears very much on the efforts of a largely hidden and limited supply of external support workers, as well as largely hidden and limited supply of specialised trade union representatives, to convince employers to take the employment of employees with Asperger syndrome more seriously. With this in mind, future research should look at identifying and fully theorising the full range of good practice developed in organisations related to reducing employment-related discrimination towards people with Asperger syndrome. Further research should also give priority attention to support practices set in the context of contemporary employment and work organisation practices.

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