

An examination of the experiences of line managers who manage employees with Asperger syndrome, exploring how these are shaped by contemporary HRM policies.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2019

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This thesis includes material published in advance

COCKAYNE, A. (2017) Considerations of Asperger's syndrome for HR specialists. In. Caven, V. and Nachmias, S. Hidden inequalities in the workplace: A guide into current challenges, issues and business solutions. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

A copy of this published material can be found in the pocket at the end of the thesis.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my children, who by nature of their differences, have inspired this thesis, my husband Martin for his endless patience, love and support, and my supervisors, Val and Alastair for their belief and guidance. Without the participation of the volunteers who shared their experiences and personal stories this study would not have been possible, and my gratitude is also extended to all those who took part.

Abstract

Autistic people are known to have strengths which employers could harness productively, yet they experience persistently low employment rates and discriminatory outcomes (Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004; Baldwin and Costley 2014; Chen et al 2015). This is despite the protections from equalities legislation and the importance of employment concerns to wider health and social policy issues for autistic people (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman 2014). The role played by those who line manage employees diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome in these outcomes is important, but their experiences are less understood as studies have emphasised an autistic person's employment experiences without considering their managers' perspective. In part this has been because employers cannot easily identify their autistic employees (Morris, Begel and Weidermann 2015; Sarrett 2017), thus restricting research access to people with this hidden disability as well as their line managers.

This research adopted an interpretivist stance to explore the experiences of line managers and HR specialists working in six different organisations, drawing on the views of autistic employees as a valuable supplementary voice. The argument presented throughout is that line managers and HR specialists lack understanding of how socio-cultural forces within organisations shape their perceptions about the autistic people they employ, as well as how these create difficulties for these employees. The specific contribution of this thesis is to show the pivotal nature of the line manager in the quality of an autistic person's working experiences.

Empirical findings show that line managers feel their autistic employees have strengths which can enhance performance in a wide range of jobs requiring skill and intellect. The thesis illustrates how these strengths can be utilised in sectors other than software engineering and technology industries (Austin and Pisano 2017), or supported and low skilled employment settings (Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008; Hagner and Cooney 2005; Wehman et al 2016). It shows that although job role is a major shaper of managers' perceptions, crafting tasks or roles to accommodate preferences and optimise working life is an approach under used by managers. The line manager's role in developing trust to support an autistic employee's decision to disclose is established and mutual benefits are identified from disclosure. It is also apparent that managers experience difficulties and frustrations directly from managing an autistic person, some of which come from equalities legislation which neither considers the additional costs required nor fully supports them in addressing the challenges they face. The uncertainties and tensions they face appear to be exacerbated because they are managing someone with a hidden, rather than visible disability.

Theoretically, the social relational framework (Thomas 2004) identifies the organisational factors that shape a line manager's perceptions that the autistic person they manage is

disabled, consistent with equalities legislation, or that they have strengths. The framework is extended by showing how ableist practices create particular disadvantage for autistic people in respect of their capacities to be flexible. Neurotypical norms underpinning HRM policies and valuations of skill further shape managers' and HR specialists' perceptions about autistic employees in their capacities for teamworking, flexibility and their approach to work and career development.

The thesis provides evidence that to understand what actually 'is' the disability, HR specialists and managers must distinguish between what it is about being autistic and what else is happening in regard to the structural aspects of organisational life. Not knowing, or not being able to see that someone is autistic, misunderstanding about what being autistic means and ignorance of how HRM policies and practices can be discriminatory, determine the responses and frustrations that managers experience as well as poor employment outcomes for autistic people. Managers or HR specialists who have high levels of reflexive capacity will question if organisational HRM policies can deliver effective inclusion for autistic people, knowing that these are often based upon what is 'normal' or typical in a workplace. Finally, the thesis sets out the implications for policy in relation to autistic people in terms of skill utilisation, preferred job roles and approaches to diversity and inclusion management, areas which are increasingly relevant as legislators expect employers' understanding of AS to advance.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Department of Work and Pensions (DWP): the UK government agency responsible for welfare, pensions and child maintenance policy. It administers the State Pension and a range of working age, disability and ill health benefits to around 18 million claimants and customers.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders: is the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals worldwide. It is used for diagnosis and treatment and is important for collecting and communicating accurate public health statistics. It covers all mental health disorders for both children and adults. It also lists known causes of these disorders, statistics in terms of gender, age at onset, and prognosis as well as some research concerning the optimal treatment approaches. In 2013, the 5th edition of DSM reclassified Asperger syndrome as an autistic spectrum disorder.

National Autistic Society (NAS): is the leading UK charity for autistic people (including those with Asperger Syndrome) and their families, providing information, support and services.

Neurotypical: the term which describes an individual with typical neurological development, i.e. with cognitive functioning that is in line with most of the population. Being neurotypical means that a person does not have any developmental disorders. Someone who is not autistic or AS will often be described as neurotypical.

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Chapter 1. Introductory framing

1.1. *Background*

The focus of this exploratory study is upon managers who manage people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, a hidden neurodiverse condition classified variously as an autistic spectrum condition or autism spectrum disorder. Approximately 1 in 200 people are diagnosed each year (Brugha et al 2012) as having Asperger syndrome, a number which represents a significant minority of the working population. In the UK, these individuals are protected under the Equality Act 2010 as disabled people who have a choice as to whether they disclose their condition. The Act aims to be protective and inclusive, requiring employers to operate people management practices which do not discriminate against this population, yet knowledge remains scant about managers' experiences of how in practice they manage their autistic employees.

This chapter begins by briefly defining the terms neurodiversity, autism and 'Asperger Syndrome', moving next to consider the issues related people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome face in the employment context. The first issue is that despite legislative provision, they experience exclusionary outcomes, yet it is not at all certain how these occur nor what role their managers might play in alleviating or exacerbating these outcomes. Neither is it clear how managers are impacted by their experiences of managing people with Asperger Syndrome. A second issue is that employers lack knowledge about people with hidden neurological conditions like Asperger syndrome and particularly so about the strengths they have. This lack of knowledge has consequences on those who manage, given they are charged with applying legislation and operating organisationally prescribed HRM policies and practices.

The terms neurodiversity, autism and Asperger Syndrome are next introduced.

1.2. *Neurodiversity, autism and Asperger Syndrome*

Singer (1999) first used the umbrella term of neurodiversity to classify a group of neurological development disorders, including those termed autistic spectrum disorders. These are characterised by neurological features relating to the ways in which individuals process sensory information and handle social interaction. The particular form of neurodiversity this investigation explores is Asperger syndrome, a condition first identified by Hans Asperger (1944) a paediatrician working with adolescents. Notwithstanding some controversy surrounding his work, including accusations of eugenics (Silberman 2015; Chown and Hughes 2016), this investigation is inspired by

Asperger's observation that these young people had strengths alongside significant difficulties and seeks to explore managers' perceptions about both areas.

Asperger syndrome was labelled formally (Wing and Gould 1979; Wing 1981) as a neurodiverse condition (APA, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV 1994), in which individuals experience a combination of social difficulties, good verbal language skills and a higher than average IQ. A person is diagnosed by a clinician following a series of behavioural observations, detailed developmental histories and tests of cognitive ability and social responsiveness, which in combination show someone is significantly impaired in social and occupational functioning. As clinical science has established more knowledge about autism itself, the condition of Asperger Syndrome has been reclassified as a subset of autism spectrum conditions, the new criteria for which appeared in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA 2013). This change in classification occurred mid-way through this study and so the terms Asperger Syndrome, (hereafter referred to as AS), and autism are used interchangeably throughout. The change has methodological implications for future studies which are noted in Chapter 10.

Neurodiversity advocates believe strongly that these differences, however they have been labelled, are valid and natural pathways within human diversity which cannot nor should not be treated or cured. They are definite that there is no such thing as a 'normal' human brain (Armstrong 2015) and so neurodiverse people should be accepted as 'is' and their differences welcomed (Kapp et al 2013). Indeed, neurodiverse people have labelled people who are not neurodiverse as neurotypical; *'a term devised by the neurodiversity movement to describe persons who are not autistic, or the 'normal' majority'* (Owren 2013: 35). This separation is important in this study as it highlights that it is those who are not 'normal', who are labelled as such by those who are 'normal', who happen also to be the neurotypical majority. This distinction also signifies that managers will be dealing with both neurotypical and neurodiverse people within their teams yet knowing very little about the latter.

Highlighting the potential for autistic, including AS, people to display strengths, Byrd (2015) cites Dr. Ami Klin, Professor & Chief, Division of Autism and Related Disorders, Center for Translational Social Neuroscience, Emory University, USA, who has remarked that autistic people vary tremendously, *"from individuals who are burdened by severe to profound intellectual disabilities, to persons who are gifted and more competent than most in the community"*. Klin identifies that autistic people vary as individuals in their abilities, difficulties and preferences as well as being different to neurotypical people. This investigation is mindful that AS people are a heterogeneous population and seeks to highlight this by revealing managers' observations of areas of differences, as well as commonality, within their AS employees.

Having defined these key terms, the issues introduced are now explored further.

1.3. *Exclusionary employment outcomes*

Whilst 46.3% of people with disabilities are employed (DWP 2014), this reduces to approximately 16% for autistic adults (NAS 2016; Howlin et al 2004; Taylor and Seltzer 2011). Riddell et al (2010) places AS individuals as four times more likely to be unemployed than other adults with a more recognised disability. Both UK and Australian studies show that once employed AS individuals struggle disproportionately to maintain secure employment, suffering full or partial exclusion from the workplace (Richards 2012), 'mal-employment' and skills underutilisation (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004; Kanfsizer, Davies and Collins 2017). It is disturbing that outcomes for autistic people are so much worse than those experienced by people with physical disabilities and also somewhat surprising given that AS people have good verbal fluency skills, as well as higher than average levels of IQ (Baron-Cohen et al 2003; Assouline, Foley and Dockery 2012; Chiang, Tsai and Cheung 2014). By dint of these abilities, AS people in theory are the least likely of those on the autistic spectrum to experience employment difficulties. This raises the question as to why outcomes are so much worse for this group with a recognised neurological disability than for those with physical disabilities, despite both types of conditions being recognised and protected under employment legislation. Possible causes of negative and discriminatory employment experiences for people with physical disabilities have been shown to be connected to organisational barriers (Kulkarni and Lengnick Hall 2014) and to employers' beliefs that disabled people are less than '*ideal*' with a reduced capacity to perform (Foster and Wass 2012:707). However, for AS people the causes are less clear.

Seeking explanations for these exclusionary outcomes, Richards (2015) notes that employers and those who represent and advocate for employees and workers have low levels of theoretical knowledge about AS and autism, arguing that this results in AS individuals being placed into roles which exacerbate their impairments and do not play to their strengths. Employers do not understand how social demands and the constraints of physical working environments create problematic workplace experiences, agreeing with self-reports from AS individuals that they encounter low job satisfaction, motivation and poor earning capacity (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015).

Exclusion from work has individual, economic and social consequences impacting upon autistic people, their families and society at large (Cimera and Cowan 2009; Jarbrink et al 2007), whereas meaningful employment supports AS and autistic adults to develop independence, a strong personal identity, friendships, self-esteem and quality of life (Badone et al 2016). These outcomes will be less likely for autistic people who are under or unemployed (Hendricks and Wehman 2009; Hillier et al 2007; Nicholas et al 2015). This state of play means that autistic people appear to be restricted in their opportunity

to achieve their full potential, suggesting strongly they are not well served by existing protective legislation. UK legislation is underpinned theoretically by the social model of disability and so this analytical framework is discussed critically in Chapter 2, as a precursor to introducing a social relational lens as a more appropriate approach to exploring the experiences of the managers of autistic people in the workplace.

1.4. National policy – gaps in knowledge of employment issues for autistic people

Empowering autistic people through opening up employment opportunities was a key theme at the Autism-Europe 11th International Congress (Bolte 2017) and similar calls have been made to UK employers, particularly in the public sector and health care. The publication of 'Think Autism', a progress report on policies relating to autistic people (Local Government and Care Partnership Directorate 2016) has directed employers to be better at adapting job requirements and to provide autism awareness training for staff and managers. Underpinning these guidelines and noted in section 33 of the Think Autism report, is a sense that public awareness about autism needs heightening, particularly to the wider business community, to improve work opportunities for autistic people. However, the report does not specify how employers should treat their own AS and autistic employees, with only two of the fifteen challenges articulated relating specifically to employment, developing skills, living independently and securing a job. These limitations are consistent with reviews of policy and services where discrepancies in autism specific employment provision (Pellicano, Dinsmore and Charman 2014) have been highlighted. Debating World Autism Awareness Week, the UK Parliament identified that whilst specialist autism support services are expanding, employers particularly require more information about autism (House of Commons April 2016). This debate is likely to be a reference point in future decisions regarding legislation and policy intervention as strategy unfolds and is due for review in 2020. Despite these intentions, the most recent UK Government paper on disability and employment, entitled 'Work, health and disability green paper: Improving lives' (Department of Work and Pensions 2016), makes no mention of autism or neurodiversity, illustrating how bringing the topic into the public and hence the employers' domain, is not at all straightforward.

Extensive clinical studies have shown individuals at the low functioning end of the autistic spectrum have severe sensory and cognitive impairments, particularly in childhood (Nicholas et al 2016). This area of research has been justified in the main by the known high costs of providing lifelong support for such impairments (Reed, Osborne and Waddington 2011; Howlin et al 2004). However, far less work exists on how those with higher end functioning autistic spectrum conditions such as AS are affected in the same way. Critically, for this investigation studies have engaged more strongly with supported employment settings, often where people are 'employed' as volunteers, rather than in general employment (Mavranouzouli et al 2014; Bolte 2017). Knowledge is based upon

child not adult experiences, experimental not employment studies and unsurprisingly therefore the prevailing research agenda is also driven by clinical concerns (Matson and LoVullo 2009) rather than employment issues or targeted employment interventions. It is as though employment for autistic people is seen as difficult or not desirable, despite the national policy goal that barring exceptionally poor jobs, work is a factor in improving working lives for all (Taylor 2017). In contrast, studies of mental health and physical disability connect more tightly to address employment policy interventions as well as societal exclusion, community and health concerns.

Interdisciplinary perspectives are emerging as clinicians are realising employers play a significant role in maximising opportunities for neurodiverse individuals and that organisational factors are key in reversing exclusionary outcomes for autistic people (Bhandari and Khanal 2016). Specifically, Vogus and Taylor (2018), also clinical researchers, call for exploration of what it is that leaders do that affects autistic people.

1.5. Autism and Asperger syndrome- the condition

It is reasonable to assume that exclusionary outcomes for AS people are connected in some way to employers' lack of knowledge about autism and poor understanding of autistic strengths. Both arise from the complexity of the AS condition, noteworthy in that it is both a hidden neurological disability, exemplified in the positioning of AS people as disabled by legislation, yet also as a condition that can confer strengths. Straightaway, this duality contrasts with notions of physical forms of disability, in that disabled people are frequently viewed as impaired or restricted in some way, albeit the causes of these restrictions differ depending upon whether medical or social models of disability are applied.

In a large-scale study of autistic and non-autistic populations, Kapp et al (2013) concluded that autistic people could be perceived as having both positive and negative identities as well as coexisting skills and impairments. This duality has been succinctly captured in the legal context, as in Barry's (2012:31) defence of a claim for access to specialist support. Here, he posits support is needed not only to overcome disability, but *also* to fully utilise an autistic person's strengths:

In contrast to the doom painted by the parties for all untreated autistics, autistics are in the workforce, they are in academe, they are artists, architects, engineers, physicists, musicians, and writers. Many have, through the brilliance, innovation, impartiality, persistence, and courage with which they are gifted, disproportionately contributed to the progress and enlightenment of society.

1.5.1. Duality confers disability - the case for exploring the disabling aspects of AS

Clinicians have viewed differences in neurological functioning experienced by neurodiverse individuals as problematic, resulting in terms and labels of abnormality, disorder and developmental disability. Someone labelled as having an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is assessed to have a complex lifelong disability that affects the way they think, communicate, and their ability to live and work independently. The word disorder, assigns deficit, consistent with clinical research focus which for many years has viewed autism as a learning disability. Thus, an autistic spectrum *disorder* (ASD) indicates a person is dysfunctional in some way. Alternative terminology uses '*condition*', (ASC), signifying a more neutral placing, how that person just 'is' and how they think and act. Worth noting and addressed in Chapter 2, is that supporters of the social model would be likely to automatically describe AS, or autism, as 'disorder' on account of the status as a protected disability. This present study uses the term 'autistic spectrum condition' but recognises that competing views about autism exist and that impairments reported are real.

Clinical studies have shown that autistic people do experience difficulties with organisation, memory, concentration, perception, sequencing and listening, as well as experiencing an extreme need for predictability and order. They may also have problems in interpreting the thoughts and intentions of others within the constantly shifting context of social encounters (Frith 2008), difficulties in constructing meaning from the situational context (Vermeulen 2015) and are likely to experience disabling levels of anxiety (Tantam 2000). As a result of these clinical accounts, negative perceptions have emerged which actively portray autistic people as being deficient in some way and autism as a significant and problematic disorder, shaping negative perceptions of autism across wider society including, of course, employers. Supporting the case that disabling aspects do exist for AS people is the evidence presented prior regarding the problematic and exclusionary experiences that autistic people report.

1.5.2. Duality confers strengths - the case for exploring AS strengths

Although a recognised disability, AS has also been placed as a condition associated with particular skills. In a post on the TheAtlantic.com, neurodiversity advocate Harvey Blume (1998) first drew attention to this possible connection:

Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment? Cybernetics and computer culture, for example, may favor a somewhat autistic cast of mind.

Posting on the web site of the American Society of Learning and Development, Armstrong (2012) urges employers to focus “*their attention on differences, not disabilities, and in particular, that they discover as much as they can about the assets of their employees*”. Similarly, John Robison, neurodiversity scholar-in-residence at The College of William & Mary, is cited by Lewis (2014) as making the case for organisations to accommodate such variations in neurology:

Neurodiversity, from the standpoint of a human resources department, is poised to be the next civil rights frontier that will have to be dealt with... and poses challenges for both neurotypical individuals and employers. Workers must learn to understand and manage their own brain differences, and how and when to disclose it to colleagues and supervisors.

Wehman et al (2014) in the USA, following Hillier et al (2007) in the UK explored transitions from education into employment, both studies noting that young adults had skills as well as impairments which employers recognised and valued. These talents and special abilities have been established in the clinical domain as of interest and value to employers (Howlin, Alcock and Burkin 2005; Happé and Vital 2009; Happe 2015). Related to the general lack of knowledge about autism is that HR specialists and line managers know very little about autistic talents, as studies have focused upon problematic experiences (Krieger et al 2012; Morris, Begel and Weidemann 2015). Employers in the highly specific area of software design have sought to employ autistic people for their strengths (Grant 2015; Wang 2014; Annabi, Sundarasan and Zolyomi 2017), indicating that autistic people have valued skills. However, these aspects are underexplored in organisations at large and autistic people assumed to have limited interests outside such technical areas. Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) have shown that AS people can and do want to work in careers and roles outside stereotyped technology sectors and jobs with high detail, although again left employers’ views on these areas unexplored. Although there is growing interest in using the strengths that being neurodiverse confers (Krzeminska et al 2017), employers in general and managers specifically are yet unlikely to know when and how to optimise autistic strengths.

1.5.3. AS is a hidden neurological condition

Improving knowledge about managers’ experiences of autistic people in the workplace calls for consideration of how to understand and investigate an aspect of the human condition that is largely unseen. All things being equal, this is likely to be more challenging than studying aspects of difference which are visible, an observation borne out in the imbalance between studies of visible physical disabilities, which have been

studied extensively in employment (Foster and Wass 2012) versus knowledge of less visible disabilities such as autism and AS.

Researchers note disability is a form of difference and so should attract research attention (McGuire 2014; Qin, Muenjohn and Chetri 2014). However, whilst Kormanik and Nwaoma (2014) are clear that physical qualities and abilities are forms of difference, they do not discuss invisible disabilities as a primary aspect of difference. Disability has been viewed as a dimension of diversity along with age, gender and ethnicity (Bierema 2010), who also notes that HRD research has ignored actual inclusion issues for disabled people and in fact reproduces the exclusion by ignoring hidden disabilities. For others, disability in all its forms is “*glossed over if mentioned at all in conversations about diversity*” (Rocco, 1998:7). Procknow and Rocco (2016:3) further lament disability is ‘*sidestepped*’ in the HRD literature, seeing this as a lost opportunity to understand experiences, particularly those of people who have mental and cognitive disabilities which are under researched when compared to other identity markers such as race and gender. Muyia Nafukho, Roessler and Kacirek (2010) call for disabilities to be viewed as part of the wider diversity and inclusion agenda, noting this is difficult and citing the importance of environment, attitudes and expectations of employers and co-workers as well as the perceptions of people with disabilities themselves. However, no mention is made of how these socio-cultural factors impact upon hidden conditions such as autism and AS.

Where studies have attempted to explore autistic people and their managers, research access has been difficult because many people with a diagnosis choose not to disclose fearing discrimination or stigma (Morris, Begel and Weidermann 2015; Johnson & Joshi 2016). Some autistic people do not know they are autistic (Aggarwal and Angus 2015; Hickey, Crabtree and Stott 2018) or like neurodiversity advocates simply do not regard their condition as a disability (Kapp et al 2013; Lewis 2014). The key point is that hidden disabilities are somewhat more difficult to research than visible disabilities and other visible differences and is a major reason in explaining why hidden neurological disabilities like autism have been less well explored than physical disabilities in the employment context.

1.5.4. Case for improving knowledge about autistic employees from the line managers’ perspective

To varying degrees, line managers are responsible for managing the performance of those who work for them and the ways they do this are shaped by the various HRM philosophies and practices that surround them (Evans 2015; Shipton et al 2016). These are important structural dimensions in understanding how socio-cultural forces enable or constrain the contributions of their autistic employees and so are particularly relevant to their employment experiences, as Snyder et al (2010) has shown is also the case for people with physical disabilities. Listening to what line managers say is key in gaining

understanding as to why exclusionary outcomes occur and why skills are not well optimised. This thesis concurs with Richards' (2012:643) call for researchers to gather primary data *"not just from employees with Asperger's syndrome, but from the many parties to the problem"*. Taken together with legislative directives that managers should fully understand the nature of autism to make the appropriate workplace accommodations, there is a pressing need to explore line managers' experiences of managing autistic people.

1.6. Summary

Employers have a legal obligation to protect AS employees from discrimination and arguably a moral responsibility to optimise their experiences, albeit the exclusionary employment outcomes evidenced suggest their responses are ineffective. There is evidence that autistic people display both strengths and impairments in the workplace, yet whilst clinicians have acknowledged this duality, it appears that employers have been slower to do so, perhaps as they are influenced by legislation which places AS as disability. Whatever gives rise to these views, the effect has been to side-line the potential for neurodiverse skills at the expense of perceptions that certainly in the workplace, autism is a disability and autistic people are disabled. This investigation sets out to redress this imbalance by seeking to explore how and when managers come to notice the strengths their autistic employee demonstrate, as well as the disabling effects they experience. It seeks to uncover what it is about legislative directives, workplaces, managers and organisational policies and practises which shape these perceptions, matters which are socio-cultural in nature.

Understanding of what it is like to manage an autistic employee, particularly in regard to the effectiveness of current equalities legislation has been restricted, in part as research has been clinical and child centred, rather than employment focused. The hidden nature of the condition, voluntary disclosure and low disclosure rates mean that accessing autistic people in organisations and their managers is not at all straightforward. It is therefore unclear how line managers actually handle their autistic employees and what challenges they face in accommodating the disabling aspects of the condition, as well as in utilising fully the capacities that autistic people have. The many studies of the difficulties autistic people face lack the perspective of their managers, which is a significant omission given they are obligated to make legislative accommodations as part of their day to day role.

This thesis recognises the complexity this largely invisible difference creates for managers of autistic people, also that that autistic employees have characteristics that can be both disabling and also can be viewed as strengths. The hidden nature of AS in particular requires further explication to create meaningful understanding, a matter addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.7. Aims and objectives

These introductory issues have served to formulate the broad aims of this thesis. It is an exploratory study seeking to build knowledge and develop understanding for employers and ultimately policy makers concerned with autistic people. It is absolutely critical that employers develop a comprehensive understanding of autism, so that they can know more confidently what issues someone diagnosed with an autistic spectrum condition has to confront. Additionally, their knowledge of what autistic people can do with ease or difficulty in the workplace can be expanded. The focus of this study is therefore upon finding out more about how AS people with a recognised disability, experience work from the perspective of their line manager.

1.7.1. Theoretical objectives

Current employment legislation guides managers to adjust workplaces and avoid discriminatory treatment in their day to day dealings with autistic and AS employees. This protective legislation is underpinned by the social model of disability, an analytical framework which dominates approaches to managing disability in the employment context. Reflecting the observation that existing legislation does not serve AS people well, the first theoretical objective of this thesis therefore is to assess how the social model of disability supports managers in addressing the issues presented in managing autistic people.

Given the well documented criticisms of the social model (Oliver 2013; Thomas 2004) as an approach to understanding what happens to disabled people in the workplace, the thesis also considers if alternative theoretical frameworks would do so more fully. The social relational model of disability will therefore be introduced in the following Chapter as an underpinning theoretical framework for this investigation. This prompts the second theoretical objective which is to explore the extent the social relational model of disability aids understanding of the experiences of line managers who manage AS employees. Included in this exploration are considerations of how a social relational framework with its origins in theorising physical disabilities in the workplace, could help theorise about the particular socio-cultural forces which impact people with hidden disabilities. The thesis aims to assess if and how these forces shape managers' perceptions of their AS employees and their responses. It seeks to be critical by challenging views that disability automatically equates to impairment and considers how the social relational model might be enhanced to support understanding of hidden conditions.

Theorising about these matters without the perspective of the line manager is inevitably limited in its richness. Social relational approaches were developed with the experiences of the person with the disability uppermost and whilst they suggest organisational factors are important, these lie at an abstract level and not specific to the line manager. This

study has the explicit aim of exploring the specific experiences of the line manager in this situation and how their perceptions are shaped. A final aim is to examine whether the application of critical realist principles can improve understanding of this hidden condition, particularly in respect of the unseen neurological features that are integral to autism.

1.7.2. Applied objectives

The study also aims to explore more applied matters. On one hand employers seek to accommodate the disabling effects experienced by AS people, yet their lack of knowledge means they are unsure as to how to do this and unlikely to recognise the strengths that AS people possess. Therefore, the study seeks to offer empirically derived contributions to help employers and line managers understand more about the challenges and opportunities inherent in managing AS people. The thesis builds upon the knowledge already established about AS employees by deliberately seeking to explore the strengths autistic people have rather than solely the areas that they find problematic. The contributions to knowledge will come from exploring in detail the perceptions managers hold about autistic people, in so far as these come from their observations of their AS employees. Placing this investigation in more typical, rather than supported employment sites or heavily technology focused industries, should improve understanding for managers and for autistic people, in regard to employment matters that are important to both.

The structure of the thesis is next outlined.

1.8. The structure of the thesis

Some terms appear in the thesis which may be unfamiliar to non-clinicians, to those outside the HRM field and indeed to employers who have not yet encountered AS employees. A glossary of terms and abbreviations is therefore provided on page 5.

The dual and hidden nature of the AS condition, coupled with the shortfall in accurate knowledge about AS in the employment context, calls for a theoretical framework that recognises autism is a condition with a layered nature and with biological features, which in turn form the basis for the perceptions that characterise the social. Understanding these complex aspects of AS is necessary and so are introduced in the theoretical framework which emerges at the end of Chapter 2. The framework includes critical realist principles as well as aspects of the social relational approach to disability in the workplace. This theoretical framework is not without its limitations and these are discussed here also.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the literature review relevant to this study. Chapter 3 details what is known about the AS condition, outlining how this creates the personal and social effects that a social relational approach to disability recognises are important when

exploring disability in workplaces. Engaging with the clinical literature identifies the characteristics which distinguish autistic people from neurotypicals, noting only briefly there are various explanations as to what causes these. The focus is very much more upon how being autistic has implications for AS people and their managers which connect to exclusionary outcomes and to unexplored strengths. The emphasis is upon how these effects are perceived by line managers and the consequent decisions they make, rather than directly upon AS people, as these have been well documented by others. Chapter 4 of the literature review thus explores the role of the line manager by considering what is taking place within the organisational dimension and how this might shape their responses. This necessitates an exploration of the various socio-cultural factors affecting organisational life, including employment legislation and how the popular media portray autism and autistic people. Other socio-cultural factors affecting the interactions between managers and AS people include employers' valuations of skill and HRM policies and these are reviewed critically outlining how these might include or exclude AS people. The chapter closes by bringing together in a conceptual framework the organisational dimensions pertinent to a social relational approach, making it clear that these are important in moving from abstract notions to more specific identification of the factors affecting managers' experiences of hidden conditions in the workplace.

Chapter 5 provides the research questions which have emerged, moving to discuss how these were addressed and considering issues of research design and methodology. The hidden nature of AS creates substantial challenges for the research process which are discussed in detail in relation to access. The qualitative interpretative methodology and the epistemological underpinning of the study are consistent with the realist and relational approach to disabilities outlined in Chapter 2. The approach to selecting participants is discussed and the data collection methods presented. The data analysis procedures are described in detail and the development of the coding template used to structure the findings is outlined. The final section discusses the limitations of these methods and the impact that my own role as a researcher has had upon data collection, analysis and interpretation.

The findings from the study are presented across three chapters, all drawing upon social relational approaches in regard to how disability is conceptualised, the nature of legislation and valuations of skill. Chapter 6 details the knowledge and perceptions held by line managers and HR specialists about autism and about autistic people. Chapter 7 then explores managers' experiences seeking to understand how and when these become disability, strength or problematic in some way. Chapter 8 explores the reactions and responses of managers regarding work allocation, team contribution, interactions with others and how adjustments to working environments and roles are made. Chapter 9 brings together these findings by discussing the key themes which emerge in line with the aims of the thesis, which are to improve understanding of managers' experiences and

to extend theoretical understanding. Mindful that application of neurotypical norms to neurodiverse individuals can create intentional or unintentional indirect discrimination, the discussion explores the role of HRM in reproducing these and in supporting line managers.

The study is very much exploratory and closes with a summary in Chapter 10 of the extent to which the research questions have been answered. The key empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions are presented and the implications for policy and practice are also reviewed. Finally, a review of the study is offered with considerations of the many possible areas for future research, some which concern employers directly and some with the employment experiences of AS people.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the relevant theoretical underpinning of the investigation. Constructing a theoretical framework for this study starts from the observation that studying people with unseen neurological conditions is a challenging matter, quite different to studies of visible 'things' such as physical disabilities that are somewhat more straightforward to understand. The chapter begins by outlining the limitations of existing approaches discerned from the existing literature in regard to understanding autism and autistic people in the organisational context. It moves to examine how critical realist principles can help address the consideration of what autism and AS 'are', by differentiating the unseen and seen layers and discussing how the hidden nature of the condition is so significant throughout this investigation. AS is a disability protected by law and so the chapter next reviews how disability has been conceptualised and studied, showing the limitations of the social model in understanding disability in the workplace. It introduces the social relational approach to disability as a more useful theoretical framework, recognising this too has some limitations for exploring managers' experiences of their autistic employees. The theoretical principles emerging from this discussion are drawn together in a schematic representation to close this chapter.

2.2. Approaches to exploring hidden conditions

2.2.1. Scientific realism

Clinical studies seeking to understand the characteristics of autistic people are dominated by what is often termed 'positivism', but which might be better termed 'scientific realism', where it is assumed that 'facts' exist which can be ascertained using experimental methods. Such methods seek to construct closed systems within which regular causal connections can be identified, and indeed have furthered knowledge of autism as well as created new responses to the condition. However, two problems are manifest. One is that at the level of philosophy of science, facts are not there simply to be observed, rather these 'facts' are deeply influenced by the theories that posit their existence and the methods used to garner them. In particular, the argument has been made that what science does is to search for the mechanisms that cause the events that register empirically. The second is that these methods cannot be transferred to the social domain as the social world is an 'open' system which is not amenable to the artificial closure required by experimental methods. Organisations are very much 'open' systems where perceptions and opinions exist, leading critical realists to view knowledge gathered in this way as lacking social context and so far too 'thin' (O' Mahoney and Vincent 2014:16). Workplace complexities can never be replicated sufficiently to illuminate understanding of

managers' experiences of working with autistic people and thus experimental methods cannot provide the rich knowledge needed to explore their experiences.

2.2.2. Strong social constructionism

Responding to the critiques of scientific realism by social theorists and disability activists alike, some have sought to argue that the social domain is heavily socially constructed through language. Law and Urry (2005:396) emphasise the need for investigations into the social world to recognise that although 'things' (like autism) are 'real', they are also very much '*made*' by the social world, having multiple realities and enacted in different ways' (Law and Lien 2013). This approach would direct an investigation to focus solely upon how managers perceive an autistic person, attaching no meaning at all to the label given to them following a clinical diagnosis. The problem that strong social constructionism presents is that the bodily aspects of the condition disappear from view, leading to conclusions that changes in social arrangements can by themselves remove any impairments. This is a conclusion which does not correspond to the reports of the lived experience of autistic people and is a highly probable factor in creating the difficulties AS people have reported in employment.

2.3. Critical realism addresses the multi-layered nature of AS

As scientific realism focuses exclusively upon neurological mechanisms and strong social constructionism writes out the impact of such mechanisms, an alternative approach to understand the nature of a hidden condition like AS is needed. Thus, this investigation adopts critical realism, a meta-theoretical perspective that has been viewed as helpful, although '*relatively new*' (O' Mahoney and Vincent 2014:20) in workplace investigations. Lying between positivism and constructivism, critical realism represents a 'third' ontology which holds that an '*objective world exists independently of people's subjective interpretations which influence the ways it is perceived and experienced*' (O' Mahoney and Vincent 2014:2-3). Researchers are alerted to consider the multi-layered nature of the 'thing' they are investigating, but also to attend to the importance of organisational aspects such as structures, policies, practices and legislation.

The following section address the key features of the critical realist approach which are particularly relevant in this investigation.

2.3.1. The 'unseen' (the hidden) and the 'seen'

A strong attraction towards critical realism in this investigation comes through its notions of stratification and the corresponding ontological assumption that reality consists of hierarchically ordered levels and so is multi-layered. In regard to the condition of autism, one layer is unseen and remains hidden from our view. This layer consists of neural mechanisms, namely executive function (Russell 1997), weak central coherence (Shah and Frith 1993) and theory of mind (Baron-Cohen 1995). These are all clinically identified neurological features characterising someone diagnosed as AS which reside in the biological level and with causal powers, which critical realists (Sayer 2010; Porpora 2015) say are very important to note. In autistic people, these mechanisms produce psychological effects, which clinicians have observed vary in systematic and patterned ways from neurotypical individuals. As these have been observed in controlled experimental conditions, they have become established as facts.

Knowing how hard it can be to understand something which has a hidden component, an analogy drawn from the physical sciences; that of a rainbow, is presented to illustrate how identifying the unseen and seen constituent layers of something can further understanding (Mason 2017). Most people have seen a rainbow and at some stage, probably in childhood, have likely wondered as to how it is made. Most, again in childhood and uninformed by knowledge of refraction, assume that what they see is real. In fact, what they see is not at the real level but at the empirical. Figure 2.1 below illustrates that these layers of real, actual and empirical are distinct. The 'real' is the potential for light and water to interact, leading to the actual where light is refracted through the rain in the atmosphere. What someone sees empirically is the multi-coloured arch in the sky above them. Using this analogy in this investigation, the empirical level equates to managers noticing an autistic person struggling with eye contact or performing well on tasks requiring fine detail. These empirical effects come from neural mechanisms which, because they are unseen, make it very hard for managers to understand where these actually come from, yet do not prevent managers noticing that autistic people can be quite different to neurotypical people.

Figure 2-1 Stratified reality of AS using critical realist terms

Level/layer	Rainbow	AS
The empirical: that registered by the senses (and can be seen, heard, smelt)	A multi-coloured arch in the sky	Perceived failure to maintain eye contact (and which is different to neurotypical people)
The actual: that which has occurred	Splitting of the spectrum of light into its component parts by refraction through water particles	Unconscious direction of movement of eyes
The real: the mechanisms that produce the actual	The properties of light and water	Neural mechanisms shaped by deep brain connections.

Again, just like a rainbow, which is real in the sense it can be photographed and talked about, autism is also a real and objective condition, not an entirely subjective phenomenon. The focus of this thesis is on the perceptions of autistic people held by line managers and HR specialists, which, as actors they build upon to construct their own subjective interpretations. The importance of the distinctions sketched above is that they confirm that these perceptions are based on something that exists; they are not pure social constructions. It is not the task of this thesis to examine the hypothesised examples of the actual and the real; indeed, the examples given can only be illustrative and are the focus of research by others. The critical point is that the division between what is seen and what is not seen, is very important in this investigation and informs the theoretical framework which appears at the end of this chapter.

Critical realism rejects absolutely the strong constructionist position that there may be no neurological condition at all, a position which would render AS people as just 'different' and deny someone's diagnosis. Referring to high profile investigations of child abuse, Pilgrim (2017) warns that strong social constructionist approaches to research can be dangerous, in that real and very damaging events are overlooked, which in extreme can lead researchers to conclude that some things are all 'made up'. Mooney (2016) also

rejects the position of those who are sceptical or indifferent to causes of mental illness and who remain content to view it as a condition which is purely socially constructed. A 'weak' social constructionism (Sayer 2010) is preferred in investigating managers' perceptions of this complex condition, in line with evidence from neurodiversity advocates (Silberman 2015; Goldstein-Hode 2014; Ortega 2009) and from autistic people talking about their own experiences (Baldwin and Costley 2015; Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008), that perceptions are indeed dependent upon social matters. A weak social constructionist approach would also say that even if we accept that the condition of AS 'is' and exists, it remains impossible to determine the actual truth. All that can be done is to explore and reinterpret findings and so ultimately all interpretations are subjective. Critical realists would agree too that it is impossible to claim that anything is completely objective, and so what is 'true' needs to be sensitive to the complex nature of social reality.

2.3.2. Understanding disabilities – the hidden layer

Critical realist approaches to disability have recognised disability has many layers, viewing disability as '*a complex dialectic of biological, psychological, cultural and socio-political factors, which cannot be extricated except with imprecision*' (Shakespeare & Watson 2002:22). Seeking a better understanding of mental illness, Mooney (2016) has also applied this stance to uncover its constituent layers, which like autism and AS are sometimes hard to distinguish yet have unarguable effects on the sufferer as well as others around them, some of which are observable and some of which are not. Accessing the subject, who in Mooney's study was Laura, a young woman with mental illness, a critical realist approach to analysing interview responses enabled perceptions of what causes mental illness to be challenged. Mooney identifies that causes of mental health have their roots in biomedical structures as well as social support, concluding that identifying these multiple, complex and contingent causalities and mechanisms is the best way to deliver enriched understanding of a hidden condition. This is a further attraction in this investigation as it supports the earlier observation that it is very hard indeed to understand those things that cannot easily be seen.

Critical realism also offers a commitment to understanding the 'person' and their capacities for reflection and moral choices, emphasised by Mooney (2016), in her assessment that individual resilience is important. This approach supports the existence of agentic qualities in the person affected, although she emphasises the centrality of the patient rather than others who interact with the subject. The realist stance adopted also raises important moral and ethical questions which are pertinent to this investigation given the employment exclusion experienced by AS people and the associated undervaluation of autistic strengths.

2.4. Theories of disability in the workplace

Having positioned the investigation as one that seeks to explore strengths, the fact that legislation classes AS a disability directs this section to begin by considering how disability has been theorised and understood in the workplace. It explores how these approaches have impacted upon exclusionary outcomes for AS people in regard to their disability, which for many remains very much hidden, undisclosed and undeclared. Mindful of the focus upon managers, these theories are examined as to how they support understanding of how and why employers and managers face challenges in managing AS people.

2.4.1. Moving from medicalised to socially constructed approaches to disability

Early medicalised approaches to disability made an automatic link from being disabled to being impaired, an inevitability (Goffman 1968) which led to assumptions that some kind of intervention in the workplace must follow. Usually these assumptions were made by others who are not disabled, leading to interventions which granted disabled people access to the labour market and capacity to function within the workplace, all the time against normative and non-disabled standards. Constructing disability in this way has justified exclusion or limited participation in the workplace of people with disabilities on economic grounds, in that disabled people are assumed to be less productive and that interventions will be costly.

These assumptions have been challenged through recognising that disability is not an inevitable consequence of impairment, rather it is that people become disabled because of the barriers that society in general and workplaces specifically impose, rendering disability as something that is entirely socially constructed. Such criticisms shifted research towards the role that societal and work environments play in oppressing people with disabilities, creating exclusionary outcomes and politicising the situation of disabled people (Oliver 1990; Barnes and Mercer 1997; Barnes and Mercer 2005; Patrick 2012; Jones and Wass 2013). Eventually this led to legislation positing that responsibility for addressing the challenges and hurdles faced by people with disabilities should lie primarily with employers, rather than the individual with the disability. Indeed, current employment legislation is predicated on assumptions that adjustments, assessed as reasonable by employers, can modify work and working spaces to mitigate a recognised disability. Thus, employment outcomes for disabled people will improve and their exclusion from workplaces prevented. Employers have responded by changing those aspects of workplaces that restrict someone's activities, for example providing a ramp so that a wheelchair user can access spaces otherwise only accessible via steps. The social model of disability has been the predominant theoretical perspective in understanding the experiences of disabled people in the workplace since its inception as a protective

instrument against the exclusions encountered by people with disabilities (Oliver 2004; Foster and Wass 2012). Yet, because managers know so little about what being autistic means, acting to improve inclusion requires them to interpret generic prescriptions as to what is 'reasonable' in specific contexts, which is likely to be difficult.

2.4.2. Critique

Both medical and social model approaches to disability have attracted critique. In brief, the medical model has neglected the importance of social matters, a limitation that has been well documented (Hughes and Patterson 1997; Barnes and Mercer 2005). The social model has also been criticised for failing to consider that impairments play a part in causing disability and exaggerating the significance of societal barriers and norms as sources of oppression for disabled people (Shakespeare and Watson 2002). Pilgrim (2015) has written extensively from a critical realist perspective on mental health, arguing that existing perspectives which medicalize such hidden conditions are limited.

Returning to the wheelchair user, it is clear that the social model does not fully account for how disability in the workplace is understood. For example, whilst providing the ramp will undoubtedly lessen a wheelchair user's restrictions as they can now move up and down the levels like non-impaired others, it does not fully explain why some of these 'others' (as well as the person themselves) may still regard that person as disabled. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) agree, adding that being impaired is a quite different term to being disabled. This distinction between the impairments associated with the condition and socially imposed matters is highly relevant in this thesis which seeks to explore how both these areas create challenges for those who manage autistic people. In doing so it supplements existing knowledge about autistic people and their struggles with working life. Autistic people have reported they find the social world and specifically the employment world difficult and confusing and have cited their difficulties in 'reading' others, engaging in meaningful social interaction and in being flexible. Knowing that all these effects have been shown in both clinical (Baron-Cohen et al 2003; Tell and Davidson 2015; Eack et al 2015) and employment studies (Haertl et al 2013; Muller, Schuler, and Yates 2008), it appears that no matter what legislative accommodations are made arising from socially constructed models of disability, the social model of disability is insufficient in understanding the experiences of autistic people at work. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely it will be helpful in developing understanding of their managers' experiences either.

A further criticism of medical and social models is that they have viewed disabled people as a homogeneous group and have failed to explore how individuals' experiences differ when considering how to modify environments. This is acknowledged by Oliver (2004) in his later studies. Certainly, autism and AS are not collective conditions, as evidenced by the wide variations people experience in social matters, for example how they tolerate

light and noise. As Chapter 1 has shown, understanding the spectrum nature of the condition is very important in this investigation.

Expanding upon critical realist stances in studying physical disability outlined in the previous section, Williams (1999:803) is clear that social models neglect the 'real' entity of the body, in that they '*write the body out*' completely when trying to understand how disabled people experience society and so remain a problematic approach to disability. Denying the causal link between illness, impairment and disability is a form of essentialism which naively distances the bodily problems from the actual impairment or physical trauma. Downplaying someone's impairments then (incorrectly) implies that disability is entirely about social oppression. Williams (1999:806) recognises that disability arises from this real body as well as from the social: "*the body in short, diseased or otherwise, is a real entity, no matter what we call it or how we observe it. It also, like all other social and natural domains, has its own mind-independent generative structures and causal mechanisms*". Given the neural features established as being present in autistic people and which are absent in neurotypical (non- autistic) people, it is critical to take the opposite view and thus '*write the body in*' to underpin this investigation. The key word is generative in that it signifies that the level of the biological is important to develop understanding of what happens to and around that person as a result.

2.4.3. Integrative approach

The focus of both medical and social models upon physical rather than mental impairments perhaps points to why neither alone can explain the complex nature between a person's health condition, their ability to function and various contextual factors including social attitudes, the working environment, individual coping styles, social background and education. These limitations spurred the development of the 'biopsychosocial' approach (World Health Organisation 1980) which provides a more integrative view of disability. Impairment is acknowledged as real in line with the medical model, *as well as* socially constructed, thus someone is not automatically disabled, but only when their particular impairment limits employment. An individual may have one leg, but if they can still walk and function normally will be disabled only if she or he is then excluded from activities which are open to others and so restrict potential or performance. The bio-social-psychological model to managing disability has been used extensively in welfare and employment policy, although this conflation in approach has been criticised by disability activists (Shakespeare, Watson and Alghaib 2017) as a ruse to get people working at all costs, particularly those who are physically disabled. This integrative approach aligns closely to realist principles, through its holistic approach to understanding causes of a patient's disease, but lacks epistemologically in that it does not discuss how it can be known confidently that patient and the doctor share a common

understanding of the label assigned to any particular condition. Certainly, mental health patients very much make their own meaning of their state of mind, and autistic people like many with neurodiverse conditions, construct their own interpretations of what the condition means to them. Some autistic people and on some but not all occasions, will agree with the legal classification of autism as disability. Sometimes they will regard being autistic as a condition conferring superiority over neurotypical people, whereas other times they simply do not have a view either way; after all able-bodied people do not necessarily stop to consider they 'are' able bodied and indeed if they did, would likely be considered unusual.

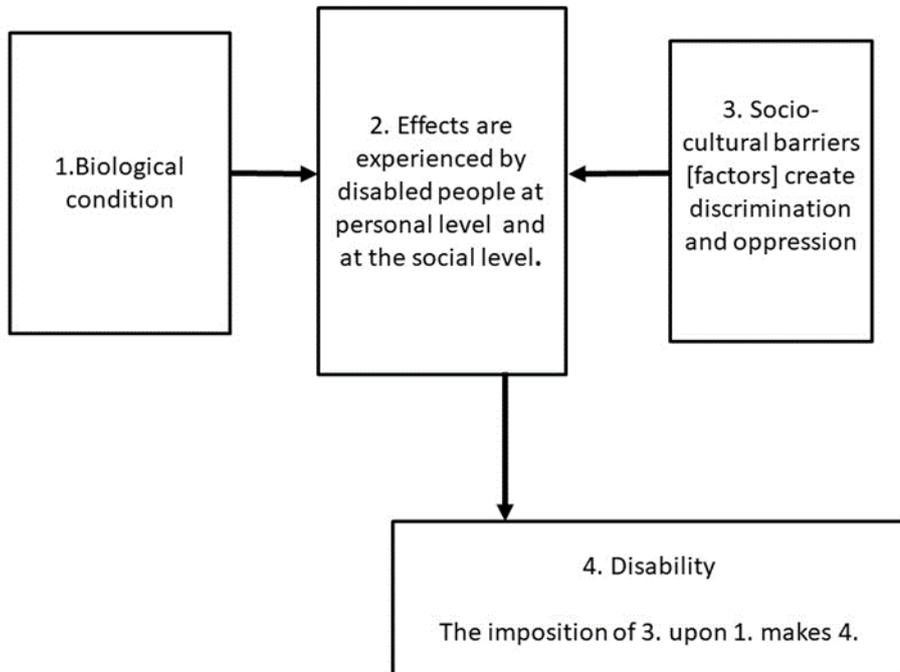
2.5. Case for social relational approach to understanding autism in the workplace

For Oliver (2013:1025) criticism of the social model is justified, although distracts from the more important matter of improving outcomes for disabled people in the workplace. His view that the social model has '*barely made a dent in the employment system*', resonates with one aim of this study, which is to consider why, nine years on from the Equality Act, managers still encounter challenges in enacting accommodations for their autistic employees and perhaps why in turn autistic people fare so badly.

What is needed is a social relational understanding of autism and for this the thesis turns to Finkelstein (2001), who developed the approach from his desire to understand and remove the oppression of physically disabled people. Disability is not contingent on the impairment someone has, which is usually a condition with a medical diagnosis, instead disability is very much connected to the relationships with others and their perceptions. It also means recognising that a person with impairments becomes disabled only when barriers which are wholly social in origin are imposed upon top of the impairment. Thus, without the ramp a wheelchair user is not disabled, just restricted in mobility, becoming disabled only when they encounter steps which stop them (but not others without impairment) from walking into that same office. This notion of disability requires the state of impairment is viewed as an entirely separate matter from the label or state of disability; instead it is the interplay (i.e. the relations) between the restricted activity and the phenomenon of disability, as well as others perceptions of what someone can do, that are important. This approach allows broader conceptualisations of what disability means than that offered by the social model, which claims that without the ramp someone is automatically disabled.

Adapting Reindal's (2008:143) framework for discussing disability in the special educational needs context, the social relational approach is reproduced below:

Figure 2-2 Social relational approach to disability



In social relational terms the focus is upon how the imposition of socio-cultural barriers (Box 3) upon the condition itself (Box 1) creates disability. This is important given that line managers operate in a context where legislation directs them to accommodate disability by attending to social barriers, for example when employers are required to supply visual aids for a visually impaired person. The social relational approach retains these notions by highlighting the elements of discrimination and oppression that the social model is imbued with. A strength of this social relational approach as Reindal (2008:144) concludes is that it also allows researchers to make the important distinction between *'someone's personal experiences of social restrictions due to their reduced function in a social setting, versus imposed social restrictions in social settings'*. In effect Reindal recognises that two levels of analysis are possible. At one level the approach exposes what might be needed to adjust to the experience of disability on an individual level. This suggests it is possible to discuss social effects as something other than just social barriers. For example, the discomfort a visually impaired person feels may be as much to do with the isolation they feel because they cannot see the same office dashboard that others can, as it might be from the physiological aspects of eye strain. Reindal (2008:144) also proposes that concept of *'additionality'* is valuable, prompting

enquiry into what additional social, cultural and environmental mechanisms exist which constitute social impositions upon someone with an impairment which comes directly from their condition. These are signified by Box 3 in the figure above.

2.5.1. Critique of social relational model as applied to autism and AS

Finkelstein's thinking emerged from his personal experiences about visible physical disabilities rather than hidden neurological conditions, both classed as disabilities by clinical science and the law. Social relational approaches have been used to investigate the impact of physical disability upon physical activity (Martin 2013) and to understand the experiences of pupils and their parents in special needs education, some aspects of which are visible and some which are not (Reindal 2008). Neither topic is immediately apparent as specifically relevant in this study, although Martin's conclusion that individual, social and environmental factors matter in understanding how disabled people seek to engage in activities designed for abled bodied people has some interesting parallels with neurodiverse employees seeking to work in neurotypical workplaces. Martin's intention was to allow the disabled person, the special needs pupils or their parents (the subjects) to tell their own stories of how their reduced function has enriched and restricted their own lives. However, in this investigation the predominant subject is the line manager not the autistic person and it is therefore the managers' perspectives that take priority. More recently social relational approaches have been adopted to explore the lived experiences of working people with hidden disabilities (Sang, Richards and Marks 2016), who make an important contribution in acknowledging these experiences are also subject to gendered constructions. However, the focus upon neurodiverse employees rather than those who manage autistic employees means that a gap remains in understanding the perceptions of their managers.

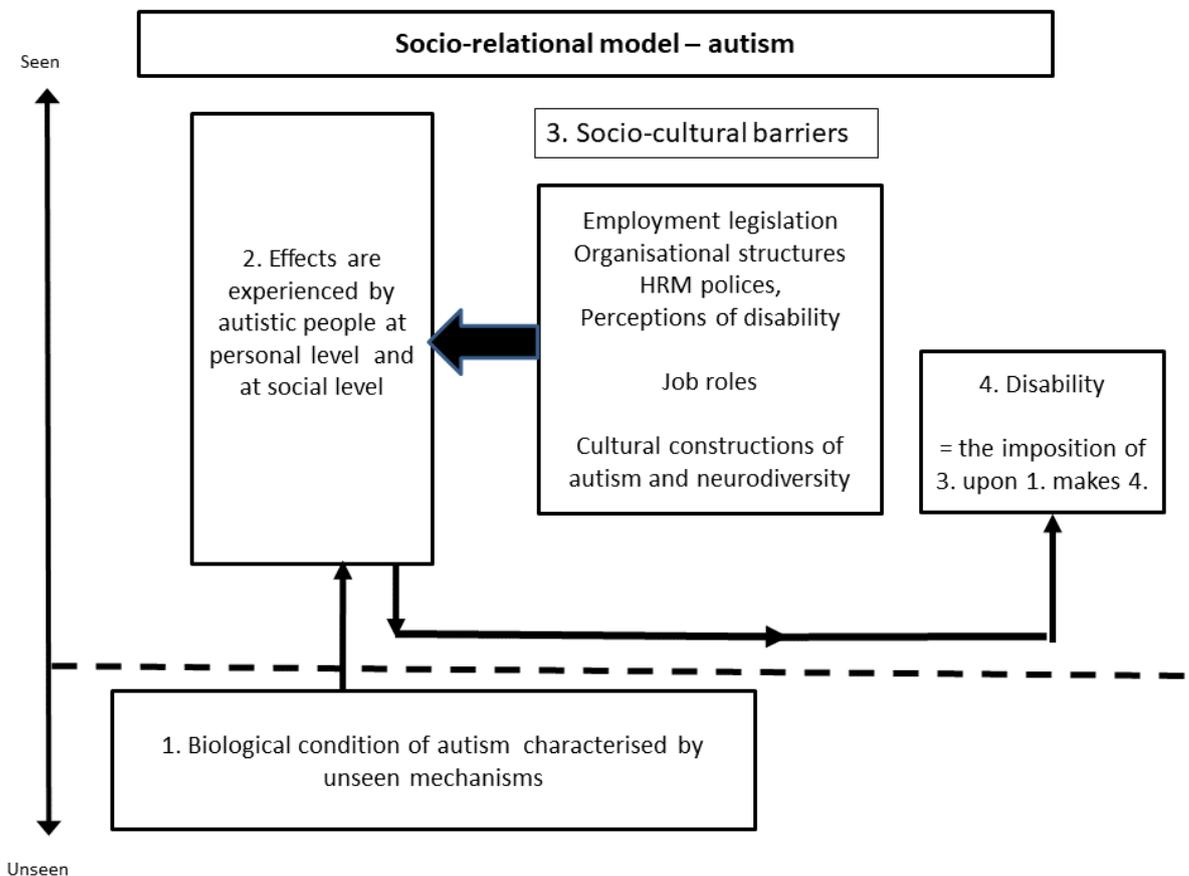
A further problem in using the framework as it stands is one of omission, in that it considers disability but lacks any explicit mention of strength. The closest it comes to doing so is to talk about activities that are not restricted, indicating that at best, autism is a condition is something that is neutral. This view contrasts with knowledge from clinical and more limited employment domains (Happe and Vital 2009; Baron-Cohen et al 2003; Austin and Pisano 2017) that autistic people have strengths. An interesting semi-autobiographical account of a young AS man, Peter (Badone et al 2016), is very clear that being autistic is disabling, noting too how key employment has been in equipping him with coping abilities and developing his own potential and skills. All these relational insights reinforce this investigation's aim of exploring further what it is about simply being autistic as well as the employment context, which might shape managers' perceptions that their autistic employees can be disabled, show strengths or indeed show both.

Finkelstein recognised that there are aspects of some physical disabilities, for example spinal injury, which are open to medical advances and over time remove the impairment. In effect, these advances might negate the restricted activity and the need to make social accommodations in the workplace. However, in the case of autism, neurodiversity advocates (Purkiss 2016) have settled at a position where cures are entirely inappropriate let alone possible, instead neurological differences are to be embraced. Clinicians too (Baron-Cohen 2015), are shifting their views from seeing neurodiverse and autistic people as disabled and towards understanding their differences. For the purpose of this investigation AS is an innate, irreducible biological condition that accompanies autistic people throughout their whole lives.

2.5.2. Applying social relational approach to AS and autistic people

The social relational model lends itself well to exploring how AS and autistic people can be seen as disable, by considering socially imposed forces as well as the condition itself. Thus, it forms the basis of the theoretical framework and is shown below.

Figure 2-3 Social relational approach to disability adapted for autism



The dotted line in this schematic indicates that the condition of autism is one where there is a separation of the unseen and seen aspects, characteristic of the stratified and multi-layered nature of AS and autism. The biological AS condition is depicted in Box 1 showing its unseen mechanisms, namely weak central coherence, theory of mind, and executive function. These will be discussed in more detail in the literature review, but for now the important point is that they create differences, which have been reported as reduced function or impairments, giving rise to particular effects.

Box 2 shows that autistic people experience these effects at a level personal to them and at the social level too, effects which can restrict their activities and impede functioning. For example, at the personal level an AS person is likely to find it difficult to read emotions and so find roles with requirements for empathy also hard to perform. At the social level, an effect that managers might notice is that an AS employee struggles with particular social interaction in which empathetic skills are required. Separating these effects upon autistic people in this layered manner allows analysis without returning to an individual approach, much like the autobiographical accounts autistic and AS people have provided to describe their employment experiences (Higashida 2013; Badone et al 2016).

At this point it is worth noting there are some studies showing autistic women experience disproportionately poorer mental health than autistic men, a disturbing finding which reinforces the need to explore how gender may play a part in the experiences of neurodiverse people, as Sang, Richards and Marks (2016) have indicated is possible. Thus, Chapter 3 discusses the role that biological and sociocultural forces play in these differential experiences, clarifying that this present exploratory investigation will surface, but not explore in depth, how the personal effects experienced by autistic people may intersect with their gender.

Socio-cultural factors have been shown to be important in understanding disability (Reindal 2008; Martin 2013), which for both Thomas (2004) and Finkelstein (2001) is also key to explorations of disability in the workplace. These oppressive forces resonate with the discriminatory experiences of autistic and AS people, necessitating these principles are retained in the theoretical framework adopted. Box 3 depicts those aspects which are wholly socially imposed on top of the AS condition itself. In brief, these categories include the ways that employment legislation and HRM policies shape perceptions of disability and valuation of skills. Organisational structures are very significant too, given this is an organisational investigation of how line managers operate. Thus, job role is included as a socio-cultural imposition to reflect the accounts autistic people have provided as to how important this is to their employment experiences. Externally, the potential for media portrayals about autism to influence managers' perceptions is also noted. These become areas to review in more detail in Chapter 3 and

4, in particular how these forces shape how managers perceive and respond to their autistic employees.

The social relational approach recognises that individual disability is a phenomenon contingent upon the social hindrances and restrictions that are imposed on top of the effects that impairment may bring about for the individual. Thus, there is a need to separate the effects created by socially imposed barriers (Box 3) from those that are a feature of being autistic (Box 1) in order to better understand autism in the workplace. Both are important and separating them will allow exploration of managers' perceptions in relation to their autistic employees' experiences. This thesis seeks to explore the personal and social effects of this hidden disability from the perspective of managers, venturing beneath surface observations and justifying a '*revival*' of the social relational understanding of disability (Thomas 2004: 580). The theoretical contribution will be to show in more precise terms how both elements impact upon line managers and in turn AS people. This will allow the development of a conceptual framework which places the line manager as central to this investigation.

2.6. Chapter Summary

Autism and AS are real conditions with distinctive attributes and capacities which attract a label of autistic for those who have the condition. Both the label and the attributes emanate from approaches named broadly as positivist or scientific realist and about which clinical science has yielded substantial knowledge. The existence of unseen neural mechanisms that clinicians know about has contributed to the difficulties in studying autistic people in the workplace, which in turn has hampered research into their managers' experiences too. Critical realist principles have been applied in studies of others' perceptions of conditions similar to autism by nature of their hidden neurological basis. This, this approach is assessed as helpful in constructing the theoretical framework for this investigation. It allows for an understanding of the condition itself, a necessary precursor to exploring and understanding managers' perceptions, reactions and responses to managing AS people.

Applying social relational notions that impairment does not in itself necessarily constitute disability, enables the investigation of where and when autistic characteristics can become strength or problematic issues in the workplace. This investigation focuses upon the social effects as seen by managers and touches also upon the personal effects their autistic employees talk about. It explores how socio-cultural factors result in restrictions and hindrances to AS employee, as seen by their managers. The interplay between the condition itself, the effects and these factors then becomes central to the analysis and interpretation of the experiences of managers. The social relational model was not developed specifically as an approach to exploring hidden disabilities and so is not without its limitations for this investigation. However, it will be a useful framework for

exploring matters such as how managers apply employment legislation for AS, a hidden neurological condition.

Discussing critical realist principles alongside the social relational approach to exploring autism in the workplace, suggests strongly there is a good 'fit' between them, in that both identify the importance of the social as well as the discussing the condition itself. Using these to construct the theoretical framework in Figure 2.3 will extend understanding of this complex condition and allow the investigation to make theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge about hidden neurological conditions from the perspective of line managers. It will allow the investigation to frame the social and organisational dimension.

These first two chapters have established that the hidden nature of AS, a neurological disability, make it both a challenging and interesting topic to explore in the organisational context. The following two chapters elaborate on the aspects that have been outlined to date. Chapter 3 reviews what is known about the condition of autism and the experiences of autistic people in more detail, emphasising throughout the implications for the employment context. Chapter 4 then outlines some key features of that employment context, with particular emphasis on the central importance of the line manager.

Chapter 3. The AS condition

3.1. *Introduction*

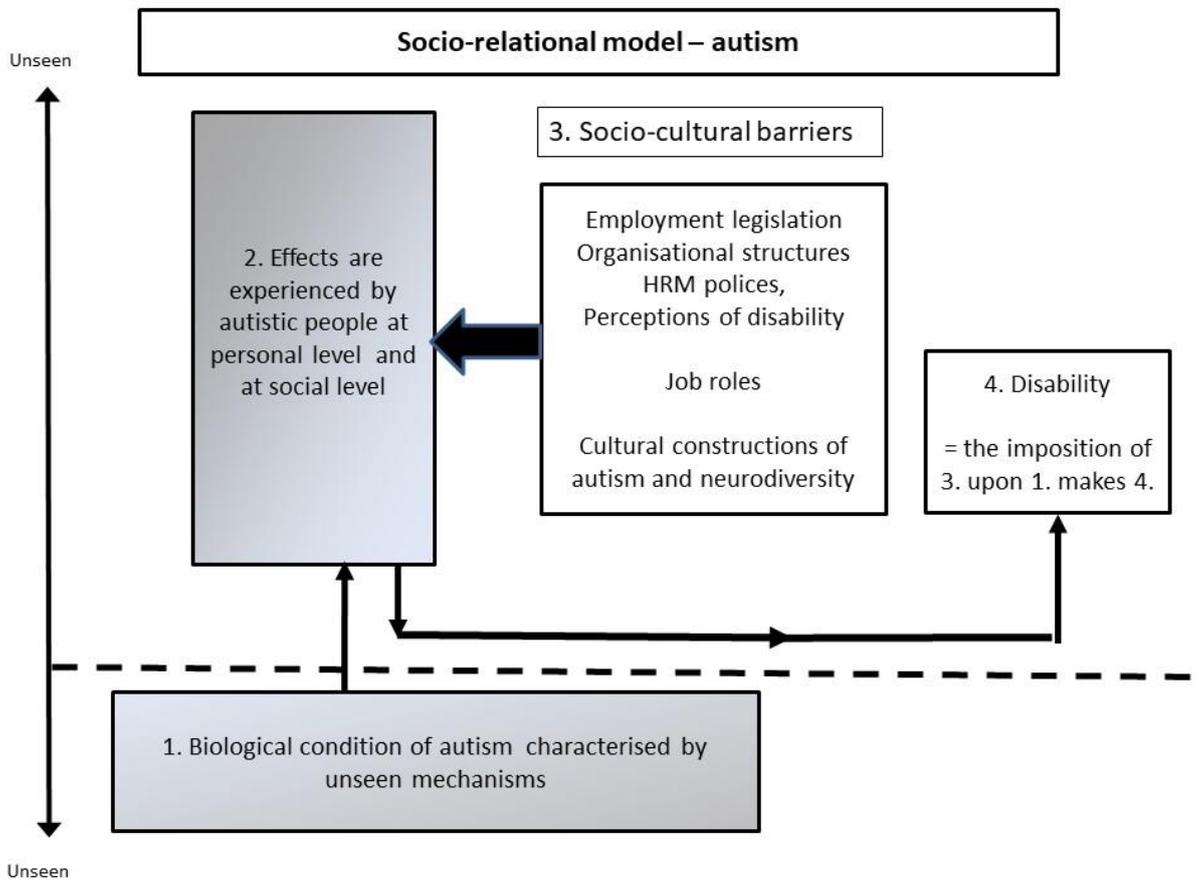
The theoretical framework chosen for this study highlights that autistic people experience personal and social effects arising partly from hidden neurological mechanisms. Thus, this chapter provides an overview of the knowledge clinical science has established about these mechanisms and how they are linked to the individual differences AS people have. It surfaces some of the ways that these differences might impact the employment relationship from the perspective of the employer, particularly pertinent given that autism research has focused upon clinical, health and social care concerns, rather than the employment context and the perspective of those who manage autistic people. Clinical findings are important to review in this investigation in that they establish some facts about autism and AS. These will be helpful to support the findings about the far more subjective experiences of managers and autistic people in the workplace.

3.2. *The biological condition of autism; key concepts and how they create difference.*

This section explores the condition of autism in more detail and briefly examines the neural mechanisms the realist approach detailed in the theoretical framework has identified are an integral aspect of autism. These include theory of mind, weak central coherence, executive function and hyper/hypo sensitivities, important concepts to discuss as they give those working in organisations the opportunity to grasp fully a sense of the strengths and difficulties that being autistic confers. This section is informed but not dominated by the clinical literature, aiming to show how these mechanisms create both the personal and social effects that the social relational model of disability identifies as existing in someone labelled as disabled. This knowledge of hidden neurological mechanisms is then connected to the personal effects and the differences (the social effects) that they create, in order to understand these in relation to the skills and attributes commonly articulated as valuable within organisations. It explores how these personal effects have the potential to be interpreted by line managers as strengths, or as disability, via the imposition of these valuations.

The theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter is reproduced, using the shaded area to highlight that the condition itself will be explored.

Figure 3-1 Social relational model adapted for autism highlighting biological condition



3.2.1. Theory of Mind and 'mindblindness'

The early observations of Kanner (1943) and Asperger (1944) have been followed with extensive clinical studies, demonstrating that autistic people differ from people who are not autistic, through the particular ways they process cues from others' facial expressions, language and the situational context. Somehow, autistic people are blinded to various aspects of situations, particularly in attending to how another person is feeling or thinking. These are the personal effects of being autistic, named first as 'theory of mind', later as 'mindblindness' (Baron-Cohen 1995) and extensively evidenced in clinical studies which Annex 1 details, including the 'Unexpected Transfers Test' (Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith 1985) and the 'Strange Stories' test (Happe 1994; Jolliffe and Baron-Cohen 1999). Further studies of theory of mind have shown how hard it is for autistic people to decipher what someone else is trying to convey through their tone of voice (Rutherford, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2002), or through their eye contact (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright and Jolliffe 1997). Highly intelligent AS individuals find it hard to decode facial expressions from photographs, possibly because they are less attuned to the social world and less likely to seek out social meaning in the ways that neurotypicals would

(Chawarska, Klin and Volkmar 2003). Both child and adult studies (Tell and Davidson 2015; Riby, Whittle and Doherty-Sneddon 2012; Eack et al 2015) have found AS people have difficulty in distinguishing between happy, neutral and negative facial expressions, making it hard to interpret other people's emotions or understand easily what they are thinking or feeling, characteristics which have led to autistic people being described as having an 'odd' social profile (Montgomery et al 2016; Ghaziuddin 2010). Such studies are clinically based, frequently child centred and do not examine work or employment scenarios as this investigation does. Consistent with calls for this kind of experimental research to cross over in the employment context (Vogus and Taylor 2018), Murray et al (2017) showed similar effects in less experimental conditions, but lacking managers' perspectives.

3.2.2. Mindblindness; decision making, logic, intuition and emotion

Mindblindness also affects how autistic people weigh up the social and situational context before making decisions. Taking a non-clinical setting first, to provide some context to the interest in decision making as an organisational competence, Kahneman (2011:13) identifies that humans have the capacity to solve problems and make decisions by calling either upon intuitive or deliberative thinking. Intuition, 'System 1' thinking involves effortless and non-conscious processing which is characterised by 'gut feel', whereas 'System 2' thinking is more effortful, requires deliberate consideration and takes longer, in short being reliant upon deep thinking and use of logic. Kahnemann has shown that people frequently make decisions based upon their intuitive 'gut feel', which can turn out to be wrong or somewhat irrational, simply because human nature means our emotions sometimes make it difficult to move away from the evident facts. Additionally, most people do not like uncertainty, have an inbuilt tendency to expend little cognitive effort and a desire to see patterns or trends whether or not these actually exist. Errors and poor decision making are compounded further because people are not always aware that their decisions are based upon personal prejudices or bias (Sadler-Smith and Shefy 2004). Kahneman suggests therefore that the majority of individuals, when faced with a problem to solve, will use the quicker and less effortful 'System 1' in preference to the more considered 'System 2' thinking. Although not commenting where this group of 'most' are to be found, a connection between this preference for deliberative reasoning and autism through different emotional preferences is alluded to (Kahneman 2011:76). Methodological weaknesses in this proposition are those related to experimental derivations of decision-making, for example the '*bat and ball puzzle*' (Kahneman 2011:45-46) is not analogous to how workplace problems are solved or how decisions are made.

As far as organisational scenarios are concerned, making important decisions based purely on intuition can be problematic if, for example, the people making decisions have

close emotional ties to others involved in that particular situation. Intuition is often expressed as emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996) and frequently cited as a requirement for individuals working in customer service or in management and leadership roles. However, intuition does not only refer to making intuitive decisions about people, the social arena, but can also be the intuition used in decision making scenarios needing technical expertise, or where a creative or moral judgement needs to be made (Sadler-Smith and Shefy 2004). It is possible that because intuition is a capability most frequently conceived of as being connected to feelings and emotions, employers do not appreciate these fine distinctions and so may downplay or miss these alternative interpretations of what is meant by intuition.

Clinicians have also explored how this personal effect may account for an autistic person's ability to distance the facts from the emotions other people display when they make decisions. In an experimental study exploring decision making processes, Channon et al (2010:1224) identify that in comparison to neurotypicals, AS people are less sympathetic when asked to comment upon other peoples' *'wrongdoing'* behaviours, particularly if they could not see a logical reason for these behaviours. However, these autistic people were not asked to infer what these *'wrongdoing'* people might be thinking or feeling, simply to make their decision based upon the facts presented. Nor did the study replicate the subtle nuances which accompany decisions taken in the workplace, such as whether or not to decide to help a colleague who is struggling to meet a deadline. However, it did explore how AS individuals process information about other peoples' motives and so contributes a little more understanding of how autistic people might handle everyday situations, some of which could be analogous to those in the workplace. Buon et al (2013) find that autistic and AS people make judgments which are assessed as overly harsh in comparison to neurotypical others, although why this is the case is unclear. In attempting to explore more everyday experiences, Jameel et al (2014) indicated autistic people experience some difficulties in offering pro-social responses which would affect how they engaged in collaboration and cooperation with others, which is a social effect that others in the workplace will very definitely notice or experience the consequences of. Again, these scenarios were not employment related but indicate that such difficulties could impact upon the ways in which AS individuals operate within teams in the workplace. Annex 1 details these studies further. The suggestion from these studies is that emotions govern the decision-making of neurotypical individuals, whereas logic is the overriding concern in the AS group.

Exploring further this preference for logic over emotion, Dvash (2014:389) showed autistic people are less prone than neurotypicals to *"social motivation and social referencing"* from others, making it more likely they will rely upon their own ideas and interpretations of events rather than being concerned about others' opinions. Studying reasoning style in autistic university students, Brosnan, Lewton and Ashwin (2016:2117)

identified the '*circumspect reasoning bias*', a bias similar to the System 2 thinking identified by Kahneman, making it likely that an autistic person will lean much more towards deliberative reasoning and away from using their intuition. In the workplace, this is likely to mean that not only does an autistic person tend to make decisions alone but will probably take longer to do so. Again though, these experimental results are of limited use to employers as the findings were based on university students, omitting valuable data on degree discipline and making it hard to say if this reasoning style was connected to their choice of degree, or from being autistic.

Mindblindness plays out as having difficulty with noticing body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, which are all areas strongly associated with an individual's ability to 'read' others, show empathy and thus engage in meaningful social interaction. In the workplace, these characteristics resonate strongly with the kinds of interactions and processes involved when teams in the workplace collaborate and coordinate. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any role which does not require some degree of social interaction or the ability to infer another person's feelings and thoughts. Therefore, examining the characteristic of mindblindness, how AS people experience its effects and how managers notice these is important for employers, particularly line managers who have responsibilities for managing AS employees in contexts where interactions with others take place. The studies above also suggest autistic people have a more deliberate and less intuitive approach to decision-making and perhaps are less likely to apply this effectively in the social arena. However, this knowledge is not grounded in the employment context and so such differences in how AS and neurotypicals use intuition and make decisions, both important abilities in the workplace remain under explored.

3.2.3. Executive function and weak central coherence

Executive function is the name given to the combination of the cognitive processes involved in solving problems and making decisions through planning, organising and executing a course of action. An individual with 'good' executive function will have the ability to search and organise information and to show flexibility where a particular plan needs to change, whereas autistic people are thought to have impaired executive function, a personal effect that predicts they will exhibit inflexibility in thought patterns and responses to change. In the workplace the ability to be flexible and adaptable to changes created through new technologies, processes and working practices is frequently seen as a desirable characteristic, yet outside the clinical context this is another area where understanding about how AS people experience change differentially from neurotypicals is low. 'Weak central coherence' means autistic people are likely to notice the detail first, contrasting with the global coherence used by neurotypical people (Frith and Happe 2001), who instead process information by first extracting overall meaning from a given situation. This original exposition of weak central coherence has been

reconceptualised as an aspect of cognitive style (Frith 2008) giving autistic people the ability to perceive fine levels of detail to a far greater extent than can neurotypicals (Shah and Frith 1993; Jolliffe and Baron-Cohen 1997), studies which Annex 1 summarises. Explanations are inconclusive as to why this is the case, perhaps because autistic people focus upon discrete parts and are less distracted by the whole (Baron-Cohen 2008) or that they can somehow divert their thinking (neurological resources) towards processing the detail (Happe and Vital 2009; Mottron et al 2006). Skewes, Jegindo and Gebauer (2015) connected this same capacity to an ability to take sensory information very much at face value, meaning that an autistic person is likely to rely less on their own existing views than would a neurotypical person. Whatever the explanation for the ability to spot and work with extremely high levels of detail, how it plays out as a social effect that managers notice has been underexplored in the workplace. The use of workplace terms such as 'seeing the big picture' and not 'getting lost in detail' are reminders that this kind of ability for detail may be an under-valued attribute.

3.2.4. Creativity

The combination of mindblindness and weak central coherence characteristics are personal effects of autism, leading clinical researchers Happe and Vital (2009:1373) to suggest:

Mindblindness, while not the starting engine, may act to enhance talent [...] The combination of detail focus as the starting engine and reduced mentalizing as fuel, may give a special flavour, independence and originality to talent in ASD, that is hard to find in other groups.

Building on this suggestion that resistance to others' ideas may contribute to originality of thought and so indirectly to the talents that are found in about a third of ASD individuals, Happe (2015:197) explores further how "some of the consequences of failure of intuitive and obligatory theory of mind in autism, may be positive". Drawing on studies of conformity, she connects theory of mind deficits to AS individuals being less likely to accept an expert's views as the final word on a particular subject and so more likely than neurotypicals to continue their exploration of a subject. Such a predisposition has been connected to the career interests of AS individuals in fields which are open ended, involving continual seeking of new knowledge, particularly in scientific disciplines. Creativity has also been linked to autism (Fitzgerald 2003) although the causes remain unclear. Perhaps, as the previous discussion has noted, autistic individuals are less curious or interested in what others think, or that they simply do not 'see' what others see. Either way, they are likely to think about situations and ideas in an unconstrained manner, echoing the originality effect first documented by Kanner in his accounts of a brilliant scientist who is laughed at on account of his clumsiness and social awkwardness.

In the organisational world creativity, just like teamworking and communication skills, is frequently cited as a valuable organisational competence. Although the approaches that people adopt to thinking about matters and generating ideas are for the most part unseen cognitive processes that may stay at the personal level, never becoming 'social', it is certainly the case in working life that the effects of someone's creative output can be seen by others.

3.2.5. *Savant skills and special talents*

The term 'autistic savant' was first used (Rimland 1978) to describe autistic people with extraordinary levels of skills, commonly in mathematics, music, art and often showing a photographic memory. Cases are cited of artists who demonstrated prolific abilities to reproduce fine detail in their line drawings (Humphrey 1999) and of a pianist reported to be able to play any piece of music having heard it just once (Sloboda 1985). It is possible these genius abilities come from simply having the time and inclination to pursue a special interest rather than any innate skill, or that they emanate from an autistic individual's capacity and preference for detail, a predilection which could 'kick-start' talents (Happe 1999; Brown et al 2003). For example, in music the ability to discriminate detail of pitch is an essential skill in becoming a talented musician, or in art, being able to see and reproduce fine detail will likely heighten the artist's ability.

3.2.6. *Systemising*

Associated with autistic people is the capacity for 'systemising' (Baron-Cohen et al 2003; Roelfsema et al 2012), defined as the drive to build and analyse any particular system, irrespective of the field or discipline within which it occurs. For example, continuing with the musical domain discussed above, this systemising ability connects with an individual's ability to quickly and naturally grasp the complex rules in chord composition. Further examples include mechanical systems which represent the workings of a car, or a natural system involving understanding of climate, weather and patterns. Whatever the system being considered, this ability to systemise means that an individual has the ability to easily and very naturally understand complex rules, which sometimes may be unconventional not routine.

A good systemiser is a splitter, not a lumper, since lumping things together can lead to missing key differences that enable you to predict how these two things behave differently. Seen in this light, it is the neurotypical person who has a difficulty, skating over differences that might be very important (Baron-Cohen, 2008: 70-71).

Measuring these abilities using the systemising quotient (the 'SQ'), Baron-Cohen et al (2003) found AS adults scored significantly higher as systemisers than a control group of

neurotypicals, suggesting this is an ability more likely to be found in autistic individuals than the non-autistic population. In an emic account Professor Temple Grandin, a well-known AS academic describes her own systemising abilities in creating, organising, retrieving and reproducing detailed blueprints of highly complex system machinery, contrasting this with her inability to communicate these complex ideas through written text or speech (Grandin 2009). This contrast will be important to this investigation in that it resonates with the coexistence of skills and disabling features identified in the theoretical framework. In the organisational world Senge (1990) has emphasised systemising as key in developing capacities for organisational learning, in that someone with this ability can readily draw connections between the intricate workings of organisational structures, systems and cultures. Of note here is that these systemising propensities are personal effects which appear connected to the skills employers require in STEM disciplines, specifying people with high measured intelligence (IQ) and an affinity with data. Clinical studies evidence also link 'being' AS to having talent in physics (Baron-Cohen et al 2001), a STEM discipline. Such connections led The Economist (April 2016) to conclude employers are potentially wasting valuable skills of the autistic population through their lack of knowledge of what being autistic means. Employers frequently lament STEM skills are in short supply and successive governments have highlighted these as an economic priority (UK Commission for Employment and Skills 2015). National focus has been upon attracting women, ethnic minorities and people with physical disabilities, but has made no explicit mention of neurodiversity, an omission which reinforces the under-explored nature of autistic strengths introduced and shows how little employers appear to know about the potential for AS people to contribute.

3.2.7. Hyper and hypo sensitivities

Autistic individuals exhibit hypersensitivities to sounds, texture, colours and tastes, frequently resulting in stress and anxiety, well documented in autobiographical accounts (Higashida 2013). Public awareness campaigns (NAS 2016;2018) have sought to convey these in everyday contexts, yet this knowledge is far lower in the context of how adults in the workplace react to such stimuli. Exploring hypersensitivities in autistic adults, Smith and Sharp (2013:903) identify that some of these are '*pleasurable*' or '*fascinating*', discussing how these have been used to advantage in occupational roles and concluding that a better knowledge of these qualities could benefit AS people as well as practitioners working in career guidance for those on the autistic spectrum. Hypo-sensitivities occur when autistic people are less sensitive to sensory information than their neurotypical peers (Talay-Ongan and Wood 2000) and are even less well understood in the employment context. This personal effect is also important in seeking understanding the experiences autistic people have in workplaces, in that if they do not hear some sounds, for example faint background noises such as music or others' voices, they will be placed

at an immediate disadvantage when attempting to tune in to day to day background conversations in workplaces. This 'hypo-sensitivity' effect may also be a contributor to the difficulties in empathy and social interaction discussed prior.

3.2.8. Diagnosing autism and AS

Broad estimates place about 1 individual out of every 100 people in the general population on the autistic spectrum, with highest estimates suggesting approximately 1 in 68 individuals (Diamant 2014). In the UK approximately 1 in 200 children people are AS (Baird, Simonoff and Pickles 2006; Brugha et al 2012) which is broadly comparable with rates observed in other countries, allowing for variations in data gathering methods and diagnosis techniques (Sun et al 2013; Pantelis and Kennedy 2015). Epidemiological studies suggest that autism and AS are becoming more common, primarily because children at the higher functioning end of autism with typical intelligence as well as those who have already presented with clinical problems are included in sampling.

Classifications of what is and what is not autism have shifted (APA 2013) and Asperger syndrome has become 'bundled up' into a general classification of autism, a development that has met with mixed views from clinicians. One on hand they feel the change has been beneficial as more AS people will be correctly diagnosed, particularly women and girls, who under the previous classification risked not being recognised as such on account of their ability to hide or 'mask' the effects they are experiencing (Bargiela, Steward and Williams 2016). Others feel someone can be better understood if they are distinguished clearly as someone with Asperger syndrome rather than someone diagnosed as high functioning autism (Montgomery et al 2016). It is certainly the case that many autistic adults prefer the term AS to autism (Kenny et al 2015), mindful perhaps of the association between the superior verbal intelligence and special abilities Asperger observed. Either way, if clinicians are unsure someone is or is not autistic, they are likely to err on the side of a positive diagnosis, knowing this will open up welfare payments, or, if in work, requests for reasonable adjustments. This 'upgrading' occurs most commonly in women and girls where clinicians can see they have other emotional or behavioural conditions (Rogers et al 2015) but have been able to 'mask' their condition, an interesting intersection which this investigation addresses in Chapter 3.4. Younger people who have communication and social interaction characteristics that a clinician sees as impairments, can be assessed as simply lagging in development, rather than being autistic, leading Friedrichs and Shaughnessy (2015) to acknowledge how important social constructions are in the way that diagnosis decisions are made.

If they do not do what the rest of the group is doing (a social challenge), then they may be considered just 'self-centred'. And if they interpret language mostly concretely (a cognitive obstacle), then their linguistic interpretations may be thought of simply as "preferences" rather than problems. (Friedrichs 2015:50).

These observations indicate how difficult it is for clinicians to separate personality factors from innate conditions, a difficulty recognised as significant also for the employers and managers in this investigation. It is therefore considered in more detail in presenting the findings in Chapter 7 and in assessing the limitations of the investigation in the final Chapter. Both these observations highlight the role that social constructions play in how people are perceived and consequentially if and when someone comes to be diagnosed or labelled as autistic. For autistic women, whether they are diagnosed or not is connected to their learnt socialisation behaviour and ability to 'mask', while for young people, having an accurate diagnosis is connected to expectations that they act like their peers. Both these associations reinforce the need for this investigation to attend to the social dimension, as the theoretical framework has noted.

For adults, whose experiences are of course the focus of this investigation, diagnosis can be very problematic in that resource constraints make access somewhat random and hard to come by (Murphy et al 2016). In response, self-administered tests such the Autism Spectrum Quotient, developed by clinicians from the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge (2017), have become widely available and have had a mixed impact upon the numbers of people who secure a clinical diagnosis. Someone who thinks they may be autistic but cannot easily secure a diagnosis through under resourced medical services, could take the test to confirm their belief that they are autistic. They may either pursue a clinical diagnosis or decide there is no value in confirming clinically that they are autistic, decisions which reinforce the inclusion of the hidden nature of autism as a key component of this investigation's theoretical framework. Many adults do feel their diagnosis is a positive development and report feeling exonerated for their previous difficulties: *"I got the letter saying that I had Asperger's syndrome, it was a bit like standing up in court and hearing the jury say: 'not guilty'"* (Punshon and Skirrow 2009:277). This is particularly the case for adults in later life (Harris 2016; Hickey, Crabtree and Scott 2018) who of course will either be working or wanting to work, and further reinforces the drive for this investigation to improve knowledge of this condition which frequently remains hidden. Views about classification changes and approaches to diagnosis differ, but the major implication they have is that clinicians are more confident in identifying autism, particularly in young children, hence more people are being diagnosed as autistic.

3.2.9. Section summary

This brief section has shown that there are biological aspects of autism which create personal and social effects that those working around autistic people, including their managers, will notice. At this point a critical observation (and one which clinical studies have not been concerned with) is that as managers cannot see these mechanisms operating, wondering what might have led to them is unlikely to be uppermost in their

minds. The following section now highlights the experiences reported by AS employees focusing upon the areas that concern employers in general and line managers specifically. It examines how these effects connect to exclusionary outcomes and underused strengths, noting that exclusion from employment is the far greater outcome.

3.3. Personal and social effects in relation to exclusionary outcomes

These personal effects have strong potential to create the social effects, which have in turn led to difficulties for autistic people, making it imperative to explore further what is happening in the employment context as far as they and their managers are concerned. A meta-analysis (DePape and Lindsay 2016), reviewed 33 studies concerned with significant life experiences of autistic adults, surfacing themes of self-perceptions, interactions with others, school experiences and factors related to employment. However, the majority of these were situated in health and social care settings, with just nine of the 33 discussing employment related issues. Of these nine, half were published post 2011 reflecting the underexplored but growing emphasis upon the issues relevant for adults in the employment context. More recent studies have identified that autistic students face challenges from the expectations of their peers as to what university life should be like (Zolyomi et al 2017; Wray and Pace 2018; Gurbuz, Hanley and Riby 2018), confirming that the social world imposes demands which represent challenges for autistic people. Critically, both employment and higher education studies focus purely upon the autistic person, rather than the challenges faced by the significant others with whom they interact.

3.3.1. Negative employment experiences

Many autistic or AS adults assess work as a negative experience (Muller et al 2003; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004), citing major difficulties in sensory processing, adapting to new routines and communicating with others in social situations, all of which are placed as the root causes of problematic employment, underemployment and unemployment. Having fun at work is highlighted as a form of social interaction that AS employees will find particularly difficult to engage with on account of their difficulties *in 'laughing and joking'* (Richards 2012:11). Later, Richards (2015) becomes concerned that the sensory and processing differences experienced by AS individuals mean that they are disproportionately and disadvantageously affected by the demands of contemporary workplaces, citing commuting, selection and assessment practices, the emphasis upon team working and the demands of the physical working environment. An auto-ethnographic account (Hughes 2012), notes similar difficulties in transitioning from the relative safety of a school environment to the more difficult workplace environment, because unlike school, workplaces have limited spaces for the 'time out' needed to handle multiple, noisy and confusing conversations.

A small-scale study of six AS adults, working in a range of professional and semi-skilled roles, explored how the physical working environment affected their experiences, also noting less context dependant matters, for example the extent they had come to terms with their diagnosis (Krieger et al 2012). These descriptions were restricted to those from AS employees and not line managers. A more detailed study exploring occupational participation amongst AS people uncovered major themes around difficulties in becoming employed and employment itself, echoing previous work and noting that *"universally, the social impact of ASD was the symptom most often named as a barrier to occupational participation"* (Haertl et al 2013:37). However, despite interviewing four times more subjects, the lack of occupational context and absence of discussion with line managers or other organisational stakeholders leaves the study with a distinctly clinical focus.

Noting the absence of large-scale empirical work in the employment context, Baldwin, Costley and Warren (2014) explored in detail the working lives of 130 adults with AS and high functioning autism in Australia. Slightly less than half of these adults were working in jobs for which they were overqualified, more than double that estimated by Black (2013) for the Australian workforce as a whole. Negative experiences and 'mal-employment' were identified, arising primarily from the difficulties linked to the role they were employed for, their working relationships and from the health and wellbeing issues they experienced at work. Interestingly, this study also found that there were far fewer AS people working in managerial positions compared to the population average, speculating this may be due to the social demands required within managerial roles. Negative accounts emerged from AS employees, citing repetitive, boring and unchallenging roles, as well as experiencing difficult working relationships on account their colleagues misunderstood their intentions or meanings, particularly in formal meetings, group work and client facing tasks. 'Mal-employment' was identified as a contributory factor in their findings that this population moves jobs more often than the workforce as a whole. In turn this creates fragmented employment histories that recruiters are unlikely to interpret positively and perhaps are more likely to feel these autistic candidates would be risky choices for shortlisting. Their study is highly informative of the views of AS employees, is representative across age and gender and also provided valuable contextual data about job type, skill levels and contractual working arrangements, albeit the survey approach precluded the provision of rich detail. An important finding from this large-scale longitudinal study of employment experiences of AS people (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014), is the identification that working environments, job roles, organisational systems and practices can enable both positive and negative experiences. The very fact that these experiences can coexist is interesting, indicating that other factors are operating outside autism itself, lending further weight to explore the socially imposed aspects which the relational approach to disability notes can create both poor and favourable working conditions for AS people. However, unexplored

is the perspective of HR professionals or line managers in these same areas, resulting in an omission of contextual information about how individuals are managed and supported. Such accounts contrast with views that the support needed for AS employees should be considered by investigating the views of significant others in the organisation, as well as acquiring a better understanding of "*good practice*" and exclusionary barriers (Richards 2015:13), for this population.

More recently, Morris, Begel and Weidemann (2015) found AS employees commonly experienced problematic workplace issues connected with expressing appropriate emotions, interpreting colleagues' emotions, handling changes in routines or policies, working in a shared office or noisy settings, attending team meetings, resolving conflicts with colleagues and dealing with office politics. This study took place in information technology, a sector in which AS individuals are likely to be meaningfully employed and a critical observation at this point suggests similarly poor outcomes are at least, if not more likely, in other sectors. Confidentiality and disclosure concerns from autistic employees limited these findings to their views and echo the access difficulties this investigation has encountered, further discussed in Chapter 5.4 in relation to how these shaped the research design.

In regard to job performance, roles AS individuals will find hard to do well in have been identified as those within noisy environments such as fast-food restaurants and factories. Roles requiring specialist technical skills such as architect, librarian, computer programmer and computer animator are suggested by Stankova and Trajkovski (2010) as those that autistic people are more likely to perform well in. They warn against stereotyping autistic people's career interests, suggesting roles in sales, creative arts and the military are perfectly possible, although some of their suggestions have appeared without robust evidence and raise concerns about the study's validity. A more useful contribution is their brief discussion of how roles can be split, for example whilst 'front of house' in a noisy restaurant may be difficult for an AS person, a back-office role in the same restaurant is less so. This observation reinforces the need to attend to the socially imposed and structural aspects of organisations, consistent with the relational approach within the theoretical framework, in order to better understand the personal and social effects documented prior.

3.3.2. Positive employment experiences

Successful employment experiences have been identified when, for example, an accountant describes her job as "*ideal*" (Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008:170), because of the role's requirements for high attention to detail, limited social interaction and routine tasks. Relationships with colleagues and interactions with customers were also reported as enjoyable, a finding which challenges views that AS adults universally experience social interaction as problematic and concluding negative work experiences are by no

means inevitable, even though these frequently outweigh the positives. Positive themes have also emerged where work provides opportunity for AS individuals to use their skills and interests, maintain independence and acquire a sense of being valued for contribution (Krieger et al 2012; Haertl et al 2013; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015; Chen et al 2015).

3.3.3. Workplace support

In a systematic review of employment outcomes, Hedley et al (2016) noted poor understanding of the factors that lead to success in the workplace for autistic adults, particularly how these are affected by individual differences. A follow up study (Hedley et al 2017) offers a valuable perspective on the challenges that autistic employees face and showing how their experiences improve when supportive colleagues understand and accept adjustments for hypersensitivities. This observation shows it is possible others can recognise the connection between social and personal effects, an area explored further in this investigation which seeks to understand how managers and colleagues perceive these too. Views differ as to what represents valuable support, in that autistic people value inclusion, whereas managers value being able to access knowledge from specialist supported employment providers to help them and their co-workers understand and interpret an autistic person's tendency to work in atypical ways. Setting the study in a supported employment training programme within the technology sector limits the direct relevance of this knowledge to employers.

Focusing upon difficulties in social interactions, Muller, Schuler and Yates (2008) identified several areas employers should consider when thinking how best to support their autistic employees. As well as putting in place particular adjustments prescribed by law, critically their study also identified that avoiding particular aspects of work can be equally and possibly even more helpful. For example, not expecting people to engage in intensive social interaction of the kind associated with awaydays or teambuilding events, or by finding alternatives to face to face communication in response to known difficulties in navigating the complex social relationships that are so much part of workplaces. Recommendations were made for employers to use job matching, change recruitment and selection practices and build greater employee awareness through training, but these were uninformed by views from key stakeholders in the employment relationship. Using self-reports from 11 AS adults, only four of whom were employed, Griffith et al (2011) showed they all found it difficult to maintain secure employment, recommending they engage in social skills training and have a mentor to support their job search and job transition. Employers were also guided to disseminate knowledge about AS and autism to colleagues through awareness programmes. Critically, no reference to the job types or discussion of the occupational context were provided and so again the line managers' perspective was omitted. An interesting aside from the Griffith et al (2011) study was

that not only do employers have little knowledge about AS, what they do have is based upon inaccurate stereotypes. For example, one respondent cites his own GP as failing to recognise that autism is an innate condition, a gap in knowledge that highlights the absolute need to transfer this kind of clinical knowledge into the workplace and to do so in a form believable and understandable by managers.

Assistive technologies have been reported extensively for their beneficial outcomes on autistic children, students and young adults (Yuill et al 2015; Wynkoop 2016; Odom et al 2015; Laugeson et al 2015). These are frequently aimed at teaching neurodiverse individuals about the strategies and behaviours they can adapt to neurotypical ways of working, for example, watching video-modelled interviews to improve performance has been rated positively by autistic people (Hayes et al 2015). Pillay and Brownlow (2017) note that studies of these critical success factors have excluded the kinds of experiences that working adults have by focusing solely upon young people with autistic spectrum conditions. In a more relevant synthesis of the efficacy of vocational interventions, Nicholas et al (2015) finds job coaching and assistive technologies most likely to be effective support mechanisms for AS individuals once employed. A critical observation is that AS individuals differ from the autistic population by virtue of higher than average intelligence and developed language abilities and so may perceive interventions of this nature as somewhat basic. Aside from the difficulty of forcing someone to pretend to act in ways that are not their own, a further criticism of such prescriptive advice is that it seeks to fit AS people into neurotypical ways of behaving and operating in the workplace which are very much socially imposed, rather than thinking about how strengths can be more deliberately utilised.

3.4. Experiences of autistic men and autistic women

3.4.1. Employment experiences differ

Revisiting earlier survey data, Baldwin and Costley (2015) sought to uncover differences between the employment experiences of autistic women and autistic men. Similar themes for both were identified, including underutilisation of skills, difficulties with formalised social interaction and cognitive meltdown where work was fast paced or instructions not clear. Positive experiences relating to enjoyable and fulfilling work as well as career transition issues were also identified for both men and women within the sample. Where autistic women differed from autistic men was in the higher incidence of their requests for part-time work, their levels of anxiety arising from social demands and proportionally more difficulty in 'getting' jokes or taking comments too literally. The support or adjustments from their employers rated by these AS women as most useful were needing greater understanding from others, access to strategies to develop

communication skills, and more flexibility in their work tasks and working hours. Whilst it is generally acknowledged that part-time working may be an attractive choice for women, for this group the effect was proportionally much greater, at about double that for the female population as a whole (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). The autistic women in Baldwin and Costley's study were either studying in higher education or in paid employment and all demonstrated a strong aptitude for learning, with the majority perceiving that their skills were undervalued in the workplace. This observation raises the critical question as to whether these part-time working choices are 'real' choices in that they may have been the only way that these autistic women could survive employment and also reinforce strongly the connection introduced on page 41 between being an autistic women and exclusionary employment outcomes.

3.4.2. *Autistic women and 'masking'*

These difficulties described above may be related to an autistic woman's deliberate efforts to 'mask' her impairments, in effect pretending that she is not autistic and acting as much like a neurotypical woman as possible. This 'pretence' is a clinically recognised phenomenon (Kirkovski and Fitzgerald 2013), which frequently creates high anxiety and mental health issues in autistic women. Since these negative outcomes are significantly more likely in autistic adults than neurotypicals (Russell et al 2016), this is an area of concern not only for employers of AS individuals in general, but particularly so for female AS employees and their managers (Arnstein 2016). Baldwin and Costley (2015) focused upon employment outcomes rather than the source of this masking ability, speculating it may have been due to learnt socialisation behaviours. However, whatever is the cause of this 'masking' ability, it is a very possible contributor to the voice of adult AS women being largely unheard (Kanfischer, Davies and Collins 2017). Annabi (2018) has described this as key in why the experiences of autistic women are an 'untold story', responding by proposing an investigation to '*reveal the nuanced differences and similarities in experiences and responses of women*', aiming to identify barriers which face autistic women within an information technology setting.

3.4.3. *Gender and autism intersections*

Exploring further this possible intersection, Hayward, McVilly and Stokes (2018) compared the experiences of autistic women with those of autistic men (of which some would be diagnosed AS), seeking to reveal if the problems they faced in the workplace are a function of gender or autistic traits per se. Controlling for education and age, they found autism itself was the stronger influence of exclusionary employment issues than gender. Their finding that employers expect women to have better social communication skills is interesting, in that no comment was made as to why this may have been the case, an omission indicating they overlooked or underplayed the gendered aspect of skills, which perhaps has also been the case in similar clinical studies.

In contrast, Sang, Richards and Marks (2016) state that neurodiverse men and women do have different experiences in their employment, using a social relational approach to suggest there is potential for managers to make gendered constructions of their autistic employees. Their study omits discussion of the 'masking' effect identified above, which in itself may have explained why there were no disclosed autistic women in their study. Alternatively, this may simply have been because the study took place in a male dominated industry where there were few female respondents and so the focus was upon the relationship between being neurodiverse and being disabled, rather than being autistic and female. A further observation is that their findings were premised upon the notion that gender is a binary construct, omitting gender non-binaries, whereas in fact, gender is now considered as a non-binary construct (Ryle 2018; Connell and Pearse 2015). These fluidities add to the complexity of researching a topic like this.

3.4.4. Section summary

The issues facing autistic women in their employment appear to differ from those of autistic men, making it important to consider why autistic women report somewhat more negative experiences than autistic men. It is though very difficult to conclude from the literature whether it is biological or sociocultural forces that have the greatest impact, because neither clinical or organisationally based studies are conclusive in this regard, making it hard to know exactly what is going on in respect of the intersection of gender and autism. Fewer women disclose than men, making research about autistic women even more difficult to conduct than about autistic men, a problem compounded by the fact that investigations have adopted very different research paradigms. Either way, Cook, Ogden and Winstone (2017) have shown that studies focusing upon autistic women, or even with a good representation of women as subjects interviewed are rare. On balance, there are sufficient indications this is indeed a prime area for research concerned with employment matters and it is likely that a similar argument for investigating the intersection between ethnicity and autism could be advanced.

However, this thesis is not intersectional (Crenshaw 1989;1991) and does not explore differences in how managers relate to their female autistic employees as opposed to their male counterparts. It does not explore how managing an autistic woman is different to managing an autistic man, nor how managing an autistic person from an ethnic minority could differ from managing an autistic person who is also White British. The thrust of this thesis is upon organisational considerations and so is concerned purely with managers' accounts drawn from their observations of employees who have a clinical autism spectrum diagnosis, whether they are male or female and irrespective of their ethnic origins. Managers talk about their employees who are different from others only by being autistic. This focus is consistent with the belief, at this stage in research, that conflating being autistic with other variables such as gender and ethnicity is likely to dilute the

findings from this exploratory study, recognising that whilst intersectional approaches are popular, they can also limit a study's '*explanatory potential*' Clegg (2016:495). Others concur (Gunnarsson 2011; Gunnarson, Martinez and Van Ingen 2015), defending the importance of research that deals with the distinctive powers and properties of gender, race and class. This exploratory investigation agrees there is a need to understand how autism, along with other disabilities, intersects with gender, but suggests that as far as this investigation of *managers'* experiences is concerned, this should be addressed in future research.

3.5. *Personal and social effects in relation to underexplored strengths*

Social relational approaches to disability theorise what aspects of any particular condition, as well as the broader societal and working environments, will make someone more or less disabled. The emphasis has been upon how socio-cultural forces create disability rather than strengths, leaving the role that the condition of autism itself plays in managers' perceptions of autistic strengths less understood. The following section therefore examines evidence available about autistic strengths in order to better understand how and when these revert to disabilities, or where they are interpreted as strengths by their managers.

3.5.1. *Talents and strengths*

Supporting findings that AS employees consistently report difficulties with social interaction and sensory overload in the workplace, Haertl et al (2013) and Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004) mention briefly that AS talents exist yet are underused, but do not explore the employers' perspective on this. The few studies in the employment field note that the job performance of autistic employees is rated as average or above by their supervisors; typified as being "*methodical and conscientious in carrying out job duties; performing work of especially high quality; and being dependable, punctual, and consistent*" (Hagner and Cooney 2005:93), which although positive, are somewhat unexciting descriptions. Common themes emerge that AS employees are good at tasks involving data and enjoying tasks disliked by others due either to the repetitive nature of tasks or the social isolation (Hillier et al 2007). This keen attention to detail and ability to focus intensely has been linked to increased work output, trustworthiness, reliability, timeliness, low absenteeism and the ability to serve as an expert on a particular topic (Parr and Hunter 2014).

In primary education, Mackenzie, Watts and Howe (2012) suggest autistic children possess superior linguistic, systemising or computational skills as well as impairments. In Higher Education, Griffin and Pollak (2009) also recognise that autistic individuals have the potential to perform well, identifying strengths as intense concentration, independence, affinity with technology, good formal essay writing, attention to detail,

precision, original ideas and reliability in meeting of deadlines. Working as educators with gifted children, Friedrichs and Shaughnessy (2015) acknowledge similar strengths, adding the capacity to gather and store expert knowledge in relation to a particular topic. Critically, and paralleling the potential impact a manager can have, Friedrichs and Shaughnessy observe teachers are well placed to help AS students as they can give direct feedback that lengthy and uninvited talk about special interests is likely to have negative consequences upon their peer relationships. Exploring reflective accounts from AS students of their school experiences, Bolic Baric et al (2016) affirms the critical role of teachers in providing practical and emotional support, as well as being crucial if their students are to realise their educational potential. Analogous to the evidence about autistic challenges presented prior, these accounts about autistic strengths come from educational contexts not employment. Autistic students become autistic applicants and employees, further reinforcing the need to explore how managers and employers can learn from these contexts and improve their knowledge about the potential for skills utilisation.

3.5.2. Matching autistic strengths to roles

Some employers, including Specialisterne (SAP Corporate 2013), Auticon and Passwerk (Jacobs 2016), intentionally recruit people at the high functioning end of the autistic spectrum, a classification which will include AS people. Autistic strengths have been cited as superior concentration powers, tolerance and preference for routine tasks, all of which translate well into requirements for roles in software testing, software coding, information technology and data analytics (Grant 2015; Wang, 2014). Globally Microsoft has partnered with Specialisterne to target autistic people for similar technology-focused roles (Smith 2015) and the company's web site notes these programmes have been extended to the UK, citing benefits from a closer match of employee to customer base, increased productivity, lowered attrition rates and expansion of their talent pool (Microsoft News Centre 2016). Recognising these characteristics, the 5000 Initiative: Autism in Technology Workforce (Moodie 2016) was launched in the US, aiming to train and employ 5000 young autistic adults in meaningful and permanent employment in the technology sector by 2020. Annabi, Sundarasan and Zolyomi (2017) concluded that particular cognitive differences (personal effects), give autistic people analytic skills which especially suit software development, at the same time highlighting that employers face challenges in the design of roles and inclusive work environments. Companies using such targeted approaches share a belief that difference is beneficial for business and critically Churchard (2013) and Crush (2015) have noted that those driving these programmes have strong family connections with the challenges facing autistic people, indicating that business and social justice arguments for diversity are being used in combination. This observation reinforces that what people know and understand about

the autistic people in their own lives is likely to be important in how their own perceptions are shaped. Thus, this investigation recognises the importance of establishing the extent to which managers have their own connections to autistic people.

Seeking to identify the extent to which employers are familiar with the career preferences autistic people express outside of these technology examples, Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) gathered data in a large-scale on-line study. Their findings that autistic people are significantly more likely than neurotypical individuals to report interests under the Investigative and Conventional classification of the RIASEC typology (Holland 2008), accord with existing stereotypes, indicating that engineering and natural science roles and industries play to these preferences. Importantly, they also note that AS people pursue degrees and occupations across a wide variation of disciplines including humanities, arts, social sciences as well as natural sciences and engineering, countering stereotypical assumptions that careers outside disciplines like the technology sectors described above would be unattractive to or unsuitable for AS individuals. Despite the self-selecting sample and possible skew of the study, it suggests that strengths and preferences go beyond those identified by clinical studies, raising the potential that where employers focus upon strengths not deficits, AS people can do well in non-stereotypical roles.

Parr and Hunter (2014:2) suggest that "*the more natural the process of job acquisition, training and support, the better the outcomes with regard to wages, integration and benefits*", highlighting the importance of individual agency in the job matching process. Similarly, Wehman et al (2016) discuss success from targeted employment interventions which use self-directed job search using job seekers' profiles (Callahan and Condon 2007). Despite these indications that matching roles to actual rather than assumed preferences is likely to be of benefit to both AS individuals and organisations seeking to utilise skills, Murray et al (2016) note that there are insufficient reliable and valid career planning tools for AS individuals.

3.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has shown that autistic people differ in particular ways from the neurotypical population and established that these differences arise from hidden neurological mechanisms. These are biological features of autism and were indicated by the shaded area in Figure 2.3. A contribution of this chapter has been to demonstrate these mechanisms have been linked to the personal and social effects autistic people experience, both important elements within a relational approach to disability. It has also shown that the effects experienced by autistic people can be noticed by their managers and indicated strongly that socio-cultural factors will be important shapers of managers' perceptions of autistic people. Some of these include employers' expectations that autistic people should fit into existing workplace environments, working patterns and

conventions, as well as the existence of stereotypical views about the roles autistic people are assumed to prefer.

For the most part these effects have been documented as disabling for autistic people, particular in regard to the difficulties they encounter with social interaction and sensory over or underload in the workplace. These same effects also create the potential for employers to view autistic people as less skilled in comparison to neurotypical employees, particularly in being flexible, empathetic and a good teamworker. Critically, at both personal and social levels, these effects upon the AS person are present irrespective of the accommodations that others make and so are not simply a product of society's treatment of that individual. This observation supports the application of the social relational approach in this investigation. Arising from the same neurological sources that confer disability, clinical studies suggest there is potential for these characteristics to be utilised by employers, particularly the unusually high predilection for attention to detail and systemising abilities. Technology focused employers have deliberately sought to recruit autistic people based upon strengths, which on one hand challenges the disability as deficit perspective, yet on the other hand reinforces stereotypical views that autistic individuals are suited to particular occupational roles. The fact that these effects may be viewed as valuable abilities as well as disabilities is a powerful incentive to consider further how these characteristics may be of relevance in the workplace.

This chapter has indicated that social and structural forces exist which connect the personal to the social effects, alluding to valuations of skill, the reactions of others, the working environment and the roles performed. The significance of these factors in determining what is meant by disability has been identified in the relational approach to disability. Knowing how these personal and social effects might also affect those who manage autistic people is unclear, as studies have either been clinically based and child centred. Another limitation is that where adults have been involved, findings have come from atypical employment settings or recruited participants without the direct support of the employing organisation.

This chapter has shown that diagnosis can be inaccurate and sometimes shaped by social constructions, appearing particularly the case for women. These practical and social matters mean that not everyone who is autistic will be diagnosed as such and make it unclear if actual prevalence rates for AS are stable or increasing. However, the best available estimates indicate that the number of AS individuals entering the workplace as applicants and working already within organisations, is more likely to rise rather than fall, reinforcing the need for line managers and employers to acquire accurate knowledge about this condition. The gaps in knowledge identified reinforce the need for this study to show empirically how managers perceive their autistic employees and how they respond to the challenges this particular and complex condition creates.

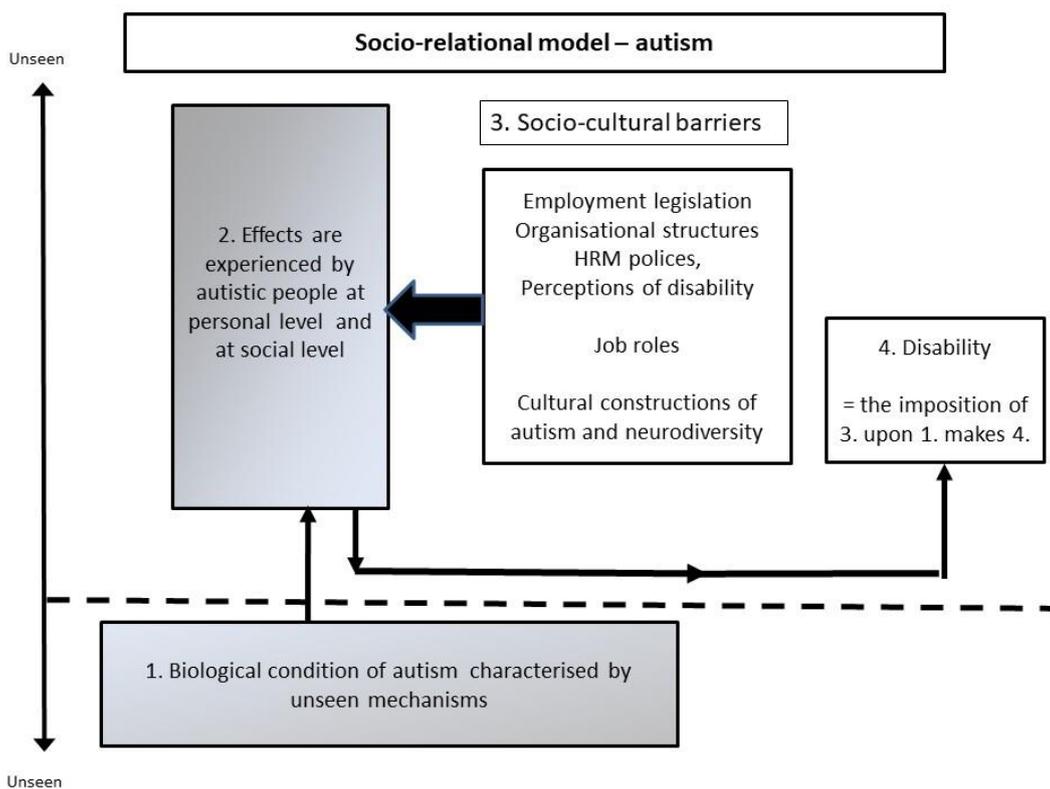
Having surfaced some of the ways that differences between autistic and neurotypical people might impact how managers view their autistic employees, Chapter 4 now moves away from the condition itself to review the contextual and socially constructed aspects within the employment context, considering the potential these have to impact managers' perceptions as well as their responses.

Chapter 4. The organisational dimension

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter has shown that the effects experienced by autistic people and the effects that managers notice can be connected directly to being autistic, that is, the condition itself. It also indicated these effects can be exacerbated or alleviated by broader socio-cultural factors and critically that exacerbation is a more frequent outcome. This chapter continues to draw upon the theoretical framework presented prior and so Figure 2.3 is reproduced below. This time, the shaded area indicates the presence of socio-cultural forces which are consistent with a relational approach to understanding disability, signifying these will be highly relevant to this investigation.

Figure 4-1 Social relational model adapted for autism highlighting socio-cultural barriers



Chapter 1 has shown that current employment legislation classes autism as a disability yet does not serve autistic people particularly well. Thus, the chapter begins by discussing how the experiences of disabled people in organisations have been understood, moving to review the legislative context within which autistic people and their managers

work. In a world where approximately 99 in every 100 people are not autistic, it is also important to explore the forces which shape the decision of an autistic person, who is very much part of a minority group, to disclose their condition to their employer. The chapter therefore also reviews existing knowledge of the issues relevant for people disclosing hidden conditions such as autism.

The shortfall in knowledge of how line managers perceive and respond to their autistic employees necessitates an exploration of their role in contemporary organisations, focusing upon how they have responded to the legislation in managing neurodiverse, specifically autistic people and surfacing some of the challenges and opportunities they face. It notes that managers do not operate in silos where their only considerations are those within the immediate context of managing one person in one role, rather their decisions and actions are subject to internal structural aspects of organisations. These include the organisational stance on diversity and inclusion, as well as the approaches employers take in arriving at their valuations of skills. These areas are pertinent given this investigation aims to build employers' theoretical knowledge of AS so they may better understand how to channel autistic strengths. HRM policies and practices are a major shaper of managers actions and are identified as further socio-cultural impositions in the relational approach to disability. Consideration of the external forces shaping managers' perceptions, responses and challenges is also important and so the chapter reviews how society has shifted its constructions of autism, considering critically the implications these shifts have for employers.

The chapter closes by bringing together the dimensions of organisations which are pertinent to a relational approach to disability and which are important from a line managers standpoint. These are shown in a conceptual framework, (Fig 4.2) which clarifies that the investigation will address specific concrete aspects relating to the perceptions, challenges and responses that line managers have in regard to their autistic employees, rather than leaving them at the abstract level.

4.2. Ableist norms shape understanding of disability

The theoretical discussion has indicated medicalised approaches to disability see someone either as able-bodied and healthy, or as disabled and sick. Similarly, the social model of disability, upon which employment legislation is predicated, notes that someone is either disabled or abled, although this time it is environmental matters and perceptions of others that are the prime cause of disability (Oliver 2013; Jones and Wass 2013). Both models contribute to perceptions that disability is inevitably problematic, rendering people with a disability as marginalised and contributing to the exclusionary and adverse outcomes this group experiences (Campbell 2008).

Looking beyond these distinctions and seeking to better understand the experiences of disabled people in the organisational context, Williams and Mavin (2012) demonstrate that ableist norms exist which ultimately privilege and maintain the norm that non-disability is an organising principle. Identifying these ableist norms operate is central to interpret what is occurring in organisational life, for example, recognising it is important to distinguish between how able bodied *and* disabled people view disability. This investigation agrees that ableist norms will be key in understanding why managers face so many tensions and challenges. Additionally, their conclusion that being disabled is distinct from having an impairment, hidden or visible, is also relevant and accords closely with the social relational framework adopted.

4.2.1. Discourse, capacity and productivity

One consequence of ableist norms is that able bodied people see disability predominately as being inevitably negative; a condition to be tolerated rather than celebrated as a form of human difference. For Campbell (2008) this means disabled people will be steered away from talking about or denying their disability wherever possible. Arguing for research about disability to focus upon the consequences, as well as the sources of ableism, she notes that failing to ask or talk about difference is a feature of workplaces where ableist norms dominate, making the act of disclosure itself an ableist practice. Where disabled people seek to '*pass*' as not disabled (Campbell 2008:156), it is because they know that ableist norms direct others to see their impairments, hidden or visible, as inevitably negative. '*Passing*' therefore means they take the opportunity to deny or remove from view completely their status of being disabled. Certainly, it is frequently the case that it is able bodied people who request disabled people to say publicly that they are disabled, an interesting parallel in this thesis to the fact that it is frequently neurotypical people who say neurodiverse people are different, not themselves.

In relation to capacities and abilities, Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk (2016) show that disabled employees can adopt other possible constructions of identity. They may believe they are just as productive as their colleagues, or as more productive if they recognise and agree that their disability sometimes confers advantage. For example, the deaf worker who can concentrate better than others when the phones are ringing. Alternatively, a disabled employee may acknowledge that it is their own disability which reduces their capacity, however much effort they put in, a difference which some believe is their employers' responsibility to accommodate.

A critical observation is that disability studies have failed to relate a disabled person's experience to the social context, and so are highly inadequate in issues relating to '*othering*' (Mik Meyer 2016:2). Alternative discourses surrounding disability do exist, in that where abled-bodied workers '*other*' their disabled colleagues (Mik Meyer 2016), organisationally prescribed norms of tolerance and inclusiveness sometimes make it very

problematic to talk about that person's actual impairment. This of course is even more likely where the dominant ableist discourse views a disabled person as less productive as a non-disabled person (Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk 2016). This is a pertinent insight in this investigation in that workplaces consist of autistic and neurotypical people, working alongside each other, in teams that their managers have to manage.

Examining the transcripts from tribunal cases brought by physically disabled people, who have been dismissed by their employers, offers some insight as to why, despite extensive employment protection legislation, disabled employees experience disadvantage. A major factor cited is the drive for numerical, functional and locational flexibility, which has created expectations that employees will readily switch between different types of tasks or adapt to working in different locations (Rubery, Kaiser and Grimshaw 2016). Other organisational structural features include the development of workplaces into places where there is *"inappropriate social and spatial organisation of work"* (Hall and Wilton 2011:868), as well as the lauding of work organisation forms such as team-based working, which requires *'full inter-changeability of staff'* that is *"simply incompatible within performance targets"* (Foster and Wass 2012:715,716) for physically disabled people. These realities create demands which are disproportionately harder for physically disabled people working in a team of able-bodied people to comply with, on account of their reduced function in both physical and mental health. Compounding these disparities experienced by disabled people are employers' beliefs in the 'ideal' worker, first identified by Rose (1988), which remains a pervasive concept in employers' minds (Foster and Wass 2012:707). This ideology has forcibly shaped employers' views that their employees must fit into prescribed and narrow roles, explicitly stating that for many jobs and tasks there typically exists a 'one best way' of working. Disabled employees therefore depart from this 'ideal', as they are assumed to be unable to perform as well as those that are not, particularly given the demands of contemporary workplaces.

Pressures arising directly from ableist norms are also significant for AS people, Richards (2015) extending this discussion to focus on difficulties with transport to work, the office environment with its political considerations and the sense that engaging with and understanding how to have 'fun' at work is an implied requirement. For autistic people these effects are exacerbated still further, in that as the clinical literature has established in Chapter 3, autism is a condition which makes these types of social interaction more difficult. Sang, Richards and Marks (2016) show men with hidden impairments, including AS, can become disabled through ableist working practices and experience adverse consequences on career outcomes and quality of work relationships.

4.2.2. *Alternative constructions of disability and autism*

Disability writers have challenged constructions of disability, for example in discussing childhood disability, Fisher (2007: 283–298) notes that outcomes of dependence and reliance can be reconceptualised as interdependence and mutuality, which are more positive perceptions. Disability is viewed as *"a constituent component of human diversity and therefore, as a quality to be valued"* and thus it is the dominant culture and ideology of *'normalcy'* that is the prime reason physically disabled people are further psychologically disabled (Goodley and Roets 2008:244). Similarly, Kapp (2011) showed individual citizenship and self-sufficiency are not universally desirable societal outcomes, conversely some cultures welcome and accept autistic people who need help to live independently, although whether these would be unequivocally welcomed in western societies and non-supported community organisations is not discussed. Similar criticisms have been levelled that interventions to support autistic children are not legitimate, in that they seek to impose behaviours of neurotypical standards of normality laid down by those that are non-disabled (Shyman 2016).

When exploring how managers perceive their AS employees, it is important to consider their views about what someone's disability actually means are actively constructed by all involved in the interaction, including the autistic person, not just themselves as the *'other'* in the workplace. This separation is borne out in emic accounts from autistic individuals who describe their disconnection and misunderstandings of everyday and employment experiences. Neurodiversity advocates refer to this as the *'double empathy'* problem (Milton 2012), arising from the difficulties that both autistic and neurotypical people have in understanding each other, as neither share the same frame of reference within social interactions. These variations in constructions as to what actually *'is'* disability are especially pertinent to autistic people given the views about difference, typicality and normality that neurodiversity advocates have expressed, especially so as autistic people are a distinct minority amongst the neurotypical majority. The thesis does not aim to replicate studies which have highlighted these difficulties highlighted by the double empathy writers, but rather how these alternative constructions have implications for those who manage autistic people.

4.3. *The legislative context surrounding AS*

Employment legislation defines disability in relation to someone's functioning in the workplace; "*a person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day-to-day activities*" (Equality Act 2010, Section 6). Initially through the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and currently through the protections afforded under the Equality Act 2010, legislation recognises that society in general and workplaces specifically can impose both barriers and enablers in respect of disabled people on top of those they experience from the condition itself. Seeing these as impositions has guided the development of legislation which directs employers to mitigate a person's disability by modifying aspects of the working environments and seeking to ensure a person with a disability is not discriminated against either prior or during their employment. Hoque, Bacon and Parr (2014) have shown that policy and practices employers have developed to accommodate and include disabled people following the Equality Act is limited in effectiveness, observing failures in how these are designed and implemented. Exploring the experiences of people with physical but not hidden disabilities, they find that whilst employers have acquired public endorsement of their commitment to include and protect disabled people, their rationale has come from seeking reputational benefits rather than from a genuine commitment to supportive inclusion practices, describing these policies in earlier studies as an '*empty shell*' (Hoque and Noon 2004:482). Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall (2104) also discuss the comprehensive barriers faced by disabled individuals seeking and during employment, acknowledging that their study excludes discussion of how these barriers apply to hidden conditions.

4.3.1. *Employment tribunal decisions relating to autistic people*

Seeking to identify how employers discharge their legislative duties to make reasonable adjustments in managing autistic employees, a search for 'Asperger' and autism (2010-2018) within the Lexis Law Library databases found 472 cases, of which just fifteen were concerned with employment issues. The remainder covered education, social care and medical claims, reflective of the child-centred and clinical nature of current knowledge. In the employment cases, a major reason AS people experienced work as problematic was the lack of their employers' knowledge about what and how autistic people differ from others in respect of their social interaction capacities and preferences. Such difficulties in employers' understanding are attributed as the root cause of autistic applicants being rejected and of employers failing to make reasonable adjustments in the area of social interaction, that is how people in their organisations talk and interact with each other. Critically, this investigation notes how difficult in practice this will be to enact. Tribunals identify that this gap in knowledge causes managers to believe that AS employees are being deliberately rude (Wallis 2012) or behaving inappropriately, rather than from

simply 'being' AS and having this biological condition. These attributions have been shown to instigate disciplinary action against autistic people or their eventual dismissal and are evidenced by tribunal decisions reached (*Hartley v Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services* 2016; *Isles v London Borough of Ealing* 2005; *Bowerman v B & Q PLC* 2005; *Hewett v Motorola Ltd* 2004; *Fotheringham v Perth and Kinross Council* 2013). These cases are detailed further in Annex 2.

Legislation also highlights that employers face difficulties in deciding precisely what is a 'reasonable' adjustment for people with hidden disabilities. In the case of adjustments to the processes used to select autistic people, tribunals have offered different interpretations as to what is and what is not reasonable. For example, Ms. Lowe, an AS applicant, was rejected for a highly skilled role on the basis of her score from a competency-based group exercise within a selection process, which both then and now is widely viewed as challenging and very competitive. She was unsuccessful and upon receiving her feedback from the process claimed disability discrimination under the law at the time (*Lowe v Cabinet Office* 2011), on the grounds the employers refused the adjustments she had requested. Her request was for the other group members to ask their questions in turn and in a specific order. However, as this exercise was designed to test candidates' abilities to build productive relationships and influencing skills, the tribunal agreed with the employer that her request was unreasonable, concluding that had they complied, the group dynamic would have been undermined and the essence of the assessment destroyed. This would have meant that none of the candidates would have been allowed to demonstrate the competencies that were so central to the position offered. In contrast and more recently, tribunals have assessed that insisting that an AS applicant complete a multiple-choice psychometric test is actually *unreasonable*, illustrated in the case of *Brookes v. Government Legal Services* (2017). Here, Ms. Brookes, also an AS applicant but this time representing herself, requested she take the situational judgment test in a written narrative rather than multiple choice form, citing her autism as the cause of needing these preferences to be accommodated. Overturning the tribunal decision and upholding Brookes' claim, the appeal tribunal concluded that employers will avoid unlawful discrimination only if they show their recruitment processes were a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim, especially if these practices are likely to put a group at a disadvantage.

Cases of students' experiences of discrimination in education, a field lying at the margins of the employment arena, have been explored by Katsiyannis et al (2016) in the USA, finding that the highest proportion of disabled people involved in litigation were those diagnosed as having an autism spectrum condition. This is a trend which may have consequent effects in the UK, where younger autistic people leaving education and becoming employed decide to pursue their discriminatory experiences in work. Indeed, the very recent case (*Sherbourne v Npower* 2019) indicates this trend, where Tom

Sherbourne, a young adult successfully won his discrimination claim because his employers failed to modify his noisy working environment. Legislation is a major shaper of managers' responses and perceptions and thus appears in the conceptual framework presented at the end of this chapter.

4.4. Disclosure considerations for people with hidden disabilities

An autistic person experiences the personal and social effects as Chapter 2 has shown, yet the hidden nature of the condition means that those around them, including their line managers, cannot easily see how and why they occur. The theoretical framework has identified that this hidden aspect of autism is very significant in this investigation. Firstly, the hidden nature means that autistic people, like others with hidden conditions, have somewhat different choices and decisions to make than do physically disabled people, about if and when they disclose their condition. Secondly, although managers can notice these social effects of autism irrespective of whether someone discloses, they can only respond according to legislation if that individual does disclose. For both these reasons, the hidden nature is clearly a contributor to the exclusionary experiences introduced. Thus, this review also reviews critically what is known about the shapers of disclosure choices for autistic people.

The Equality Act 2010 does not stipulate that an autistic person must disclose their condition to an employer either at application stage or during employment, merely that they can disclose and have a right to request adjustments, which employers must then decide are reasonable or not. Employment tribunals have made it clear that even where an applicant or employee does not voluntarily disclose their hidden condition, their employers cannot use this as a defence that they did not know someone has a disability and have criticised employers for not realising that 'something is wrong' (Doolan v Interserve Facilities Management Ltd 2013; also Galo v Bombardier Aerospace 2016). In relation to autistic people, this is an extremely challenging matter for employers to address as people with hidden disabilities do not disclose automatically, rather it is the case they make considered assessments of the risks and benefits. For example, whether or not they will remain anonymous and unnoticed, or if they will be subjected to others' incorrect or negative estimations of their abilities (Petronio 2002; Blockmans 2015).

Morris, Begel and Wiedermann (2015) found that the majority of AS individuals did not disclose their diagnosis, either to their managers or the Human Resources department once employed, fearing adverse judgments or discrimination and indicating disclosure is problematic for autistic people even in companies where autistic characteristics are valued explicitly. Sarrett (2017) also reports autistic employees fear discrimination and stigmatisation from disclosing, their fears being based upon their actual experiences in previous employments. In examining how ethnic minority groups seek to progress their careers, Al Ariss et al (2013) notes that to overcome discrimination at the point of

shortlisting, skilled ethnic minority workers can choose to adopt a non-ethnic sounding name. In effect, they seek to assimilate into the surrounding majority by disguising their differences, which is an interesting parallel to the choice made by some autistic employees to avoid the label that their hidden condition generates through non-disclosure. Such decisions support Campbell's ideas that disclosure is actually an ableist practice. There is a strong indication that very real grounds for non-disclosure do exist although the views from their managers about this critical interaction are unexplored. These observations mean that disclosing remains an uneasy choice for many autistic people, reinforcing the need in the analysis to discuss the challenges managers face which are associated with the hidden nature of autism.

Once disclosed, it is not necessarily the case that a disabled person will request the accommodations they are entitled to. Reviewing the organisational barriers facing physically disabled people, Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall (2014) show they do not always request these as they fear being labelled negatively and are anxious about imposing upon their co-workers. They suggest employers will use these fears as a reason to withhold accommodations, even though they can see clearly that someone is disabled. Critically for this investigation and consistent with the difficulties surrounding accessing people with hidden disabilities, they neglect to discuss if withholding would also be the case if they were managing someone who had disclosed their hidden neurological disability. In terms of this present investigation, whether disclosure is taken to be an ableist practice or not, many autistic people do keep their condition hidden and thus their managers cannot know formally that someone is autistic.

4.5. Section summary

Ableist norms existing in organisations shape views about what is and what is not acceptable as far as capacity and productivity standards, about who is and who is not responsible for these matters, about the way in which disability itself is talked about. Whichever way disabled employees talk about their disability, and whoever is talking about disability, dominant ableist thinking affirms that high productivity is an organisationally accepted valuable norm. This theme is therefore revisited in the analysis chapters to inform understanding of how managers' conceptualisations of their AS employees are shaped. Organisational demands for flexibility, the focus on team working, organisational capability and selection processes are all impositions of a structural nature which affect autistic people and which line managers have to work within. Therefore, these become important constituents in the conceptual framework.

The law does not allow for alternative interpretations of disabled people in that it does not direct recruiters, line managers or other people within the workplace to consider that someone who has a disability may actually be perfectly 'normal'. Changing perceptions about disabled people is not an explicit aim of equalities legislation, rather its focus is

protection which is assumed to come simply from modifying environments. These limitations have been discussed in Chapter 2.4 as precursors to the development of the theoretical framework based upon a social relational model of disability. Structural and legislative forces also impact upon the decisions autistic people make about disclosing, which in turn affects the ease with which their managers can respond to their disclosed condition.

4.6. *Role of line manager*

As this study focuses upon line managers' day to day experiences of managing AS employees, a consideration of managerial approaches and the constraints under which they operate follows. This follows calls for interdisciplinary perspectives, noting leader inclusiveness is key to reversing exclusionary outcomes for autistic people (Vogus and Taylor 2018).

4.6.1. *Capacity to influence employee experiences*

The approaches adopted by line managers in managing their employees have been noted as key in how employees experience HR policies; for Purcell and Hutchinson (2007:4) they are "*crucial agents*", with a key role in securing employee commitment, engagement, well-being and achievement of strategic goals (Townsend et al 2012). In theory they are well placed to influence someone's employment relationship through interpreting HR policies which allow them to shape the psychological contract of those who work for them (Rousseau 1995; 2005) in whatever job role they hold. Evans (2015), focusing upon the retail sector, notes managers sometimes experience role conflict and stress when translating policies into operation.

Snyder et al (2010) note that negative workplace experiences are magnified for individuals with non-physical rather than physical disabilities, suggesting this is because managers react unfavourably to the difficulties in communication that often accompany people with hidden disabilities. By no means do all autistic people share this level of difficulty in communication Snyder refers to, but important for this investigation is to recognise managers can certainly influence the discriminatory outcomes experienced by a disabled employee. Recognising agency in considering management activities, Watson (2000:223) also sees management as less about rational planning, monitoring and organising skills, instead it is rather more like a "*human social craft*", necessary to handle ongoing day to day disturbances like those identified much earlier by Mintzberg (1973). Managing in contemporary organisations therefore continues to be a skill requiring managers to know about and respond to employees' highly individual motivations and circumstances. This investigation acknowledges that managers have potential for making individual considerations and have some discretion to act, noting also that this is not though a universal capacity. Archer (2003:165) has shown that people differ widely in

their capacities to reflect, in that some are highly capable of reflection whereas others are not capable at all. These reflexive types, denoted as "*meta, communicative, autonomous, fractured reflexives*" are important in understanding managers' actions and thus this realist concept is incorporated into the analysis chapters. More critically, Alvesson and Wilmott (2012) note that managers are simply intermediaries and so limited in the results they can achieve, constrained by working in contexts where power relations exist.

It is known that disclosing disabilities is a decision influenced by the strength, intimacy and trust within the relationship between the individual and the person to whom disclosure is being made (Petronio 2002). In the 'younger' environment of higher education Blockmans (2015) noted that trust gained from reciprocal sharing of important personal information with their peers was key for university students deciding to disclose. For this population disclosing the details of their physical impairments was not seen as overly problematic or to be avoided, but more as a route to acceptance and belonging. High trust is a key indicator of a healthy and productive relationship between any individual and their frontline manager (Gill 2008), yet little is known specifically about how trust manifests between line manager and autistic employees. Parr & Hunter (2014) find that AS employees prefer their leaders to create confidence, optimism, resiliency and trust but say little about how managers can do this in regard to their autistic employees. The section prior has shown that disclosure is an uneasy choice for an autistic person and so the very fact that many may be keeping their condition secret from either their immediate line manager, their colleagues or the rather more anonymous HR function indicates the importance of trust. This becomes an element in the conceptual framework presented at the end of this chapter.

4.6.2. Relationship with HR

Shifts in relationships between those with line management responsibilities and their HR departments can mean HR perform transactional activities and strategic planning, leaving line managers accountable for selection, training and performance management. These devolved responsibilities create the potential for idiosyncratic people management outcomes, which Bainbridge (2015) has shown connect to adverse outcomes for managers in the form of frustration, strain and interpersonal conflicts, as well as being beneficial to the wider organisation. Evans (2015) notes devolvement driven by cost reduction and customer service initiatives in retail compromises what front line managers can achieve, causing them to circumvent established policies and suggesting this is common across many employment sectors. Following Ulrich's (1997) seminal work of how HR functions should operate, attention shifted to the extent to which line managers prioritised their HR related duties. Shipton et al (2015) concluded that where line managers perform 'employee champion' and 'strategic partner' roles, more positive

employee attitudes to work are likely, also raising structural concerns that lack of time and expertise may curtail their attempts to do so. McDermott et al (2015) finds a tripartite model in which line managers, HR and senior professionals are all involved in implementing HRM; the HR function develops strategic framework and practices, line managers implement these practices, and senior professionals support managers in decision-making in relation to staff matters. In practice, this is an idealised model failing to account for the tensions created by differing goals and role conflicts, representing further structural constraints affecting how managers apply directives of HR practice and policy.

The following section moves to consider what is known about the challenges that managers face in managing their AS employees.

4.6.3. Managers' responses to autistic employees

Adding a managerial perspective to the many employee based AS accounts discussed prior, Hagner and Cooney (2005) reported that supervisors found it straightforward to accommodate their AS employees' needs by modifying roles, reallocating tasks to reduce social demands and seeking to match an individual's preferences with their role. These same supervisors found it much more problematic to provide additional time and external mentors. Their study is unrepresentative of a typical employment context as the majority of roles the supervisors spoke about were low-skilled, part-time status and located in community employment sites, with just one organisation employing more than 1,000 people. Thus, the potential for loose interpretation of formal policy in the remaining smaller firms was high, a limitation recognised in this present investigation which gathers data from far more typical organisations, which are mostly much larger. A further limitation is that autistic employees who performed poorly or who had left the company were excluded from the sample, thereby creating a positive skew.

In an exploratory study, Richards et al (2013) outline some of the constraints that line managers, rather than employers in general, face in managing hidden neurodiverse conditions (including but not solely AS), noting their key role as moderators of employment outcomes for neurodiverse employees. Focusing upon just one industry, Richards and Sang (2016) reveal the experiences that trade unions have in supporting neurodiverse employees, both studies concluding that organisations need more specialist knowledge of concepts and theories relating to AS. Employers are urged to deploy more specialist neurodiversity advisors from organisations such as NAS, as well as from their own trade union representatives, to support this group who are disadvantaged by nature of their innate condition.

A further critical observation is that whilst Chapter 3 identified the support that autistic people report as helpful in workplaces, this literature lacks integration with the realities

of the structures within which their managers operate, although does surface the value that understanding what it is like to be autistic can have. Scott et al (2015) extends knowledge by comparing the different perspectives of employers alongside those of autistic and AS employees, finding that expectations about key aspects of employment differed, particularly in terms of productivity and performance standards. Employers believe that once employed, it is the employee's responsibility to meet the performance standards expected, whereas this chapter has already made apparent (pages 67-68), that this view may not be shared by everyone. It should be borne in mind though that these differences in expectations may not be radically different from the mismatched expectations and obligations reported by many employees (Rousseau 1995; 2005), yet remain observations which support the significance of ableist norms as elements of the socio-cultural forces this investigation is concerned with.

4.6.4. Changing roles; job crafting and job carving

Acknowledging the importance of the nature of the job itself in an autistic person's employment experiences (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2015), this section briefly reviews what is known about the purpose of modifying or shaping jobs. It highlights that literature has focused upon 'job crafting' as a process initiated by the employee, not their manager. Individuals can intentionally shape their job by changing its scope, the number of tasks performed (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), or by altering how they perceive the meaning of their role (Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski 2013). Employees craft their jobs to create developmental opportunities (Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski 2008; Lyons 2008), stay engaged, use discretion, seek challenge, decrease problematic job demands, prepare for promotion or deal with organisational change, which can lead to increased self-efficacy, enjoyment of work and improved performance (Tims, Bakker and Derks 2012; 2013; 2014; Petrou et al 2012). In general, crafting jobs creates favourable outcomes for the individual, although if someone reduces their workload or avoids unpleasant tasks to reduce the demands their job places on them, their colleagues may experience negative outcomes (Tims, Bakker and Derks 2015).

In the UK, legislation requires employers to adjust the physical nature of the working environment for someone who is disabled, a generic prescription. No explicit reference to changing the role itself is made, nor does it mention the term 'crafting' (Equality Act, Chapter 20, 2010). Reviewing US legislation (Riesen, Morgana and Griffin 2015) note in contrast that employers are allowed to customise employment, referring to 'carving up' or sharing jobs to support individuals with significant disabilities secure permanent and meaningful employment. Viewing autism as a condition with "*significant support needs*" (Wehman et al 2016:63) explored outcomes for young ASD people, providing some support for the notion that designing roles to match strengths, abilities and desires can be productive for the individual. A critical observation is that the language of linking job

design to support can be perceived as somewhat insulting to skilled and intelligent AS people who simply do not regard themselves as needing support.

Identifying that many employees could subtly craft their jobs to avoid detrimental consequences on their health, Demetriou (2014) finds that disabled employees may benefit more so than others yet does not mention neurodiversity. Despite studies connecting job crafting to mutually beneficial outcomes for the individual and for the organisation, it is an underused approach, leading Demetriou (2014) to suggest organisations in general and specifically managers of disabled employees could be much more proactive in finding opportunities for their employees to craft their roles.

4.6.5. Section summary

This section has shown that managers play a key role to play in determining their autistic employees' experiences and that structural arrangements often place them as responsible for doing so. Agency as well as structure has a significant impact on managers' capacities for both action and reflection (Mutch 2004) and so both become important considerations in understanding organisational life, in particular the decisions and reactions of organisational actors. Thus, the conceptual framework at the end of this chapter places the line manager as central to this investigation acknowledging the complexity of their role and the constraints they face. The themes explored in the discussion concern managers' capacities for reflexivity, their management style and the structural, including legislative, constraints under which they operate to understand more about the challenges they face and the responses they make. This present investigation adds to knowledge by exploring how managers support their AS employees, as well as the barriers they face in doing so.

4.7. Diversity and inclusion considerations within HRM policies

Chapter 3 has shown autistic strengths are underexplored outside limited technology sectors, suggesting strongly that diversity management and inclusion policies are not fully embedded as far as autistic people are concerned. These policy and practice choices represent organisational structures within which line managers operate and are socio-cultural impositions that the theoretical framework has identified. The following section now examines the extent that HRM policies make inclusion considerations pertinent to autistic people and their managers. It begins by defining the terms of diversity and inclusion, indicating their relevance to autistic people, before moving to consider the organisational implications of seeking to use the skills of diverse groups. It critiques the design and implementation of diversity management and inclusion policies which aim to utilise skills which are linked to particular diverse groups.

4.7.1. Diversity management and inclusion policies

The meaning of the term diversity has developed from relatively narrow categorisations, where differences are visible demographic characteristics such as age and gender (McGrath et al 1995), towards definitions which recognise differences in personality, skills, knowledge and competence, some of which are less easily observable (Heery and Noon 2008). This broader definition of diversity could place autism as a disabling condition through assessments of competence, as well as one which is also associated with differences in processing style, which could feasibly be related to someone's personality or their skills. Chapter 3 has identified these kinds of differences exist and critically that autistic people are quite different from those who are neurotypical and in reference to disability, not able bodied. Although of course, the 'body' term renders this distinction unhelpful, in that there is no visible bodily difference between these two groups.

Inclusion is a far broader term than diversity, extending beyond legally mandated compliance matters and diversity management programmes and requiring organisations to adopt policies and practices which are much more discretionary in nature (Winters 2014). For Nishii (2013), inclusion is a multi-dimensional construct, requiring fairness in the way employment practices are implemented, a climate where people can stay true to their own identity rather than conforming to the values and norms of a dominant group. Critically, inclusion demands a very deliberate seeking out of diverse perspectives when making decisions.

Reviewing the various definitions of diversity surfaces some parallels between researching autistic people and researching gender as an aspect of human difference. These parallels are interesting because they draw attention to the power that established organisational norms have to shape the experiences of people belonging to diverse groups, who frequently are minorities that are unable, or at least not without considerable effort, to conform to these norms. The first parallel is drawn from thinking about gender studies, where gender is now embraced as an unfixed attribute and non-binary structure, defying established male and female norms and challenging traditional notions of what gender actually represents (Ryle 2018; Connell and Pearse 2015). These studies reinforce the reality that despite diversity management initiatives, women remain disadvantaged because organisations remain stubbornly highly gendered (Acker 1990) by continuing to operate gendered policies in relation to specifying the skills they want, constructing formal job descriptions, rewarding performance and developing people (Connell and Pearse 2015; Collins et al 2015). Non-binary people, who are poorly understood by others, disrupt normative views of what gender means in society, by not identifying as either male or female. Similarly, there is evidence that autistic people can disrupt what are considered 'normal' ways of behaving, working and thinking evidenced through the biological mechanisms identified in Chapter 3. This investigation notes these

observations regarding organisational life stem from the dominance of gendered norms, which make it normal for women to be women and men to be men. They resonate strongly with the ways of working considered to be normal by neurodiversity advocates, who have recognised how difficult this makes it to work in an organisation where neurotypical norms dominate. A further parallel is that non-binary people, just like autistic people, are different in a way that is not always visible to others and so frequently choose not to disclose their identity, or condition, fearing stigmatisation (Beauregard et al 2016). A final parallel is that many of these studies seek to redress the hidden inequalities this group experiences in the workplace (Drydakis 2017), which is an aim shared by this investigation.

4.7.2. *Using skills of diverse groups*

Organisations have pursued diversity management beyond the legislative compliance requirements discussed prior, seeking to demonstrate they are inclusive employers with policies and practices which leverage the contributions that various groups can make on account of their particular differences. Recruitment, selection and career development policies are frequently premised upon the belief that deliberately deploying diverse groups of employees to match the gender, cultural background or ethnicity of customer groups will expand market capacity (Economist Intelligence Unit 2009:16). Increasing the representation of people who are different in race, gender and ethnicity is claimed to address skills shortages in hard-to-recruit for areas, a prime concern for HRM specialists. Chapter 3 has noted that these efforts have not been promoted directly to autistic people, despite their known abilities in these STEM areas. Although utilising diverse skills is an accepted approach to enhancing organisational performance, Kochan et al (2003) note it is largely unproven, citing implementation difficulties. Further critique of diversity management interventions, for example those aiming to promote greater use of the skills and contributions of people from different minority groups, comes from Noon (2007:779), who views policies as '*fatally flawed*' because they fail to recognise that employers in general and managers specifically, will sometimes disallow advancement of minority groups on the basis of economic arguments around productivity. In the case of disabled people, these arguments are a key factor in understanding their exclusion from employment. Studying diversity management, Vassilopoulou (2017:304) finds that programmes for ethnic minority groups can be diluted and '*window dressed*', citing poor understanding of what managing diversity actually means, as well as societal reluctance to tackle deeper and hidden inequalities. Again, in relation to diversity management for ethnic minority groups, Janssens and Zanoni (2014) conclude HRM policies are ineffective on account that power imbalances permeate job analysis and person specifications. All these studies highlight the complexities and limitations of promoting diversity and achieving inclusion beyond the letter of protective legislation and the claims of being a

diverse employer. In regard to all these arguments for embedding policies that improve inclusion for diverse groups are the difficulties in isolating autistic people who can keep their condition hidden, further justifying the need to improve employers' knowledge of how they might achieve this.

A useful contribution from Janssens and Zanoni (2014) is the connection they make between having HRM policies which broaden understanding of what counts as effective performance, using the example of an organisation that explicitly values the language skills and personal resilience of ethnic minorities in their workforce. This is felt to be an effective route to fostering meaningful diversity and inclusion, as it addresses root causes of inequalities, noting too that it is rare, being used by just one of the ten small firms in their study. Although their study focused upon ethnic minority groups, their conclusion that the mechanisms used to value knowledge and skills are key to optimising the skills and contributions from a particular group, is a significant parallel in this investigation, where the skills of neurodiverse and neurotypical minorities are being explored.

Therefore, the following section steps back to consider and review what is known about the forces shaping employers' understanding of skill, important as the thesis aims to explore the interpretations managers make of the contributions from their AS employees, by dint of their differences from neurotypicals. It begins by examining the concept of skill itself before considering how HRM policies in regard to deriving, specifying and selecting people affect autistic people, as well as how they might shape their managers' perceptions.

4.8. *How is 'skill' understood within HRM policies?*

4.8.1. *Social construction of skill*

Skills are commonly distinguished as to whether they are abilities that can be defined objectively, easily articulated and understood, versus abilities that are more subjectively constructed. Objective skills have been linked closely to those in technical domains, Lloyd and Payne (2009:631) arguing that for a capability to be defined as skill, it must have a "*clear link to technical competence and knowledge*". This distinction between objective and subjective skills resurfaces as 'hard' or 'soft', evidenced in the framework (Annex 3) available to HR practitioners in the UK (CIPD 2010). The terminology is important in this investigation as it explores how the differential affinities for soft and hard skills in AS individuals play out in the workplace.

Constructions of skills, whether objective or subjective depend upon the extent to which an individual is able to demonstrate to an employer that the attributes and capabilities they possess are indeed valuable. An individual therefore has 'strong' skills not just if they are actually skilled, but also that they are positioned with the opportunity and power to exercise that skill in the labour market. These same attributes and capabilities can be

constructed as 'weak' when the reverse is true, and individuals are unable to demonstrate that the particular sets of abilities, knowledge and skills they possess are valued (Littler 1982), when in fact they may be of significant value. For example, in a gendered analysis Grugulis & Vincent (2009) note that jobs done primarily by women are often considered less skilled than those done primarily by men, and so the skills that women acquire become devalued despite increasing demands from employers for some of these softer skills.

Soft skills can also become conflated with appearance, ways of talking and self-representation, creating the potential for unconscious discrimination. In regard to race, (Moss and Tilly 1996) illustrated how stereotypes held by hiring managers work systematically against particular groups such as black Americans, who are often perceived as lacking in the 'soft' skills of 'good' communication, 'good' attitudes and friendliness. Similarly, and using qualification as a proxy for skill in regard to cultural differences, Shan (2013) notes that immigrants' own qualifications in a particular discipline are constructed as less valuable than those of their host country counterparts.

In regard to how skills are described, soft skills in particular are frequently explicated very generically, being drawn from an array of personality, attitudinal and knowledge indicators. For example, communication skills may be about communicating basic instructions, which is a somewhat different skill from the fuller communicative abilities required in discussing a complex scenario in an ambiguous situation. Bedwell et al (2012) highlight how teamworking, collaboration and cooperation become conflated as interwoven concepts, creating confusing definitions. A further observation of the categories listed in the CIPD framework is that some of these are very broad and constitute both types of skills. For example, solving complex problems may be entirely to do with 'hard' data and statistical inference, or may be related to a situation where complexity arises from scenarios where individual emotions, motivations, aspirations and abilities come into play. Soft skills are often intangible and difficult to define, paralleling the notion that skill, just like knowledge, can be tacit (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Certainly, some skills have a greater tacit dimension than others, for example communication skills are somewhat more visible and perhaps easier to measure and explicate objectively than the skills associated with intuition and judgement. The expansiveness and ambiguity regarding soft skills has created the potential for these areas to attract different constructions and subject to definitional difficulties.

4.8.2. Specifying skills

Person specifications use 'job first' approaches, breaking down the tasks deemed to constitute a particular job and generating a list of the skills, knowledge, attributes, competencies and more latterly values (Waugh et al 2014). Alternatively, 'person first' approaches specify those that the current incumbent possesses. Both approaches have

been critiqued for being imprecise, subjective and ultimately flawed; either the requirements for skills in a role at any point in time are likely to change as time goes on, or the person chosen upon which to base the specification may or may not be performing the job well. Subjectivity arises also when the specification, frequently drawn up by HR, differs from what the recruiter, usually the manager, is looking for. The actual meaning of terms such as team-working can differ too as the definitional and measurement problems cited in the previous discussion of soft skills has shown. For example, teamworking can have a collaborative organisational wide meaning, or can mean the ability to fit in and socialise with the immediate team members.

Seeking to understand how employers interpret written down person specifications and drawing upon the notion that skill is socially constructed, Nickson et al (2012) identified that employers in the fashion retail sector frequently specify soft skills as personality characteristics. For example, advertising for a 'friendly' person rather than explicating the skills that are actually required and viewing personality as a proxy for soft skills. Of particular relevance to this investigation is their identification that definitions are more precise where they specify contextual elements. In the fashion sector therefore, a valuable skill would be knowledge of and interest in the sector, as well as customer service-oriented skills including emotional intelligence and teamworking, which previous sections have shown are more difficult for autistic people.

4.8.3. Competency frameworks

Competency frameworks are popular institutional mechanisms which purport to address a plethora of HRM challenges, including leadership development (Ruderman, Clerkin and Connolly 2014; Garavan & McGuire 2001) and sustained competitive advantage (Sandberg 2000). More critically Gama, McKenna and Peticca-Harris (2012:107) view competency frameworks as policies serving the interests of the organisation, through its HR specialists, rather than those of its employees; "*HR professionals largely operate to perpetuate a framework of distance, depersonalization and dissembling in the management of people in organizations, serving to neutralize the moral impulse*", recognising also that individual HR practitioners may subsequently experience tensions in managing a situation which requires discretion in applying such policies. In this present investigation it is though often line managers, not HR specialists, who have to deal directly with these tensions and therefore the thesis seeks to offer some insights into where these may lie.

Individual competencies specify the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values required in particular roles, which describe how performance is enacted and which behaviours are to be displayed. These are frequently based upon distinguishing between employees who have been assessed as average and exemplary performers (Boysatzis 1982; Hondeghem & Vandermeulen 2000), Kaiser and Curphy (2013) identifying this leaves frameworks

open to the same problems as those associated with person first derivations. Deriving competencies is also problematic due to their ambiguity in terms and situational context influences (McKenna 1999), failing to consider the role of previous experiences, emotions, sectoral variations and the role itself in determining what leaders actually do (Audeneart et al 2014). Notwithstanding the problems in derivation, implementation difficulties may come simply from not recognising individual capacities. Heinsman et al (2008) suggest that the propensity of individuals to behave in particular ways, which is arguably the goal of competency frameworks, is connected to perceived behavioural control (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980), in that for someone to display these specific behaviours they must have confidence that they can actually do so. Disability, whether physical or mental, visible or hidden, does not emerge as a factor that has been considered in such discussions about capacities. It appears unlikely therefore that those designing frameworks will have reflected upon how these may have affected autistic people, or their managers who have to respond to the consequent social effects.

4.8.4. Selection methods

Surveying approaches to talent planning, CIPD (2016) indicate that face-to-face interviews remain the most popular selection method for determining suitability, either for joining an organisation or to progress within. Participating in an interview whether face-to-face or virtual creates specific difficulties for AS individuals, in that the interview measures dispositional constructs such as teamworking and communication skills, areas which Chapter 3 has identified can be experienced as problematic for AS individuals. Additionally, in face-to-face interviews, autistic candidates may interpret questions too literally, make inappropriate assessment of social situations, avoid eye contact and handshakes. As these are well established norms governing behaviours in selection interviews (Herriot 2002), someone who does not conform to these norms by displaying these kinds of social effects, may reduce their chances of being made a job offer. Spezio et al (2007), also Stankova and Trajkovski (2010), have shown that these norms disadvantage autistic people in comparison to their less qualified competition. Assessment centres with their emphasis upon the expression of 'soft' skills in teamworking, leadership and communications are an established element of corporate selection processes (Gold 2012) and as Morgan (2011) indicates, in a post appearing on the CIPD's website, will be "*very tricky for those on the autistic spectrum*". The existing literature does not appear to provide evidence that these processes are being modified for autistic candidates. This present investigation does not focus on how autistic individuals are selected to join organisations but does discuss managers' perceptions of how internal selection processes may affect their autistic employees in negotiating career progression.

4.9. Valuing skills and the implications for AS people

This section begins by exploring employers' views about the value of skills, drawing on the 'hard' and 'soft' distinction presented prior. Throughout, the focus is upon how these valuations can impact if managers view their autistic employees as 'skilled' or not.

4.9.1. Work ethic

Employers have long distinguished between 'techniques' and 'social skills', the latter defined as the extent to which a person demonstrates reliability, responsibility, trustworthiness and stability. They have also long expressed concerns these skills are in short supply (Blackburn & Mann 1979), a finding echoed (Oliver and Turnton 1982:199) who note '*stable*', '*reliable*' and '*responsible*' workers are difficult to acquire. Contemporary accounts also restate work ethic as valuable to employers by referring to qualities of diligence and motivation (Bok 2006; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). Bracey (2006) observes that employers describe work habits as being more important than academic skills, as do HR managers, who also isolate work ethic as a necessary aspect of employability (Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote 2012; Tymon 2013). In their analysis of employers' complaints about scarcity of numeracy skills, Durrani & Tariq (2012) cite work ethic as of far greater importance, perhaps reflecting the view that such 'harder' skills can be more easily trained or developed than work ethic, a quality more akin to an individual's innate disposition. These strong indications that employers accord value to work ethic prompt further exploration of managers' reactions and responses to the work ethic they observe in their AS employees. Mindful of the critical realist principles adopted in the theoretical framework (Mooney 2016), which signify the importance of uncovering ethical issues in studying hidden conditions, the discussion considers critically if this capacity exposes AS people to deliberate or unintentional exploitation.

4.9.2. Demand for skills - 'soft' and 'hard'

'Hard' skills have been defined as those relating to literacy, numeracy and IT (Durrani and Tariq 2012; Browne & Hesketh 2004) and in higher skilled roles as those in the STEM disciplines. Skills shortages in the STEM disciplines are predicted across many sectors, leading Wilson et al (2014) to highlight the strategic importance of these advanced technical skills for the UK economy. This finding is supported by the skills survey (UKCES 2016:61), reporting that about a third of employers say '*solving complex problems and complex numerical/statistical skills*' are hard to find, making it difficult to fill STEM vacancies. An emergent skill area connected to the STEM disciplines and common to many sectors is that of predictive analytics, commonly known as 'big' data, which is a skill employers view as necessary for sustained competitive advantage in many organisational sectors (Davenport and Patil 2012; Kahnemann 2011). Critically in regard to exploring how an autistic person's strengths can be used, the value of predictive

analytics has increased in sectors outside those focused upon technology. For example, Silver (2012) has shown analytics have value in the context of political campaigning, with Davenport & Patil (2012) acknowledging these are also the skills which many organisations lack.

Soft skills are suggested to impact productivity, innovation and the ability to remain competitive, causing employers globally to express concern that applicants lack soft rather than hard skills, which they cite as initiative, perseverance, time-management and team-working (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2008). Major UK employers believe teamwork and communication to be soft skills which are key to improving productivity through improved customer service, assigning value to their presence and costs to their absence (Peate 2015). Higher Education has also responded to employers' criticism that graduates are not appropriately skilled (Yorke and Harvey 2005; Belt, Drake and Chapman 2010; Branine 2008; Archer & Davison 2008), investing heavily in embedding employability into the curriculum through the acquisition and assessment of 'soft' skills (Andrews and Higson 2008; Rosenberg, Heimler and Morote 2012).

The demand for soft skills has increased, in part as what can be classed as skill has expanded, to reflect demands from employers in service-based economies. Grugulis and Lloyd (2010:99) refer to the "*dramatic increase in the lexicon of skills*" while Thompson and Hartley (2007:160) comment that the "*palette of skills*" has widened. Skills have become more social in nature including notions of personal qualities and abilities, for example self-confidence, communications, disposition, problem-solving and appearance, an expansion which has led to accusations of exaggerated and '*universal upskilling*' (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson 2013:164). This expansion has also made it more difficult to separate an individual's personal qualities from their actual 'skill'. All in all, what employers view as a skill and something inherently valuable, has expanded from skills that are purely objective or technical in nature to those that include particular attitudes, meaning "*nothing more than whatever employers wants*" (Lafer 2004:118), or simply whatever the user wants it to mean; "*skill is a "humpty-dumpty word"*" (Oliver and Turton 1982:198).

The difficulties autistic people experience with displaying 'soft' skills have been noted in Chapter 3, and this next section examines this in relation to varied organisational contexts.

4.9.3. Career progression and performance management

Soft skills are viewed as necessary for career advancement in the professional occupations, including law, accountancy and information technology (Giusti 2008; Wolosky 2008; Sharma and Jones 2010; Joseph et al 2010; Beard, Schwieger and Surendran 2008; Nilsson 2010). Similarly, Marks' & Scholarios' (2008) small-scale study

in the software industry concluded that whilst employees and employers viewed hard skills and qualifications as necessary for entry, it was their soft skills that became increasingly essential for employability within and outside the organisation. Soft, not hard, skills differentiate between average and superior performance in project management (Muzio et al 2007; El Saaba 2001), evidenced by the dominance of soft skills in the professional institution's competency framework (Brill, Bishop and Walker 2006) and in project management training evaluation (Alam et al 2010).

In regard to learning and development opportunities and performance management processes, Sumner and Brown (2015) highlight how these can be inequitable for neurodiverse individuals. Albeit their focus is upon people with learning difficulties, not autistic employees, the barriers they identify signpost the potential for discrimination in mainstream HRM policies. A further finding which may be relevant to autistic people comes from a report challenging HR practitioners to consider the effectiveness of performance appraisal systems (Barends, Janssen and Marengo 2016), which notes employees who show organisational citizenship behaviours, political 'nous' and self-promotion appear to receive higher performance ratings than those who did not. It may be that neurodiverse autistic people, who have difficulties in social interaction, will find it harder than their neurotypical counterparts to navigate organisational progression pathways which demand these kinds of skills, particularly as most, though not all, appraisal conversations are conducted face to face. Career progression and performance management processes fall within the remit of HR specialists and managers and are therefore explored in the discussion chapter, at 9.6 and 9.8, in relation to how their managers handle their autistic employees.

4.9.4. Leadership roles

Emotional intelligence has been noted as a predictor of success in global leadership assignments (Gabel, Dolan and Cerdin 2005) and is frequently included in assessment and development protocols for managers and leaders. This connection derives from the belief that managers should be highly skilled in handling relationships at work and hold demonstrably high levels of emotional intelligence, which Goleman (2008) views as consisting of the ability to regulate their own emotions and to display empathy. Another critical competence of managers and leaders is their political skill (Mintzberg 1985; Ferris et al 2007), which a meta-analysis of existing empirical work (Bing et al 2011) notes can exert a positive effect upon performance, particularly where a role requires the use of social influence tactics. Valuations of leadership attributes in pursuit of organisational flexibility and agility have led to claims that HR recruiters hold a 'generalist bias' (Wang and Murnighan 2013), who argue this means they overlook the value of technical specialists, preferring instead to recruit generalists as future leaders. Such bias may

serve to further undervalue the hard skills that typically reside in technical specialists and also, as discussed prior, in autistic people.

4.9.5. *Service roles*

Particular forms of soft skills, including '*looking good*' and '*sounding right*' (Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton 2005:196), are assessed to be important in roles for the service-based economy as personal emotions, attitudes and ways of presentation are essential components of how employees operate. Summarising the impact of changes in sectoral skill requirements, Wilson et al (2014) projects growth in health and social care for high and low-skilled roles, which all rely heavily upon these soft skills. Emotion is involved in front line service work, seen as having negative impact (Hochschild 1983), although less deterministic views recognise some individuals are better able to manage emotion work than others, on account some people have skills and resilience to handle customer demands (Bolton and Boyd 2003). Whether or not Hochschild's views are accepted, her recognition that the self-management of emotions can be "*hard work*" (Hochschild 1983:39) is uncontested. Both clinical and employment studies have shown that AS individuals are likely to experience such tasks as being proportionately more effortful and uncomfortable than neurotypicals, raising the potential that managers may detrimentally assess autistic people working in roles where such skills are required.

4.9.6. *Combining hard and soft skills*

Kenney & Gudergan (2006:46) identified that knowledge intensive organisations are proactive in making deliberate use of different people with different skills, highlighting this '*combinative capability*' is key in acquiring and integrating valuable knowledge. Organisational features such as hierarchies, networking and management structures are indicated as shapers of combinative capability. Critically though, their analysis does not extend to actively considering how innate characteristics, such as those in neurodiverse autistic employees can be utilised, suggesting differences in individual thinking styles are somewhat less important than structural features when considering how best to capitalise on valuable knowledge. Considering further the ways that different skills are combined shows that hard skills can become more valuable when combined with soft skills (Klaus, Rohman and Hamaker 2007; Grugulis and Vincent 2009). This synergistic and interrelated nature of skill (Field 2002) means that combining abilities, particularly cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving with softer skills, for example intuition, would give employers the potential to access a valuable skill set consisting of 'hard' and 'soft' components, which may be particularly important in decision-making. This notion of deliberately combining skills is interesting, given the very real differences in cognitive styles between neurotypical and neurodiverse people that have been discussed prior. The critical point is that analysing skill in this way points to the potential

for employers to deliberately combine skills of different people, rather than seek these in just one person.

4.9.7. Section summary

The previous two sections have shown that skill is an expansive and ambiguous concept, making constructions of what is a skill, and therefore who is viewed as skilled as a very subjective matter. Given that contemporary HRM approaches emphasise the need for organisations to '*leverage people's capabilities*' (Gold 2012:5), these subjective notions of skill will influence how HRM policies are designed. Once in place, HRM practices and processes can create more or less favourable interpretations of skill. This chapter has made it clear that institutional mechanisms for deriving, articulating and assessing skills do shape the decisions recruiters make in selecting and promoting people, illustrating that HRM policies are a factor in considering the root causes of exclusion for autistic people. This is consistent with this investigation's aim of challenging the universal applicability of HRM policies derived from particular valuations as to what is typical and normal. It also accords with the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis, which has identified these are socio-cultural impositions that contribute to the effects experienced by autistic people. Therefore, how these in turn shape perceptions and experiences and responses of line managers is important to consider. Where these are juxtaposed onto the ways of working that are typical for autistic people, these represent structural and systemic inclusion barriers. The discussion incorporates these observations, considering how the views of majority groups, shape HRM policies in respect of the minority of autistic employees.

As these policies are frequently constructed by the majority, they have the potential to devalue the skills of the minority. These valuations can then translate into assessments by HR specialists or managers that autistic people are less skilled than neurotypical others, particularly in some areas of social interaction, empathy and teamworking, representing the personal and social effects that clinical and employment studies have identified.

4.10. *Societal constructions of autism*

The relational approach to disability in workplaces requires consideration of socio-cultural forces which are external to the organisation. Thus, this final section of this literature review outlines how autism as a condition has been constructed and represented in wider society.

4.10.1. *Autism in the media*

Chapter 3 has established that autistic people can find it hard to show empathy, a feature the media has used in portrayals of fictional characters, for example Saga Loren in 'The Bridge' (Townsend 2015). Saga is a female detective suggested to 'be' AS and whilst she is feted for her ability to detach from the human side of the tragedy she is investigating, she is also portrayed as struggling with social interaction and failing to understand jokes, all characteristics linked to lack of empathy. Exploring further how fictional autistic characters have influenced perceptions of autism, Loftis (2015) highlights the consequences of creating stereotypes, citing Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (2015a:23-48) and Mark Haddon's child detective Christopher Boone (2015b:108-129). Portraying both these characters as autistic people who have extraordinary intellect alongside significant social awkwardness, reflects the association previously discussed between being autistic or AS and being a gifted autistic savant. They do not though illuminate the experiences of those managing autistic people who are capable, bright but not necessarily gifted with exceptional abilities. Such portrayals have prompted calls for more informed knowledge to be made available in order to counteract negative impacts (Brewer, Zoanetti and Young 2017). Tharian et al (2019) explores how the lack of exposure of AS women in fiction may contribute to their exclusion and is an interesting reaction to the debate about the need for intersectional research identified prior.

The media also make informed portrayals, for example through the factual description of the challenges experienced by four women with AS in the workplace (Wallis 2013), and through television documentaries exploring topical clinical findings in autism (Horizon: Living with Autism 2014; Employable Me 2016). A televised drama series featuring the lives and experiences of an ordinary family with an autistic child, 'The A Word' (2016;2017) represented a significant departure from programmes where autistic children experiencing difficulties are the sole focus. Instead, it explored ordinary adults' perceptions of autism, showing that constructions can vary not only between different groups of people, but also within families. Autism discussions have shifted into mainstream programming, as where BBC News (2016) featured an AS teenager and her parents talking about both difficulties and superior abilities, reflecting the duality of interest in this investigation. The long running Sesame Street has introduced a new

autistic character, Julia (Gabbatt 2017), aiming to educate its preschool audience by portraying autism as a natural variation in the human condition to which neurotypical 'others' need to learn to adapt. The challenges and opportunities 'being' AS brings have been highlighted in a BBC documentary where a well-known naturalist gave a reflective account of his experiences from childhood through to his diagnosis in mid-life. In doing so, he revealed his frustrations in seeking to fit in with his neurotypical peers as well as the realisation that his particular abilities came from being autistic (Chris Packham: *Asperger's and Me*, 2017), an account which typifies the complexity and duality that accompanies 'being' AS.

4.10.2. Knowledge about autism available to employers

Autobiographical accounts from AS individuals (King 2014; Grandin and Duffy 2008; Higashida 2013; Jackson 2002; Grandin 2012); the accounts of parents and carers of AS people, (Bierens 2010; Heinkel-Wolfe 2008) and from AS women (Attwood and Grandin 2006; Simone 2010; Willey 2012) have all increased public awareness about autism and Asperger Syndrome. These accounts vary tremendously in their emphasis; some focus upon the impairments associated with autism and AS, whereas others celebrate the differences these conditions confer (Silberman 2015). Such emic accounts are frequently inspirational in their exploration of the challenges of experiencing the world, although fail to discuss the employment experiences of autistic/AS people, positioning these as somehow incidental to whole life experiences (Glanzman 2010). They are therefore unhelpful for both employers and for AS individuals, in that they often focus upon people who are gifted or 'special' in some way, despite the fact that such individuals represent only approximately 15-20% of the already small autistic population (Boucher 1996; Frith 2008).

The advice for employers from specialist autism support providers such as the National Autistic Society (NAS) identifies strengths of AS employees in problem-solving; attention to detail; high levels of concentration; reliability and loyalty; technical ability and specialist skills in information technology; detailed factual knowledge; an excellent memory and resourcefulness. As a government agency responsible for employment matters, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) developed jointly with NAS a guide for employers, 'Untapped Talent', (NAS 2015) recommending awareness training for the managers and colleagues who will be working with neurodiverse individuals is provided, as well as 'buddying up' neurotypical and neurodiverse employees. This guidance can also be criticised as it focuses upon managing social interaction and addressing hypersensitivity concerns, rather than how employers could utilise autistic characteristics in particular roles.

Accounts which guide autistic people to find meaningful work exist (Bissonnette 2014; Simone 2010; Grandin 2012) but have been criticised (Kopelson 2015) for marketing the

unique characteristics of an AS individual to an employer. In effect, employers are persuaded to employ autistic people on account of their capacities as Chapter 3 has described. Critically these accounts do not indicate convincingly to employers that in order for these strengths and capacities to be realised fully, the socially imposed forces this chapter has shown exist have to be considered. Inadvertently perhaps, these accounts create a rhetoric which from the point of view of an autistic person is problematic, in that it assumes their strengths/capacities will be used 'as is' and that they, not the employer, must blend into existing people management processes and practices.

4.10.3. Views from neurodiversity advocates

Neurodiversity advocates invite neurotypical people to consider their own behaviours and cognitive style from the perspective of autistic individuals. In a light-hearted manner they outline what they consider could be a diagnostic criterion for 'neurotypical disorder', which is an "*excessive concern about what other people think of them and a delusional belief in the ability to read others' minds*" as shown on the web site Neurotypical Syndrome Awareness (2011). Such views explicitly note that there is more than one way in which individuals can relate to others around them, as well as identifying that in the employment context these ways may be considered unusual. In a radio broadcast, Purkiss (2016) a neurodiversity advocate reports how other people's perceptions can result in patronising opinions about autism, for example discussing how a neurotypical person can say that an autistic presenter "*could pass as normal*". She expresses her hope that "*the next generation will query why anyone tried to cure autism... we don't try and cure left-handed people*". Significantly throughout her broadcast there is no mention of the need to accept these different perspectives in the employment context. Recent texts (Wylie, Lawson and Beardon 2016) attempt to counter this rhetoric by enhancing the understanding of both neurotypical and neurodiverse people about their respective differences, citing the tensions these differences create for autistic people, their families, and for society in general.

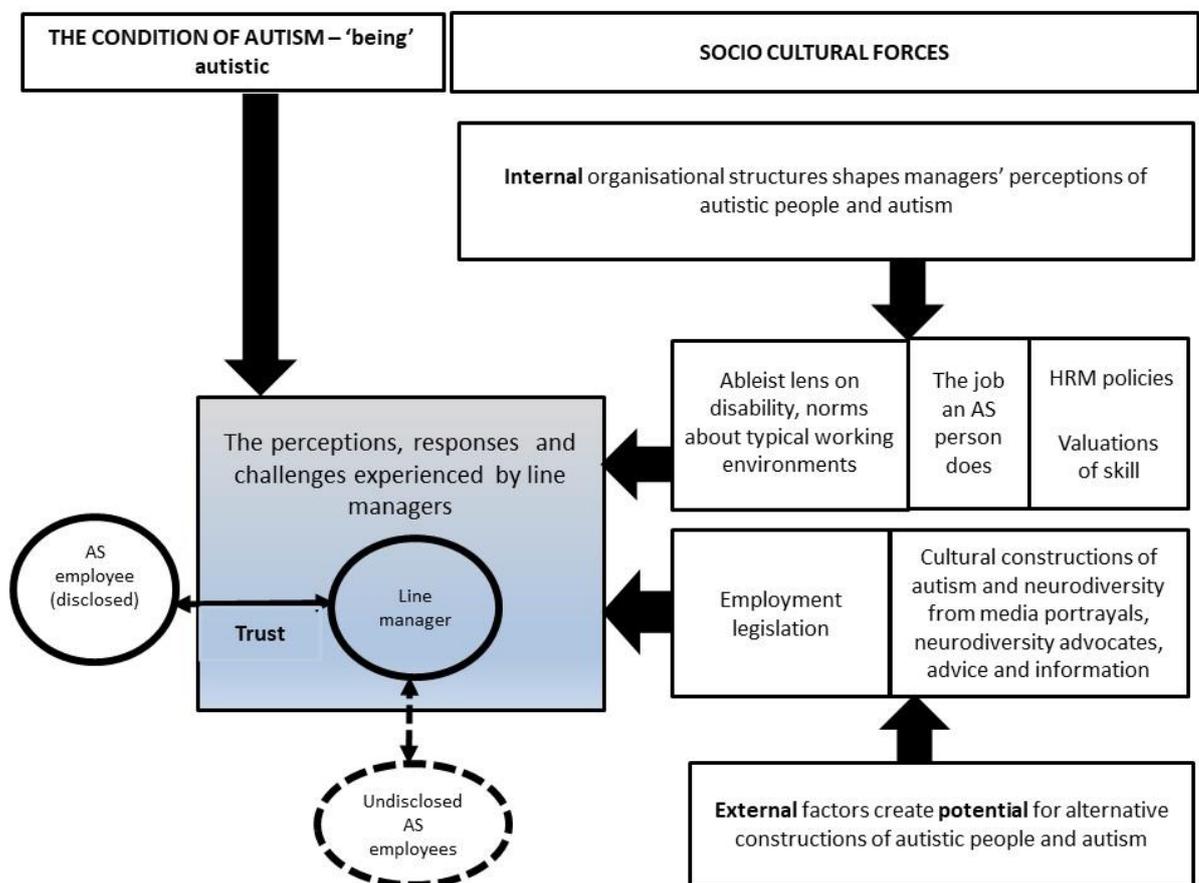
4.10.4. Section summary

Media exposure shapes attitudes towards autistic individuals which may be positive or negative and which in turn affect the interactions that people with spectrum conditions have with the broader community. Many of these sources are authored and aimed at neurodiverse populations and so may not reach employers, who are then likely to keep hold of stereotypical views. For example, they may believe that autistic people lack empathy and social skills, or that autistic people have only very narrow strengths that could translate readily into particular types of employment.

4.11. Conclusions and development of conceptual framework

It has been established that despite the legislative requirement for employers to avoid discriminating against AS people, negative employment experiences and ineffective accommodations are common. Examining existing models of disability has indicated this is connected to the dominance of the social model of disability in the workplace and to the existence of ableist norms. Hence, the conceptual framework is built upon a social relational approach to disability which is assessed as a more powerful approach to understanding managers' experiences of autistic employees.

Figure 4-2 Conceptual framework



The first thing to note from this conceptual framework is that it has two sides, which reflects the two domains of knowledge reviewed. Clinical studies have gathered plentiful knowledge about the condition of autism and tended to downplay socio-cultural forces. Conversely, studies of autistic people in employment have tended to focus upon how legislative accommodations have impacted upon employment experiences, underplaying the real clinical aspects that being autistic means for both autistic people and their managers. Net, they are both important factors and it is improved understanding of the interplay between the two in relation to autistic people and their managers that is required. The second point of interest is that the right-hand side of the figure is far larger than the left-hand side, signalling explicitly that these socio-cultural forces identified in the relational approach to disability will be highly significant throughout the investigation. This relative placing is derived from the literature review.

4.11.1. Line managers' experiences in managing autistic people

The gaps identified in this literature review place the investigation as one where the role of the front-line manager is central. Some accounts have emerged focusing upon the experiences of AS employees in the workplace, but these have lacked the perspective of their managers and HR specialists. This gap in the literature reinforces the rationale for exploring what these significant stakeholders in the employment relationship know and understand about AS and autistic people and will make an empirical contribution. Line managers have the potential to influence all their employees' experiences, and certainly there is no reason to suppose that this capacity differs for AS people. By seeking to uncover their knowledge, experiences, perceptions and responses as they talk about autistic employees working in different job roles, organisations and working environments, this investigation adds another dimension to the social relational approach to disability. It delivers knowledge about how managers deal with their autistic employees in a more concrete manner. The double headed arrow denoting trust is consistent with the literature review, as trust was shown to be an important consideration for autistic people in disclosure and in general for working relationships and which is touched on only lightly in existing work. Thus, surfacing the role of trust is an important facet of the empirical work that follows.

4.11.2. Socio-cultural forces – internal and external matters

The introductory chapters and the literature review have shown that autistic people experience disability yet also have some particular strengths. This framework recognises that managers' perceptions as to whether their autistic employees are skilled or not is likely to depend upon a variety of internally and externally socially imposed forces.

The thesis so far has highlighted the exclusionary outcomes that AS people experience, Chapter 3 indicating how the condition itself creates difficulties, albeit views as to how

best to support autistic people vary between managers and employees. Chapter 4 has indicated how organisational features, including dominant ableist norms in relation to workplace arrangements, the limitations of diversity and inclusion management and HRM policies have had upon these outcomes. Employers appear to value 'soft' skills somewhat more highly than 'hard' skills and these valuations reappear within competency frameworks. All represent socially imposed structural mechanisms which impact autistic people and likely to shape their managers' responses in performance assessments and career progression. Thus, these too are an important factor in this conceptual framework. The job or role that someone works in has been shown to be a major shaper of positive and negative experiences of autistic employees and also features in the exploration of how managers' perceptions of their autistic employees are shaped.

Externally imposed employment legislation shapes the interpretations that managers make internally in regard to their understanding of what constitutes disability, guiding their decisions in respect of making accommodations prior to and during employment. Thus, this conceptual framework identifies the importance of exploring how managers respond to legislative requirements, particularly important given the review of contemporary case law exposed the shortfall in employers' knowledge and understanding of autism. Employers have access to information about autism and autistic people and to media portrayals of the condition and all these sources have potential to shape their interpretations. This justifies the inclusion of these external factors in the framework, allowing consideration not just of how employers view AS characteristics, but also the sources from which they derive their knowledge.

4.11.3. Autistic employees - disclosed or not

Autistic people may or may not disclose their condition. This is signified by the thick or the dotted boundaries around the circles representing both groups and the thick or dotted arrow showing trust between the two. This contrast is important to note given that whether or not an autistic person discloses their condition, they may still experience the same personal and social effects. Only when someone discloses can a manager respond as directed by the law to their employees and thus may find themselves managing or working with autistic people who have decided not to disclose. Although this thesis cannot, for ethical reasons (discussed in Chapter 5.4.2), explore the experience of managers managing someone who has not disclosed, this distinction is important to represent given the likely increase in autistic people entering the workforce.

4.11.4. Bridge to Chapter 5

It is necessary to consider how the findings from the literature review and the theoretical framework adopted will shape how these concepts are to be explored. An approach is needed that allows for data to be collected and analysed about a condition that is hidden, difficult as it is the case that autistic people look on the surface the same as non-autistic people. The duality evidenced by the strengths and problematic effects described in the literature review makes it critical that both these aspects are investigated in such a way as to present the findings in a robust manner. Additionally, the interpretation must recognise that autistic people have an objective condition, yet how their managers perceive their contributions and challenges that being autistic can present will be very subject to contextual forces in and around the working environment. The implications of this are set out in the following Chapter.

Chapter 5. Research methodology and methods

5.1. *Introduction*

Research in the social sciences requires consideration of methodological issues, including setting out clearly what phenomena are being studied as well as justifying the methods of gathering and analysing data used in the investigation. This chapter first presents the research questions, outlining the topics being explored and justifying the research philosophy adopted. The research design is described and includes an account of the access difficulties experienced as these had such significant implications for the research methods chosen. Details of the data collection and analysis procedures are provided. This account is reflexive, exploring the limitations of the research process and discussing in the final section how my role as a researcher has shaped the investigation.

5.2. *Research questions*

The literature review demonstrated low levels of knowledge and understanding about the experiences of those who employ and manage AS individuals, justifying this exploratory research. A necessary first step in this investigation is to establish what employers and managers know about autism and about the issues that managing autistic people poses. This prompts the first research question:

RQ1 What levels of knowledge and understanding of Asperger Syndrome (AS) exist amongst those who make decisions relating to employment in organisations?

Returning to the theoretical underpinning of this study, the social relational approach classes someone who has a disability but who is not experiencing restricted function purely as not disabled. There is no suggestion that someone without this restriction might actually also be interpreted by others as someone who is skilled. Since a primary aim of this investigation is to better understand how employers could channel autistic strengths rather than stay at this neutral level of construction, this thesis is deliberate in exploring strengths alongside problematic areas. Findings will therefore represent an empirical and theoretical contribution by showing how these particular abilities can be harnessed in organisations, as well as highlighting how they also create challenges. The following research questions explore:

RQ2 How do line managers and HR specialists conceptualise the condition of AS?

RQ3 How do line managers conceptualise the talents and abilities of AS individuals?

The literature review has highlighted the requirements from employment legislation to protect and include people with hidden disabilities like autism. Employers employ both autistic and neurotypical people and so exploring how managers respond to these legislative responsibilities and internal HR directives applying to the workforce as a whole, is important in this investigation. This prompts further research questions:

RQ4 How do line managers' perceptions of, and attitudes towards the AS condition, shape their responses to the AS population?

RQ5 What constraints (and enablers?) do managers identify in managing AS individuals?

RQ6 What areas for support do they identify?

The title of this thesis refers to contemporary HRM policies, reflecting the need to improve understanding of how these policies frequently result in specifications of skills and behaviours autistic people find problematic. As HR specialists are custodians of employment legislative expertise and inclusion policies, the thesis explores these matters further:

RQ7 What knowledge do HR specialists draw on in framing policy and related procedures?

RQ8 Are there particular practices, policies or procedures that discriminate directly or indirectly, against those with AS?

RQ9 What approaches should HR consider in optimising the contribution of the AS population in regard to skills, job roles and career paths?

5.3. *Research Philosophy*

5.3.1. *Research paradigms*

Qualitative researchers have access to frameworks offering guidance as to how the broad philosophical assumptions they make will shape their research (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Choosing carefully where to situate research from the various paradigms offered is key in informing methodology, by providing context for the design adopted and criteria for the research to be judged. These important choices come well before the choice of research methods and require researchers to establish the ontological status of the topic being investigated, what it means to be human and what they believe about the nature and purpose of knowledge.

The main paradigms advanced in social science are positivism and interpretivism, positions which are frequently presented as simple choices between quantitative scientific enquiry, built around deductive reasoning, versus qualitative studies seeking to build theory through inductive inference. However, this simple distinction is inappropriate for investigations into social sciences where people rather than material matters are the subjects of these investigations. Full understanding can only be achieved from a stance which recognises that their opinions, experiences and perceptions will be subjective and so individual meanings and actions are both expected and sought. The very complexity of people means it is essential researchers explore why they behave, speak and think in particular ways, seeking the understanding expressed by Dilthey (1976) as '*verstehen*'. This is preferred instead of pursuing scientifically determined explanations sought within positivist paradigms, areas that Chapter 3 has established characterises much of the existing research about autistic people and their abilities.

More recently, Cunliffe (2011) proposes those who study organisational and management theory need access to sophisticated choices because the subject-object dimension presented by previous categorisations is too simplistic an approach for understanding organisations. In brief, she argues that for qualitative research to be accepted as robust, significant and privileged in social science, including human resource management investigations like this one, researchers must consider their choices and assumptions available from three, not two, paradigms. These are identified as '*knowledge problematics*' which Cunliffe (2011:2) labels as objectivist, subjectivist and intersubjectivist. The thrust of Cunliffe's extended typology is to present researchers with a wider range of metatheoretical assumptions to select from before deciding to embark upon a particular study.

5.3.2. *Subjectivist problematic in this investigation*

Cunliffe's ideas about the overlap between what constitutes subjects and objects are helpful in this thesis, in that autism is an objective condition, existing independent of our knowledge of it. As the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2 noted, adopting critical realist principles allows for autism to be recognised as a 'real' condition with objective features that shape subjects' actions. Considering this ontological matter further also showed two important aspects; first that being able to 'see' the multiple layers of autism is important, and secondly that its hidden nature is key in researching managers' perceptions of autistic people. Cunliffe's 'subject' distinction also requires the investigation to focus upon exploring the practical realities and experiences of the subjects in this investigation, those managing autistic people. A critical realist approach also allows that the recognition of such features depends on the perceptions that actors have of them and their likely impacts. Accordingly, an approach that recognises and supports the subjective nature of these perceptions is required in regard to the data gathered and its interpretation.

The conceptual framework has identified the centrality of managers in this thesis, thus in regard to human nature, the type of person these managers 'are' in terms of their reflexive capacities is important to recognise. I believe that each and every manager has varying core capacities for both reflexivity and understanding (Porpora 2015; Archer 2003) and they differ too in their background and prior experiences. The investigation places managers and HR specialists as agentic and active in constructing their social world primarily from conversations with others. They draw upon the '*social base*' and '*social processes*' present (Berger and Luckman 1991:174) to form their own subjective reality of any particular experience or situation. These differences are key to consider in the interpretation of the findings and necessary to improve understanding about the challenges employers and managers face in their dealings with AS employees.

The thesis next considers epistemological matters further.

5.3.3. *Epistemology in qualitative investigations*

Epistemological discussions arise from the choice of paradigm and typology researchers choose, which in turn condition the methodological choices made as to how data is collected and analysed, prerequisite for generating new knowledge that is also robust. Epistemological considerations are the broad philosophical issues relating to how researchers view the nature of knowledge, views which then allow them to articulate their assumptions as to what they believe will constitute knowledge that is acceptable, valid and legitimate, both to themselves and to those who will access the research. Sayer (2010:5) outlines a key tenet of critical realism is that the knowledge that actors believe to be 'true' can also be fallible and does not necessarily '*provide a coherent view of the*

relationship between knowledge and its object'. I agree with Sayer, and further assumptions about what I believe constitutes knowledge in this investigation now follow:

5.3.4. Knowledge, truth and power

In the subjectivist problematic, the plethora of data gathered from the experiences of the respondents mean that knowledge generated cannot be said to represent a single unarguable truth. Rather, it is the case that multiple truths exist on account that knowledge is constructed and shaped by power differentials in workplaces (Mumby 1998), thus determining what is actually 'true' is a complex matter. Being viewed as different on account of being diagnosed with a neurodiverse condition like autism requires attention to these differentials, as what is meant by difference does of course depend heavily on who it is that assigns any label. It also depends upon the norms against which differences are being compared, a point noted in the emergence of the term 'neurodiverse', developed by neurodiversity advocates to distinguish AS individuals from 'neurotypical others' (Owren 2013). This distinction in terminology is significant in the thesis as it investigates and interprets how policies based upon ableist norms play out in the employment context. In the analysis chapters, what line managers and HR specialists think of as 'true', what they know and believe, necessitates consideration of their relative and greater degree of power than the autistic employees they employ or manage.

5.3.5. Rationale for qualitative research in data collection

Managers and HR specialists may employ autistic people, but their 'knowing' of this can only be confident if the autistic person has decided to disclose their condition. Whilst Chapter 2 has shown AS is a 'real' and objective condition with mechanisms operating at the unseen level, managers' perceptions of autistic people once diagnosed are inevitably social constructions. Therefore, qualitative forms of inquiry are necessary to enable close access to the perspectives of the key actors, managers and HR specialists (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The aim here is for their natural world descriptions of what they notice about AS employees to emerge.

Further justification for qualitative research to capture relevant knowledge comes from the theoretical underpinning of this investigation, which recognises autistic people are placed as disabled by law, as well as having skills and strengths. This duality renders autism as a condition (as well as what autistic people do), wide open to multiple perceptions and shifting interpretations. This duality is a recurrent theme in this study and so another consideration in gathering knowledge is that the investigation must be capable of exposing this. It is important to find out what it is that managers actually see (the social effects of the condition), in order to extend the social relational understanding of

disability. This is particularly important given that social relational approaches say little about strengths, whereas the relative impact of socio-cultural forces upon disabled employees has been noted in the conceptual framework. Therefore, collecting data will necessitate asking questions about disabilities, with the expectation that respondents will have different understandings and interpretations of what disability means. Respondents will also be providing data about skills, a concept which the literature review has shown is heavily socially constructed and subject to varying valuations. Qualitative research is needed to elicit sufficient detail about what managers understand as disability and what they mean by skill, in order to gather rich data which will close the gap in knowledge about their experiences of managing autistic people.

This thesis has accessed clinical knowledge in regard to autistic people but recognises much of this is based upon quantitative data in preference to exploring organisational experiences. Citing examples of studies involving parents and autistic children, Bolte (2014) argues that both approaches are required to deepen understanding of autism and autistic people and emphasises the significance of qualitative accounts to do this. Howard, Katsos and Gibson (2019) go further, proposing qualitative analysis is superior in understanding the experiences of autistic people, although their focus is upon children. Investigating managers' experiences using qualitative collection methods supports these views and aims to redress this imbalance.

5.3.6. Standards for interpretive research

Research within the subjectivist problematic stands accused that it cannot determine with any confidence that *'human beings can achieve any form of knowledge that is independent of their own subjective construction, since they are the agents through which knowledge is perceived or experienced'* (Morgan and Smircich 1980:493). Indeed, some consider precise evaluation criteria do not lend themselves to interpretive research (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Guidance on research standards is though very important and in response I have followed Cunliffe (2011:667), who proposes criteria for robust qualitative research. She suggests studies must be; *'crafted carefully and persuasively, being open and responsive to the possibilities of experience, people, ideas, materials and processes, and understanding and enacting the relationship between our meta theoretical position, our methods, our theorising and their practical consequences'*. Willis (2007:185-217) breaks down these somewhat generic proposals into guidelines for conducting interpretive research, directing researchers to be alert to the significance of the context in which the research takes place, to explore multiple perspectives, allow for change as the research unfolds and encourage reflexivity. As far as the research design and the methods for data collection and analysis in this investigation are concerned these relevant points are discussed next in more detail.

5.3.7. Standards in data collection, interpretation and analysis

Exploring context and gathering multiple views

Cunliffe (2011:10) notes that '*social realities and knowledge are not durable in the sense of being replicable, generalizable, and predictive but instead offer contextualized understandings*', reflecting how in this investigation the data gathered will be subject to structural forces relative to respondents' experiences. Working with the principle that contextual understanding rather than the pursuit of absolute truth is key, this investigation views knowledge as contextual and situated in practice. Considering the context managers are operating in is necessary in order to capture the various meanings they assign to their experiences surrounding AS employees. Managers have already been designated as differing in their core reflexive capacities (Archer 2010) and thus their interpretations will be considered in light of their views regarding disabilities and their own motivations for taking part in this study. Managers differ too in their backgrounds, prior connections and experiences with autistic people, yet still operate within structural constraints (Mutch 2004), for example the policies and practices determined and developed by HR specialists. Thus, meanings drawn from respondents' accounts will be contextual and take account of what is occurring in their organisations. Table 5.3 provides size and sector data of the six participating organisations. Table 5.4 provides contextual information about the managers, who are the prime subjects, together with details of the employees they manage.

The experiences of the managers and HR specialists are placed as culturally situated, recognising their constructions of disability and of skill are shaped not only by contextual forces and their own agency, but also in relation to time. The thesis gathers a sense of how respondents, (the subjects), experience '*time, place and historicity*' (Cunliffe 2011:10), considering how, why and when they have arrived at their perceptions of autistic people. Viewing knowledge about autism and autistic people as historically and culturally specific allows findings to be interpreted, drawing upon media portrayals and clinical advances (Loftis 2015; Baron-Cohen 2015) to show views have begun to shift away from problematic impairment to more positive perceptions. Knowledge will therefore always be relative to these specific contexts and specific times and this investigation recognises the durability and relationality (Cunliffe 2011) of knowledge.

The first research question seeks to capture a sense of what knowledge about autism and autistic people is 'out there', by establishing what these managers and HR specialists already know. This is necessary to support the interpretation of the findings gathered from their responses, seeking especially to ascertain if this is representative of what employers more generally know. In seeking to elicit what these parties actually do know,

there is a need to question the assumption that participants will naturally and truthfully divulge their knowledge. In short, will their responses be authentic? There is a risk that these respondents may not do so, a challenge discussed further in the following section of this Chapter. Addressing the research questions requires an approach that can gather rich detail of the characteristics that managers notice in their autistic employees and what they report as their concerns and constraints in their management role. These aspects have been noted prior in the conceptual framework in Fig 4.2 and thus are phenomena to explore. Willis also discusses the need to gather multiple views which this investigation does by gathering data from managers, HR specialists and autistic employees. Another source of multiple views comes from examining the wording in organisational competency frameworks, although the data is drawn primarily from interview transcripts.

Reasoning in the analysis

Formally testing theory in this exploratory investigation (Silverman 2013) is unnecessary, although theorising about related matters is, given that insufficient knowledge about managers' experience of autistic people exists. This makes it important to identify the key issues and themes that emerge from their subjective experiences. To do so, Willis (2007:185-217) suggests research design should connect to the reasoning employed, which in this study will be abductive, rather than precisely deductive or inductive reasoning. For Cunliffe, reasoning requires the researcher to draw meaning by moving between theory and practice. Movement occurs between the frameworks surrounding relational approaches to managing disability back to the accounts that managers provide from their day to day activities and practical concerns. Moving between these positions allows this investigation to identify what might be the better amongst competing explanations for their descriptions and responses.

Reflexivity and the intersubjective

A further epistemological consideration is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the knowledge being sought. Willis notes that reflexivity is important in interpretation, and for Cunliffe (2011) it is the intersubjective space between researcher and respondent that necessitates reflective consideration, recognising that knowledge is created as a result of the interactions between the two. In this investigation I will be constructing knowledge knowing that both my presence and my role will shape what data I seek, how I collect it, and the observations I place upon the findings. I recognise that simply by asking questions and giving respondents time to step back and reflect upon their own experiences, will mean that some will begin to question their own practice and perhaps come to think differently in their understanding about the topics under discussion. I certainly encountered this transformative notion of the double hermeneutic

(Giddens 1984), where Manager A commented that my question to him had caused him to step back and reflect. This response is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.9.1 which explores how variations in reflexive capacities are significant. My own role has also had a significant impact upon the research focus and design, as well as the choices I made in interpreting respondents' accounts. Hence notions of both the double hermeneutic (Giddens 1984), and the reflexive hermeneutic (Cunliffe 2011) are employed in this investigation and are discussed more fully in the final reflexive section of this Chapter.

5.4. *Research design and methods*

5.4.1. *Initial research design strategy*

The project was originally envisaged as an exploration of how AS individuals use their particular skills in their jobs, examining how the type of work, organisation and sector in which they worked shaped their experiences. The proposal was submitted initially to the College Research and Ethics Committee (CREC) in 2013, as an exploration of employee experiences within skilled jobs, seeking to connect the findings from the literature that AS people have skills well suited to the STEM disciplines. The primary aim was to explore how the differences in skills and processing approaches identified by clinical studies played out in the employment context. I planned to interview those working in recruitment and development roles, from organisations employing autistic people, as well as the autistic employees themselves. CREC commended the value of this exploratory research but were anxious about the status of these AS employees as vulnerable adults. However, by late 2013, AS adults in mainstream employment were no longer defined as vulnerable, due to legislative changes introduced by the Protection of Freedoms Act (2012) which resulted in '*a more proportionate approach in preventing unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups and children*'. These changes were incorporated into my second proposal, which CREC approved.

Next, I contacted HR managers from over 100 organisations who were selected to be representative of medium and large organisations from a wide range of sectors. I stated the need to access directly line managers who could talk about their AS employees. The prevalence of AS at approximately 1 in 200 (Brugha et al 2012) indicated that in all but the smallest organisations there is likely to be a proportion of autistic individuals and so I was hopeful sufficient respondents would be generated. In organisational studies it is important to demonstrate to organisations that a particular research stream is valuable to them and so the 'hook' I used was the connection between AS characteristics and organisationally valuable skills. My assumption was that this connection would resonate with HR managers tasked with securing alternative talent pools to alleviate skills shortages.

Whilst continuing to seek participants for the study, I set up pilot interviews intending to establish what employers knew about Asperger syndrome, autism and neurodiversity as well as to develop a robust interview framework for the main investigation. The interviewees in the pilot study were two senior operational managers with substantial people management responsibilities and two HR specialists, drawn from organisations of varying size and sector and secured using my personal contacts. This strategy was a

pragmatic approach to seeking participants, following Brewis (2014) who notes how personal connections can enhance data collection.

Table 5-1 Pilot Interviewees

Job title	organisation	number of employees in organisation	number of employees directly responsible for	connections to study
HR Manager	education software supplier	100	None	mother and daughter of men with Asperger Syndrome
HR Manager	data analytics	200	None	Interested in the skills aspects - employing autistic people in data analytics
Operations Director	Transport	1500	1500	none
Head of Estates and facilities	University	8000	200	Interested in topic

Their responses confirmed that existing levels of knowledge are low, particularly amongst the people expected to know most about the areas, who were the HR professionals. None knew much about autism, had heard of the term 'neurodiversity', or could tell me if their organisations employed anyone with the condition.

The majority of the 100 HR managers contacted expressed strong interest and curiosity about the investigation. However, many said their organisations could not participate in the study as they were unable to say how many, or indeed if any autistic/AS people at all were employed. At this point the options of targeting organisations that publicised positive experiences of employing autistic people or those organisations who recruit autistic people on the basis of their known STEM skills were considered. In this latter case, the investigation would focus upon line managers' experiences of managing autistic people in complex and skilled roles. This sampling strategy would have accorded with my initial aim of uncovering how strengths are utilised in the workplace rather than focusing overly on the impairments associated with autism. However, neither approach was

adopted, on the grounds that doing so would generate data only from those industries or discipline in which some knowledge already exists of the kind introduced in Chapter 3.

A more targeted effort to secure participants identified two large organisations in the public sector, although both declined to participate, citing their concerns that taking part would raise ethical concerns. Their email responses are shown in Annex 4. These HR professionals were uncomfortable in identifying managers of autistic employees, understandable given the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 around disclosure of an individual's protected characteristics, which in the public sector create stringent requirements. They may have still classed AS individuals as vulnerable adults, who if interviewed, would have required a Caldicott guardian to accompany them (Department of Health 2013). It is also possible that in addition to legislative caution, both organisations were uncomfortable with identifying autistic people and uncovering workplace challenges they did not know how to deal with.

The challenges introduced at the beginning of this thesis and reinforced in the theoretical framework, in respect of studying a hidden condition in the employment context, continued to create access difficulties. Despite concerted efforts over a twelve-month period and completing four pilot interviews, almost all the 100 organisations contacted found it impossible to identify how many AS individuals they employed. Just four organisations had been secured for the main study representing five line managers. I considered this sample would not generate sufficient knowledge for a doctoral thesis in that I wanted to contribute beyond gathering a very few stories about the experiences of autistic people and those who recruit and manage them. My aim throughout was to assess the level of knowledge and understanding amongst actors with the power to influence the working environment of AS people. The difficulties in gaining access could have arisen simply from a lack of interest or unwillingness from those approached to take part in this study. However, given the literature review has revealed autistic people report fears that disclosing will create discrimination and stigmatisation, the more likely cause is simply that many people have not disclosed. These continued access difficulties, whilst extremely frustrating, did at least cohere with the findings from the pilot interviews and reinforced the need for this exploratory investigation to continue.

It became apparent that my thesis would need to change direction, necessitating adaptation in both its purpose and the approach taken to securing participants. In essence the adaptations had to address the challenge of assessing levels of knowledge about a condition which is often hidden from employers and about which some respondents had anxieties, perhaps about the implications and consequences of accessing and uncovering new knowledge.

5.4.2. Changed research design - adapting the purpose and strategy

The purpose of the investigation became an exploration of the perceptions and experiences of those managing autistic people and the issues they face. Convenience sampling was used as a pragmatic approach to gaining access. Six large public sector organisations, some local to Nottingham, were approached and the heads of HR division or Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) were contacted directly by letter. These are shown in Annex 5. The rationale here was that as such large employers, the numbers of autistic people who had disclosed would be high enough to identify enough managers to participate. The project sponsor in organisation 5 was highly supportive of the study but uncomfortable with the request to approach line managers without extending the invitation to autistic employees. He therefore stipulated that I also seek autistic employees as interviewees who must have a clinical diagnosis although they did not need to have formally disclosed this. His aim here was to learn from my investigation about their perspectives on such matters such as disclosure, suitable/unsuitable roles and organisational support for someone diagnosed as autistic. This stipulation necessitated a third proposal to the CREC for a changed approach to the study. All these iterations in purpose and access strategy are captured in the Research Timeline below.

Table 5-2 The Research Timeline

	Jan – March	April – June	July - Sept	Oct - Dec
2011			Considered PhD with topic of AS individuals, employers, a study of careers	
2012	Literature Review begins			
2013		Submitted 1st project proposal - Experiences of AS employees in skilled jobs	Ethics committee commend topic but reject due to concerns about vulnerable autistic adults. Clarification requested about status of vulnerable adults in sample	Submitted 2nd proposal. CREC approve referring to Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.
2014	Search for organisations to participate Pilot begins	Access is difficult, 4 organisations are found Research interviews organisations 1,2,3,4 (line managers only) ongoing difficulty in accessing respondents forced more targeted sampling and new ethics proposal ongoing discussions with organisation 5 created amendments for study proposal	17 December- Submitted final (3rd) proposal accessing line managers and with access stipulation 20 January 2015 - Ethics committee approve new access arrangements 22 January 2015- Organisation 5 signed off research study	
2015-2016	Research interviews in organisations 5 and 6			

5.4.3. Data Collection – rationale for focus groups and interviews

Previous studies have gathered data about AS people, either from experimental settings or via autobiographical accounts (Krieger et al 2012; Haertl et al 2013), which although rich in description of personal experiences do not relate at all well to the natural employment context. Addressing this knowledge gap necessitates methods which will access the knowledge and perceptions of key actors who are line managers and HR specialists. The theoretical framework has identified autism as a condition that has real foundations and about which perceptions to be gathered will be subjective. These are all areas that qualitative data collection methods have the potential to surface and which will extend existing knowledge about the experiences autistic employees have reported from their own accounts. Focus groups and interviews were chosen as the preferred method of accessing these perceptions, seeking to elicit and elucidate meaning by probing the thoughts, knowledge, experiences and actions of those who employ and manage autistic people.

Knowing that these subjects are likely to vary in what they feel is important to discuss, necessitates an element of structure into the interviews and the focus groups, in order to explore particular areas of interest. Thus, interviews were semi-structured and as the prime method of data collection they reflect the broad interpretivist stance adopted. Structure is introduced, for example by distinguishing between the positive and negative experiences managers talk about of employing AS people, broken down further into investigating the difficulties they experience and the support they need.

In this investigation, the focus group was chosen as the method to identify what HR specialists knew about neurodiversity and autism as well as how they supported managers of autistic employees. Focus groups are often used if sensitive topics are being discussed (Greenbaum 2000) and given the possibility, by nature of their interest in the study, that this group had autistic family members or close friends, the intimate nature of the focus group setting was assessed as appropriate. Focus groups have also been used to explore workplace experiences of neurodiverse people, line managers and trade union representatives (Richards and Sang 2016). Section 5.6 discusses the design and operation of this focus group and Annex 6 shows the topics and responses gathered in this discussion. Some respondents in organisation 5 worked long distances from the university and telephone and so Skype interviewing were considered but rejected. I felt that only face to face discussions would engender the conditions required to establish sufficient rapport for participants to divulge their thoughts and experiences, knowing how sensitive these were likely to be.

The interviews with managers and AS employees had the potential to surface support needs which are explored further in section 5.5.

Moving beyond these broad approaches to data collection, techniques were needed to elicit the data I needed to answer the research questions posed within the time constraints of the interviews.

5.4.4. Designing data collection methods - exploring knowledge and experiences

My first consideration was how to gather data from the HR specialists and line managers which reflected accurately their actual levels of knowledge about AS and autism to address the first research question. The key consideration here was how to gain confidence in the integrity of the data collected from their responses. It was important that respondents answered truthfully what they really knew and really thought about AS, neurodiversity and autism and particularly that they felt able to disclose what they did *not* know. Data gathering needed to acknowledge the risk that respondents, particularly the HR specialists, would want to show they were knowledgeable about autism given their responsibilities under the Equality Act. As a former HR specialist, I recognised the temptation for them to find out the 'right' answers before being interviewed or taking part in the focus group in order to portray themselves and their organisations in a positive light. Had they done so this would have greatly interfered with my ability to assess the level of knowledge that exists in their organisations. Therefore, an approach had to be found that minimised the risk they would read up about the topic first. This was achieved firstly by establishing with all respondents the reciprocal nature of this exploratory study (Roulston 2010), affirming that my experiences positioned me well to help them access specialist knowledge, offer support where they had experienced difficulties or tensions in their managing role, as well as listen to their stories. Annexes 9, 10, 11 and 12 constitute the preparatory information I sent to all who took part. These reinforced the requirement for respondents to tell me what they did and did not know, stressing the importance of this investigation in furthering employment prospects for AS individuals, particularly younger people. Secondly, repeated emphasis was made that for this study to meet its purpose they must be categorical if they did not know that a statement about AS was true or false and to be completely explicit that their answers were guesses.

Based upon the literature reviewed, I generated 7 statements which are shown in Annex 7. The respondents were then invited to answer each statement with one of three possible responses:

Figure 5-1 Statements presented to respondents

<p>I have absolutely no idea if this statement is true or false (in other words I would be guessing)</p> <p>I know this statement to be true</p> <p>I know this statement to be false</p>

One of these seven statements "AS is a disability?" was followed by the open question "What are your perceptions of AS and autism?". This was asked to understand how both groups conceptualised AS, important in this investigation given the duality identified in the theoretical framework.

Another consideration was how the limited interview time could be used to gather as much rich detail as possible from the managers. Someone diagnosed as autistic would be expected to experience difficulties with social communication and interaction and to display restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities including sensory difficulties. These descriptions were far too broad and overly clinical to encourage managers to talk about what they noticed in their autistic employees. Instead I decided to make use of prompt cards which would help them recall particular behaviours, events and scenarios to explore their perceptions and experiences of their autistic employees.

In constructing the phrases on the prompt cards, one option considered was to include the behaviours used in the competency libraries of the participating organisations. However, doing so may have unintentionally excluded the behaviours that line managers did recognise in their AS employees, given the literature review had identified that these do differ from neurotypical people. It may also have interfered with the aim of the investigation, which was to explore the actual behaviours managers notice, rather than leading them towards those which they might expect and were familiar with. Instead, I wanted to draw directly from clinical and employment studies to find out what managers notice, rather than a more general discussion of all the various situations they could talk about in relation to their autistic employees. Therefore, on each prompt card I used a word or short phrase derived from the literature review to provide what I considered would be meaningful indicators of behaviours and ways of working in the workplace context. These derivations are shown in Annex 8.

Care was taken to avoid value statements on the cards, and so phrases such as 'working with others', rather than 'good at working with others' were developed. Some characteristics could not be presented any other way than as value statements, for example, 'conscientious in finishing a task'. These are asterisked in the figure below. In total 26 cards were developed which created a structure to the data collection, enabling rich data to be collected within the time constraints of the interviews, which averaged around two hours. Chapter 7 begins by outlining how these cards were clustered in order to support the presentation of findings.

Figure 5-2 Prompt cards presented to line managers

working in a team	sensitive to bright lights/noise	Timekeeping
a loner?	handling stress	Attendance
Empathy	Honesty, finds it difficult to lie	Enjoys tasks (or will do without complaining) tasks that others find boring
working with customers	trusting	Conscientious in finishing a task*
a strong desire to help*	Objective	obsessive with a task
attention to detail	Detached from organisational politics	often an expert on specific topic*
Flexibility	dealing with complex data	high work ethic*
ability to handle change	understanding complex systems	level of work output
	level of intelligence	has savant skills

5.4.5. Data Sampling

The changed approach discussed prior resulted in a final sample of six participating organisations.

Participating organisations

Organisation 1 is a provider of leisure and hotel services employing 15,000 employees across 4 sites and employing 9,000 at the site where the interviews took place. The focus group there consisted of the HR team comprising the HR manager, 2 HR advisors and an Occupational health specialist.

Organisation 2 is a local NHS trust employing approximately 5000 employees. The Director for Diversity and Inclusion was supportive of the study and invited HR and line managers to respond. The HR specialists declined to take part, and just one line manager volunteered.

Organisation 3 is a service delivery provider for learning disability support employing approximately 1200 employees. HR specialists declined to take part in the study.

Organisation 4 is a medium-sized software design company, privately owned and employing approximately 500 at two sites. A senior manager offered access to the study as no HR specialists were operating at the site.

Organisation 5 is a very large public-sector organisation employing approximately 65,000 people across several sites nationwide. The interviews took place with a talent planning specialist, a specialist in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and two advisors with expertise in Disability Support and Reasonable Adjustments. Organisation 5 was the only organisation able to provide line managers, HR specialists and AS employees. It is the primary data collection site.

Organisation 6 is a large private sector organisation operating globally and employing 12,000 at one of their UK sites. They are heavily engineering based and the HR manager granted access through the Occupational Health Director.

Table 5-3 Participating organisations and respondents

Organisation	sector and number of employees	Line managers talking about AS employees	HR Focus groups or HR specialists	AS employees
1	Leisure 15,000	Yes	Focus group (x4)	No
2	large, local NHS trust approx. 5000	Yes	No	No
3	Service delivery for learning disability approx. 1200	Yes	No	No
4	Software design c500	Yes	No	No
5	large quasi-public-sector agency employing 65,000 people across multiple UK sites	Yes	HR Specialists (x 4)	Yes (x10)
6	large engineering firm employing 12,000 people at local site	Yes	No	Yes (x2)

5.4.6. Identifying and recruiting participants

An interesting observation from the access difficulties described prior was that the HR specialists I approached appeared somewhat more reluctant than managers to take part in this investigation. For example, when I approached organisation 3, the provider of learning services, the HR manager declined my request and directed me instead to the Operations Manager. In Organisation 6 the HR Manager suggested I contact the Director of Occupational Health as he had been involved in a company-wide mental health programme, an association which reinforced the nature of autism as hidden disability rather than as abilities or skills. This reluctance meant that in the final sample only organisations 1 and 5 had HR specialists interested in taking part. In organisation 1, all four of the HR team expressed their desire to participate and these practical matters of access and time drove the decision to gather their views in a focus group format.

In regard to identifying line managers, the HR specialists from organisations 1,2,3 and 4 identified for me those who managed AS individuals directly. In organisation 5, the project sponsor sought participants via their intranet. In organisation 6, participants were recruited through posters on twelve noticeboards across a large site, following an initial discussion with the Occupational Health Director.

Organisation 5 employs 65,000 people and organisation 6 employs 12,000, which means that approximately 325 autistic people from organisation 5 and 60 from organisation 6 could have volunteered, provided they had a clinical diagnosis and had disclosed this to either their manager or an HR representative. A relevant observation at this point was that organisations 5 and 6 had well publicised diversity initiatives. However, just 14 employees came forward to participate, a very low number and far less than those predicted by official AS prevalence rates. Whether these low numbers were due to the method of seeking participants or other factors is unknown, although this aspect of recruiting respondents is likely to be a key consideration in future studies.

5.4.7. Participant demographics

Line managers

The purpose of this investigation is to find out about managers' experiences of managing autistic people. It is appreciated that gender and ethnicity are characteristics in this sample that might influence their perceptions, but the access difficulties were so significant that this precluded securing sufficient respondents to investigate this. In addition, the focus of this investigation is on the roles occupied by line managers and their actual managerial experiences, rather than their personal characteristics, making it very important to gather details of the managers' job titles, experiences and age. It was important that all the line managers interviewed had people management responsibilities and that they were either currently, or within the past 12 months, responsible for managing one or more autistic employees who had disclosed their diagnosis. This experience qualification was imposed in order that respondents could talk with some authority based on recent experiences of the issues they had encountered.

In organisation 5, the impact of the access stipulation was that several 'pairs' of employees and their immediate line managers were created. Another pairing also resulted in Organisation 6. The table below asterisked the six pairings.

Table 5-4 Line managers

Organisation	Line manager	Line managers experience and job title	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Talking about employee	Employee's main job role
1	A	Operations Manager Oversees 5 restaurants. Managed teams for over 10 years. Managed AS employee for 4 years	Male	35 - 45	White British	Tom	Assistant Restaurant manager
1	B	Operations Supervisor Managed people for over 5 years. Managed 2 AS employees for 2 years	Female	55- plus	White British	Sol Joanne	Cleaner Cleaner
2	C	Staff nurse/Ward manager. 7 years 'experience of line managing people. Managed other employees with hidden disabilities, including dyslexia and AS employee for over a year.	Male	35- 45	White British	Derek Sharon	Nurse Healthcare assistant
3	D	Operations Manager in a nationwide service provider for disability support, with over 10 years line management experience. Managed AS employees for about 2 years.	Female	45- 55	White British	Aaron Lara	Employment facilitator -
4	E	Data Delivery Manager with 5 years + line management experience. Managed /worked closely with her AS employee for 6 months	Female	35- 45	White British	Xavier	IT trainee
5	F*	Team leader with 10+ years' experience of managing people across varied organisations. Managed AS employee for about 1 year	Male	55 plus	White British	* Keith	Call centre agent (paired)
5	G*	Team leader with about 13 years' experience across varied organisations. Managed AS employees for about 4 years	Female	45- 55	White British	* Shelley	Call centre agent (paired)
5	H*	Team Leader. 7 years' experience of line management. Managed employee for 4 months	Female	45- 55	White British	* Colin	Administrative officer (paired)
5	I	Business Learning Manager responsible for overseeing graduate trainees, one of which is her AS employee. 18 months as line manager and extensive prior experience as technical specialist.	Female	45- 55	White British	Leila	Finance specialist

5	J	Managed and supported AS employees for many years. Adjunct role as disability mentor and wellbeing champion	Female	35-45	White British	Tim	Data handler
5	K*	Team leader with 2 years' experience. Managed her AS employee for about 22 months.	Female	35-45	White British	* Joe	Administrative officer (paired)
5	L*	Team leader promoted from a technical specialist role. About 2 years' experience of managing people. Managed AS employee for 18 months	Male	25-35	White British	* Pearl	Administrative officer (paired)
6	M*	Director of a large Engineering Division. 25 years in variety of management roles some of which have been global, managing up to 200 employees. Managed and worked closely with AS employee for over 5 years	Male	55 plus	White British	* Callum	Senior engineer (paired)

*6 'pairings' created.

HR specialists

All the respondents identified as HR specialists had roles in either mainstream HR, talent planning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Disability Support or Occupational Health.

Table 5-5 HR specialists

Organisation	Specialist area of HR	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Data collected from
1	HR Manager	Female	35 – 45	White British	Focus group
1	HR Advisor [a]	Female	25-35	White British	
1	HR Advisor [b]	Female	25-35	White British	
1	Occupational health nurse	Female	45-55	White British	
5	E and DI specialist	Male	45-55	White British	Interviews
5	Talent planning	Female	25-35	White British	
5	Disability support lead	Female	45-55	White British	
5	Reasonable adjustment specialist	Female	35 – 45	White British	

The overwhelmingly female composition of the HR specialists interviewed reflects the gendered nature of the profession. The lack of diversity in regard to ethnic minority representation, as with the line managers, is an artefact of both the recruitment and promotion policies of the organisations concerned and of the way in which the sample was constructed. The limitations of the composition of this sample are discussed and acknowledged further in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

Autistic employees

Of the 14 employees from organisations 5 and 6 that volunteered, two told me they thought they may be autistic but did not have a diagnosis which prevented them taking part in this study. Of the remaining twelve, another two employees (Gavin and Shaun) could not be interviewed due to geographical constraints, so instead completed a questionnaire which contained questions very similar to those used in the interview. In total ten AS employees from organisations 5 and 6 were interviewed. One interviewee (*Pearl, italicised*) requested the tape was stopped 30 minutes after starting the interview, although she did very much wish to continue her discussion with me. This rendered the data unusable. In total nine usable interview transcripts and two completed questionnaires were generated.

Table 5-6 Autistic employees in organisations 5 and 6

Employee	Job title	Organisation	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Data collected from
Keith	Administrative Assistant	5	Male	25-35	White British	Interview
Shelley	Administrative Assistant		<i>Female</i>	25-35	White British	Interview
Colin	Administrative officer		<i>male</i>	35-45	White British	Interview
Shaun	Administrative officer		<i>male</i>	35-45	White British	Questionnaire
Gavin	Web developer		<i>male</i>	25-35	White British	Questionnaire
Joe	Administrative officer		<i>male</i>	35-45	White British	Interview
<i>Pearl</i>	<i>Administrative officer</i>		<i>female</i>	25-35	<i>White British</i>	<i>Interview</i>
Jack	Administrative officer		male	55 plus	White British	Interview
Joseph	Technical Specialist		male	35-45	White British	Interview
Steve	Administrative officer		male	25-35	White British	Interview
Callum	Engineer		6	male	45-55	White British
Martin	Engineer	male		35-45	White British	Interview

The fact that only two of the ten AS employees were female does merit further discussion and may not simply be an artefact of the research. It is perhaps indicative of the propensity for autistic women to remain undiagnosed on account of masking their condition, a finding common to clinical and employment-based accounts (Kanfiszer, Davies and Collins 2017; Annabi 2018). Another observation is that the employees were slightly younger than those who managed them. Whilst this difference itself is unsurprising, it reflects the trend that it is younger rather than older people who are more likely to come forward and disclose their diagnosis to employers.

Data collection covered sites across the UK and the table below shows the process took approximately 20 months.

Table 5-7 Data collection schedule

Participant	Date	Organisation	Source of data
HR Manager 1	11 June 2014	1	All attended the Focus Group
HR Advisor a	11 June 2014	1	
HR Advisor b	11 June 2014	1	
Occupational Health Nurse	11 June 2014	1	
Manager A	11 June 2014	1	Interview
Manager B	11 June 2014	1	Interview
Manager D	22 September 2014	3	Interview
Manager E	10 December 2014	4	Interview
Manager C	12 January 2015	2	Interview
Manager F	2 March 2015	5	Interview
Keith	2 March 2015	5	Interview
Jack	3 March 2015	5	Interview
Manager G	6 March 2015	5	Interview
Shelley	6 March 2015	5	Interview
Manager H	23 March 2015	5	Interview
Colin	23 March 2015	5	Interview
Shaun	26 March 2015	5	Questionnaire
Gavin	26 March 2015	5	Questionnaire
E and DI specialist	2 April 2015	5	Interview
Talent planning specialist	2 April 2015	5	Interview
Manager I	9 April 2015	5	Interview
Disability support lead	2 April 2015	5	Interview
Manager J	9 April 2015	5	Interview
Joseph	30 April 2015	5	Interview
Reasonable adjustment specialist	30 April 2015	5	Interview
Joe	13 May 2015	5	Interview
Manager K	13 May 2015	5	Interview
Pearl	27 May 2015	5	Interview (not usable)
Manager L	27 May 2015	5	Interview
Steve	28 May 2015	5	Interview
Charles	21 July 2015	6	Interview
Martin	25 June 2015	6	Interview
Manager M	2 March 2016	6	Interview

5.5. Ethical Concerns

5.5.1. Language choices

The language choices used to approach participants and determine the interview content were informed by Kenny et al (2015) and reflect the preferences of those with direct experience of autism to use disability or identity first language [an 'AS individual']. Here, AS is viewed as an aspect of an individual's identity consistent with the notion of neurodiversity, which categorically rejects negative terms such as 'disorder' or 'impairment' (Robison 2011). Person-first language ['an individual with AS'] is used mostly by clinical professionals who separate a person's autism from their identity. Here, they follow medicalised models of disability where the implication is that something is 'wrong' and that difficulties arise directly from being 'broken' in some way. Deliberate choices were made in the language used to correspond with potential respondents in the ongoing discussions with stakeholders as well as in the interview itself. The words 'condition' and 'AS individual' were the terms used throughout. Annexes 12 and 13 show the wording in the Participant information and consent documents.

5.5.2. Anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation

To balance the duty of confidentiality to the respondents, all their quotes have been anonymised. Alpha assignments are used for the managers (*manager A, organisation 1*) and the employees are given anonymised first names (*Tom, organisation 1*). The HR specialists are given their job title and organisation (*HR Manager, organisation 1*). Any technical terms which would identify organisations are also removed from the interview transcripts.

5.5.3. Care of participants

Recognising the potential sensitivity of the participants, particularly the AS employees, care was taken to ensure that participant information and informed consent documents were autism friendly by checking the wording with disability specialists at two separate universities. This same rigour also applied to the design of the questions used in the interview and questionnaire. After sending out the call for participants I received many lengthy email replies, particularly those from AS employees who described their frustrations borne from difficulties encountered in their employment experiences. Replying to these responses I set up telephone conversations with each autistic employee and with each manager. These lasted on average about 30-45 minutes and I used this as an opportunity to provide information about the study as well as reinforce the emancipatory potential in this investigation (Martin 2015). Knowing that many of the managers in this study were likely to be talking about their experiences with AS

employees for the first time, I anticipated they would use the interview to surface their own difficulties. These initial conversations were helpful in ensuring I brought useful support information and contacts ready to give out to all those who took part in the study. For example, I recall the first interview with manager F from organisation 5 (which at two and a half hours was the longest). It became very clear he needed support and I was able to reassure him that support does exist for someone needing to know more about managing autistic people, by signposting him to the NAS.

A break was scheduled in the interviews to allow a rest from what I considered would represent prolonged social interaction for autistic employees and the interviews took place in rooms that were not brightly lit. These adjustments were made on the basis of my own views about what would matter to an autistic person, as well as those documented in the literature, as Chapter 3 has established. I did not wish my autistic interviewees to experience discomfort in any way and recall thinking that they would appreciate this accommodation. In the event, they all talked readily throughout without needing a break, leading me to consider the power of my own views to inform my thoughts and subsequent actions. In the interviews with the line managers I also scheduled a break, but this time for comfort as well as space for my own reflections about the interviewees' responses, rather than placing the break as a conscious adjustment. The implication of these differences in reasoning made me consider further in the analysis of findings not just what norms operate, but who makes these and what assumptions they hold.

The pairing created by organisation 5's access stipulations shown in Table 5.4 was not deliberate. In fact, strenuous efforts were made to accommodate ethical concerns and where I interviewed a manager and employee who worked together, I reassured both that the information they divulged to me would not be repeated to the other. The exception I made was where one person said to me that they thought a particular piece of information would be helpful for both parties and gave me their specific consent to do so. An example of this was signposting managers and employees to the Access to Work programmes, where this topic came up in the discussions about reasonable adjustments.

5.6. *Conducting the Focus Group and interviews*

5.6.1. *Focus Group*

The focus group took place with all four members of the HR team at organisation 1 and lasted 90 minutes. Participants were asked first about their experiences of autistic people in the company and this led to a discussion of the accommodations they made to their recruitment and selection procedures for an autistic candidate. All four were next asked to respond to the statements about AS. Their responses were recorded on a flip chart, using different colours to differentiate between the respondents and are shown in Annex 6.

Further topics explored were the experiences they had of advising and supporting managers of autistic people, their views about the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion and finally their views as to what constituted valuable skills in their company. They were shown the prompt cards which helped them recall situations where all the team had been involved with two particular autistic employees. A more general discussion followed about capabilities and autistic behaviours, where the reactive nature of their role emerged. Mindful of the hidden nature that the theoretical framework has identified as significant in this investigation, this discussion also explored how they dealt with someone they thought someone may be autistic but had not disclosed.

5.6.2. *Interviews with HR specialists*

As with the HR specialists in organisation 1, the HR specialists in organisation 5 were also asked to respond to the 7 statements about AS. They were then invited to think about any autistic people they had dealt with directly, which generated data about recruitment, redeployment, capability and performance management scenarios. Interviewees were also asked questions about policy and practice in respect of neurodiversity and the Equality Act, as well as about their organisation's commitment to diversity and inclusion, keeping in mind that this thesis seeks to understand how practices, policies or procedures may discriminate directly or indirectly against autistic people. The final part of the interview asked questions to generate knowledge about the value of 'soft' and 'hard' skills and how these skills were articulated. This line of questioning was designed to explore the implications of under using autistic strengths, but in fact generated answers which were too generic to be of much use to this investigation. This limitation is considered more fully in section 5.7. The structure of the interviews with the HR specialists is shown in Annex 9.

5.6.3. Operation of interviews with line managers

The interviews were designed to explore how the social world shapes managers' constructions. As these are inherently subjective, the semi-structured interview was designed to allow the differences and similarities in the meanings, perceptions and interpretations managers made of this objective condition to be explored. Annex 11 shows the structure of the interviews with the managers.

The interview began by ascertaining managers' prior experience of managing someone with a neurodiverse condition. Knowing about the extent of their managerial experiences allows their responses to be contextualised, in that someone who is inexperienced or new to line management, may experience difficulties or lack confidence, where a more experienced and capable person would not. In the subsequent analysis, exploring more about the personal qualities of these agentic managers did indeed become important and is discussed further in Chapter 9.

Part B of the interview used the prompt cards, laying them out in front of the interviewees, acting as a visual cue to help managers recall examples of scenarios and events in relation to their autistic employees. Care was taken to guide the managers to compare these with other team members doing similar jobs, as it was the *differences* in their perceptions of AS people versus those of their neurotypical employees, which were the focus of the investigation. The emphasis here was on exploring how these differences were manifested in day to day practices they employed managing their teams, as well as ascertaining what support they felt they had received from the organisation itself. Another area to explore was that of how, if at all, these differences affected the immediate team, given the influence of working relationships upon employee experiences (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015; Richards 2012; 2015). After the line managers had exhausted the areas suggested by the cards, they were also asked if they had encountered any surprises in dealings with AS employees. This question was designed to explore characteristics managers may have encountered beyond the stereotyped behaviours that have been associated with AS people (Lorenz and Heinitz 2014). I felt this to be important in that it reflects the heterogeneity of autistic people and reduces the likelihood of collectivising experiences of disability.

Part C of the interview explored the context in which these managers operated in regard to the environment, the nature of their employees' roles and the HR policies in place in the organisation. This area of questioning reflected the need for this investigation to consider the structural aspects of the working environments in which managers operated, mindful these are socio-cultural aspects of the investigation identified in the conceptual framework. As Cunliffe (2008;2011) has shown, interpretation requires knowledge

gathered to be situated in practice to deliver contextual understanding, consistent with Sayer's view (2010:5) that structural forces '*generate events*'.

Returning to the aim of finding out what managers knew about the condition of autism and AS, Part D presented them with the 7 statements described on page 114. Placing these here rather than early in the interview was deliberate in order to avoid the temptation of discussing with managers the implications of these terms before they had talked about their own experiences. Structuring the interview this way gave me greater confidence their subsequent responses to discussions about the AS characteristics had not been unduly influenced, recognising how the intersubjective space between researcher and interviewer can easily lead the interview to become conversations where '*participants jointly reflect on issues and discuss insights*' (Cunliffe 2011:659), rather than purely gathering data.

The theoretical discussions in Chapter 2 have exposed limitations of existing approaches to understanding disability in regard to how autistic strengths might be more fully utilised by employers. These discussions prompted Part E, where managers were asked about the skills they valued in their immediate departments and the wider organisation. Mindful of the terminology in the literature review, they were also asked if they considered these to be 'hard' or 'soft' skills.

5.6.4. Development of questioning in interviews

Three months after the interviews had begun, the questions used in the interviews were adapted slightly to address the concerns of the project sponsor in organisation 5, who was keen to understand how new technologies, which were driving changes to roles and to the skills needed, might impact autistic people. Indeed, adapting the questions in this way allowed the theme of '*organisational context created difficulties for managers*' to emerge. The following section of this Chapter discusses how this was used in the data analysis procedures. Chapter 9 continues by discussing how these requirements for flexibility in the face of technological and change impacted managers as well as their employees, contributing an additional dimension of knowledge in regard to employees with a hidden, not physical, disability.

As the interviews progressed, the rich descriptions generated led to more exploratory questions and I began to wonder why it was that some managers, more than others, appeared to have positive perceptions or use the skills of their AS employees more productively. I now asked myself if this was purely coincidence or was it related to the capabilities of the particular line manager, considering if they are a 'good' manager? It became apparent that these differences could also be related to the organisational context in some way and so I revisited the literature searching for more information

about management style, the role of front-line managers as well as aspects of diversity management policy and practices. My interpretation of how their management style may have shaped responses is revisited in section 9 of the discussion. These conscious developments in questioning illustrate the need for researchers to remain alert to unfolding changes (Willis 2007; Cunliffe 2011), reflecting the interpretivist stance in this investigation and the realist approach to method in social science investigations (Sayer 2010).

5.6.5. Interviews with AS employees

Organisation 5 stipulated that the views of autistic employees were heard, albeit their experiences were not the focus of this investigation. Annex 12 shows the structure of the themes to be explored in the interviews and the questionnaires used where interviews were impractical. These generated rich information about individuals' career experiences which were both positive and negative, illuminating the perceptions autistic people have about autism. The broad interpretivist stance adopted recognises that the perceptions and labels they refer to are very much socially constructed matters, particularly the case when talking about disability and the consequences they experience as neurodiverse people working within predominantly neurotypical norms. Gathering data from autistic employees represents a different perspective which offers additional insight and valuable depth to the discussion in Chapter 9.

5.6.6. Documents - Competency frameworks

During the interviews, the competency frameworks used in organisations 5 and 6 emerged as a possible influence upon how managers arrived at their perceptions of autism and autistic people. I felt these were valuable source of data necessitating further examination. These frameworks represent socio-cultural impositions and as such are explored further in the discussion by considering how they impact managers too. Confidentiality requirements prevent complete reproduction of the frameworks and so only the extracts deemed relevant to the discussions around soft skills and flexibility are shown in Annex 15.

5.7. Limitations of data collection process

5.7.1. Respondents - numbers, representativeness and attitudes

The access difficulties encountered mean this investigation is limited in regard to the number of participants in the final sample. The reluctance of HR specialists to take part detailed prior resulted in just one focus group and four interviews. The team of four HR specialists in organisation 1 had in combination dealt with just two autistic employees.

The two disability specialists in organisation 5 between them had encountered no more than five people in their day to day dealings with queries around reasonable adjustments for autistic employees, very low given they had both been employed for over 10 years. This restriction in sample size and experiences inevitably affects the transferability of findings. Although 13 line managers contributed to the study, the two employed by organisation 1 were not asked to respond to the statements about AS, simply as I had earlier explored what was known about AS and neurodiversity in the focus group with the HR team from the same organisation. There are 11 not 13 responses relating to levels of knowledge and understanding, thereby missing valuable information which was particularly frustrating in a small sample size.

A further limitation comes from the composition of the sample in regard to gender and ethnicity of those that I interviewed. This limitation was especially evident in the ethnicity mix as every respondent was of White British origin. The gender split of the line managers was approximately 60% female and 40% male, whereas just one of the eight HR specialists was male. The distribution of the managers was slightly skewed towards those aged 45 years upwards and may mean their views may not accord with those of younger managers, especially given the increased exposure to AS and autism in the media that Chapter 4 identified. These proportions are also an artefact of the study, although are not untypical of proportions in regard to gender in HR specialist roles and to age in large public sector organisations. They therefore limit the transferability of findings and future studies should explore more representative samples, particularly in regard to ethnicity and gender. In the sample of autistic employees this gender split was significant in that just two of the ten were females. This is a further limitation of the investigation as the data gathered from managers may not represent their experiences of managing autistic women, an area that Chapter 3 has commented extensively upon.

The HR specialists in organisation 1 willingly provided me with access to interview line managers of AS employees, who they knew from their own disability statistics had disclosed, a decision which I felt demonstrated their desire to learn more about the topic. Additionally, about half of the managers and HR specialists interviewed had a personal connection with AS, either through family or close friends seeking or receiving a diagnosis. This information is shown in Annex 17. Chapter 6 goes on to comment upon the possible impact of these connections upon the findings. In regard to the organisations these respondents worked in, the HR team in organisation 1 were categorical that the climate in which they operated was conducive to positive conceptualisations of diversity in all its forms. In organisation 5 the main project sponsor was a senior EDI specialist, who like his colleagues that I subsequently interviewed, held a very positive approach to diversity and inclusion. Such attitudes are therefore likely to construct positive interpretations of

the AS condition and should be noted by researchers seeking access to organisations like this as well as those without these advanced levels of knowledge.

5.7.2. Ambiguity of question wording

Flexibility in research requires a constant eye on what is unfolding in the study to monitor if findings align with the study's aims, regularly questioning and moving between the data. I experienced this when listening to the responses from the questions I thought would identify the value that managers and HR specialist placed upon 'hard' and as 'soft' skills in their own organisations. A significant moment came for me in an early interview when manager A from organisation 1 struggled to hide his lack of interest with this line of questioning, in direct contrast to the engagement I noted when he talked about his AS employee. On reflection, perhaps the term 'skill' was simply too expansive to extract specific information. I adapted the later interviews to allow more time for elucidating examples of scenarios and related characteristics.

The statement '*AS is a disability?*' was presented to see how respondents conceptualised AS. This ambiguous wording may have confused respondents, as it could be interpreted either as 'is AS classed by law as a disability?', or as, 'is the condition of AS disabling?'. The statement could have been worded better as; '*AS is a disabling condition*', which would likely have revealed a greater range of perceptions and prompting me to probe further where the disabling effect came from.

5.8. Data analysis procedures

5.8.1. Template analysis

Analysis of transcript data should seek to identify what respondents' think and feel about their experiences and their reactions to the situations they encounter in managing or working with autistic people. This investigation adopts template analysis, a form of thematic analysis that King (2012) has shown is a useful approach in small scale qualitative data analysis akin to this investigation. The small sample size also shaped the decision to avoid coding software such as NVIVO, following Richards' (1999) account of the potential for these applications to unnecessarily hinder analysis. Brookes et al (2014:206) notes template analysis has "*strong roots in organisational research*", making it particularly suitable for the analysis of textual data gathered from interviews, focus groups or written questionnaires, all of which are used in this thesis. Thus, the data analysis follows Brookes et al (2014) qualitative interpretative enquiry of patient perceptions, chosen as the size of the sample, with twenty respondents, resonates with the parameters of this investigation. Template analysis allows the researcher a '*relatively high degree of structure in the process of analysing textual data with the flexibility to*

adapt it to the needs of a particular study (Brookes et al 2014: 203). One way this flexibility can be interpreted is in encouraging researchers to consider how themes are defined and how they relate to each other, rather than rigidly set out a specific number or sequence of codes. This approach can be applied across many different epistemological underpinnings and is particularly suitable in that it allows for 'bottom up' approaches (Brookes et al 2014:205). In this investigation, these are the accounts of the line managers, HR specialists and autistic employees about working life. The technique recognises that their perceptions and experiences will be open to multiple interpretations which are both context specific as well as related to the researcher's own stance. In regard to managers and HR specialists, these perceptions and experiences are shaped by the structural aspects of organisations which are matters over which they have little control. These have been identified in the conceptual framework, for example legislation which dictates managers accommodate an autistic person's request for headphones, or resource constraints which force that person into a role where strengths cannot be developed. The transcript data is therefore coded to improve understanding of how these perceptions are shaped, allowing the analysis of findings to comment upon the extent they vary. Indeed, in analysing some of the themes it will also be important to review the extent the data is similar, despite the influence of varying contexts. This is because it returns to the idea that autistic people are actually different from neurotypicals as well a heterogeneous group, allowing the consideration that varying perceptions are not solely the result of organisational features.

The process of developing the initial coding template is next outlined.

5.8.2. Development of the initial coding template

While there is a considerable body of knowledge deriving from scientific investigations that points to the objective features of AS, the interviews revealed that many of the participants lacked this knowledge, justifying the subjective focus of the investigation. Whilst the thrust of this investigation is towards interpreting managers' subjective accounts of AS, an objective condition, the gap in manager's experiences people justifies attention to establishing their baseline knowledge about autism and autistic people. Thus, the first analysis of the transcript data focused upon the point in the interviews where managers and HR specialists gave their responses to the statements about autism/AS and neurodiversity. The intention here was to establish some sense of what this group of practising managers and HR specialists knew about these areas and how confident they were in their knowledge. The data gathered here became the first heading of 'knowledge and beliefs about autism' on the final coding template (Fig 5.3), mindful that template analysis allows descriptive themes like this first one, as well as other interpretive themes, to emerge.

5.8.3. *Sifting the transcripts for coding*

I had 13 usable interview transcripts from managers, four from HR specialists, data from one focus group and eleven transcripts from autistic employees, a number too unwieldy to read through all at once. As the thesis explores managers' experiences of working with autistic people within contemporary HRM policies, the first sift comprised transcripts from the focus group and four transcripts from managers working in organisations 1, 5, and 6. This captured a small cross-section of the data drawing from HR specialists and managers across three of the six organisations. The transcript from Manager F's interview is shown in Annex 16, with coloured areas corresponding to the ten themes identified on the final coding template. Template analysis allows and encourages *a priori* themes enabling researchers to build upon existing empirical and theoretical contributions. The theoretical framework has clearly identified the hidden aspect of being autistic is a key feature of this investigation and thus words and phrases related to *invisible, hidden, visible* created the next coding heading of invisibility.

For most of the managers, the largest proportion of the transcript data emerged from their responses to being shown the prompt cards. Reviewing these generated another heading related to the differences they noticed between their autistic and non-autistic employees. Many instances emerged which managers viewed as useful strengths and many which they interpreted as disabling or problematic in some way. This segregation reinforces the duality the theoretical framework identified and also reflects the hierarchical relationships typical in template analysis. At this point I was not seeking to code these observations as either personal or social effects of being autistic, nor whether these effects came from the socio-cultural aspects the theoretical framework had identified. Therefore, I did not use these as two headings in their own right. However, consideration of the balance between these two sources emerged in the analysis of findings and became a very important area in the main discussion. Template analysis also encourages iteration in coding development which occurred as I read through more transcripts, for example contextual factors emerging where managers reported difficulties experienced by autistic people. These were labelled as 'organisational context creates difficulties.'

5.8.4. *Second sift*

Given the focus was upon managers' experiences, these four initial coding headings were next applied exclusively to another seven transcripts from the managers. Revisiting the data about autistic characteristics, showed managers varied in the ways they chose to view disability in general and autistic people specifically, creating another heading of

'differences between managers'. At this point I noted the data appeared to be related to their knowledge about autism and their prior experience of autistic people.

Template analysis is integrative (King 2012), which was a principle employed in revisiting the theme of difficulties. The sources of managers' difficulties appeared to be related directly to the AS characteristics, particularly around flexibility and social interaction, unsurprising as the literature review had identified these as very key in the accounts gathered from autistic people. These areas did in fact turn out to feature across many of the responses and on reflection these could have also been themes to take forward into the analysis of findings. However, doing so may have meant less focus upon under researched areas such as honesty and directness and so would not have fully illuminated the experiences of the line managers noted as key stakeholders in the employment relationship. That said, these areas remain major areas of concern for employers and for future research directions. Developing this theme further, the hidden nature of autism and difficulties connected to HRM and HRD policies and practices emerged as sources of difficulties for the managers. In the latter case, whilst these are owned by HR, they relate strongly to managers' experiences. Further sifting through the transcripts revealed how HRM processes, specifically competency frameworks, career development, performance management, capability procedures, organisational change and redeployment did shape perceptions and experiences of both employees and their managers. These echo the additional elements specified in the social relational approach to understanding disability and became important in the later analysis of findings.

These transcripts so far yielded evidence that these managers were frustrated in their efforts to manage their autistic employees, forming another very general heading in the initial coding template. Managers spoke further about the impact upon their teams from employing an autistic employee, an aspect that neither the theoretical framework nor the conceptual framework had identified and so was included as a new and interesting heading. They also referred to the support available, versus that they needed, which became another theme used in the analysis to contribute new knowledge in regard to managerial responses to the challenges of managing someone with an autism spectrum condition. At this stage in the data analysis, I revisited the transcripts regarding the data generated from the 26 prompt cards where managers talked about the characteristics which they were confident distinguished their AS employees to others in the teams. Within this data, I sought the themes that had so far emerged, for example organisational context, invisibility and impact upon the team.

5.8.5. Third sift

The next sift reviewed transcripts from the remaining four HR specialists given the significance of HRM policy and practice in this investigation. Managers had previously identified how HRM processes had created difficulties for themselves and their employees and some of the HR specialists also referred to these. I added these to the themes around invisibility and organisational context developed prior.

5.8.6. Views of autistic employees

Whilst the investigation focuses upon the experience of managers and their subjective perceptions, the stipulations made by organisation 5 created an opportunity to hear from the autistic employees too. Their voice brings a valuable supplementary perspective to the investigation, and so the transcripts from all of the autistic people interviewed, (except one which was the unusable transcript from Pearl's interview), and the two questionnaires were studied. Themes emerging here again were related to the tensions involved in deciding to disclose, some related to invisibility and some referring to the differences that individual managers could make to their decisions and experiences, mentioning trust specifically. Whilst the first sift had already connected invisibility to disclosure, there was sufficient data in the employee transcripts to create the final theme, which concerned their considerations in deciding to disclose.

5.8.7. Final sift and final coding

The last two transcripts from Managers G and B in organisation 5 continued to be matched to the template, until it was apparent that no further data could fit and none of the themes needed to be removed or modified.

Table 5-8 Selection of transcripts for coding

	Organisation	Job title	Data drawn from
Initial coding	1	HR Manager HR Advisor [a] HR Advisor [b] Occupational health nurse	Focus group
	1	Manager A	Interview
	5	Manager F	Interview
	5	Manager H	Interview
	6	Manager M	Interview
Second sift (7 managers)	2	Manager C	Interview
	3	Manager D	Interview
	5	Manager I	Interview
	5	Manager J	Interview
	5	Manager E	Interview
	5	Manager K	Interview
	5	Manager L	Interview
3rd sift 4 HR specialists	5	E and DI specialist	Interview
	5	Talent Planning	Interview
	5	Disability support lead	Interview
	5	Reasonable adjustment specialist	Interview
4th sift AS employees	5	Keith, Shelley, Colin, Shaun, Gavin, Joe, Jack, Joseph, Steve	Interviews and questionnaires
	6	Callum, Martin	Interviews
Final	5	Manager G*	Interview
	1	Manager B	Interview

The tentative headings listed were modified to create the final template. The *a priori* themes are asterisked.

Figure 5-3 Final Coding template

<p>Knowledge and beliefs about autism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confident in their knowledge • Guessing in their knowledge • importance of organisations EDI training • employees know better than HR <p>Invisibility*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easier to accommodate disability if its visible • difficulty in believing someone is disabled for self • difficulty in believing someone is disabled for team • easier for team to be sympathetic if can see the disability easier for self to be sympathetic if can see the disability <p>Difference between autistic and non-autistic employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beliefs about what is 'normal' • characteristics create difficulties for the team • autistic person can sometimes be highly skilled and sometimes very disabled <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o routine preference means work hard in jobs others don't want to do o routine preferences mean insistence on high standards o higher performance than others in same grade job o willingness to do jobs other people don't like o high commitment when others don't o different to manage autistic employees than others o honesty is refreshing o higher output than most o operating at higher level is good for business o always on time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disability and struggles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Find social interaction harder than others do o Struggling with role o Struggling with different tasks – flexibility o Noise and lights make the job hard, sometimes cause stress 	<p>Organisational context creates difficulties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continuous change and improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o quality drive o restructuring changes job role to more interaction/customer facing o jobs are contracting, fewer opportunities o roles are constrained o large organisations can't change standardised procedures o forcing people to be flexible o flexibility is needed in most jobs o tension between achieving performance and complying with equalities legislation o Equality act is helpful • HR (inc Occ Health) service o HR is remote o OH lacks expertise <p>Differences between managers themselves *</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience • age • attitudes to managing • attitudes to autism • attitudes to disability and difference • knowledge about autism • personal and prior connections to autistic people <p>Causes of managers difficulties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being different to rest of team • invisibility • people management practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o recruitment o ease of redeployment o capability and absence management o career development o Flexibility is needed in most jobs 	<p>Impact on manager /frustrations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee over reacts • making people flexible that cannot be • needing more time to manage • time-consuming to make accommodations • Occ health don't know much • Unable to separate autism from personality - implications for capability issues • Watching someone struggling • Taking employee's struggles on board <p>Team issues (new theme)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talking about autism • stigma • sympathy varies • need to know vs confidentiality • marking out <p>Support Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support gaps identified • HR ineffective • Occ Health better <p>Disclosure decisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to deal with employees post disclosure • Trust important in disclosure decisions • Diagnosis comes up after performance issues appear • Diagnosis allows job to be shaped • Employees doesn't want others to know
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5.9. Reflexivity in my role as researcher

5.9.1. Personal motivations

Reflexivity requires a conscious unpacking of the researcher's motivation for undertaking the study as well as a clear exposition of who is the "I" (Samra-Fredericks 2010) in the study. My initial motivation has come from watching my daughter experience persistent and disabling discomfort and anxiety from her sensitivities to some sounds, textures and her immediate social world. As she grew up, her peer relationships became more significant, worsening her difficulties and resulting in hospital admission, which for both of us was an extremely distressing experience. Six weeks later, then aged 17, she was discharged with a diagnosis of AS. My feelings were partially of relief in finding some explanation for her trauma, as well as recognising that my inability to handle a difficult and emotionally demanding situation was due to my lack of knowledge about what being autistic means for young people.

Another consequence of my daughter's diagnosis was that she immediately qualified for disability support payments under the welfare legislation of the time. Whilst she was extremely resentful about this, I encouraged her to claim these payments, recognising that many of the part-time jobs (mostly in bars with noisy or bright environments) that were available to her peers, she would find impossible to work in. I felt angry that she would encounter these disparities and knew that to some extent the payment would compensate her for this situation. In contrast, my daughter, then aged 18 years, viewed the same situation as deeply embarrassing.

Recollecting these distressing experiences, I experienced a strong sense of my own powerlessness and inability to provide her with the help she needed. Following Mills (1959:197) I began this thesis:

"Whenever you feel strongly about events or ideas you must try not to let them pass from your mind, but instead to formulate them for your files and in doing so draw out their implications...how they might be articulated into productive shape.... Experience is as important as a source of original intellectual work"

These experiences and the feelings they left me with are the 'spark' in this study because I needed not only to know how to help my daughter survive her immediate difficulties, but also how to thrive in her future life. Mindful that she wanted to go to university, my prior HR practitioner experiences alerted me to the likely difficulties she would have in being successful in negotiating assessments geared around particular and standardised social interaction requirements, let alone what she might face if she joined an

organisation who knew little, if anything at all, about the condition. Above all else, wanting to look after and support my daughter in the best way I could has motivated this thesis.

5.9.2. Role shapes interview responses

During the interviews I sought managers' responses as to whether they thought autism and AS are disabilities. I was aware that I had made my parental connection transparent in the prior communications and in introducing myself to the interviewees, which could have influenced their responses. Managers could have withheld talking about an autistic person as disabled either through embarrassment or feeling I would judge them as intolerant. I was careful to reassure them that whilst my own experiences had prompted this thesis, these were no means unique and there remains a pressing need to know more about the strengths associated with autism as well as the kinds of situations they notice where autistic people struggle. Thinking about all the managers that I interviewed, I feel that they acknowledged my personal experience was significant in establishing rapport and securing their full and open participation. Additionally, I have coaching qualifications which equip me with the skills to create focused and cohesive interaction, positivity and coordination between participants, all necessary components in rapport (Tickle-Degen and Rosenthal 1990). In the event, line managers readily disclosed to me what their AS employees found difficult, or were not so good at, in comparison to the rest of their teams. These dualities are carried forward in the analysis chapters which explores how AS characteristics presents as both strength and weakness in the workplace.

I recall asking Manager L from organisation 5 if he thought autism was a disability, and quickly adding my own comment that being autistic could sometimes be a strength. This is a response which indicates I was not actively listening to the response he gave. Doing so may have led him towards more discussion about strengths, thus risking insufficient time for exploration of more negative perceptions and influencing his own constructions of AS. This was particularly disappointing for me as my prior interview training and experience has instilled the need to suspend personal opinions. I believe this has demonstrated just how hard it is to fully set aside my own aim of uncovering strengths. I also recall Manager D from organisation 3, talking about how anxious her AS employee was when he had to tell her he wished to move on from her team. Replying that this was a fairly 'normal' response showed I was constructing it as typical of a young person's behaviour and again may have restricted exploration of why his employment was problematic.

5.9.3. Role shapes interpretations

As well as reflecting upon my motivation for completing this investigation, it is also necessary to reflect upon the impact my presence in the interviews has had upon interpretation of the responses. Research interviews are social encounters, where I am not only collecting data but also using the process to persuade and inform my participants. My own views have shaped my interpretations and illustrate the presence of the double hermeneutic (Giddens 1984) characterising interpretive studies. I feel it is also necessary to consider the impact of the intersubjective space between myself and the interviewees (Cunliffe 2011), which I encountered in talking with Manager E, who commented how Xavier, her graduate trainee was very direct in his style. By replying that I agreed with her this directness was indeed a strength, I inadvertently reinforced her views, instead of simply leaving them as her interpretation.

On the other hand, my motivation to understand this complex condition along with my prior knowledge has informed my interpretations. I can gather insights which other researchers may have missed, for example recognising that when one of my autistic interviewees looked away it was because they were more likely to be thinking about the question posed and not because they were disengaged from the process, an assumption which may be made if a neurotypical person responded in the same way. Another example came when I asked managers about their experiences with 'hypersensitivities' in that knowing the meaning of this relatively unusual term enriches my understanding of their responses. Arguably, I can capture more fully the range of meanings they describe, than could someone without my unique prior knowledge and experiences.

I have also recognised that complete detachment from either my role as parent or as an HR specialist is neither possible nor desirable and have mobilised the advantages of both to suit the various stages of this research. For example, in discussions with project sponsors and HR specialists to secure access I have drawn heavily upon my experience as an HR practitioner to establish credibility and to identify areas of common interest, for example skills shortages, diversity management and inclusion policies. In the interviews, I have drawn upon my parental role to elicit rapport with respondents whereas in the analysis I have aimed to detach myself from my parental role and return to that of the HR specialist, as this resonates more closely with the aim of the thesis to further career prospects for young AS adults by considering how line managers and HR specialists handle the condition.

Rocco and Delgado (2011) ask if a non-disabled person can conduct research that contributes to knowledge about employees with disability without objectifying the disabled person. I concur with Barnes and Mercer (1997) that I do not have be disabled

myself to carry out research, merely that I wish to place my knowledge and skills at the disposal of disabled people. I also recognise that as a researcher seeking such outcomes, I may be accused through my privilege as non-disabled, of being arrogant in speaking for a group of individuals that some would class as oppressed (Cassell and Symon 2004).

5.10. *Chapter summary*

The research philosophy has been shaped by earlier theoretical discussions and epistemological considerations in regard to eliciting knowledge about a hidden condition. The theoretical framework recognises the need to acknowledge the objective features of AS and the subjective perceptions of significant actors. In exploring their subjective perceptions of autistic employees, assumptions made are that managers' accounts and interpretations will be conditioned by their own prior experiences, their reflective capacity as well as the structural constraints under which they operate. It is especially important to have this approach given that AS manifests as both potential disability (and as such a protected characteristic in legislation) and a potential source of strengths. Whether such strengths are recognised and can be appreciated and mobilised is thus a key feature of the research. Accordingly, the thesis draws upon Cunliffe's typology and is underpinned by the subjectivist problematic, necessitating an interpretivist paradigm.

The disclosure tensions experienced by autistic people discussed in the literature review have necessitated flexibility in my approach to securing access and in adapting its purpose. These changes reflect the points advanced regarding iteration and emergence (Cunliffe 2011; Willis 2007) in research. Data collection and analysis have also been iterative processes, for example in developing interview questions and selecting themes in the analysis process.

Access difficulties resulted in the final sample being geographically dispersed and a data gathering process which lasted 20 months. These difficulties reinforced the need to persevere with this exploratory investigation in order to contribute to understanding the issues encountered in managing autistic people. The research methods used began with one focus group consisting of four HR specialists from organisation 1, followed by semi-structured interviews with 14 line managers and four more HR specialists across six different organisations. The interviews with managers used prompt cards to uncover their observations of their autistic employees and the constraints they faced in carrying out their management role. This detailed textual information generated from the cards exposed both strengths and problematic areas in managing autistic people, revealing the duality the theoretical framework has shown is key in understanding managers' experiences and perceptions about autistic people in the workplace.

The small sample size lends itself well to template analysis, although isolating themes from the vast amount of data generated was challenging and created some uncertainty as to which pattern of data to follow first. The initial themes were developed into ten themes in the final coding template, including *a priori* themes highlighted by the theoretical discussion as well as new themes. All the themes resonated with the aims of the investigation and will deliver empirical and theoretical contributions.

This chapter has shown how my personal experiences have been significant in my decision to begin this thesis and have made me the prime tool for data collection and analysis. Some inevitable bias to the investigation has occurred, creating a particular interpretation of the data. However, consistent with a robust interpretivist stance, this chapter has also articulated clearly my motives, experiences and purpose to achieve transparency throughout the research design and process.

5.10.1. Bridge to findings and analysis

Once finalised the themes on the coding template were not transferred directly to the analysis itself, rather the findings and analysis are shaped by the conceptual framework which has pointed to the significance of the socio-cultural factors in this investigation. Adopting a broadly interpretivist framework, the analysis explores the accounts of line managers, HR specialists and AS employees.

Chapter 6 explores the level and depth of knowledge held by HR specialists and line managers about autism and about autistic people, considering how their perceptions are shaped. Chapter 7 provides empirical evidence from managers about how and when their autistic employees display skills or experience problematic situations. The analysis of these findings reflects the duality the theoretical framework has indicated is important to explore. Chapter 8 builds upon these findings, exploring how managers react to the challenges they face in managing people with a hidden disability.

Chapter 6. Findings - the knowledge base of line managers and HR specialists

This chapter outlines the key findings from the interviews with managers, HR specialists and autistic employees. It seeks to gather a sense of what they know about autism and what they understand about autistic people in the workplace. Next, the variations in how managers perceive autistic people are presented, establishing clearly that viewing autism as a disability and autistic people as disabled is not the only placing possible. The literature has established the centrality of the line manager's role in their employees' experiences and thus the final section of this chapter explores their role in disclosure situations. This is important as it is only after someone discloses their hidden condition that managers' subjective perceptions of this objective condition can actually be surfaced, discussed and responded to. These findings lay a foundation for a more detailed analysis of what managers notice about their autistic employees and the implications this raises for managing.

6.1. Employers' knowledge

6.1.1. Who 'is' autistic?

Only seven of the nineteen respondents knew that people are born autistic, leaving everyone else not knowing either way, or in one case to believe incorrectly that people somehow acquire autism. Ten of the eleven managers and four of the eight HR specialists knew confidently that AS can be diagnosed by a clinical professional, a difference which is perhaps because managers have a closer working relationship with their employees than do the HR specialists who frequently become involved only when problematic performance issues surface. The four that did know worked in more disability specialist areas, whereas the four that did not know about these diagnosis matters had generalist roles with very limited experiences directly of autistic people. It is likely this lack of exposure and experience contributed to their lack of knowledge. Annex 19 details these responses in full.

Ten of the eleven managers were unsure if more men than women 'were' AS and they openly said their responses were pure guesses. Six of the eight HR specialists felt confident that more men than women had AS and only two guessed. In total, most respondents made educated guesses, basing these perceptions predominately upon knowing more AS men than women within their immediate family and friends. Manager L knows he is guessing here:

I would hazard an [educated] guess that it is more men than women.

Manager J adds a little more reasoning for her views that gender differences do exist, wondering if it is because autistic women have not attracted the same medical attention as autistic men:

or is it that just more boys have been diagnosed, girls have been left alone?

When managers and HR specialists were asked how many autistic people they thought might be in the population as a whole, all except one person guessed. Guesses ranged from as high as 1 in 10 to as low as 1 in 10,000 people. Just two respondents guessed anywhere close to those claimed by the best estimates available, and the only correct response was that offered confidently by the reasonable adjustment specialist in organisation 5, which stands at 1 in 100 for autistic people and 1 in 200 for AS people. Manager L says he would be guessing how many people are autistic:

I really don't know. When I first knew about P's diagnosis, I spoke to a support group to find out more about it. I thought it would be more common than 1 in 200.

It is possible he thinks there are more autistic people than are actually diagnosed because he, like every respondent, had heard of the term 'autistic spectrum' and believed that many would be placed at some point on this wide spectrum. Manager A similarly suggests that as the spectrum is very wide ranging, there must be many people who could say that they are autistic:

it's a spectrum, I'm confident there would be lots of people on spectrum.

Manager H thinks that autistic characteristics appear in everyone, not just many:

I honestly believe that EVERYONE [interviewee's emphasis] is on the scale. We all have a little bit.

Responses from both line managers and HR specialists regarding whether or not AS was becoming more common were very varied as just under half said the numbers of autistic people were increasing, two felt numbers were not changing and just over half the respondents did not know either way. Annex 19 details these responses. Those like Manager J who thought numbers were constant, thought that better clinical knowledge about autism was the most likely reason that more people know they are autistic:

same number of people have it, we are just better at finding it.

Manager H agreed, suggesting that it is because clinical knowledge has been translated into the lay context that explains why more autistic people are being identified:

It's always been there but we are discussing it more, more knowledge, raised awareness, that's what has changed.

The HR manager from organisation 1 suggests that many autistic people remain undiagnosed. Interestingly she believes this is because they do not realise they are autistic, rather than considering the possibility that they have decided not to tell their employer. This somewhat naive response indicates she may be discounting the fears autistic people might have from other people's attitudes, which would steer people away from disclosing what they think others will view as a negative condition.

we have 15,000 employees. 4 people have disclosed that I am aware of. I think there's a lot more- they go through their life not even knowing.

All the statements presented to managers and HR specialists to find out what they know and understand about AS and about autistic people are 'true', or at least accepted as such by current clinical studies. If they were all accurately informed, as well as fully convinced by this same clinical knowledge, the expectation would be they would all say confidently these statements were 'true' and no-one would respond either with 'false' or 'I would be guessing'. However, this was not the case, in that over half the aggregated responses were guesses and many of the other responses incorrect for both line managers and HR specialists. Annexes 18 and 19 show these responses in full.

6.1.2. Organisational expertise

The literature review has shown that knowledge about autism and autistic people comes from many sources, including clinical studies, the popular media as well as autobiographical accounts from autistic people talking about their working lives. These sources vary tremendously as to whether autistic people are positioned as disabled, different or skilled in some particular way, making it important to establish if employers have drawn upon these in arriving at their own knowledge and understanding.

The experiences of the HR and disability specialists from organisations 1 and 5 are next presented, important as their knowledge informs their interpretation of legislation as well as their organisation's wider diversity management and inclusion policies.

The HR Advisor [b] from organisation describes her team's response to requests from managers for support or advice:

having a medical centre on site helps a lot, they're able to give clear understanding straight away of what is needed. We can just pick up phone, they are more qualified than us.

Her colleague, HR Advisor [a], added that other managers in the organisation had requested autism awareness training to improve their knowledge of how to care for customers' autistic children in the nursery:

they [nursery staff] would like more training in autism to better know how to deal with the kids, and so need to understand more about the condition. We did look at this, but the spectrum is so large that there isn't really the training out there that would help.

The EDI specialist from the very large organisation (5) demonstrates that she has proactively sought information from external sources as well as from autistic people:

I know about autism from my involvement in my role as diversity policy advisor, mental health/ internet research, and contact with individual employees.

Seeking out information like this might be expected from someone working in a specialist role, although it is apparent that others, like Manager L, who operates as a front-line manager, also needed to consult similar and multiple sources:

my knowledge comes from the organisation, guidance from the internet and from employee herself.

Manager L reported that following Leila's disclosure she did not contact the HR or Occupational health services within her own organisation, thinking instead that external specialist support would be better:

when I first knew about her [Leila's] diagnosis, I spoke to an external support group to find out more about it. She rang up workplace wellbeing and asked if she could speak to someone with Asperger's expertise. But there wasn't anyone.

Manager H cited the media as a source of information about autism, reflecting the association noted prior by Manager J that AS is a male 'thing':

I did once read article in Sunday magazine, it was about someone's son. Also heard about others with sons, husbands.

Manager E from a smaller organisation, talked about the young autistic man she manages, saying she gained 'a lot of knowledge from my friend's autistic daughter, adding; 'the stats say autism is more prevalent in boys than girls'.

Describing her reaction to seeing AS declared on a candidate's application form, Manager B shows this is an unfamiliar situation for her:

I didn't know a lot about it, I did a little bit of research.

Manager M refers first to medical sources, also recognising the value of his experience of managing Callum, an autistic engineer:

I'm at a position of very little knowledge. From what I've read it's a medical condition. Also, I have learnt a bit since we [with Callum] spoke.

Whilst appreciating Callum is different, he also refutes the idea that these differences need labelling or adjusting for:

I didn't know anything about it [the AS condition]. I haven't done a lot of research on it. If I'm honest I'm going to take him as he is. I'll respond to him, as he is, not to some kind of written instructions. If HR had offered support I wouldn't have wanted it though. Nothing happened. It was just a personal conversation with C. I don't remember. No one has come at my door to teach me about this, if they had done I'd probably sent them away!

Talking about Sharon's arrival as a new member of staff, Manager C, from the Health Trust, recalled the accompanying note from HR, written after her interview. This note informed him that "you'll need to do a bit more work with her" but did not say what he would need to do, nor offer any explanation for the instruction. He went on to say that he sensed Sharon had some differences which may be problematic, basing his assessment upon her opening comment to him:

'it was the way she spoke, she was very forward, very direct. Basically, she said within an hour that the lighting was the wrong kind for her, and that she feels she might be off sick because of this.

He knows he needs to find out more:

that was the first day. I was like, wow, I think we need to just look at this, maybe it's an OH referral. I don't think I'd ever done a referral within an hour and a half. I was thinking, have we done this lady justice, are we right here?

Talking about his experiences with the HR department when asking for support, he recognises the lack of knowledge there:

HR didn't really have much more knowledge [about employing autistic people] than her [Sharon] in how to best support her - they would bat it back to Occupational Health.

6.1.3. Personal connections to autistic people

Manager C, who has close connections to autistic people through his experience as a mental health nurse, comments about the appropriateness of bright lights for an AS employee:

night lights aren't the greatest when you're working night shifts. I asked if we could just turn off alternate lights at night? As an organisation they said, no it's all on one system; it would be too much to rewire the whole system. I would say it's OK, just take a bulb out!

Talking about a similar adjustment needed, Manager F from organisation 5, who did not have any close connections to autistic people, also referred to structural constraints in making these adjustments. In contrast to Manager C, he appears to accept without challenge that these are simply company policy:

he just can't function if desk lighting is too bright, so wears a hat. I can't move this teams about, these are national procedures; we can't

He also suggests knowledge is poor because autism is a hidden disability, saying:

I haven't had enough day to day support, this isn't a criticism of my boss, it's a factor to do with the invisibility of the disability. It's not really there.

The invisibility manager F refers to appears throughout this thesis as a major reason that managers face challenges in managing, prompting the discussion to explore this area further.

Differences in opinion between managers C and F emerge in considering their irritation and acceptance of the organisational constraints which affect their autistic employees. However, these are slight differences and at this point it is unclear if their opinions differ purely as a result of their own connections and what they know is hard for AS people. Their responses indicate how inflexible physical workspaces and resources can be, yet these are exactly the areas that Chapter 3 and 4 have shown create difficulties for autistic people. Hence these are further explored in Chapter 8, where managers talk about how they have adapted to such structural constraints.

All the employees in this study stressed how important it was to know an autistic person well, as this provided a route to understanding the condition itself. Joseph, a technical specialist, who had not disclosed to his manager, typifies this view:

people don't know a great deal unless they know someone who is autistic.

Colin also felt that a manager's perception of autistic people would definitely be shaped through knowing friends or family, even if this was quite a distant connection or relationship:

*probably that they have friends, or know someone, or it's in the family.
Then they would have some sort of perception.*

Jack was much more definite that managers and employers would only acquire useful knowledge if these connections were through very close family:

it would HAVE [interviewee's emphasis] to be if they had a son or daughter with autism.

6.2. Managers' perceptions of autism and autistic people

When asked if they knew whether AS is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, most of the respondents knew confidently and correctly that it is, except two who said they were unsure and so could only guess; Manager M was '*guessing - yes it is [protected]*' and Manager D also guessing, adding this '*also depends on personal opinion*'.

All except organisation 3 were large organisations with extensive legal compliance training in place and so it is unsurprising that most managers knew that the Act exists to protect anyone with a disability against discrimination at entry and during employment. Manager L's comment typifies the use of organisational compliance training to equip managers with knowledge about AS/autism:

I know AS to be a disability. I know that it is under the Act. I know this through my job as a line manager. When she [employee] told me, it was I looked it up on our internal guidance and checked.

A reasonable expectation therefore is that if managers and HR specialists knew that autistic people are covered by this legislation, they would also be fairly confident in placing AS and autism as a disability. However, although the majority of the respondents were confident in saying an autistic person is disabled, six others were unsure or disagreed. As a task of this thesis is to understand the various forces operating which shape these subjective perceptions, the following section examines what the respondents actually went on to say when asked to provide further reasoning as to how they positioned autism. Annex 20 provides the responses in full.

The following section shows that their views varied considerably.

6.2.1. Autism conceptualised as a disability

Managers E and B both stated they viewed autism '*definitely as a disability*' and made no additional comments to illustrate or qualify these assessments. Other managers' comments show that whilst they also place autism as a disability, they go on to qualify this categorisation. Some compared AS with other mental health conditions, like Manager I who has a mentoring role as well as managing Leila, an autistic woman. She knows an autistic person is born autistic and also equates it as a disability, which in itself is something that cannot be cured. Her referral to a cure, whether one exists or not, indicates her belief that not being autistic would probably deliver a better outcome for that person and is symptomatic of entrenched beliefs that any disability is better avoided where possible:

disability can't be cured, depression can be cured, whereas AS will be there permanently, so AS is a disability.

Manager C also equates autism with a problematic condition. As an experienced mental health Staff Nurse, he has previously managed employees with hidden disabilities including one dyslexic and three autistic people. He took great care to establish he was not talking about his own perceptions, but those of other people who are unlikely to have as much contact and experience with autistic people.

my experience would be that AS is seen by OTHERS [interviewee's emphasis] as a learning difficulty, so not as bad as having a severe mental health issue.

Other managers also made positive comparisons between an autistic person and someone with a mental health condition. Certainly, Manager H does so, although in thinking further about this, she also recognised that whatever the diagnosis or condition, from her point of view she still needs to know what being autistic can mean in work:

in a way I would say that AS is more positive than depression because if someone has got a diagnosis, you know what they are like, and what to expect and how they are.

The talent planning specialist in organisation 5 recognises that autism, like other hidden conditions, is complex and misunderstood. Her view is mirrored in the theoretical underpinning of this study which has identified how hard it is to understand something that cannot be seen.

mental illness is severely misunderstood, I'd say that autism is treated more like a disability than depression is.

The EDI specialist in organisation 5 comments on the potential for autism and mental health conditions to be stigmatised:

mental health conditions in general and AS both have stigma. Managers would probably have the same level of anxiety in dealing with someone with depression or ASD's.

Manager H, in the same organisation, goes on to consider that once other people become aware a colleague is autistic, they might very easily label someone in a negative way. She feels perhaps it would better if they didn't know, a view which certainly accords with those who feel that differences or oddities in behaviours come from natural variations in people:

and I bet if you asked everybody in here, only people that really know him well would know he has [AS]. Others who didn't know him well would just say he's just a bit of a loner or just a bit quiet.

6.2.2. Conceptualisations become less certain

Moving on towards those managers whose comments reflected their uncertainty that they would describe autism as a disability and by implication an autistic person as disabled, Manager K's response is hesitant, suggesting this is not an automatic placing.

disability? Mmm, yes I suppose it is.

Manager J talks about the positive outcomes of disability in general before she decides where to place autism. She did not actually arrive at any particular classification, perhaps unwilling to assign what many consider a derogatory label:

some disabled people are good at doing what they want to do. It's not a philanthropic gesture. We live in a very diverse world, it would be boring if we were all the same - bring something to the party.

She hints this time that someone's contribution will depend upon those who work around that person and does not mention workplace environmental factors:

I treat AS as something to take in your stride. It's not a big issue - although some people perceive autism as a bad thing, some don't understand that there are good things that come with that.

Manager L, thinking about Pearl, an administrative officer is also reluctant to assign any classification at all, saying; *it's just a label, that's just who she is.*

Manager M had already said he was not quite sure if autism was protected under the Equality Act, fighting shy too of assigning a medical label. He believes societal

perceptions about disabilities are more likely to be negative than positive, recognising too that disability is not universally problematic:

from what I've read it's a medical condition. I hesitated to tick that box [AS is a disability]. The website says registered as a disability. But I think it's so interesting. As a nation, I worry about how we tag things like disabilities because of the perception - in this [Callum's] case it would be a terribly flawed decision. Aren't we all disabled in some way good at some things and not others?

Manager J has suggested that other peoples' perceptions are important in identifying someone as disabled. In contrast, Manager M draws upon the idea of the autistic spectrum and the accompanying variations in difficulties, as the prime reason why views could differ about what autism is, or what autistic people are like. Interestingly he does not mention that the spectrum could mean that people also vary in their strengths.

It's only a disability if it affects everyday life. I am going to have to say 'guess'. I don't know for sure. I would say no it is NOT classed as a disability. I think it is disabling for people with the condition but because the spectrum is so wide, you could be either disabled or not depending upon severity. At one end you could be disabled, at the other, not.

Already noted has been that the notion of the autistic spectrum muddies the picture as to how many people employers believe could be autistic. Here, Manager M uses the idea of the spectrum as the reason why some autistic people experience greater restrictions than others in what they can do in the workplace. This of course downplays the extent that socio-cultural forces are the prime cause of someone's disability.

Further exploration of the responses from those who said they were unsure or disagreed that AS is a disability, yielded many examples where their perceptions were shaped by the views of the autistic employee they worked with. Manager D was one of the two managers who was not at all sure if autistic people were protected by law, offering her view that whether or not someone says they are disabled is more likely to be down to their conscious choice about labelling themselves:

I'm not sure. I presume it's a protected characteristic, a significant impact on day to day life. That's why I bounce it back to an individual. It's about how the individual perceives themselves, as disabled or as diverse.

This Occupational health specialist also questions whether an autistic person will identify as disabled:

is it a disability? I don't know. I wouldn't say that people acknowledge they see themselves as disabled. It is legally but it depends on someone's perceptions?

The reasonable adjustment specialist, familiar with providing equipment and advising managers about how to accommodate disabled employees, also recognises that an autistic person may choose to set aside their status as disabled:

I think it depends on how the individual sees themselves. I would say they are diverse.

These comments indicate they recognise an autistic person can choose to declare a disability, yet at the same time regard themselves as not disabled. It is also interesting that even the Occupational Health and reasonable adjustment specialists appear to place responsibility entirely on the individual as to what state they experience, rather than other factors. The social relational underpinning of this thesis notes disability arises only when a particular combination of structural forces, alongside the condition itself, conspire to restrict someone's function, which helps to 'unpack' what is meant by disability. These views suggest it is important to consider what the person themselves thinks about their condition, although of course if they do not disclose their disability, such discussions may not even surface.

6.2.3. Autism conceptualised as difference not as disability

Some of the respondents were very clear that autism is not a disability, making references to '*difference*' and '*diversity*' as they spoke about what being autistic means to them.

The talent planning specialist feels that working in an organisation with a positive inclusion climate is why organisation 5 includes disability in its definition of diversity:

this organisation does not see AS as disability. It depends on personal opinion. I see disability as part of diversity. They are both about difference, that's what diversity is, having a diverse workforce.

The only respondent who said that they were absolutely confident that AS is *not* a disability, was the experienced EDI specialist in organisation 5. He believes that it is the impact of being autistic, or indeed having any condition, that is key in deciding how someone sees it. He knows disability is not the same as being disabled and his comment succinctly illustrates the duality of the condition:

I think it is either diversity alone or disability and diversity depending on the impact on the individual. I'd tend towards the diversity camp if we really want to explore the positives of the condition and how we can make best use of those in the workplace. But if a person identifies as disabled that could help them, their manager, and the organisation to focus on making appropriate adjustments in order to remove barriers.

As an EDI specialist he is likely to be very knowledgeable about legislation as well as have a highly nuanced understanding of what disability means. Interestingly, he believes that whether or not an individual sees themselves as disabled, there is still something about that individual which is likely to cause other people to see him or her as different.

This section closes with a view from Shelley, an administrative assistant, who when asked what she thought other people would say about someone who is autistic, paused to consider her response:

What if AS is really not a thing and it's just how some of us are? Why has it got to be said that's it's a thing that I [emphasis], not a thing like YOU [emphasis] are.

Her response very neatly highlights the paradox that perceptions of a particular condition really do depend on who is doing the labelling. This contrast in regard to perceptions as to how people are different from each other is an important theme addressed in the discussion, Chapter 9.3.

6.3. *Disclosing*

The theoretical framework has identified how significant it is in exploring managers' experiences that autistic people can keep their condition hidden, a matter that has been evidenced in the access difficulties which stemmed primarily from low disclosure rates. This prompts an exploration of what managers experienced when their autistic employees decided to disclose.

6.3.1. *Managers' views on disclosing*

Manager M was clear that Callum's decision to disclose was helpful:

in subsequent dialogues, this [his diagnosis] has helped us understand each other and settle at the reality that we aren't going to change this, so how do we keep working. If it does become a barrier what would we do? The fact that it was disclosed shows a high level of trust.

Callum disclosed to his line manager because he was the only person he trusted, feeling at the same time that it would be unlikely he will disclose to HR:

soon after my diagnosis I told my boss. This is only time I shared it at work because I felt he was a fantastic manager and was interested in supporting me. I felt comfortable. I've never told HR, so how would they know that I am an Aspie?

Manager A describes Tom's reluctance to disclose to anyone because he feared their reaction, feeling sure that Tom would not want the rest of his team to know:

he was worried what people would think. That people would look at him and judge him, and that such a big change would change their opinion of him. I still don't think that the staff know that he's got Asperger's because he doesn't want that to be the case, and the company is quite happy with that.

Adding again that HR would very much be a second choice:

there were two of us that he spoke to, myself and my Deputy Manager at the time, who he could confide in. Basically, we were the only two people he would share that information with. I had to say to him that we have to let the company know, HR need to know - he was really put out, he really didn't want that.

Charting the shift in their relationship, he shows how knowing about Tom's diagnosis meant he could respond more helpfully:

before we knew the diagnosis, it was very difficult. If I was to challenge him about his performance that would be a guaranteed argument and could get quite heated. And he would get very, very defensive towards me. That stopped a lot after the diagnosis. The conversations were much easier to have.

The interview with Manager F took place just a few weeks after Keith had disclosed, where he seems hopeful that a similar shift might make his job of managing less difficult:

fortunately, we have a diagnosis now and we can use this to put in place the right kind of support.

Considering how to tell others in Keith's team, Manager F recognises that reactions from team members might vary if they did know Keith is autistic:

not everyone will want to know [about Keith's disability]. Some don't care or aren't sympathetic, actually I hadn't considered this until now. If you are just sitting there and getting hammered by lots of phone calls, and someone else is getting twice as much time off the phones, then you might not be very sympathetic. You might understand, or you might feel aggrieved that they are getting more time off the phones. I don't want to sound flippant, but it just is easier for people to have sympathy [with a physical disability]

Manager M was the only person who disagreed that anyone else, including HR, needed to know that someone is autistic. He is very mindful of making assumptions about any individual's preference, cautioning:

we need to be careful very of pigeonholing people- it's an individual decision [to disclose].

He was also anxious that if his employee's condition was more widely known about, others would judge him on the basis of negative or stereotypical perceptions:

I think that others' perception is that if you put him in line management he wouldn't do well. But he did an absolutely fantastic job - very engaging and encouraging, focused on team development. Went out with suppliers talking and engaging with people, all of that stuff. SOME [interviewees' emphasis] people would think he wouldn't be good at this. Stereotypes can be dangerous and limit people's career, there is a risk of this openness.

Manager B indicates that because neither she and others in the company do not know much about autism or AS, she thinks a more appropriate strategy would be to equate it to learning difficulties:

We didn't say it was Asperger's, we just said there will be learning difficulties. Because if you say Asperger's, because we don't know enough about that, and if somebody was to ask a lot of questions you didn't have the answers for. But when you just say a learning difficulty, they accept it.

6.3.2. Should I disclose? - autistic employees' perspective

About half of the AS employees interviewed mentioned in detail the tensions and difficulties they had experienced in disclosing. Whilst their views about disclosure are not this study's prime focus, they do provide some insight into implications for line managers and HR specialists and so are presented here.

Like the HR manager (p146), who speculated there were probably more working there than had disclosed, Callum is an engineer who is fairly sure that in his company:

I am sure there are 100's of people here. I have no idea how many have heard of it. Or would recognise they have it or admit it.

He agrees that some people may not know they are autistic but unlike the HR Manager recognises that being autistic may be something they are not proud of. He uses the word 'admit', perhaps to convey his belief that autistic people will be very wary of telling other people about their condition, because they know that many will regard it as a disability and by implication that they are a disabled person. Joseph too, expresses his concerns about disclosing:

I've never discussed [being AS] with anyone, don't want to admit I've got anything, even to my wife. Should I announce it to the whole office? But, I'd be worried I'd be labelled.

Rather than requesting headphones or desk partitions to help manage noise disruption, he has '*tried to cope with it without asking. In fact, I've tried to get on with it and just man up*'.

Keith, who worked in organisation 5 shares this certainty that there are other autistic colleagues working around him. Again, he feels that admitting he is autistic will carry a negative or unhelpful label.

I don't know anyone else with AS in this workplace. I see some people from a distance that I think are probably Asperger's. Disclosure is key, although I have not always adhered to this.

Jack, older and very recently diagnosed, is very wary:

I declared on basic things like [physical disability] and was marked down for a promotion. God knows what they would say if I disclose autism. Senior managers don't want to know. I think it is because we have an ageing workforce and old attitudes. At the moment, you can't even

disclose it. Everything goes against you when you do. At some point. I'll have to tell more people and come out a little bit. And it's a big step, yes, I think it must be like when gays come out.

Still weighing up whether to disclose, Jack wonders if once he discloses others might understand the difficulties that particular situations cause him:

it would be lovely to walk outside for people to know, they can then make slight allowances, like meetings not going on for 2 hours where I lose concentration or do the important things in the first hour.

Steve, who is an administrative officer working in organisation 5, talks about disclosure in general, not his own. He thinks that disclosing needs to be tied to a point in time where he is feeling comfortable and secure in being able to perform the job:

once you have got the job and feet under the table, then maybe have a quiet discussion with your line manager.

The RA specialist who is experienced in working with AS employees and applicants, suggests the opposite, in that a reason an autistic person might not disclose is if they are doing well:

some people don't want to know [they are AS], after all they have managed quite nicely.

Once disclosed, another choice autistic people have is whether they will share this with their colleagues. Colin explains that the reaction he expects to get from his colleagues might stop him talking about being autistic:

on the surface you look perfectly normal, you seem OK to me, maybe a bit funny.

Gavin also indicates the less than sympathetic response that the invisible nature of AS can create:

in the first years of my diagnosis, I do not feel that my issues were handled sympathetically. Perhaps as I could still walk and talk management thought I was making "mountains out of molehills".

When employees were asked how they would describe autism to other people, the media featured prominently in most of their accounts. Of the nine employees interviewed and the two employees who completed questionnaires, all except one individual mentioned that they thought other people would know about AS and autism from the fictional characters they had seen in the popular media. Every autistic employee mentioned the power that stereotypes have in creating negative perceptions of AS and autism. For example Shelley, an AS woman, and Joe, an AS man, cited 'The Undateables', a TV programme showing on Channel 4 at the time of the study. 'Rainman', a film first shown in 1988 that many of the respondents would likely have seen or heard about, was also mentioned. Keith, the call centre agent noted these stereotypes would be '*mixed and inaccurate, patronising in the extreme*'. Gavin also remarked how Sheldon, the main character in The Big Bang Theory, created a negative stereotype:

I don't know whether or not Sheldon's character has helped or hindered people with an ASD, but I think he is both a role model and a stereotype. His behaviour is 'classic' Asperger's; and gives the impression that Aspies are rude, arrogant, self-absorbed, socially inept and, perhaps worst of all, very hard to be friends with.

AS employees rated the knowledge of the HR representatives in their own organisations as low and inaccurate, adding that this was also the case for their colleagues. Many of them talked about their desire to raise organisational awareness in order to dispel the myths and stereotypes surrounding AS. Steve recognises his own experiences position him well to help autistic people experiencing difficulties:

I am a person that would benefit others in working with diversity. I am very sympathetic and know how to approach people with different conditions and see that they are troubled. I know it is best not to assume anything.

Jack, from the same large organisation, also feels he can share his knowledge usefully. This time, he shows how important it will be to target this directly at policy makers and those who are managing autistic people. He knows that the type of information that is needed has not yet reached his particular area of the organisation and feels it would help other autistic employees, who otherwise will continue to worry about being stigmatised.

I would love to get the senior bosses round in here, and tell them, I wouldn't be scared to do that and discuss it properly... And then they can think about it.

For most of the autistic employees, their line manager was usually the first person to know of their diagnosis and no one mentioned disclosing to their colleagues. Manager A thinks that perhaps if they did know, his life as a manager would be somewhat easier:

but it's much easier to deal with in that case, not to defend him, but both sides are easier to deal with.

All these employees work for large organisations with robust inclusion and diversity policies, yet still believe that they would be stigmatised or met with an unsupportive response from others in the organisation. These findings illustrate the tensions they face as they 'weigh up' the various pros and cons of disclosing

6.4. Conclusion and summary of Chapter findings

Drawing on responses from managers, HR specialists and autistic employees within six organisations of varying size and sector, these findings confirm that what employers know about autistic people and about autism is inaccurate and frequently based upon guesswork. Being unsure whether people are born autistic, how many people are affected, particularly women, are all facets of knowledge which are poorly understood. Neither do respondents appear to fully understand the links between mental health and AS. Whilst they know that AS is a spectrum condition, they are uncertain if autistic differences are shared to some extent by the rest of the neurotypical population, some likening the idea that it is purely the broad nature of the spectrum itself that creates the differences in the restrictions autistic people experience in the workplace.

All the line managers said their knowledge came primarily from their experiences of managing AS employees, who they felt were more knowledgeable about their condition than the HR specialists or occupational health departments to whom they referred for advice and support. These observations reinforce the need for managers to make individual considerations. Managing an autistic person or knowing autistic people outside work for many managers is their main source of knowledge about AS and so naturally this influences their perceptions about the condition of autism. Some of those with personal connections expressed strong views about how organisational systems were not geared up to handle autistic people. This finding reinforces the significance of the socio-cultural forces this investigation is concerned with and which the following chapters explore in more detail. No managers or HR specialists mentioned the media as a source of their knowledge, contrasting sharply with almost all the AS employees who cited how powerful the media can be. This was not an area of focus in this study and so conclusions cannot be drawn about why this was the case.

Another important finding is that some respondents seemed unaware of the extent that powerful workplace socio-cultural forces shape the choices many autistic people make not to disclose, indicating strongly that the anxieties identified in the literature review are operating. This ignorance of socio-cultural forces appears throughout the following Chapters and is a major theme explored further in the discussion. The finding that managers believe that someone with a disability can alter their own perceptions as to whether they are disabled is very important, as it signifies some naivety in their understanding of what it is like to be autistic.

The majority of respondents appeared confident in their responses that AS is a disability protected by legislation, although as the chapter unfolded they readily talked about autism beyond the legal definitions of disability. Probing deeper established that the managers in particular, rather than HR, are more positive and closer to conceptualising autistic people not as disabled but simply as different. Consistent with the interpretivist stance (Berger and Luckman 1991), these managers construct their own views of what they think about disability, in effect challenging the knowledge delivered by internal compliance training and external legislation which places autism firmly as a disability.

This chapter has established that perceptions of AS people are closer to difference than disability and are shaped by competing sources of knowledge, some naivety and a degree of ignorance, many of which are consequential of the misunderstandings about autism in the employment context. It has also shown that HR specialists and managers requires a much better understanding of autism, a finding eloquently summarised by Keith:

I feel for him [my manager] - he has a team of people and I'm the most work right now. It's unfair for me to expect him to learn and understand about AS, cos' it's complex, but it is necessary for him to do his job to understand certain key points.

The following chapter contributes further by providing empirical evidence of what managers notice about their autistic employees and how they differ from neurotypicals, seeking to reveal what they regard to be strengths. It returns to the conceptual framework to identify how socio- cultural forces have shaped their perceptions.

Chapter 7. Line managers' conceptualisations of autistic people

7.1. Introduction

Chapter 6 has shown that what managers and HR specialists know and think about autism varies considerably, extending in many cases well beyond its status in law as a disability. By implication this also creates the potential that their perceptions of autistic employees will vary. Therefore, exploring further what these are and how they are shaped is important to advance knowledge about autistic people in the workplace. This chapter provides empirical evidence of the abilities and the problematic areas which managers say distinguishes AS employees from others in their teams working in similar roles. These accounts lie at the heart of this thesis and build upon existing knowledge of the employment experiences of autistic people by adding their managers' perspective.

7.2. Presenting the data from the prompt cards

Chapter 5.4.4 has discussed why the prompt cards were used to help managers recall their experiences with their autistic employees, showing how these were derived in Annex 8. The following section explains how the extensive data these cards generated about managers' perceptions and experiences were then clustered, in preference to presenting the data from each of the 26 cards on a one by one basis.

7.2.1. Cluster- 'work ethic'

The literature review has identified that autistic people are methodical, conscientious, dependable, punctual, good attenders (Hagner and Cooney 2005), willing to take on repetitive tasks (Howlin, Alcock and Burkin 2005; Morris, Begel and Weidemann 2015) and focused (Happe and Frith 2006). It is reasonable to consider that employers would consider these qualities as work ethic in that they reflect the skills and attributes that employers have consistently valued (Oliver and Turnton 1982; Rosenberg et al 2012; Branine 2008). Work ethic could also be viewed as the ability to persevere with tasks that are boring, repetitive or disliked by others, characteristics which are highlighted in clinical and employment accounts (Hendricks and Wehman 2009; Hillier et al, 2007; Howlin, Alcock and Burkin 2005; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015). Many cards were placed in this cluster, reflecting the expansiveness of the meaning accorded to work ethic identified in the literature.

7.2.2. Cluster- 'attention to detail'

Attention to detail is a straightforward definition of the capacity for fine detail identified in the literature (Shah and Frith 1993). Other cards were used to help managers recall behaviours related to this capacity for detail, reflecting clinical and employment studies which have noted these attributes revolve around preferences for detailed, routine and

repetitive work (Happe and Frith 2006; Howlin, Alcock and Burkin 2005; Morris, Begel and Weidermann 2015).

7.2.3. Cluster - 'IQ'

In discussing intelligence, the label 'IQ' is used as a shorthand for cognitive intelligence (Wechsler 1958), an attribute which clinical studies have recognised as one which distinguishes AS individuals from the neurotypical population (Assouline, Foley and Dockery 2012; Chiang, Tsai and Cheung 2014). Employment studies show autistic people do well in software engineering roles where they handle complex systems or data. Making the assumption that these roles need intelligent people to perform them led to the inclusion of these phrases in this cluster. The clinical accounts showing exceptional abilities of gifted autistic savants, often who are experts in a discipline (Happe and Vital 2009; Sloboda 1985; Humphrey 1999), also provided phrases in this cluster.

7.2.4. Cluster - 'honesty and directness'

Autistic people have been described as trustworthy, with tendencies to take information at face value and speak literally (Parr and Hunter 2014), attributes which were translated into phrases concerned with trusting people, not lying, being honest. Detachment from emotional considerations and use of pure logic to make decisions, described as "*circumspect reasoning bias*" (Dvash 2014:389; Brosnan, Lewton and Ashwin 2016:2117), was used to indicate detachment from people, objectivity and being disinterested in matters of organisational politics which are not connected to the job itself.

7.2.5. Cluster - inflexibility

Autistic people have been shown to experience problems when experiencing change and new situations (Wing 1981), finding it more difficult than neurotypical people to handle change (Hendricks and Wehman 2009) and often experiencing high levels of anxiety. Both these phrases were used in this cluster.

7.2.6. Cluster - 'hyper' sensitivities

A very well-recognised characteristic of autistic people is the high sensitivities they have to sensory stimuli (Smith and Sharp 2013). This creates anxiety and stress, words used in this cluster.

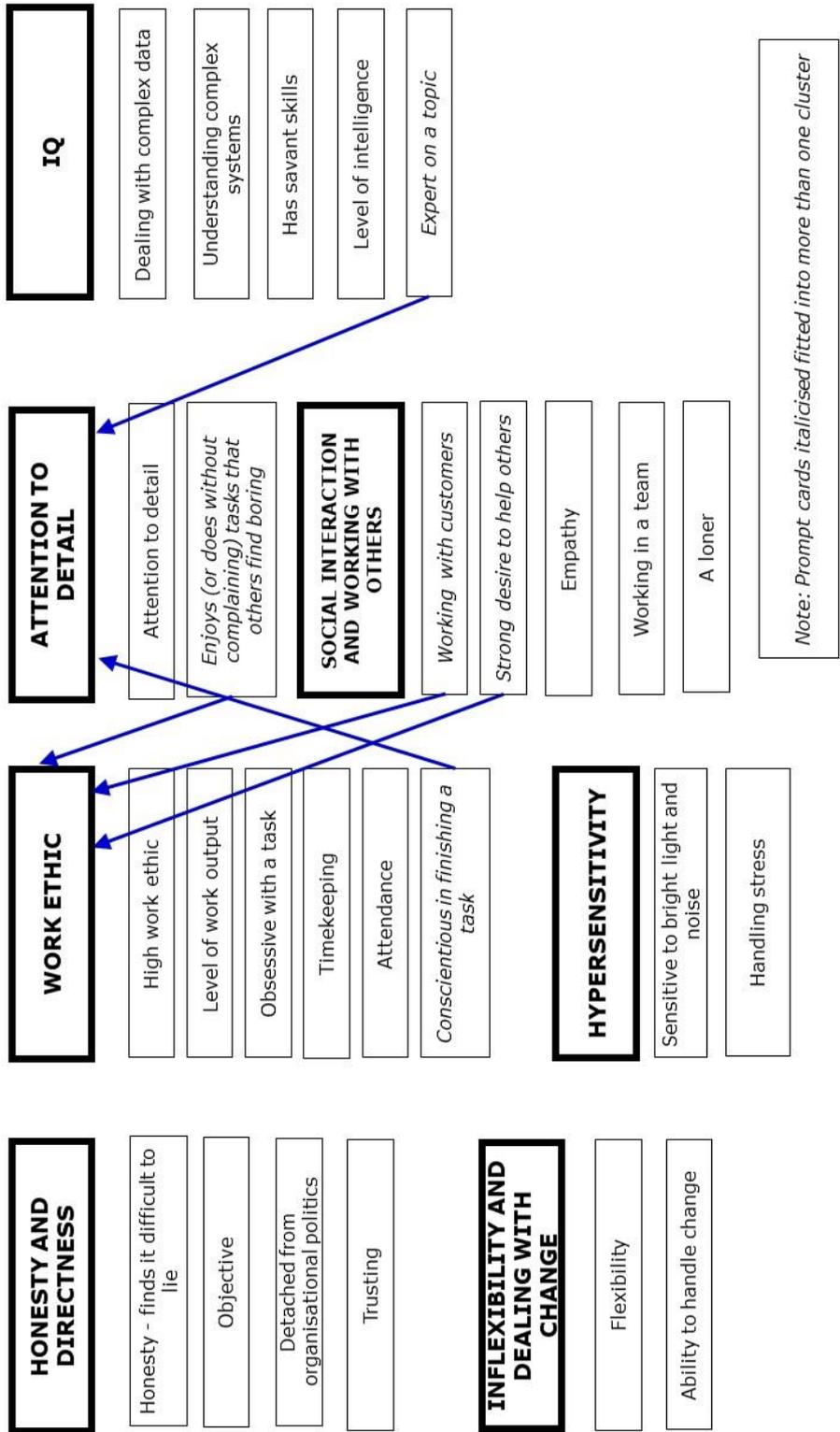
7.2.7. Cluster – 'social interaction'

Autistic people do differ from neurotypicals in the ways they experience and engage in social interaction with others. Clinicians have described these characteristics as '*socially aloof, difficulty in understanding personal space; reading facial expressions and body language*' (Wing 1981). Further examples exist related to workplace contexts where autistic people find it hard to 'get jokes' (Richards 2015; Morris, Begel and Weidermann

2015), or grasp social rules (Haertl et al 2013; Muller et al 2003; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004). These observations were translated onto the cards using words like 'customer', 'working in a team' and 'being a loner', to give a sense of the day to day situations they are likely to be facing and which their managers have responsibilities for.

Figure 7.1 below shows how all 26 cards were clustered. The arrows indicate where cards have overlapped classifications, reflective of my subjective interpretation of the information gleaned from clinical and employment literature. For example, enjoying tasks that other people complain about could feasibly be interpreted either as work ethic or a liking for routine and detailed work.

Figure 7-1 Clustering the prompt cards



7.3. Work ethic

The first of the seven sub-sections begin with the findings that managers reported in relation to 'work ethic', an attribute that employers have consistently valued highly.

7.3.1. Working on unpopular tasks

Almost every manager said that their autistic employees were willing to perform tasks that others did not want to do, often because they were boring or repetitive. For example, Manager I described how Leila willingly volunteered to sort out basic filing, adding her view that this was somewhat unusual for a highly skilled finance specialist:

I could tell her to do filing and she wouldn't mind. She did a really boring data hunting job for me the other day.

Manager K, running a team of administrators, gave a similar example of Joe, who readily volunteered for the routine job of organising the car park rota for her team:

he just wants to be busy and will take anything on. He helps me out quite a lot. For example, he sorted out the car park rota for me.

Managers also reported examples of their autistic employees' willingness to take on tasks which others in the team might see as unattractive. Manager A, running a busy restaurant, knows he can rely on Tom to handle unpleasant situations:

sometimes there are accidents in the restaurant, children's sickness or worse. There is a procedure that a member of staff goes and tidies that up. And that kind of thing he [Tom] would literally be absolutely fine. Doesn't matter what the situation was or how bad that was. He would just say yes OK. Not many people would like to do that.

He went on to say that Tom also volunteered to take on the responsibility for carrying out internal environmental audits. Although organisation 1's main focus is upon hotel and leisure services, these audits are strategically important as they enable the company to demonstrate their environmental credentials. Also significant is that the role had previously been performed by a more qualified professional:

he takes on other roles that are sometimes a little bit under-rated. He audits this site and other sites, a very structured audit. Practices that have to be right.

Manager D, managing a team delivering learning services, taking calls in an open plan office, spoke about her relief that Lara volunteered to sort out a task that she had not yet allocated to anyone in the team. Her assumption is that no one would readily want to take on this fairly mundane task:

we had a new box to put the keys in for the filing cabinets. It takes ages to number all the cabinets and the keys and then write on hooks. She [Lara] took her time over it, enjoyed doing it, but erm ...I would have ended up doing it because I knew I couldn't give it to another person. It's those jobs that don't belong to anybody.

From a line manager's perspective, having someone in the team who seems willing to perform unpopular, unexciting or routine tasks like these can be extremely useful. This can be the case whether these tasks are viewed as strategically important or as menial. Themes emerged of line managers feeling pleased that tasks are finished and in some cases relief that they do not have to ask or coerce other team members to perform these unpopular tasks. Whether managers assign their autistic staff to these jobs or whether they volunteer, there will be potential that autistic people will be impacted adversely. Employee centred accounts have discussed poor employment experiences but have not identified that a possible reason for these outcomes is that managers make their decisions because they know that autistic people have these preferences. As exclusionary outcomes have in part driven this thesis, this is an area explored further in the discussion.

Several examples were reported of employees who were willing to put in effort over and above what might be reasonably expected in comparison to others in the team. In talking about her two AS employees, Manager B, running the cleaning and housekeeping team, commends them both and is pleasantly surprised:

there is one thing I would say about [Sol and Joanne] is that they are willing to do anything you say. We obviously have quite a few young ones here that do all the bed making. Their body language is – yes, I want to do it for you because I want to please you.

Manager E of a technical team spoke in general terms about Xavier noting that:

he was very happy with whatever we wanted him to do.

Manager J talks about Tim, a member of her data processing team who took on additional responsibilities when the current manager was away. She recognises that

taking two roles on at the same time is a high workload but makes no distinction as to why the other team members might not have done the same. As she did not suggest that other people were not capable or simply unwilling to take on these additional demands, her observation raises the concern that when there is additional work to be done, it will be Tim that is her first choice.

he's a model employee, does the work of 2 people. He is obsessive with finishing a task. He covered for an absent manager, carried on doing the data handler as well as the management job. He had taken on 2 roles during the summer holidays. He just 'sucked it up'.

Manager H appreciates Colin's attitude to his work, feeling confident that this will benefit her colleague when he moves to a new role created by organisational restructuring:

will do what you ask him to do. Others would say I don't want to do that. His mindset is that if he's been asked to do something then he will do. He usually never says no. I have said to his new manager that she won't have any trouble with him - he is low maintenance and you will get a large proportion of work out of him.

In talking about how hard someone works, one manager uses the term 'model employee' and the other 'low maintenance', examples which raise again the potential for adverse impact upon autistic employees.

7.3.2. Working hard

Turning now to the observations made in regard to the effort managers saw their employees making, rather than those concerning the nature of the actual tasks they do. Manager K, running a team of administrative officers, describes how she regards Joe's obsession with finishing a task:

if he's given a task to do he has to do it, and it has to get done. He will do it until he has finished it.

Manager I was delighted by the speed and accuracy Leila showed when asked to deliver a report in a very tight timescale:

she gave a very good breakdown of the legislation, a really good for and against argument. She did it in a day and a half. And people from that team were incredibly impressed by how and how quickly she had turned it around; others in the same cohort would take days if not weeks.

Trainees normally don't turn it out as such a polished finished product. They usually tinker with it; there would be lots of drafts.

Simply keeping focused upon a task and not wanting to socialise with his teammates were the reasons Manager H rated Colin as being better than the others that worked in the same team:

He's always sat on own when having lunch. In a way this is better, they all want to go on breaks together. Emails go back and forth when they are supposed to be on calls, in a way you get more work out of the person. He doesn't chat to anyone.

In the same organisation, Manager L who manages another administrative team, is also pleased about Pearl's abilities:

it's just the fact that a lot of it is really strong, the speed, accuracy and quality that comes back is above her pay grade.

Manager M talks about the way Callum approaches his engineering role, noting the positive outcomes of being very focused upon particular tasks or activities:

I don't think he is obsessive. But I think he is very focused on trying to complete and move on. It's not overly obsessive, just very focused. The strengths side of obsession. I think it's a strength -his ability to really focus and compartmentalise stuff, finishing it before moving on to next one is high. This is really big, he doesn't let himself get distracted. He is one of the people I go to when I have a complex task that I need to know that it will get done.

Manager F also acknowledged how hard Keith tries to do well:

I watch K and I genuinely believe he is performing at his optimum level. He's not somebody who is swinging the lead, he is doing his best. He is clearly motivated, he really wants to help people.

When asked later about Keith's specific strengths:

He is clearly motivated, he really wants to help people

Drawing on employers' views that work ethic often equates to turning up on time, it became clear that the majority of managers viewed this as an area where their autistic employees were exemplary. For example, Manager F needs people to be reliable like Keith, who has to clock on and off at specific shift times, to ensure the smooth running of the call centre:

Keith has a high work ethic. Attendance is a real positive. He always comes in plenty of time and is not desperate to leave. We are really highly monitored on our breaks. He can forget and come back too early or too late. This makes him anxious.

Manager K also regards Joe's timekeeping as a strength:

his timekeeping is spot on, I can set my clock by him. Attendance is good when he is well. It's keeping him well, he struggles keeping working a full week.

The drive to come to work was observed by some line managers as over and above that they might expect from the rest of their team. The overall view appeared to be that AS employees would go out of their way to arrive and stay at work, even in really difficult circumstances. Manager A reflects that walking this distance to work is not something many people would consider reasonable and even more so in bad weather:

he lived about roughly about 7 or 8 miles away and he walked to work every day and he walked back for a week at night, bearing in mind we were finished at half 10, 11 o'clock. He never even batted an eyelid. We offered for him to stay here but he didn't want that. He was quite happy, still always on time, never missed a part of his shift. Would never go home early. But we had half the staff team say, I'm not coming. You couldn't really argue with that because the weather was so bad.

Being ill or having an accident is another situation where managers might expect some of their employees will decide not to come to work, even if they could, particularly in this organisation which provides generous sick leave. Manager C notes that on his Ward:

I would say this area is better than average, he would come into work by hook or by crook. He got injured, tripped over and scraped all his arm. Whereas I probably wouldn't have expected somebody to come in with that, he would be saying sorry I didn't manage to finish my shift yesterday!

He also acknowledges that personality as well as being autistic can influence someone's behaviour:

it's really difficult to pick out what's his personality and what's not. They are so close together. If it doesn't impact on your job then I don't care as long as you are doing positive things, I'll support you. That's how I manage.

Manager K from organisation 5 also wonders if working hard is connected to someone's personality:

He is very eager to please. Maybe a personality thing.

Manager A talked about how much he appreciated Tom's reliability:

you could always guarantee that he would never abandon a job. If the first table was at 5pm and the last table was at 10pm then between 5 and 10 he was at the door in the restaurant, never anywhere else.

Here, the meaning distilled from Manager A's description of Tom is taken as positive, in that he appears to be valuing this consistency. An alternative interpretation though is that Tom is rigid and inflexible in his routines as he goes about work, a rather more negative valuation. It is a good example of the choices open in interpreting anyone's particular behaviours (whether someone is autistic or not), justifying the need for this investigation to adopt an interpretivist position. Inflexibility is unlikely to be a characteristic that employers will warm to, thus exploring beyond the surface of what it can stand for indicates potential for wider use of these kinds of capabilities.

Employees' accounts also appear to support their managers' observations about working hard. Joe says:

the main reason is that I'm quite hard on myself. I don't need my manager to pick me up when I do something wrong- I will do this myself! I expect standards from myself to be higher than anyone else. Targets I set personally for myself are different to what the line manager might set. Mine would be 150% - half as much again at least!

Jack was clear that being autistic is a disability, but at the same time that his abilities in some areas are not restricted, especially when he has a job that 'suits'.

if I get a job that suits my disabilities.... it can be a tough job..., but if it runs along with my disabilities, I can 'knock doors out of windows'. Nobody can catch me. I'm always much higher because I just set away and the time flies.

Jack was referring to a previous role in the Health and Safety function which involved monitoring, checking and recording in a very methodical way.

Manager I is recognising Leila's keenness to come to work often has to be understood alongside her attendance problems:

very high work ethic. Timekeeping impeccable. She always finishes what's she's started. She is very technically gifted, but it is keeping her at work that is the issue, her attendance. She definitely has her own timetable, she gets in and gets home very early, would not come in at weekends as she is trying hard to keep herself well.

Manager G agrees that Shelley:

does want to come to work. But she doesn't always make it - she was offered a large incentive to come in at the weekend, so she volunteered but then rang in and said you know what, I'm not coming in.

Some of these managers have noticed there are times when their employees deliberately regulated their attendance, suggesting this was probably because they knew that unless they did self-manage in this way, their chances of being involved in capability procedures would increase.

7.3.3. Summary

All except one manager thought their autistic employees had a strong work ethic compared to others performing comparable roles in their teams. Working hard, achieving high output levels and taking on unpopular tasks are all potential strengths from a manager's perspective, either directly through determined efforts at a particular task, *or* simply by keeping focused when others want to socialise. No one said outright or wondered if there might be any connection between working hard and taking on unpopular tasks with being autistic, raising the potential for unintentional exploitation. Deciding whether these effects come directly from being autistic, which are of course an aspect of the person, or if they come from the particular set up and culture of the

working environment is likely to be very difficult for managers. It also indicates that no matter what role an employee has or where they work, managers might notice similar effects, but be unable or indeed unwilling to change someone's approach to work.

When talking about the difficulties in keeping someone well and at work, none of the managers mentioned job role, working relationships or the physical working environment as possible contributory factors, despite employees' accounts suggesting otherwise. This is important as it shows how easy it is for managers to ignore these socio-cultural factors in their understanding of when and how someone becomes disabled. In many of the cases where an autistic employee was so willing to work hard, their manager responded by seeking to protect them, a theme which the discussion addresses.

7.4. *Attention to Detail*

This is a particularly interesting area to explore, as although the literature review did not place a strong affinity for detail as a skill valued by employers, it does represent a way of working which appears in many competency frameworks.

7.4.1. *Attention to detail is a strength*

Talking about Pearl's abilities with spreadsheets, Manager L sees a positive outcome in that she can support his own weaknesses in this area. He also notes she is working in a role well below her intellectual capabilities:

she is excellent. She will question things, more so than other people. I might let it go but she [P] is really good at picking up on the detail. It is good when she picks me up on this. Some of the errors she spots in work are those that I would expect a higher-grade person to pick up.

Manager D notes Aaron's capacity for detail:

his attention to detail meant that he would happily work for a long time on powerpoint slides. He would not be easily distracted. Another staff member might go off remit, whereas he [A] had a dedication to this purpose and would not get distracted from this.

She sees this as a positive outcome but at the same time knew that '*his attention to detail would overtake the timescale*', by which she meant it would take him longer than she expected.

Colin's preference for detail is used when he completes timesheets, which Manager H knows is a task that her other team members will not give the same rigorous attention:

it is precise to the minute [filling in timesheets] whereas some of my team will round it up. So, 7 hrs and 23 mins, not 7 hours 20 mins.

Another example came from Manager E who decided to ask Xavier, her IT trainee, to work on a highly detailed and repetitive coding task:

we were all like oh no, who's going to have to do that? He did it all and he did it pretty quickly. If we had any heavily manual but quite repetitive work which might take someone a few hours to do, then we would pass it to him.

Manager M notes Callum's affinity for detail, echoing the findings of the previous section which showed how autistic people are often very comfortable with routine work that others do not want to do. He also identifies that this may be because other people simply cannot work in this way, being a very scarce skill:

a rare skill is to look at these [charts] and pick out some pedantic detail [text and font] but more than that - he [Callum] will know that people won't make sense of the data and so will change it. I think there are only 3 or 4 I've known that have that level of intuition. Where a task is both technically complex but also has really critical attention to detail, lots of people get bored in the process but he [C] just blows through it. I actually think he thrives on it, the process of working through complex things. He excels, where others just get lost by the detail.

When asked if these same abilities applied to *qualitative* data, his reply that "yes I think it does, but less" opens the possibility for exploring further these detailed capacities outside roles with heavy data components.

Many of the roles being discussed in this study were those of an administrative nature and the only role with some managerial elements was Tom's. His manager [A] describes Tom's strengths:

attention to detail was very high. He would have the lists of jobs that I'd given him. Then there would be a few bullet points from him as to when it was done, how it was done, if there were any issues, that type of thing. If there was anything I needed to know. You don't get that from his level of management very often.

7.4.2. Attention to detail can be problematic

Manager K hints at her uncertainty about whether checking for detail is always a helpful characteristic, expressing concern about the additional time it takes Joe to complete tasks. She does not mention that allowing more time is an accommodation prescribed by legislation, which is an interesting omission:

J is a data handler. He probably does work that doesn't really add any value to the task in hand but it's important for him to do it. And in some ways, that's a really good thing. The weakness here is that it will take extra time to check all the unnecessary detail.

Manager C, managing a ward in the Health Trust, notes that it can be useful to have someone, like Derek, who constantly checks their own work, again hinting this could become problematic. He did not say what these drawbacks might be, perhaps as he feels this is also one of his own strengths.

he'd have to go and sometimes check on his work to make sure he's done something. Probably he had done it, but that attention to detail and wanting to do things 100% correctly all the time as well became sometimes a bit of an obsession. There were times when this was strength - making sure you've done something. If you're checking up on yourself it's not a negative thing, it's a positive thing - I do it as well.

Recognising that Pearl, just like any employee, neurodiverse or neurotypical, has preferences for particular aspects of their role, Manager L notes:

yeah, definitely. It [attention to detail] can be quite the highest on the team, if she (P) is engaged on the task. Attention to detail can be very high on some tasks or very low on others.

Joseph, a technical specialist, reflects that his expertise is rated as extremely high, linking this to capacity for detail:

a senior official went to a seminar and found out that others have said that mine is the most detailed knowledge they have seen.

7.4.3. Summary

All except one of the 13 managers reported that attention to detail was a characteristic that they frequently associated with their AS employees, in comparison with others in their teams. This finding supports clinical and employment studies which have placed affinity for detail as a major aspect of being autistic (Happe 1999; Hagner and Cooney 2005). Managers from different organisational sectors see this as a valuable skill in both high and low skilled roles, sometimes also outside the stereotypical roles that have been associated with autistic capabilities. Affinity with detail can also be viewed as problematical, suggesting that these variations appear to be strongly connected to the nature of the role and tasks rather than to the environment. Again, the fact that none of the managers mentioned any connections between being AS and having good attention to detail is consistent with the lack of knowledge this thesis aims to address.

7.5. IQ

IQ is not a skill as such but given that employers are likely to be seeking people with high rather than lower IQ for many roles where skills shortages apply, this short section of the findings explores what managers think about this area of their autistic employees' capacities.

7.5.1. Overqualified or under employed?

Working in organisation 5 at a time where new technologies designed to handle vast amount of complex data are being introduced at pace, Manager H notices Colin has:

higher IQ than the rest of the team definitely. I would say he knows a lot about a lot of things. We have some complex systems and data and can always get his head around this, whereas some of the others would struggle.

In the same organisation and talking about similar systems, Manager J says Tim has:

higher IQ than the rest of the team. Dealing with complex systems and data is like 'food and drink' to him.

Thinking about Pearl's abilities in dealing with complex data, Manager L knows:

she can deal with complex systems, but with the caveat that she is engaged with it. She is definitely the highest IQ in the team. She will be able to pick up anomalies within the data. She will then take these

anomalies, do some extra research with it and suggest reasons for it. She will look behind the result, not just take it at face value.

It is the role of a line manager to build engagement in their employees, at least according to contemporary management theories, suggesting Manager L is wise to reflect that someone's level of engagement is very likely to affect how they perform in any role.

Both these managers report extremely positive outcomes of high IQs when talking about employees who worked in highly skilled roles. Leila is a finance specialist and Callum an engineer:

Leila has a higher IQ than the rest of the team and can definitely deal with complex systems and data. She is exceptional (I'd say gifted); works more quickly, makes less mistakes, generates higher levels of output than all of her more experienced colleagues, and has a more creative approach to solving problems.

Manager M places his assessment in the context of employing many highly qualified and experienced staff:

Callum has skills in connecting complex data – an ability to draw connections that other people just don't. This is definitely strength. Right now, I've got a really bright lady in my team, she's doing similar work. She gets it. But, he is at a completely different level. This comes naturally to him, doesn't come naturally to others- they are at 80/20, with him it's 95/5. It's the extra piece, it's natural, not being asked to do it.

Manager E also notes that making these kinds of assessments requires her to take account of who she is making comparisons with:

I'm working with clever people so that's a hard question to answer. I mean he was certainly able enough to work in this office and most of my staff are degree qualified. All are quite clever, so yes, his IQ must be high.

As does Manager C:

I've a wide range of people in the team, some degree qualified people. Seems a bright guy to me but I don't think he is particularly above or below

Describing Joe as 'clever', Manager K suggests that it is not so much intelligence that is key here, but the ability to keep focused in the face of needing to understand a new task or idea:

He's clever. Good to be able to ask him to find out about a particular IT topic, and he will spend a few hours working out to do it. He is intelligent. I wouldn't say he is particularly strong at complex systems or complex data but will get to the bottom of these. He has a need to understand, it drives him to find out what is going on and why.

A more problematic picture is painted by Manager G, who notes that Shelley finds it hard to pick up basic aspects of the role in comparison to the rest of her team.

in the context of this job I have to say lower [IQ], purely and simply because of the amount of assistance required for what would be perceived others as a basic task. She definitely cannot handle complex systems or complex data.

She finds it is hard to decide what exactly shapes Shelley's way of working:

some of that [difficulty] I think is just her [Shelley] and sometimes I have to gauge when that won't be appropriate. Since her diagnosis I probably over-think this to a degree.

Probing further about the changes she had seen in Shelley after her diagnosis, Manager G indicates that knowing Shelley is autistic casts a different light on these difficulties, citing the organisation's lack of knowledge as a major cause:

over 4 years, it [Shelley's absence record] has been pretty bad. We have had to discount some of this as we have caused it. We promised that we would have someone sitting with her showing her the new platforms. But because the support couldn't arrive at the allotted time, she was absent for a week. That's recently been discounted under the Equality Act. No one's fault, it's a training issue. Advice from HR was that we have to acknowledge that this was our fault, we have let her down.

It may be that Shelley does not pick things up as easily as others. However, it may also be the case that someone who has been denied support simply because neither she nor the organisation knew she is autistic, has contributed to her poor absence record and compounded these difficulties.

7.5.2. Utilisation of skills and abilities

Not referring to IQ specifically, but explaining how Tom sought out additional responsibilities connected to his interests in environmental matters, Manager A comments:

I doubt that there will ever be anybody at his level, his grade of management, that would be able to take on that additional level of responsibility and still be a manager in a restaurant. He has an absolute passion for environmental management systems... you could joke about it and say it was almost an obsession because he is so into it that he writes a leaflet off his own back, gains a lot of information. He does one every month, and he's done that for 7 years. He's got a copy of every single one. It's amazing.

The Ward Manager also sees a similar ability in Derek, which he could harness:

once he's been in a topic or a situation he will go off and read up on it, go and find out a lot of information about it. He's able to retain that information and bring it back to me and tell me something I didn't know about it. Being an expert is a positive thing because I might not know something and then they go, well I've read this.

7.5.3. Summary

The majority of the managers rated all except one of their autistic employees as at least as clever, or having a higher IQ, than those in the rest of their teams. They conceptualised this as a strength in relation to abilities in handling complex data and systems. Managers also referred to individuals who talked about topics related to their special interests, using words like '*gifted*', '*exceptional*' and '*amazing*' to describe how their employees have unusual abilities which stand out from the crowd. Callum is seen not just as being better, but somehow having different abilities which his manager has interpreted as having an '*extra piece*'. These employees are special by virtue of the facts that others '*just don't*' have them, appearing analogous to the abilities first noted by Asperger (1944) that underpin this investigation. Either way, managers seem to be finding these exceptional abilities hard to understand, perhaps as they may not have yet come across it in the workplace.

The themes emerging so far are of managers noticing problem areas and strengths, reflecting the dualities that characterise autistic people. Tentative evidence is emerging that autistic people can do well in managerial roles and those roles where high attention to qualitative not just numerical detail is needed. These findings have also raised the potential for exploitation which could be deliberate or unintentional.

7.6. Honesty and Directness

7.6.1. Talking directly

The findings in this area begin with a light-hearted example where Manager D notices Lara's direct style:

there was just that honesty. In the office environment A and L didn't struggle in any way to say what they thought. For example, L asked a colleague; "How old are you?" Her colleague said I'm 47, and L said; "yes you look 47!"

Manager C views Derek's directness in communication not just as honest, but also as a strength:

I suppose in some respects he is very honest to patients. It's a good skill. You can be very honest and truthful and not very good. And you can be honest and put it in a very empathic way. I would say D will do that with patient.

A situation directly related to the benefits of being honest and direct occurred where Manager M described what happened when he, as the Director of the Engineering Division, had to deal with an important customer who had raised complaints about a late running project. Having spoken to various people in the organisation, it became clear that many of the responses to these customers issues had been vague and 'skirted around' what exactly had gone wrong. In contrast, when Callum had been involved with this customer:

I know what I'm going to get. It's complete trust and no uncertainty. It's also valuable, where I can use it in a constructive way. He will just go and deliver the message. There are times when his approach is what I need, like when I need someone to be strong, he will just be very strong. For customer response purposes he is straight to the point, matter of fact. I always get a very direct answer - a customer will think this is very powerful. I think this is a strength. If he delivers a message like it is, it is sometimes extremely successful, but one might argue that this is not very empathetic

He was clear that being able to trust what Callum said is absolutely key as well as knowing he can convey difficult messages to the customer unambiguously. His assessment of this skill downplays the importance of empathy, a soft skill which has been repeatedly cited as a valuable organisational competence, making it apparent that

managers' interpretations of their autistic employees' social interactions vary greatly. However, he also acknowledges Callum's style could create problems for other people:

for the most part as he is always right it's fine, people embrace it. He is focused, direct. He is in no way at all offensive about this. This is where a sense of where he gets people on side. There are times where his directness will work for some people and not for others.

Manager D thought that the kind of conversations Aaron had with team-mates could potentially create interest as well as annoyance:

A was highly intelligent; he had read a lot of information about his special interest (cars) and could easily remember and recall this information. He was quite happy to impart it whether people were interested or not! It's not necessarily the topic; it's how he talked about the topic.

Manager J viewed this as mostly difficult and worried:

Tim has special interests to the point of boring you senseless; it's his only topic of conversations outside of work.

Designing websites, Gavin recognises that his level of detail may risk irritating his colleagues:

one of my obsessions is the correct use of spelling, grammar and punctuation. A growing role in my work in future will be to editorially check jobs before they are uploaded. I am hopeful that this obsession will come in handy there; conversely, I am fearful that disputes will arise as I insist on doing things in a way that others regard as wrong or against our style guide

On the whole being honest and direct is a characteristic that managers view as beneficial and somewhat refreshing. Sometimes it impacts upon the team, for example Manager K notes Joe's interactions with others can be problematic:

he can be blunt, direct. He will say it how he sees it, in his own language, won't massage their ego.

PI: Any times where this has been helpful in work?

[Longish pause]. "No."

PI: Any times where this has been a problem?

Yes. It ended up with an argument with a higher-grade staff member.

Similarly, Manager J has had issues with Tim which were compounded by his colleagues' lack of understanding:

sending emails that were too blunt and upset one member of staff. It did cause me a real problem. I don't think that the recipient will ever really understand - they don't know about the condition.

7.6.2. Challenging people, practices, process and policy

In many teams it is unusual for employees to openly criticise how their managers work. However, rather than be disconcerted by Tom's directness, Manager A views this opinion as helpful:

I find [his honesty] quite refreshing sometimes. Lots of people have opinions and you never know what they are. Whereas, Tom feels comfortable enough to say it. And not kind of blot that out or bottle it up.

As he talks, he reflects that being interviewed is; *'making me think now- we all make judgements about people but often we wait and see what will happen before speaking'*.

Manager D is also appreciative, knowing she can rely on Lara's opinion whether it was a matter of her own management style or some other aspect of working life.

I always liked the fact that L would always give me a straight answer. She would be quick to say you've done that wrong, or just pointing it out.

Moving away from personal criticisms, which of course can also be seen as objective and helpful observations depending on who provides it, managers felt their autistic employees were somewhat more prepared than their team mates to question policy and practice decisions. Manager L reported how beneficial it was to him personally to have Pearl in his team, as she was usually willing to criticise or point out problems with a particular decision or process:

her directness is brilliant. I was taken aback the first few times. Often she will pick holes in what I've done - which feels a bit... erm.. Well, I got quite defensive! But now I know then it's water off a duck's back. It definitely keeps me on my toes!

Manager K comments cheerfully that:

Joe has no fear of asking anyone a question; he would not bother if it was a CEO or an admin assistant.

Manager C spoke about how he expected his staff to change their demeanour, in that "when a senior manager comes onto the ward you have to behave in a different way. He went on to talk about what happened when they arrived to announce an unpopular policy change:

I would say that [Sharon] didn't care who was there. She would be quite open and honest. Policy changed so that we stopped giving employees free transport home after a shift. Everybody who didn't have a car was pretty disgruntled because there's no bus services, so they were going to have to get their own way to work. S went; "right who has made this decision? I'm having them!"

Manager C is well aware this policy change will create practical and financial problems for everyone who has to work late shifts, causing him to question:

why shouldn't an employee go to the person who made that decision and say; "I'm disgruntled, I'm not happy?" Everybody was being disgruntled and not happy with me and the other managers.

Manager G also notices this directness:

The Board Director visited and walked round the office. Shelley just stopped her and said we didn't want to go on phones, why did you put us on phones, what's happening to all our other work? She just came straight out with it. She will call a spade a spade. Not a shovel.

Being willing to comment upon or question decisions other people avoided was also noticed in less controversial scenarios. Manager D reported positive outcomes when Aaron asked a question at a team meeting:

I remember thinking thank god for 'A' because I really wanted somebody to ask that!

Manager E was also relieved that Xavier broke an awkward silence:

one time our MD came down from Head office to talk to us and take us out for lunch. The MD asked if anyone had any questions. A said; "yes, have YOU [interviewees emphasis] enjoyed your day?" Everybody laughed, and the MD replied that yes, he had.

7.6.3. Detachment from organisational politics - a strength?

Another area where honesty can come into play is where people talk about their immediate 'office politics'. Managers felt their AS employees were unlikely to be interested in political manoeuvrings, probably because they perceived them as games or as largely irrelevant to their role. For example, Manager I thinks that Leila would find office politics:

an alien concept. She would know what I meant but she wouldn't understand the need for it or get involved.

Manager H describes how Colin insulated himself from the conversations surrounding someone's contentious promotion, contrasting with the rest of his team, who speculated at length about this:

he's not interested in it, not party to gossip and rumours -there's a lot of that in here. He is blinkered to it all, just gets on with it. C was there in these conversations, but he never involved himself in it. Whereas the others just went on and on about it for ages. You couldn't draw him into it.

Callum's detachment and insulation from office politics was observed frequently enough for Manager M to note it as a different quality from other people in the organisation that he had managed or dealt with in similar roles:

there's no recognition that this stuff [politics] goes on. There's no engagement, no interest. But it won't affect how he does his job.

Probing if this had ever been problematic, he acknowledges this detachment could limit the quality of the more 'political' conversations which have been frequently viewed as a necessary part of a manager's role.

there are times when I might be trying to tap into his intellect to help me deal with some of the political issues. So, I might say to him: if you were having a conversation with the Director of x, what would you do? When I think and reflect about this, I just don't get the same reaction and interest. He will go with it, but it's just not the same level of interest.

Jack, working as an administrative officer reinforced how difficult he finds office politics:

I can't play these mind games. If you are too straight people can use this against you. I've learnt this.

7.6.4. Summary

All except two of the line managers across the six organisations surveyed cited the tendency to speak directly, express their opinions, challenge decisions or raise complaints that others were afraid or embarrassed to, as positive qualities of their autistic employees. They also noted that sometimes these could be problematic, in particular someone's bluntness in style, a finding reinforcing the potential for those managing and working with autistic employees to make positive or negative constructions from conversations and actions. This duality appears to be shaped by organisational expectations, particularly in regard to implicit norms of workplace behaviour which are socially constructed in nature. An interesting theme emerging from this section is of the characteristics of the managers themselves, in that they show that in general they welcomed rather than resisted challenges and criticisms.

7.7. Inflexibility and dealing with change

In most organisations, there are very few roles in which tasks, processes, locations, customer requirements and technologies remain the same for any length of time. This prompts an exploration of what managers notice about how their autistic employees are affected by ongoing changes.

7.7.1. Being flexible – differing conceptualisations

Manager A described how Tom's preference for routine helped the smooth running of the restaurant:

when the very last people in the restaurant were seated, he would walk to the end of the bar, pick the phone up for 10 seconds, put the phone back down then come and see me and tell me the last table was in. He did that every day, exactly the same thing. Routine and repetition is strength in my opinion. Especially in what we do. In running restaurants, you need somebody to be able to perform at the same level all the time and regardless of whether you've had the best or the worst day before you came to work, the level of professionalism has to be exactly the same. And you got that, without a doubt.

He is clear that in the unpredictable environment of a busy restaurant, it is key for food to be delivered against predetermined standards of service. In other words, simply getting things done to time and quality is important, rather than solely about using customer interaction skills, which are a more usual interpretation of what constitutes customer service. Tom's preferences for keeping things the same can also negatively impact customer satisfaction:

If the restaurant table is booked at 8 o'clock, then that person has to sit down at 8 o'clock. It has to be absolutely to the minute. If it goes over then he will get very, very frustrated.

He notes that Tom can be inflexible and not able to see sides of a customer satisfaction issue:

he would only see the side the customer has relayed. His reaction to that sometimes was quite blunt, quite harsh to a member of his staff. He would go to that member of staff and hold them responsible for that guest having a bad experience and not see both sides.

and how hard it is for Tom to change his mind:

he wouldn't go back to an individual that he had maybe been quite harsh to or over-stepped the line with. He wouldn't go back and retract that comment. When he says it he's said it and that's that.

In organisation 5, Manager H describes the productivity benefits of Colin's approach to taking breaks:

if you say your break is 15 mins, C will only have 15 mins, whereas others who are grown adults will be late, constantly going on unscheduled breaks, even though these are at their discretion. In this respect, he is a model employee.

She also knows Colin finds it hard to apply discretion when formulating a response to a customer:

if a standard reply doesn't fit, we have to make a non-standard one. C would change the standard reply, take it apart and put it back, but then it didn't flow right. If you tell him how to word it then he will do, but can't do it himself if it doesn't fit the standards. He would struggle with this and find it hard to imagine what it would be like for a customer reading

And that the team can find this problematic:

C can be obsessive with finishing a task. We have a team meeting every day. C really doesn't like it if he is in the middle of a case and is reluctant to leave it. I have to tell him to come, because there are things I need to tell the team.

In the Health Trust, Derek repeats phrases to calm down a distressed patient on the ward. His Manager (A) translates this as a strength, interestingly thinking that other staff would find it much more difficult to do:

D was really persistent but really calm. He was like a record, saying the same thing over and over again. D was really good, we both sat with the patient at the bottom of the ward and D turned it into a bit of a relaxed conversation, and he just used his skills. Just keeping really calm, saying the same thing.

The following example summarises the tensions that Derek's capacity to use routine brings:

the same thing being said to you all the time can be quite frustrating. But again, it's that kind of skill and keeping the professionalism at a good level.

Sharon, a healthcare assistant also works for Manager C. He describes how she reacts to being asked to take a patient for a meal, noting how her manner exacerbates distress for the patient and causes him difficulties too:

when I questioned her, she just said: but you told me to. You told me I needed to get everybody for lunch.

Some managers reported that their employees found it difficult when they have to change what they do. Manager L describes how Leila struggles:

change is something she struggles with. She likes that consistency - knowing what she is doing on that day. She can be flexible if she knows what the task is, then quite happy to jump in at short notice to get that task done.

Manager G sees Shelley react similarly when organisational restructuring changed call handling processes:

S is definitely not flexible. She doesn't handle change well. I called her in Tuesday morning, (she gets 24 hours' notice of changes before others in the team do on account of her condition). The work of this team was being redeployed elsewhere and her choice was either to stay with me doing something different which she wouldn't like, or move to another job on the phones which she loves. She said; "no I'm not doing this. It's about what I like to do, let me do that".

7.7.2. Employees' perspective

The two engineers working for organisation 6 expressed varying degrees of inflexibility to organisational requests for locational flexibility and hot-desking. Callum does not find it difficult to be flexible and comply with these demands:

we've got agile working now, for example- you shall not sit in same chair every day. I'm not wedded to routines, am not as disconcerted by changes to other routines as other people may be that are on the spectrum.

His manager agrees:

he is COMPLETELY [interviewee's emphasis] flexible. There is no argument - he will say; "I'll move whatever I need to move." I'm trying to reflect on this. I think he has a way of doing things which is set. I don't think I'm in a position to know whether he would bend or be rigid. So, it would be wrong to comment one way or another.

In this highly skilled engineering role involving data analysis, much of the way the work is done is not visible to the line manager and many options for gathering and interpreting the data exist. Arguably, the role allows discretion for a skilled employee to develop particular approaches to the output required. It also seems clear that Manager M recognises he actually may not have sufficient information to be confident in his assessment, showing clearly his reflexive capacities (Archer 2003).

In complete contrast, Martin finds having to work at different sites unpleasant, indicating his colleagues ['they'] may find his own liking for sameness somewhat puzzling. His response points to the significance of workplace norms:

I hate making changed arrangements. I turn up at the same site, same time every day. Only twice this year have I not been at work at same time. They accept it, but don't quite understand it.

Both are highly skilled engineers working in similar environments, yet they experience very different responses to being asked to change their day-to-day working arrangements. These responses further complicate the choices managers have in the adjustments the law requires them to make.

7.7.3. Summary

All the managers seem clear their autistic employees have a preference for tasks, processes and working environments to remain the same. Managers conceptualise this as both a strength and as problematic depending upon the role, and that it can also be apparent in the same person. In the main though, the lack of flexibility represents challenges for managers. Managers' responses are more fully explored in Chapter 8 against a context where the pursuit of organisational flexibility has been cited as key for competitive advantage and well documented as a factor in the exclusionary employment outcomes for AS people.

7.8. Hypersensitivities

7.8.1. Accommodating discomfort

Manager L says he knows that Pearl needs accommodations:

I know that we have reasonable adjustments in place to minimize the amount of noise and light. I know she needs some protection from noise.

For Joe, it is not the lights, but the noise from other people chatting as they work in the open plan office that is uncomfortable. Manager K says:

he isn't sensitive to lights. But is sensitive to more than one voice, when too many people talking. One on one he doesn't have a problem.

Manager F knows Keith finds noise in the call centre even more difficult:

he's definitely sensitive to noise. He can't cope because of the noise.

Manager D talks about the environment where Aaron and Lara work:

A was a very sensitive person, he would jump at sudden noise, and so was L. Their reactions were palpable. 'A' absolutely struggled, and as much as we tried to make reasonable adjustments, e.g. giving headphones and quiet space, it was all the other stuff that was going on in the office, that he just couldn't cope with, paranoid, the anxiety, this was quite disabling.

These effects experienced by Lara and Aaron are very much social in that they are so visible to Manager D, who recognises that exposure to bright lights, noisy call centres or open plan offices is disabling for them. Significantly, she notes it is problematic because of the noise *and* from the social interaction.

However, it was interesting that none of the managers referred to workplaces that they thought were *too* bright or noisy, indicating they are taking for granted the assumption that these environments suit everyone working there.

7.9. Social interaction and working with others

Managers' accounts so far have established that what they notice about their employees' interactions with colleagues, customers and themselves, shapes their views as to whether or not these represent strengths. The very visible hypersensitivities discussed prior indicate that interacting with others in dedicated team meetings and in more general day-to-day working environments is also problematic. Additionally, the high valuations placed upon soft skills, particular teamworking and empathy are requirements representing a particular kind of socio-cultural imposition, prompting the need to explore what happens when AS employees work in teams.

7.9.1. Working and collaborating in teams

Asking Manager F if he thinks Keith 'fits in' with the team:

he definitely wants to work in a team. K is not a loner within this team, far from it.

Keith gives some reasons why this is hard, describing how the tension between wanting to be part of the team versus the discomfort this causes is hugely distressing:

Within family friends, friends, I feel alien. I responded incorrectly at a joke, and I still cringe about that. I cut off social niceties - social interaction is superfluous to doing the job. When I come into work I can shut down. I don't want to be rude, am trying to accommodate it, focusing on getting prepared for the next call. Sometimes it's horrible. I want to be a team member, a valued member of the team. But I just can't handle the team in this environment. I don't see the need for social unless it's a team activity.

Manager D is also very clear that Lara doesn't want to be isolated in any way:

She certainly wasn't a loner though. Within the team I think she was quite well liked.

Manager E talks about how Xavier's trusting nature and openness helped him 'gel' with the team. To her, he is the complete opposite of being a loner, seeking determinedly to join in:

X did not have difficulty in making friends. He might not have had close friends, but everyone was very protective of him; he would often start a conversation with people. At team meetings, we always did a round table. X would happily and openly share what he had been doing at the weekend. Maybe not close bonds, but certainly work relationships were ok.

Manager J says it is the way the team is set up which affects whether Tim can feel a part of it, particularly how noisy the team are in their day to day talking and working.

he is not a loner. He wants to be part of the team, as long as not too many people are talking at once.

Jack, working as an administrative officer usually in an open plan office, shows how his own contribution to the team is affected by the expectations that others have about *how* he takes part, rather than *what* he says:

in a meeting, I don't keep eye contact, so they think I'm not concentrating. Or not listening or being awkward. I can repeat back word for word, what they have said, as I tend to process thing by looking away.

Managers expanded upon what they meant by teamwork, which is interesting as it exposes the different valuations they can make. For example, Manager H discussing how

Colin fits in with the rest of his team, has decided it is very natural to reach out to others and want to mix:

he is definitely a loner and doesn't seem to have any friends in work. Sometimes he mixes with them if we are in a group, but he doesn't choose to mix. He is part of the team. But I wouldn't say he is the best at team working. He waits for people to come to him, not a natural team worker

In this administrative role, Colin's performance is measured primarily by the number of requests processed. Revisiting her earlier discussion of work ethic, she acknowledges how his focus on work, the fact he shies away from office gossip and sits alone at lunch time, are all beneficial to her, unlike many of the others in the team:

in a way, this is better...you get more work out of the person.

Similarly, Manager I suggests that it is normal in this workplace for someone to be 'comradely', 'chummy' and 'friendly'.

she is a loner. The team take a long time to get used to L because of the way she interacts in class - she definitely has a strong desire to help in the case team. Will help other trainees if they have another issue with a particular subject but not in a sort of comradely way. It's about getting the job done and passing on knowledge. Not really a chummy, friendly way

Manager L notes his implicit preference for Pearl to engage in the team in a particular manner, labelling this way as 'nice':

when she is in a chatty mood, she chats a lot, that's nice to have that engagement. But more often than not she doesn't want to chat, she gets on with work. I don't see that as a problem.

Manager J uses the word 'normal' in describing what conversations she observes taking place in the working environment:

good at working within a team in terms of understanding the role that they and others play. But not good at working in a team in terms of day-to-day interactions. Not engaging really in normal conversations and chit chat. That kind of thing that may or not add value to the job in hand, but I think is largely beneficial.

These examples suggest managers are indicating their employees may feel more comfortable when working at some distance from the team. They also appear to be assessing that a 'natural' way of working in a team exists, recognising too that other team members may not easily warm to some of these 'ways' of interacting, observations which highlight how powerful these norms can be.

Manager I notices that Leila, a finance specialist working in a project team, finds it hard to chat as she works alongside her colleagues, because it is *'hard to differentiate between people's voices, it was too much. She finds it very distressing.* Her manager (I) recognises she is experiencing significant discomfort from being so sensitised to other people talking, describing the consequences for Leila when she has to leave the team meeting:

she misses out on the social interaction between the trainees. She doesn't mix with them in the same 'way'. It's a big part of their learning, as they are all at the same stages.

Leila is a member of a project team working in a professional knowledge-based setting requiring collaboration within the team. Her manager is astute enough to know this will compromise her progress, in that talking with colleagues is such an important part of learning, particularly at an early stage in someone's career development.

in Global Business Services across the world, it's very difficult to work out what the process should be, it's not an absolute figure. One person does not make a decision like this, it's the team, what options are available, what methods can we use to determine what the price should be in the global market.

7.9.2. Being empathetic

All except one of the managers stated they noticed that their autistic employees found it hard to show empathy appropriately. Manager D is aware that Aaron:

had some difficulty in reading body language or facial expressions, would often interrupt me when I was talking to clients.

Manager J notices that Tim can be rigid in his approach to handling different people and different situations:

he doesn't always think, he will approach every situation the same way, not taking into account how the recipient will perceive the message.

Manager G talks about how Shelley dealt with a customer, highlighting that her lack of 'mirroring' steered the conversation in a demonstrably unprofessional way:

on the phones, her knowledge and answers are very good. Her delivery is poor...sometimes swearing. She doesn't 'mirror' - what you see is what you get. She was on phone to the IT guy on the Helpdesk and said: "I don't know what you are talking about." If that was me on the other end it would really put my back up!

Manager C has to explain to Sharon why she needed to be empathetic to a self-harm patient. He was surprised that she didn't seem to know how necessary this is given the caring element in her role working with mental health patients:

she would struggle with the notion of 'self-harm'. I had to explain to her why people do this [self-harm], but she couldn't understand why somebody felt the need to cut their arms. This is difficult when you're working with that kind of client [patient], really challenging.

Later that day Sharon dealt effectively with another patient. This time, her manager's account illustrates that he can see her level of emotional detachment represents strength in her role:

we had an incident here where somebody had cut their arms. At one point a staff member walked in and walked back out again as they couldn't deal with that situation. Whereas S walked straight in and dealt with the situation... she didn't care that there was a lot of blood everywhere. S just went in and said; "what do you want me to do? Tell me what to do and I'll do it." That is a strength in dealing with an emergency. Sometimes you need those people to be able to do that; to have those skills to just get on with it.

In the example above, empathy is less about competence in influence and persuasion, as might be required in higher skilled and management type roles and rather more about simply dealing with an emergency.

7.9.3. Being 'social'

Manager A describes an occasion which Tom found difficult:

his role meant that all of a sudden, he needed to have contact with Deputy General Managers and General Managers. They go for meals every night when they are at work. That kind of thing - to go and work for a day and then to socialise where you go out for dinner before you go back to your villa for 3 days - he found that very, very difficult.

He describes how this 'socialising' caused Tom so much anxiety that he requested time off to recover, finding it 'hard to adjust'.

Acknowledging that different ways of working and behaviours exist in regard to working in teams and summarising how she thinks others might regard them, the reasonable adjustment specialist from organisation 5 comments:

some of the behaviours we have seen, can be quite time consuming in getting support in place - they find the behaviours difficult and don't want to do team meetings. They might be happy with their own world, but we can't expect them to be the same. It's about valuing difference, seeing the person, seeing the strengths. If that person doesn't want to interact with the team, this makes it difficult. That person can sometimes be seen as the difficult member of the team.

Here, she values differences but also equates these to difficulties, analogous to the way that disability and impairment have been inevitably linked under medicalised approaches to disability. Such views indicate it is hard even for someone who is likely to be very aware of the disabling effects of the working environment, to view disability as entirely positive. For those without this practical experience and informed knowledge it is even less likely they make positive connections as they may not notice the restrictions imposed by socio-cultural forces which so many working environments entail.

7.9.4. Employees' perspective

Martin feels that his colleagues think he might not be listening to them:

others may see me as aloof. My face goes to sleep sometimes. That might be disconcerting for others, they think I might not be expressing anything

Gavin is sure that other people think badly of him, even when this is not his intention:

I'm often proactively apologising for any potential rudeness, particularly with people I've just met because I'm forever saying / doing things that I think is OK, but other people think are not appropriate, and means I can often behave inappropriately because I haven't worked out that the way I've acted can be seen as rude or offensive.

In talking about how he would not want a role requiring 'people skills', Colin feels:

I would have to know how to handle difficult phone calls etc, but I might not be very helpful, not say or do the right things.

and what he sees as limiting career progression:

one of the things that put me off promotion is having to deal with other people and telling them off. Sometimes that can be a very difficult thing to do. I could do a higher- grade job if I was checking people's work, but I would still have to deal with team leaders and still have to know how to handle difficult phone calls. I might not be very helpful, not say, or do the right things.

Joseph is clear that it is being autistic that is problematic for him in work, appearing resigned about the inevitability of having to deal with the ways that other people operate most of the time:

the biggest drawback for someone with AS, more than anything else is the interaction with people, I avoid it, I like a little bit. I never sit down and have a proper deep meaningful conversation. This is the thing that limits me most in the workplace - interpersonal interaction with colleagues as well as social interaction.

He adds his views about why a managerial role would not be a good fit:

I couldn't manage people. In all my time here - 26 years - I only ever had 1 person to manage and he left! I say what I think, I'm too direct. I probably go a bit too far in the way I am with people. Maybe management would not be my forte.

When asked about his direct style in relation to the competency framework in the context of the annual performance management process, Joseph replies:

it's all about you having to tell your manager how good you are. You are supposed to 'blow your own trumpet'. I'm not good at doing this; others are extremely good at 'gilding the lily'. This system allows people to bullshit an awful lot. It's all about knowing the buzzwords, if you know these it's easy to fill in the [PCDR] form.

With similar views about the approach organisation 5 takes to performance reviews built around competencies, Jack comments about the evidence he is supposed to supply:

I've done the job there's no complaints. I've finished it, I do more than most people. I get a task and just do it why should that not be enough proof? I struggle with talking about different people; I say this and that... I sometimes feel like am an alien.

Offering views as to why career progression into roles they feel will be heavily people focused, Shaun describes other people as '*needlessly complex and 'extremely draining*'. Callum adds that as far as empathy goes, this is '*relatively limited compared with most people, therefore AS people tend not to pick up on a number of social cues and may appear to be disconnected in certain situations. Or say something completely unrelated to what everyone is thinking*'. Perhaps both are leaping to the assumption that managerial roles would actually be much more uncomfortable than their own roles, which like many in this study, demand a significant amount of non-discretionary people interaction. However, it may also be the case that managerial or more senior roles actually do have more discretion as to the approach they can take to people intensive conversations, or greater choice about the type of environment they work in. In this respect, managerial roles would perhaps be less demanding than autistic people may have considered.

7.9.5. Summary

In different organisations and talking about people working in skilled and semi-skilled roles, many managers noticed that their employees found working life was made difficult by the demands placed upon them by the more 'social' aspects of their job. Rather than the task itself, these were viewed as peripheral areas such as chit-chat, gossip and team meetings. Some managers said their employees struggled to join in with their teams although further probing established that it was the amount and the type of socialising that was problematic rather than not wanting to socialise at all. These social matters are separate from the actual effects of noise and light, yet still create unpleasant and difficult effects for autistic people and compromise their working experiences. Of the eleven employees who participated in this study, nine also commented social interactions can be very troubling, views which reinforced their managers' perceptions.

Some managers were surprised that their employees wanted to be closely involved with their teams and highlighted this differed from what they had thought about autistic people in general. These observations counter stereotypical knowledge promulgated by the media and apparent in clinical literature that autistic people will frequently seek to avoid other people in working contexts, even though this section has also established they often find this genuinely difficult.

The effects upon managers stem from the tensions created from wanting to accommodate someone's need for a quiet working space, which is an adjustment the law requires them to make. At the same time, they have to keep their employees connected with their teams and are acutely aware that this day to day 'chat' can be valuable for learning, working and engagement purposes. An emerging theme, explored further in the discussion, is the silence of legislation on matters which involve team involvement, perhaps as they are, like autism itself, somewhat less tangible in nature.

7.10. *Valuations of flexibility and social skills*

Having looked at manager's accounts drawn from their day to day working with autistic people, the thesis turns now to the views of the HR specialists from organisations 1 and 5. Managers have been clear that social interaction and flexibility are areas where their autistic employees differ significantly from neurotypical people, offering interpretations in these areas that autistic people can have strengths or problematic disabilities. The following section explores these observations from the perspective of those working with HRM policies, important as managers must operate within structural constraints often imposed from HRM policies and interpreted through HR people.

The HR manager in organisation 1 talks about how ingrained the requirement for flexibility is, permeating the way people are assessed and contractual matters:

flexibility is in our notion of skill – it's part of our selection process. we ask all candidates about flexibility – they have to be flexible. Zero hrs work well for us, people like to retain some connection, I knew they have had some bad press. We have policy of moving people up and around internally, more than one job here- may have 2 or 3 jobs part time, 3 separate roles- That why we retain a lot of roles, they like the variety.

Her additional assumption is that people will 'like' this flexibility, a comment indicative of those who laud the temporal flexibility associated with zero hours contracts. Her assumptions about variety appear predicated on what people 'like', which Section 7.6 has shown is likely to be far less the case for AS employees.

Organisation 5 is massively affected by increasing digitisation of services. The EDI specialist makes it clear this affects many routine clerical roles, which have:

reduced very significantly over the past few years as more of the system moves to digital. In addition, many administrative jobs are becoming telephone jobs. People are increasingly expected to be flexible.

The talent planning specialists talks about geographical mobility being important to careers:

less a skill but still important in terms of what's valued, and that's willingness to be mobile/move around geographically - that enables individual with more career choices than if they stay put. We offer flexibility - in return we value those who are flexible. In an ideal world we would want more flexibility to move between roles, being multi- skilled or at least willing to retrain to move to where the work is.

The literature review drew attention to the requirement in almost all roles for some level of social skills and the ability to 'fit in' with the team. Thus, the views of the HR specialists are next presented to show this is an increasing requirement in many roles in their organisation. In organisation 1, this translates into changing expectations for the ways that staff should interact with customers (who in this organisation are referred to as guests) the HR advisor[b]:

as the years have gone on the guests have said that they'd like more interaction with housekeeping staff - so we want people to engage as much as possible with the guests.

Her colleague, HR advisor [a] describes how HR became involved with an employee when childcare sessions were introduced for guests' children:

elements of job role have changed. She didn't seem to be able to judge emotions or react appropriately to different kids' emotions- couldn't pick up if child was distressed or unhappy or not engaging. This resulted in guest complaints - the fun element was missing. So, we did performance audit that highlighted some issues, session wasn't being run as well as it could have been, we look for eye contact, tidy uniform etc all kinds of things.

Discussing a job change following performance problems for another autistic employee, the HR manager looked to find him a less customer facing role:

Its guest facing - he couldn't cope with pressure of asking questions - we are looking for a more back of house role.

Returning to organisation 5, the EDI specialist emphasises technical people will also need soft skills:

It's high pressured and technical – but there's also a forward-facing aspect to the role - meeting face-to-face with the customer - It's not for everyone.

The talent planning specialist emphasised that more attention will be paid to behaviours, referring to these as 'soft' skills:

People can't rest on delivery alone anymore, which will one day prevent people getting to top levels with technical skills and nothing else. The digital agenda means automating more of our processes, but still need to manage customer interactions more effectively. Communication also-including networking. Finally, digital skills and being savvy with Yammer/social media.

Talking about the requirements across cleaning, childcare, catering, call centres and technical specialisms, two very different organisations are indicating that their demands for the 'softer' skills associated with customer-facing work, as well as locational and functional flexibility, have all increased. An observation at this point is that both areas have also been associated with adverse impacts on workforces in general, either through demanding 'emotion work' (Bolton and Boyd 2003:291; Hochschild 1983), or in worsening terms of employment (Rubery, Kaiser and Grimshaw 2016). Significantly, these areas have been highlighted in the literature review as disproportionately problematic for AS people than for neurotypicals. Thus, the constructions managers make of their AS employees' capacities in these areas are important to identify, as well as thinking about why they draw these interpretations. As these are often linked to the competency frameworks in their organisations, the following section briefly explores what managers felt about applying these.

Completing the competency based HRM performance documentation, Manager J reflects upon Tim's liking for routine:

it does concern me that [organisation 5] expects its workforce to be flexible. An expectation that you are somebody of worth if you are willing

to be flexible and change roles, retrain and do things different - it is seen as the way to progress your career.

She spoke further about the link between the experiences designated within career pathways, being flexible and being autistic:

in discussing career pathways targeted at disabled people, there is an insistence upon the pathway developing leadership and management capabilities. The 'but' though, is that a lot of what's in there will require lots of flexibility, lots of working with new groups of people, working outside comfort zone and certainly developing new projects. These requirements (or opportunities) will cause shedloads more stress to someone on the spectrum.

Questioning the recruitment processes which aim to select people with strong interpersonal skills, the HR advisor[b] in organisation 1 reflects as she speaks:

We recruit for behaviours, so maybe there's a contradiction with our recruitment process. I wonder if our process would make it more difficult [for someone] with AS to get through?

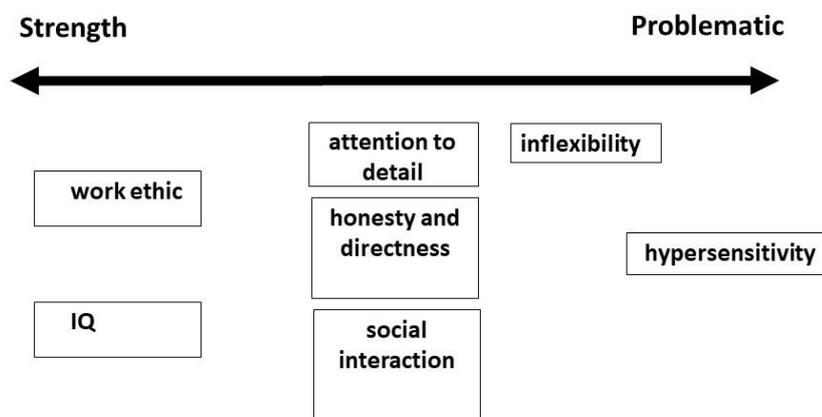
In both organisations these respondents appear to be wondering, possibly for the first time, if their processes, documentation and ways of articulating skills and behaviours are entirely appropriate for AS people in both recruitment and performance assessments. These observations merited a closer examination of the descriptors specifying effective and ineffective behaviours within organisation 5's competency framework, prompting the discussion to consider the impact these documents have upon how managers utilise the skills of their autistic employees. Chapter 5 has noted the ethical concerns in reproducing in full the framework and the relevant extracts only are shown in Annex 15.

7.11. Conclusion and summary of Chapter 7 findings

Despite the fact that employers have a poor understanding of autism and the issues that face autistic employees, the findings in this chapter have identified that their managers do notice that autistic people differ from non-autistic people. Building upon their accounts of alternative constructions of autism beyond disability, this chapter has added specific detail of the social effects referred to in social relational accounts of disability. Managers note these differences are sometimes hard to separate from the effects of someone's personality, but on balance feel this makes their autistic employees very distinctive from their neurotypical employees. The areas they notice as distinctive emerge as seven broad areas which are work ethic; IQ; attention to detail; honesty and directness; inflexibility; hypersensitivities and social interaction.

Managers feel that their autistic employees are particularly strong in the areas of work ethic and IQ, both areas they also felt to be beneficial capacities from an organisational standpoint. Significantly, this did not prevent these AS people experiencing exclusionary outcomes. Being hypersensitive to lights and noise and lacking flexibility were conceptualised by managers as frequently problematic, who reported predominantly negative consequences for their employees. Particularly interesting are the findings that managers saw in attention to detail, honesty and directness and social interaction in that these veered between strength and being problematic. Mindful that autistic people, just like neurotypical people, cannot be pigeonholed with categorical skills and abilities, the continuum below is used to illustrate the potential that managers will hold varying perceptions of their autistic employees.

Figure 7-2 AS characteristics as observed by line managers



Closer examination revealed that whether managers see some of these characteristics as strength or problematic is contingent upon job role, which appears to impact heavily upon the perceptions that managers hold about someone's attention to detail, their interactions with other people and their honest and direct style. For example, having high attention to detail may be both an ability resulting in higher productivity where work involves a fine level of detail checking. In contrast, this same characteristic may be viewed as a constraint when someone takes longer than expected to complete a task. Similarly, managers can value someone's liking for repetitive, monotonous or unpopular work, or find it problematic where roles demand flexibility. This duality is a feature of the theoretical discussions established about being autistic and is explored further in the discussion chapter. Job role appears to make little difference to the ways that managers conceptualise work ethic and IQ, in that they were noticed almost universally as strength. Neither does job role appear to impact how managers conceptualise the problems associated with hypersensitivities.

Working relationships and the physical working environment emerged as shapers of managers' perceptions and not just the experiences of their employees. Few managers made the connection between how these might have affected someone's discomfort, their wish to opt out of taken for granted team activities or indeed to absent themselves from work itself. This has been evidenced by their implicit assumptions about what counts as a good working environment and what are normal ways of working. This recurrent theme is symptomatic of the difficulties in separating the effects of autism itself from the socio-cultural forces so key to this investigation and contributes to why autistic people might become disabled at work.

Some of the managers and HR specialists suggested that competency frameworks impose unreasonable, unfair and impossible standards upon autistic people where they saw someone struggling in trying to adopt 'people' skills or to be flexible. As these frameworks are so well established in organisations, they inevitably feed through into performance assessments and progression decisions and are explored further in the discussion. Should HR specialists decide to rethink the contents of their existing frameworks, they could refer to the broad areas of skill and preferences identified here.

This chapter has surfaced some of the day to day tensions and difficulties managers experience which have an impact upon customers and colleagues too. These outcomes may be due to the particular characteristics of being autistic, or because socio-cultural forces lead to unintentional discrimination. Either way these findings lend weight to the need to explore further what shapes the responses managers make, the impact upon themselves and how HR are positioned to support them.

Chapter 8. Responses from line managers and support from HR specialists

This chapter explores the impact that managing an autistic person has upon managers, focusing upon what happens when they make the accommodations required by legislation. It begins by exploring how effective the law is in addressing some of the issues raised in the previous chapter, drawing also upon the views autistic employees have about these accommodations.

8.1. *Making accommodations*

Findings so far have shown how lights and noise from the physical working environment as well as from day to day workplace chatter makes working life hard, and in some cases highly disabling, for autistic employees. Legislation allows managers to make accommodations for these difficulties and the different ways they did this are presented below.

Manager L knows that Pearl needs quiet space to work which he accommodates by using *'noise cancelling headphones, a quiet desk in the corner, a temporary partition'*. He also sets up a homeworking arrangement, knowing this may have consequences on the optimal functioning of the team:

homeworking has a risk of isolation - we are aware of this and try to guard against it. She does 2 days at home, 2 days in work. We are trying to keep the connection to the team as well - I've asked her to lead on some issues. She is a strong part of the team. When we have meetings, she can come up with left field ideas, so it's important she feels part of the team.

He seems to be unsure if doing this is allowed under the law, wondering if; *'all managers have made this [homeworking] as a reasonable adjustment? I'm not sure I'm doing it right'*.

Manager K doesn't change the environment, instead she alters her team's protocol for how they converse and share information with Joe:

I ask people to speak one at a time. Or I will ask if he needs a break, as he can't hear if too many are talking at once.

Proving a different perspective, Colin, thinks that it is obvious that noise is distracting and working environments should be quiet, thinking it is somewhat strange his colleagues would disagree:

I don't like very loud noise - especially people talking, when voices start to get raised. Only adjustment is that people should use their common sense and take their discussion into a room so it's quieter.

Manager I really wanted to secure Leila's equipment, expressing frustration with delays:

basically, it means finding out what can we do that won't cost us anything, will have maximum impact and will help level the playing field for them. After the reasonable adjustment passport was in place, I got Occupational Health to give me the answers I needed - this was difficult. We got noise cancelling headphones.

Manager F's responds to Keith's difficulties in coping with the noisy and bright open plan call centre where about 1,000 people are employed:

what I've done is moved desks about so he's next to someone who is very quiet and away from the noisy ones. He just can't function if desk lighting is too bright. He is the only one in the building wearing a hat, as no one else is allowed to.

As well as moving Keith's desk, Manager F adjusted his work pattern to allow extra breaks from taking calls. Keith also asked to wear a hat to help reduce noise disruption, resulting in a set of accommodations that are all very difficult to hide from the rest of the team.

Chapter 7 has established that managers sometimes view their autistic employees' preferences for routine as strengths. Here, Manager H highlights that these same preferences create a need for her to invest time by giving advance notice of changes. Significantly, this is far longer than the notice she planned to give to the rest of the team:

changes in procedure like recording time off are not a major change, but are very problematic for him. It takes him an awful lot longer than others in the team. He doesn't deal with change easily- it makes him less flexible than the others. If we are doing a new type of work, he needs a little bit of extra time.

Manager B mentions very small changes to housekeeping schedules:

this did throw (S) out a little bit at first, whereas we'd [rest of the cleaning team] probably get used to it by the end of the day. It would take S just a little bit longer.

Manager A also knows he has to give Tom more time than his other staff:

if I thought things were going to change within the team or we were going to try and make changes and really try and reinvent something, then he would get enough prior warning to try and apply his thoughts to it and almost catch up.

Manager K knows how Joe will react when facing changes to processes:

he does try his best to see it [change] and accept it. If it's too quick, he will be like a 'deer in headlights'. He would switch off, not see or hear anything, saying it's too much to take in. I have to double up my time

The HR manager in organisation 1 draws on her experiences working in other companies recognising that managers in general do need additional time to manage someone who is different. She is well aware that not all managers would readily do this:

I have experienced [outside this company], that managers have said they would rather get rid of that employee and have someone else work for them. We don't find that here, but I have seen it elsewhere with dyslexia. I have seen managers ask why they have to do things differently, and there is a level of intolerance, where anything veering out of the ordinary is tedious, time consuming and unnecessary.

8.2. Capacity for change

Most of these examples of adjustments were gathered from organisation 5, where technological developments and increased customer focus have shaped administrative roles, creating a need for people to switch between varied tasks and work more quickly.

Gavin enjoys his job as a website developer and knows what it is like to work at pace:

although I do enjoy my current role, the speed of change in the digital world can take your breath away. I sometimes think a job where you know what you'll be doing day to day would be a nice change of pace.

Talking about introducing new technologies, Manager H observes:

it's when we change to do something different. We do x for a while and then literally we have to stop x and start working on y. It's these times when he [Colin] has struggled, he is out of his comfort zone.

PI: Is it difficulty of the thing or the change?

It's the change

In the same organisation, Manager J reflects upon the source, as well as the rationale, for this flexibility requirement. Echoing the valuations of flexibility articulated by the HR specialists at the end of Chapter 7, she questions if it is possible to expect AS individuals to be as flexible as their neurotypical counterparts:

flexibility is on our competency framework. Where does this leave people within the spectrum and other disorders, where they aren't seen as being flexible, because they can't? It's like asking someone with a broken leg to do the fandango.

Both managers recognise that whilst change was problematic for the employees they managed, this came from their *capacity* to be flexible as distinct from their desire to continue working or willingness to change.

Manager F's response illustrates how even in a very large organisation, it is not always possible to move an employee experiencing difficulties in one role to another more suitable role. This is a stark reminder of how distanced a front-line manager can be from broader organisational opportunities for using whole workforce skills:

what on earth can we do [about moving], if he is handling contact centre queries? There is not a role here, as much as this is a huge organisation.

The law recognises that someone's impairments are socially constructed and, as the reasonable adjustment specialist from organisation 1 has declared, that employers should '*subscribe to the social model; it's what's wrong for the person not what's wrong with the person.*' However, these examples indicate limitations exist which go beyond straightforward implementation difficulties, for example knowing which headphones to buy.

8.3. Sculpting tasks, jobs and roles

Chapter 7 identified that someone's job appears to be a significant factor in how managers conceptualise AS characteristics, prompting an examination of how managers have utilised these characteristics within roles, rather than outside legislative requirements.

Manager D described how she adapted Lara and Aaron's roles:

she didn't exactly fulfil the role I was looking for, so it was about using the positive bits and thinking what she could bring to the service. She (L) was happy to go and talk to employers about autism support, but the phone was difficult for her. One of the other staff that had worked with her told me that I would always have to text her, don't ring her.

(A) was genuinely interested in IT and we were able to use this - we changed the job to let him do this. His attention to detail meant that he would happily work for a long time on PowerPoint slides. He would not be easily distracted.

She is seeking to deliberately harness the strengths that she has recognised in both employees; for Lara it is extending the content of the job to accommodate preferences for speaking face-to-face, rather than using the phone, whilst for Aaron it was about harnessing his capacity for detailed work.

Manager L knows that Pearl finds it difficult to take incoming calls, yet is very competent with written communications:

she doesn't like speaking to people on phone, internal or external customers ... She's just not comfortable and it affects her confidence. When she is in the zone, she is such a good communicator verbally and written, particularly written - she is able to construct an email and put forward reasoned arguments- really, really good.

PI: Have you been able to use this as an advantage?

Definitely. We don't have direct contact with external customers so it's more difficult to maximise [her written skills] but wherever we can we do. There are certain jobs that would be ideal for P. We had a discussion about what changes should be made [to one of our spreadsheets]. The result of this was that P emailed this to the team telling them what changes, and this was perfectly done. She nailed it, there were no errors.

Chapters 7.3 and 7.4 identified how AS characteristics can connect with exploitation where managers allocate routine, repetitive and detailed tasks disproportionately to an AS individual, rather than more equitably across the wider team. Speaking rhetorically, Manager E wonders what the right or wrong thing to do is when she plans Xavier's forthcoming performance appraisal and possible job changes:

How can I have a conversation with X about career development when I know that he loves doing this type of repetitive work?

Manager A is also uncomfortable in agreeing that Tom, working as an assistant restaurant manager, takes on a repetitive aspect of the job [door hosting] which is usually performed by lower grade staff:

I just disagreed that he should be on the door and hosting all the time.

PI: You wouldn't expect a junior manager [PI's emphasis] to do this?

no - because you can't move for 6 or 7 hours, that's your job. It caused huge conflict to the point where he took a leave of sickness for two weeks. It was the stress of the situation.

In exploring some options for using Tom's preferences for routine:

when we went through the process of what he wanted to do and where he wanted to be and where he felt most comfortable - it was 'door host'. So, T greets every single person that walks in the door. There's very much a routine to it...almost a script. How you greet people, how you interact with children. He just took that and developed it into his own way. It's fantastic. We have something that our guests love and that he created.

PI: Do the team resent that?

I don't think so, because I think they don't all know that T has Asperger's but I suppose they understand that he has quirky ways. The job host might be seen as favouritism. Not everybody likes doing the door.

Colin is very keen to reassure managers that such work may not be inevitably problematic, providing some insight as to how managers could respond to someone like himself, who says they like routine work:

others find it boring, routine is OK to me. I spent a long-time issuing letters for months on end. I didn't mind doing it. Repetition is boring, but if you are an Aspie you tend to think it is perfectly OK. I like a routine. An NT might do this for a week; I could go happily at this routine task for months on end.

In the same organisation, but a very different role, Manager I recognises Leila's strengths, knowing that despite her skills, being different will probably restrict her career options:

people have recognised that she has this ability and makes a valid contribution, even though she is nowhere near the finished product. I said to her, you will be very good in a technical role, but not as a manager. As a technician, she would be excellent. This is what she wants to do; increasingly we are being told trainees have to show leadership behaviours. She would be a good leader in a technical role, but not doing anything that involves lots of people.

8.4. Managing performance

Keith was unhappy in his previous role and so wrote a statement to support his request for redeployment, in line with organisation 5's policy. Manager F describes his reaction to reading this and how he wanted to help:

maybe I shouldn't have helped him, but I didn't think this was fair. The statements he wrote down were more like apologising for what he can't do instead of saying I've done this and that. I protect him. But, [interviewee's emphasis], not all team leaders would have protected him. It's because I'm 55. I'm glad to have this job but it's not the end of the world if I lose it. If you are a young team leader, and you want to get promoted, there would be a temptation not to take the flack.

He is well aware that being autistic has made it hard for Keith to perform some tasks. He also knows that his own personal circumstances have impacted upon what has happened so far to Keith, because he can afford both financially and politically to challenge the accuracy of how Keith has represented himself, looking beyond the organisational protocols for this kind of documentation. Had he been younger, more ambitious or in more need of a secure career role, he knows that Keith's outcomes would probably have been worse. Another possibility that he does not mention, is that he may have decided not to bother helping him through lack of time.

Manager H also feels she has a 'duty to care' and proactively looks to accommodate Colin's difference:

it's my job, and I have to be involved. I try to be conscious that he might not like something, or he might not feel comfortable with it. You do have to tailor your management style to each person in the team; if you don't you can end up upsetting people. I have learnt that and have changed massively, through working with other team-leaders and variety of other people I've managed.

The HR specialists in organisation 1 referred to three separate incidents where an autistic/AS employee had encountered performance issues, not always knowing people 'were' AS. HR advisor [a] notes:

a couple [of cases] have come to our notice because of issues in the way they are working. It wouldn't hit us unless there was a performance issue.

Her colleague, HR Advisor [b]:

we wouldn't use the word diagnosis or Asperger's. We knew something was not quite right, because of the behaviours we saw, but we aren't specialists so rely on experts to give a diagnosis. We ask them [employees] to see the company doctor.

HR Advisor [a] has already mentioned (p.201) how increased expectations of being flexible have caused difficulties, confirming now that this change prompted the performance difficulties:

She performed normally, it's only as things within the division have changed, that things have changed for her.

All of the above examples were describing situations where a person's behaviour or character was problematic, consistent with the negative conceptualisations noted in Chapter 7 where AS people worked in environments which they found difficult, or where preferences for unusual ways of working sometimes had adverse impacts on the team. The examples refer to behaviours, either implicitly: '*something isn't right*', or more explicitly where she notes the nursery worker could not run a childcare session in the '*normal*' ways organisation 1 expected, with lots of eye contact and direct interaction with the children. Significantly, these HR specialists encountered these situations *after* managers had sought their advice around individual performance issues. They also all led to the employee's dismissal or resignation, in line with the evidence from case law which suggests that the single most common reason that AS employees arrive at employment tribunals is connected to the lack of employers' knowledge about AS in relation to communication styles and ways of working.

Manager A remembered a loud argument he had witnessed between Tom and another manager:

I had to get involved with this - it had to be dealt with a little bit formally. It didn't go to disciplinary but a formal chat if you like. And I suppose his reaction to that was to completely withdraw from everything. From his relationship with me, from the restaurant. He didn't want anything to do with me at that point because I'd forced that situation on him

Manager G worries about what will happen to Shelley when she leaves her team:

I don't want her to be with someone who is softer, it won't work- her new manager needs to be hard not softer.

and is clear that standards of performance do need to be met:

if it does get to dismissal my job as a manager is to make sure these boxes get ticked, so any appeal wouldn't hold. As a department, we can't sustain the level of absence she has had.

Talking about managing Pearl's blunt email style, Manager L wonders how he should respond when she does her job differently to others, showing less empathy in her email communications:

where do you draw the line, when is a behaviour unacceptable due to the condition? When is it to do with AS? We aren't shying away from this, we're working on it. We get emails out and go through them. I ask her to read it and think about it in hindsight. I ask her how it could be perceived.

He veers towards as positive an interpretation as he can about how Pearl works, probably on account he doesn't know much:

there must be a point where they aren't hitting the benchmark, you reach a point. I can't judge what this is, so I give her [Pearl] the benefit of the doubt.

In contrast, Manager E working in a much smaller IT organisation, does *not* feel the need to give feedback in noticing unusual behaviours in the office, indicating she is happy to accept these differences:

there were some things that weren't really concerning, they were just things you had to learn to deal with, for example, long meetings could be

difficult. He once actually hit someone by flailing his arms! He sometimes started muttering loudly. Sometimes you get a weird crazy laugh. It did not stop anyone doing their job, and it was not a deal breaker.

Manager A addresses Tom's inflexibility by scheduling a conversation to address the consequences of the behaviour:

it takes a conversation afterwards to sit down with T and say: "what about this? What about that? Did you consider that member of staff's point of view?"

Drawing on her knowledge acquired from managing Colin, Manager H describes how she might use this if she worked again with someone that she thought may be autistic:

before [managing Colin] I probably wouldn't have picked up on it but now I would be more aware. I'd say: "has anyone ever spoken to you about this?", or, "go see the doctor". I would be more about asking probing questions, seeing if anything strikes a chord.

Asking if she would do this if even if there were no performance issues, she acknowledges it 'would be hard to have this discussion' although that later; 'if I saw areas where there are difficulties, then it would be easier to say that I'd worked with someone with similar problems'.

8.5. Impact upon managers

Chapter 7 has shown that managers recognise that work ethic is a strength of their autistic employees. Managers also felt that *they* experienced negative impact, speaking about how difficult it was for them to see someone they managed working hard. Manager J talks about her anxieties managing Tim:

once in work that high work ethic kicks in, and my problem is getting him to go home! The conversation is then about me saying leave it till tomorrow! He will say; "no I can't, I can't, I need to get it done now". I would have to physically remove him from the office at 7 pm. He will still be saying; "it's Saturday tomorrow, can I come in!"

Manager K worries about how hard Joe works:

he has a high work ethic. Yes, he wants to do well and gets very upset with himself if it doesn't go right, I will say come on J, wind it down, what is the matter?

She also worries about her abilities to handle Joe:

Joe and I had long and frank conversations, I do know that routine can be an important thing for someone with AS. I wasn't sure how I was going to provide it. The difficult bit is managing it. It has been a traumatic job and it's learning to step back as a manager. I was trying to be too nice, forgetting I was his manager, trying to help too much, almost like parent to child, when it should be parent to parent.

Manager A asked Tom to deliver a training course to other staff members about environmental matters. Knowing that Tom was an expert in this area, he expected that this would be an enjoyable and interesting activity.

T was the most experienced person, so I asked him to train all the heads of department and the senior managers, about 15-18 people whom he knows, and everybody knows him.

However, watching Tom struggle was hard and really uncomfortable:

that was hard to be on the training course to be honest. Hard for him but hard for me to stand there and watch him because he was uncomfortable. That was a kind of show for me of what he goes through. He'd kind of turn away from people.

Suggesting Tom delivered this training was something Manager A did with a positive motivation, certainly not anticipating just how difficult this amount and type of social interaction would be.

Manager F also describes his frustrations experienced from recognising that his employee was working really hard in an environment that was difficult for him.

this is someone who is trying their hardest on a daily basis; there is nothing worse than this [for me to see].

He is definite that trying to reconcile these pressures has a real impact upon his own state of mind, creating major discomfort:

I am left in catch 22 – in that I can actually make somebody feel under pressure and being a bully. This is what I mean by being stuck between a rock and a hard place. K's performance is likely to reduce if he is stressing AND he thinks that I'm stressing. So, yeah, the most difficult thing is being caught between a rock and a hard place. I have left myself vulnerable from my boss about productivity targets. It is stressful and worrying for me because I don't want to be a bully.

Here, he refers to the pressure from above to meet departmental performance targets, set against knowing that pressurising Keith to do so will make matters worse. He then goes on to acknowledge that it is the unseen aspect of the AS condition which created additional difficulties for himself:

it would be a lot easier if it [the disability] was one arm or leg. There's a difference between those disabilities you can see- where it's easier to make adjustments - and those you can't. I feel there is a lot more support and understanding placed upon someone who has a disability that you can see, rather than someone who had different brain chemistry.

He continues to consider why it is that the unseen nature of AS creates additional difficulties:

I had someone who had a disfigurement, where it is really obvious to all around that there is a disability. Not like K, he drives a car!

The experienced reasonable adjustment specialist working in the same organisation also notes this:

I would also say that people are a little bit more tolerant if they can see, that someone is say blind or in a wheelchair.

Talking about how he responded to Sharon, Manager C felt:

I would some things she said as embarrassing. She would be very honest and open in front of colleagues. That would have an impact on how they would react. Some would say 'I didn't want to hear that'. Others would go to the point where they might laugh at her. I found that having to manage that situation was really quite uncomfortable. I had to manage it and say to her that you can't be like that.

Manager E describes how Xavier did not appear to recognise when and where it was appropriate to discuss personal matters:

'X' would shout across the office to me and ask me what is happening with my contract. I would always say to 'X' that we will get together in the office and talk about it. I don't think he ever realised that this was inappropriate.

Echoing the earlier discussion in Chapter 7.9 about what is construed as natural, normal or nice, her uneasiness with someone asking about their personal employment contract, comes from her view that private matters should not be discussed in the public workspace. This is likely to be an implicit protocol based upon taken for granted assumptions about what is 'normal' in this particular workplace, matters which she sees as self-evident in daily life, or '*common sense knowledge*' (Berger and Luckman 1991). Critical realists also suggest these '*normative expectations*' existing within organisations (Vincent and Wapshott 2014) are important in seeking understanding of actors' reactions.

8.6. Conclusion and summary of Chapter 8 findings

The previous chapter showed that managers can view autistic traits and preferences as strengths which can benefit themselves and the wider organisation. It also showed that job role is an important factor in realising this potential, yet this chapter has found few examples of roles that were deliberately crafted or shaped in some way to optimise AS characteristics or utilise expert knowledge. Only one example emerged where someone's special interests were deployed in roles, in the main as many of the roles under study were heavily prescribed and standardised. Neither did the HR specialists mention deliberate use of AS skills, focusing instead on more generic areas of skills in their organisations. This is unsurprising given they are somewhat removed from the situations that managers were talking about directly.

Evidence has been provided that managing autistic people can also create challenges for managers as they go about their day to day job. Adverse impact and frustration for these managers comes from the additional time investments they make, from performance problems and from being required to operate within particular HRM policies, practices or workplace norms. The latter are all socially imposed forces which confirm the relevance of these in this investigation of how autism, a potentially disabling condition, is understood by employers. Managers experience uncertainties, tensions and difficulties when responding to situations which many find unfamiliar. These appear to be exacerbated because they are managing someone with a hidden, rather than visible disability.

8.7. Summary of all Chapter findings

Findings show that managers have articulated specifically how their autistic employees are distinctive from their neurotypical counterparts, adding to the rather vague social effects referred to in social relational accounts of disability. The finding that managers notice strengths, problematic areas and disabling effects which sometimes coexist in the same person, indicates why their role in managing someone on the autistic spectrum can be more difficult, complex and effortful than others they have been used to managing. Some of these complexities come from socio-cultural constraints created by HRM practices that legislation purports to resolve, but for autistic people does not. The challenges managers face are apparent and exacerbated by their poor knowledge about autism and understanding of how workplaces impact autistic people. These combine to shape the many possible constructions of what autistic people can and cannot do.

Having presented the detailed findings, the following Chapter relates these to the issues arising from the theoretical framework.

Chapter 9. Analysis and discussion of findings

9.1. *Introduction*

This investigation has placed the line manager as the central subject and so the discussion now returns to the aspects of disability presented in the theoretical framework and supporting literature to explore how the findings affect managers. It begins by outlining the consequences that poor levels of knowledge and understanding have upon employers and managers as well as, indirectly, their autistic employees. Next, the strengths managers notice in their autistic employees are explored, showing how and when dual constructions arise and emphasising that it is both the presence and ignorance of socio-cultural forces which frustrates managers seeking to manage. Part of this ignorance is because autism is a hidden condition and so this chapter also discusses the challenges this represents for managers and employers. Mindful that this investigation is exploring managers' experiences, the discussion also makes it apparent how managers are affected by these dualities. The implications of the ways in which managers respond to their autistic employees in the face of socio-cultural constraints are explored. The chapter closes with a discussion which returns to the aims of the investigation by considering the implications of the findings for improving knowledge within organisations.

The first major theme to emerge is that there are consequences for employers as a result of their poor level of understanding and knowledge about autism and autistic people.

9.2. *Knowledge and misunderstanding*

9.2.1. *Guesswork*

Respondents freely acknowledge that their knowledge is incomplete, according with the gap identified in employers' factual knowledge about autism and AS (Richards 2015; Richards and Sang 2016; Vogus and Taylor 2018). Guesswork was very evident too from these respondents as to how many people in the general population they believed to be autistic. Taken together with the fact that legislation cannot force someone to disclose their condition to an employer, this level of guesswork indicates that employers in general are unlikely to know that approximately 1 in 200 of their workforces may be AS and possibly more people in some sectors. It also means that managers may be unaware that someone working for them has an autistic spectrum condition, which is likely to perpetuate some of the difficulties that the managers in this investigation are facing.

Turning next to what employers thought about autism in relation to mental health, respondents expressed a wide range of views as to whether they consider autism is more or less problematic and stigmatised than other mental health conditions. This ambiguity indicates HR specialists and managers might mistakenly think that it is being autistic that

is the primary cause of the mental health difficulties described in numerous autobiographical, media and employment accounts (Higashida 2013; Attwood and Grandin 2006; Arnstein 2016). In fact, it is more likely the case that these effects come from the exclusionary employment experiences introduced in Chapter 1 reinforcing the importance of these socio-cultural factors. More concerning is that where views exist like those of Manager B, who wrongly equated autism as a learning difficulty, these could easily counter the more positive perceptions other respondents reported from placing AS closer to difference than disability. It therefore becomes very important for HR specialists to disabuse employees and managers within their organisations of making automatic connections between being autistic and having poor mental health, instead to recognise that whilst these can be linked, they are not inevitable.

9.2.2. Believing everyone is 'on the spectrum' and downplaying difference

Managers were familiar with the notion of the autistic spectrum and most felt that autistic people 'sat' somewhere on an infinite spectrum of possible combinations of human preferences and abilities. Some like Managers H and A thought autistic characteristics appear in everyone. If managers who work with autistic people or HR specialists share this belief that everyone is 'on the spectrum', then it becomes a little harder for colleagues to take the differences identified in this investigation quite as seriously as they could. Holding onto beliefs like this could very easily trivialise the experiences of autistic individuals in employment as autistic people and their families (Kenny et al 2015) have also indicated. Taken to its logical extension, this belief in the infinite spectrum would mean that everyone (and every employee) could potentially be placed somewhere on this spectrum, analogous to conceptualisations that diversity is broad rather than narrow, given people differ from each other in so many ways (Heery and Noon 2008; Winters 2014). If employers do truly hold this belief, they might see little point in trying to accommodate autistic people specifically or may on the other hand come to regard it as their responsibility to seek to suit all manner of differences. In this latter case, accommodations and deliberate matching of skills to roles would need to become available widely. Certainly, it is very easy for employers to promulgate views they have designed their diversity management policies to celebrate these many differences, despite strong evidence that implementation of these policies is frequently superficial or ineffective (Hoque and Noon 2004; Vassilopoulou 2017). If they do, the problem then becomes one of practice, whereby constraints in adopting very many aspects of organisational life to suit very many 'different' groups of people mean employers in general are unlikely to respond in this way. Noon (2007) has commented this weakens any argument put forward by those wishing to improve inclusion for any particular group assessed to be 'different'. For autistic people who are in such a small minority and look

the same as other people, these inclusion outcomes become even more difficult to achieve.

Theorising about disability, either from a medical or social model perspective, has tended to view someone's disability as a collective condition. This is particularly relevant in studying the experiences and challenges faced by those who manage autistic people, in that the spectrum nature of the condition means that immense variations in characteristics within autistic people do actually exist. Here, it is the clinical meaning of the 'autistic spectrum' that is important for employers to understand, which is absolutely categorical that autistic people will not experience universally bad or good outcomes. A good example of this is where Callum and Martin, autistic people working as engineers and in similar physical working spaces, expressed very different responses to being asked to change their day-to-day working arrangements (pp.190-1). This illustrates that the concepts that managers need to better appreciate are those which concern individual variations, whatever beliefs they might hold about how many people are 'on the spectrum'.

9.2.3. Autistic women

Differences between how managers perceived autistic men and autistic women were not the focus of this investigation. However, the fact that only two of the autistic people who volunteered were female is consistent with autistic women frequently choosing to 'mask' their symptoms. This low number in comparison to the male volunteers may have been because they made a conscious decision to keep their condition hidden, or perhaps that some women in the two large organisations surveyed were autistic, but not diagnosed. These decisions may come from 'masking', noted as disproportionately disadvantageous to autistic women and contributory to their poor mental health (Baldwin and Costley 2015; Kirkovski and Fitzgerald 2013). Although clinical studies have not reliably established whether there are actually more autistic men than autistic women, it does seem that experiences of AS women could be far better understood. For example, being cognisant of 'masking' could help employers be more confident that an autistic woman's poor mental health and wellbeing, directly connected to this masking, may be related to problematic performance in ways they have not previously considered. It is hard to imagine how effortful it must be for someone to continually pretend that they understand all of the social interactions going on around them, that they can cope well with everyday levels of light and noise, or that they find change difficult. Of course, all these considerations apply to autistic men too, yet this investigation points to the need for managers to know that autistic women could be further disadvantaged by poor understanding about the particular issues they face as autistic women, as well as being autistic. Such distinctions need to be made in light of the possibility someone will not identify as wholly male or female, instead adopting a more fluid categorisation of gender.

9.3. Contradictory and fuzzy perceptions of autism

Autism and AS have been classed as disorders in clinical domains and subsequently translated into legislation which places autism as a disability. However, the umbrella term of neurodiversity, also now recognised by the law, suggests that as far as individual neurology goes, there is no such thing either as 'normal' capacities, or what a 'normal' person is, indicating how easily this knowledge can get lost in translation. Perhaps this is reflective of the separation of employment and clinical studies about this very specific topic. The following section discusses how the structural aspects of organisational life might contribute to these varying and contradictory constructions about autistic people.

9.3.1. Legislation shapes knowledge

It is unsurprising that almost all the respondents knew confidently that AS is a protected disability under equalities legislation, given that all the organisations involved required those with HR or line management responsibilities to undergo appropriate training. Taking part in this would make it clear to managers that AS is a disability affording protected rights and raise their awareness that modifying environmental aspects or providing assistive equipment are often helpful for disabled people. Knowledge borne out of legislative compliance is a powerful driver, particularly for HR specialists, to label an autistic person as 'disabled', noting that in smaller, owner-managed organisations, these considerations are somewhat less likely. However, in the same breath respondents rejected the automatic placing of autism as a disability, instead appearing fairly definite that AS characteristics are not problematic impairments. Further consideration is now given to why asking the apparently straightforward question: 'Is AS a disability?' yielded perceptions about autism and autistic people which contradicted medicalised views of disability.

9.3.2. Talking about autism

It is possible that this fuzziness in conceptualising autism and autistic people lies in the type of knowledge being investigated. Disability is a sensitive topic, as discussions of others' reactions to autism in workplaces have noted, (Morris, Begel and Wiedermann 2015) and respondents are likely to consider very carefully their answers. It was noticeable in this investigation that some, like Managers J, L and M 'hedged their bets' and were very reluctant to assign any label at all when talking about someone they worked closely with. Indeed, most of the respondents avoided mentioning words like impairment and disorder particularly the specialists in equality, diversity and inclusion, Occupational Health and reasonable adjustments, who were more likely to place autistic people as different, not as disabled. This suggests they too are strongly influenced by ableist norms identified by critical disability writers (Mik Meyer 2016), which often prevent others from talking about a colleague as being impaired. Being reluctant, or

embarrassed to talk about someone being autistic, will continue to contribute to policy makers, HR specialists and line managers 'sidestepping' hidden disabilities like AS (Procknow and Rocco 2016). Given the strengths this investigation has revealed, this appears a particularly unnecessary choice.

These specialists also recognised the disabling aspects of the environment, again unsurprising given their professional expertise. What is interesting is that they also highlighted AS employees will still experience impairments, irrespective of the accommodations they knew had been made. These observations concur with the accounts of neurodiverse people, who whilst embracing their differences, also accept these can make life difficult in a predominantly neurotypical world (Robison 2011; Goldstein Hode 2014). The critical point is that many of these difficulties do not go away purely by accommodations and so managers are presented with the ongoing challenge of reconciling neurotypical and autistic preferences. So, whilst employers like organisation 5 have specialists who understand autistic people and seek to accommodate based upon legal directives underpinned by the social model, there will be limits as to what they can actually do as far as neutralising these difficulties goes.

All the respondents showed their tolerance and inclusivity and most equated disability as difference, perhaps because of their personal connections to autistic people, or perhaps from their own experiences in managing an autistic person. Who they 'are', the notion of personhood that Archer (2003) has identified as key, may also have contributed to their fuzzy perceptions and explored further towards the end of this chapter. All in all, disability is a state open to personal opinion, as well as being shaped by the socio-cultural forces that the relational approach has so clearly identified.

9.3.3. Who labels autistic people?

Labelling someone as different in any particular way has to be understood by considering who is assigning the label. Whether respondents label an autistic person as different or as disabled is likely to depend upon their own status; are they autistic or are they neurotypical? Here, none of the managers and HR specialists were autistic or at least did not say that they were. Assuming they are neurotypical means of course that when they classified someone as different (or not), as disabled (or not), they did so from a baseline of being able-bodied people with no disability or diagnosed condition, considering themselves as 'normal' neurotypicals. Having uppermost in mind that the person doing the labelling is the one assigning someone as different is also important to remember when thinking about why it is that people are marked out or stigmatised in some way. A good example of the limits of this logic was captured by Shelley (p.156), the young autistic woman, who wondered why it is the case that autistic people are always classed as different to neurotypical people and not the other way around. It is entirely possible too that an autistic person may label a neurotypical colleague as different, or that they

go further and refer to them as disabled. Neurodiversity advocates have done this when they have described the problems a neurotypical person encounters because they feel it necessary to find and maintain complicated social relationships, something that to someone like Shaun (p.199), who finds people '*draining*', might view as quite illogical. Along with Shelley's views, these illustrate perfectly how negative labels can come about and why such differences as to what actually 'is' normal can cause employers tensions. These can be at macro- level in considering how to make HRM policies inclusive for neurodiverse people and at micro- level for managers attempting to change environments that do not disable or exclude autistic people. The discussion remains mindful that employers employ neurotypical and neurodiverse people, which inevitably will create tensions in determining policy choices and for managers who have to operate within these.

9.3.4. Media portrayals

In constructing their perceptions of their autistic employees, these managers and HR specialists may well have been influenced by the way the media has portrayed autistic people. Loftis (2015) has shown that fictional depictions are very powerful in relation to autism and thus the analysis of this data must account for the constructions that our '*real world*' shapes (Sayer 2010). However, in this study managers did not cite the media as an influence, perhaps because some were not attuned to such information, given that about half the sample had no personal connections to autistic or AS people. Another possibility is that these influences subliminally, rather than consciously, shaped their perceptions. In contrast, autistic employees were more definite that the media did shape their colleagues' perceptions about autistic people, evidenced when they used famous fictional characters, like Sheldon from the '*Big Bang*', to describe what they thought other people would think being autistic was like. The fact that these interviewees thought other people would hold negative rather than positive perceptions could explain why they saw themselves in a more negative light than did their managers in this study.

9.3.5. Section summary

These findings show that autism is poorly understood by managers or HR specialists as none said they felt fully informed in relation to the knowledge they needed to manage their AS employees. This was despite the knowledge they had gathered as to what being autistic is from their close family or friends and in some cases having managed autistic people for some time. As clinicians do not fully understand precisely why autistic people differ from neurotypicals, nor how being autistic is associated with specific behaviours and preferences, it is unsurprising that employers neither know about nor understand the unseen neural mechanisms that exist in people diagnosed with an autistic spectrum condition. Nevertheless, a manager's ability to manage will be enriched if they do at least

know that these mechanisms exist. For example, it could help them decipher why someone behaves in a particular way, as well as understand why this looks unusual set against the context of the 'social' processes and practices that they can more easily see. Their guesswork and lack of knowledge means they are likely to feel they are working in very unfamiliar territory, an uncomfortable position which creates them difficulties which this discussion explores.

The reactive nature of their involvement with AS employees together with this not knowing or reliance upon guesswork means that it will be difficult, particularly for HR specialists, to comply with the Equality Act's directive in regard to proactive management of disability and in securing reasonable adjustments. Tribunals have shown that this lack of knowledge is compounded by employers' over reliance upon prescriptive generic advice and failure, as well as their failure to know confidently that autistic and AS employees differ as individuals in their characteristics. They are becoming increasingly critical of employers for not understanding that reasonable adjustments should address subtleties in the ways of working which employers take for granted will suit everyone. Critically, these are often designed for efficiency rather than embracing broader notions of what effective inclusion means, as the Brookes case (2017) showed. HR specialists defending discrimination claims will therefore frequently find it is too late to address issues which have invoked disciplinary procedures or resignations, thus increasing the likelihood of discriminatory employment outcomes as well as missing opportunities to harness AS talents. A further consequence of these misunderstandings is the potential that their managers lack knowledge of autistic strengths. Thus, the following section now turns to what managers say about these areas.

9.4. *Autistic strengths*

9.4.1. *Working hard*

Managers generated many examples of autistic people working hard, feeling in general this was a strength. Listening to managers talking about their employees' approach to work, it is apparent that many autistic people in employment have an atypical capacity to engage with or volunteer for tasks that others may dislike, as well as strive to achieve high output. Managers are unlikely to view these ways of working as problematic and are more likely to want to reap productivity gains they bring, similar to the benefits Manager H described from Colin's approach to taking breaks (p.171). It appears that managers are seeing outcomes similar to those identified by Jammaers, Zanoni and Hardonk (2016), where physically disabled employees elect to work harder than their colleagues, implicitly accepting ableist norms around productivity.

9.4.2. Using detail and routine as strengths

Managers rated their AS employees as strong in a number of different roles and tasks which involved detail, routine and repetition, a finding consistent with the many clinical studies reporting this as a superior capacity found in autistic people (Frith and Happe 2001). This same capacity has been suggested to underly an autistic person's motivation to apply for jobs in software engineering and technological disciplines (Austin and Pisano 2017; Grant 2015) and why they can outperform neurotypicals who regard heavily quantitative coding work as both difficult and boring (Morris, Begel and Wiedermann; Wang 2014). Manager M's comments about how well Callum could handle detailed qualitative data certainly points to the potential for utilising these capabilities in areas and roles other than those working with quantitative data. His suggestion that other people simply *cannot* work in this way (p.176) reinforces how scarce some of these skills can be.

However, there was an element of surprise for some managers who found it a little hard to come to terms with someone who was highly skilled and demonstrably enjoying routine work. For example, where Manager I talked about Leila, the finance data specialist, analysing detailed pricing data for global product sales. Or, where Manager E experienced tension from talking to Xavier about career development, knowing this would take him away from the routine work that he enjoyed. As some of these surprises come from misunderstanding about what 'normal' means for an autistic person, managers could reflect whether their assumptions about how long that person feels comfortable performing that role are shared with that person. This would require them to step back and 'weigh up' what is involved in a specific role, before deciding which tasks they could allocate to an autistic employee. Where someone's liking for repetition plays out as wanting to stay in the same or similar role, those tasked with developing intelligent and skilled autistic people into leadership positions need to consider the possibility they may approach their career development with different values and different timescales from neurotypicals. This was certainly expressed by some of the autistic people in this investigation, for example Joseph (p.198) talking about not wanting to ever manage people or Colin (p.211) being happy to stick at a routine task for far longer than his colleagues. Additionally, managers could question if they actually do need to change an AS employee's perception that their routine tasks or job are boring, a tactic job crafting studies have suggested can make these more palatable for neurotypical employees (Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski 2013).

Another role yielding interesting strengths was Tom's, who was the only autistic person working in a job with some elements of managerial work. It is also the kind of role which has frequently been noted as unsuited to AS employees on account of their difficulties with social interactions (Muller et al 2003; Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008; Krieger et al

2012). However, roles in the lower tiers of leadership pipelines are often fairly mechanistic requiring strong planning and organising competencies and perhaps less of the soft skills that have been feted as desirable for career progression in managerial roles (Giusti 2008; Wolosky 2008; Nilsson 2010; Marks & Scholarios 2008). If employers identify and make explicit these distinctions, the choices autistic people have in their own career progression could be extended.

9.4.3. Exploiting these strengths

Just like physically disabled people, there is always potential that autistic employees want to compensate for their disability, especially where there is a poor inclusion climate which does not seek to understand difference, nor where differences are spoken about in an informed and positive way. A cause of concern is that adverse effects may be even greater if those working around autistic people, including of course their managers, do not understand that someone may be working this hard, or sticking at a boring job, purely to negate these effects. The examples where managers talked about 'model' and 'low maintenance' employees (p.170) certainly show there are unintentional and negative consequences for autistic people, particularly where managers downplay the fact that autistic people are different in distinctive ways, much of which they do not fully understand. There is also a risk that working in these ways will come at the expense of an employee's wellbeing, shown where managers reported their employees are driven to work so hard that this is sometimes accompanied by dips in attendance as a form of recovery. Or in contrast, where someone comes to work when they are not well enough or in other situations where managers would expect them to stay home. Employers place a high value upon someone's hardworking work habits (Bracey 2006; Durrani & Tariq 2012) and if they automatically equate autistic people with a propensity to work hard and for long hours, they could be tempted to employ them for this, rather than the more positive interpretations of professionalism and reliable timekeeping (McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Branine 200; Jackson 2009) arrived at by managers in this investigation.

Most of the AS employees interviewed worked in semi-skilled roles where an eye for detail is valued and all involved routine and repetitious tasks. Despite this, their managers almost universally placed them as having higher IQ than their team mates, and a troubling reality therefore is that many more autistic people will be working in roles beneath their intellectual capabilities, echoing the findings reported of 'mal-employment' and underemployment (Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015). These findings also resonate with those of Richards (2012; 2015); Krieger et al (2012), either in the form of being trapped in low skilled, uninteresting or unpleasant roles, or perhaps being allocated a greater proportion of such tasks than peers. A further observation, in regard to these preferences for routine, is that as technological change driven by artificial intelligence eliminates repetitive tasks within both high and low skill

levels, AS employees who have found a good match with their skills in such roles may become disadvantaged and disproportionately more so than people who are not autistic.

Some managers were unsure that allocating routine tasks to an AS employee might actually be mutually beneficial and so avoided doing so. More generally, other managers may not stop to consider one way or the other that allocating these kinds of tasks would have any impact at all. If so, they will remain unaware that placing their autistic employees in these kinds of roles could also create adverse outcomes. In contrast, some autistic people will be much more certain that simply being at work is difficult, making it unsurprising that many have made deliberate decisions to accept part time work at skill levels lower than their qualifications and intellect would predict (Griffith et al 2011; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014). Whilst some may have 'freely' chosen to do, for others this is likely to have been from a more considered and deliberate decision to offset difficult working environments, knowing they will not be able to meet productivity standards or fit easily into these norms. Viewed more critically these 'choices' create exclusionary outcomes, including having an effortful working life and enduring disparities in pay and status compared to their neurotypical counterparts. Certainly, there was a contrast in this investigation between most of the employees who worked in low-grade administrative jobs and their managers and HR specialists who worked in far higher graded jobs.

9.4.4. Exceptional talents

No one with the kind of exceptional abilities in music, art or photographic memory noted by Happe and Vital (2009) emerged in this investigation. This is unsurprising given these are rare in the autistic population (Rimland 1978) and highly unlikely to surface in this exploration of people working largely around standardised tasks, which were certainly not viewed as creative roles. The closest example of these kinds of abilities was Callum, who was the only person rated as exceptional, without reservation, by his manager. Callum is an engineer working in a role which he considered matched his skills very well, which in effect means his AS characteristics are working for, rather than against, him. Such matches are uncommon raising questions as to how managers react when they do *not* notice their employees have preferences which could be used in a specific role. The potential for autistic strengths can so easily be lost and represents the unintentional discrimination experienced by some autistic people in this investigation, rather than a situation where they are deliberately victimised or treated unfairly.

Clearly organisations are not vehicles for indulging anyone with their special interest or passions, yet managers could highlight to their talent specialists they have AS people with exceptional talents or specialist knowledge that may be underused. If managers cannot use skills to suit preferences, then perhaps those further up the organisation with wider sight of opportunities and changing skill needs could channel these talents

productively, as Friedrichs and Shaugnessy (2015) showed is possible in their work with talented autistic students. A further observation about autistic people with exceptional talents is that media coverage frequently portrays these people as a little 'odd', as though it is not possible to be autistic and at the same time 'normal' or even just successful. Although coverage is moving towards showing that more ordinary autistic people can have success, managers are unlikely to be easily convinced that employing someone with these qualities yet with a recognised disability will be straightforward.

9.4.5. Section summary

This section has shown that if managers want to use these strengths then they must consider many variables including what they think a person may be capable of, the kind of work they want to do as well as the actual specification of the role. Of course, these are all variables to be juggled in many manager-employee relationships but are made particularly more complex in the AS condition. Thinking about these managers' observations about their autistic employees' strengths in work ethic and detail has highlighted the fine line between wanting to honour someone's work preferences and unintentionally worsening their career outcomes. Many of these considerations require a consideration of what is classed as 'normal' in working life, thus the impact of these socio-cultural forces is next explored.

9.5. Duality

Managers noticed these same qualities could sometimes create problematic situations, synonymous with the duality earlier discussions have identified as key in understanding this hidden condition. Socio-relational accounts of disability have emphasised what confers disability rather than strength, lacking detailed consideration of how strengths and weaknesses can coexist. To develop further insight about how these dualities are perceived from a manager's perspective, the following section explores situations where managers noticed these in the same person. This is particularly the case for the perceptions that managers drew about detail, honesty and directness and flexibility, reflected in their placing on the continuum (Figure 7.1) and the contingencies identified. These are discussed below.

9.5.1. Constructions of directness, detail and flexibility depend upon job role and situational context

On the whole, managers' observations about how direct their autistic employees could be were positive, supporting accounts from neurodiversity advocates (Goldstein-Hode 2015) where this is celebrated as being a unique attribute in how AS individuals interact with others. Managers viewed this directness as helpful and somewhat quirky, by referring to the lightness that can come when someone says out loud what other people are only

thinking in awkward situations. These observations support the '*idiosyncratic humour*' (Krieger et al 2012:143) has noted, although her conclusions were based upon employees' not managers' perspectives. Both the managers and the autistic employees also indicated this bluntness meant they had a tendency to speak about difficult matters that others would avoid, which is potentially another valuable attribute. Although directness is not listed as one of the skills the literature review has shown employers value, there will be occasions where this capacity to 'cut through the 'noise', or to circumvent overly political considerations of the benefits and drawbacks of a particular idea or process, could be advantageous to organisations.

Thinking about what might offset these positive outcomes and returning to the line manager's role, someone's directness is more likely to be accepted and valued where they are known well to their manager and immediate team, or like Callum (p.182), to their established customers, as those involved will have seen for themselves and potentially benefited from this approach. However, managers and autistic employees were clear that this directness might also disrupt working relationships. Where others do not know the individual well, perhaps where they have recently joined the team as a new recruit or where a new line manager is assigned to an existing team, this style may become more problematic. Workplaces change in that managers change roles and people join or leave teams, changes which represent structural barriers to communications. Previous chapters have identified knowledge about autism and understanding of how autistic people experience work is very low, reinforcing the need to embed and maintain knowledge about AS across all parts of an organisation not just between that manager, that team and that person. This matter is addressed in section 9.10 of this discussion.

Neither speaking up about troublesome situations or being blunt in personal and sensitive matters are likely to be helpful in promoting career and work experiences. Of course, these findings do not mean that it is only autistic people that would respond in this way, many neurotypical people may do much the same, depending upon the '*normative expectations*' (Vincent and Wapshott 2014) within their organisations, as well as their neurology. It is certainly not the case that an employee has to be autistic to disengage from impression management actions or refrain from conversations and tactics that would count as politicking. However, these kinds of activities have been assessed to be key skills for management and leadership roles (Mintzberg 1985; Ferris et al 2007) and generically in roles requiring social influence (Bing et al 2011). It is possible that this literal and direct style, that does not appear to flex to seniority considerations, will mean autistic people find career progression pathways somewhat more difficult to navigate than their neurotypical counterparts. All other things being equal, this may contribute further to disparity in career outcomes and exclusion.

Revisiting the managers' accounts where they noticed someone's high level of detail, show they did not always construe this as a strength. Managers J and D talked about how irritating it was, either to themselves or their team members when they noticed how others reacted to Aaron and Tim's day to day conversations (p.183). Gavin was well aware that whilst his affinity for fine detail is an extremely useful ability in his proofreading job, there will be times this will unintentionally annoy his colleagues.

Managers placed someone being inflexible mostly as problematic, feeling also that there were times when it could be strength, as where Tom's insistence on routine (pp.187/8) was interpreted as good customer service. Manager C's interpretation of inflexibility was to value Derek's strength (p.189) who by repeating the same phrase calmed down a distressed patient. These interpretations that being inflexible can be both strength and problematic do not suggest managers view autistic people as automatically disabled, instead that they regard inflexibility as being useful in some parts of some jobs. Similarly, customer service is frequently associated with good verbal communication and patient care with empathy, areas that employers complain are in short supply (Peate 2015; Wilson et al 2014). Yet these examples show that dealing with customers or patients does not always need such high levels of empathy or excellent communication skills, providing an alternative interpretation that being skilled can mean someone who is consistent and conscientious in their approach to work.

9.5.2. Social interaction

The findings regarding social interaction were the most puzzling of all those in this investigation, in that managers reported a very wide range of interpretations. Sometimes managers felt these preferences for ways of talking and interacting with others were positive, for example where Manager C saw Sharon's lack of empathy as a strength, even though empathy is almost always viewed as essential in caring roles. Yet he also felt this to be problematic (p.196). Manager H's view that Colin's aversion to office gossip and avoiding much of the day to day socialising was beneficial was perhaps because she could accept that Colin was different. Colin and Jack both felt their preferences for avoiding social interaction were perfectly 'normal' and not something their managers or their colleagues should be unduly concerned about. However, the fact that so many of these managers, mostly who sought to be tolerant and inclusive, felt that their employees operated counter to their own views as to what is 'nice', 'natural' or 'normal', makes it very likely that these norms will disadvantage autistic people.

Every manager interviewed noticed that their autistic employees found it difficult to be as social as their teammates and customers expected and that working around other people causes them difficulty of some kind. This is consistent with the views of the autistic interviewees and the studies which have shown autistic people feel the kind of social interaction required in the workplace is difficult, exhausting and puzzling. Their

puzzlement reflects the double empathy problem (Milton 2012) where autistic people describe their misunderstanding of everyday situations such as those that have come to light in tribunals. The findings have shown that these misunderstandings are deeply connected to typical ways of working, which in themselves are related to the specific valuations of skill, perhaps more so than any of the other areas.

To understand more about the disabling aspect of social interaction necessitates discussion of what it is about workplaces that create the difficulties these managers noticed in their autistic employees.

9.5.3. Disabling places or disabling people?

The accounts managers gave of autistic people reacting badly to exposure to bright lights, noisy call centres or open plan offices concur with the descriptions autistic people have provided as to how hard these environments are (Richards 2015; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015; Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008). Managers F, D and G were all talking about people working in open plan or call centre environments, reflective of organising practices that seek efficiency. Cost considerations have been shown to dominate over quality of workflow concerns, even in academic environments where knowledge sharing is purported to be valued highly (Baldry and Barnes 2012) and so, where work does *not* seem to need quiet environments, it is likely to be even harder for managers to make accommodations for hypersensitivities.

Turning to what else might be happening in contemporary workplaces, the kinds of team meetings and project reviews mentioned by the managers in this investigation are very common. Often these are spaces where many people talk at once, creating a disorganised and frenetic climate that AS employees may experience adversely because they find it hard to handle multiple confusing tones and voices, or because they find it hard to pick up on the background chatter. Sociability and making 'small talk' are frequently promoted and valued on the assumption that the working environment will be better, possibly even more productive, if people are engaging with each other and appearing to enjoy their work. Alternatively, environments may be much quieter and managed with norms which govern more politely how people get 'airtime'. Whatever norms exist in such spaces, attending and being part of such meetings in particularly social 'ways' are taken for granted assumptions in many organisations and by most managers.

Manager A's observation of Tom's difficulty in socialising after hours with the other professionals as part of the environmental auditing role he took on is interesting, in that it demonstrates how this type of socialising is often felt essential to the smooth running of day to day working life. Another implication here is that celebratory occasions such as office parties, or team away days and networking events, all of which demand social

interaction over and above the job itself, are unlikely to fit easily with the ways that feel comfortable to AS employees. In contrast, many people expect these to happen and feel they can be fun, or perhaps as a reward from their day to day responsibilities. Given that there are often implicit requirements to attend such events, these demands can create hidden inequalities, simply by making it difficult for autistic people who want to take part, yet feel they have no choice. Al Ariss et al (2013) has noted how effortful it is for someone to act differently from their natural ethnic identity and this investigation indicates this is also likely to be the case for an autistic person seeking to fit into a neurotypical workplace. To avoid compromising organisational inclusion aims, managers need to consider quite carefully and deliberately whether or not an autistic person does need to be involved in all of the day to day social spaces and forums, balancing this with the recognised benefits of such activities in building team cohesion, role and organisational learning. Most of these managers worked in close proximity to their employees and met or spoke to them most days. However, this will not always be the case in other organisations, making it possible that AS employees will experience discomfort when their managers are not around to notice it. All these observations reinforce the key role line managers play in an autistic employee's experiences.

It is unclear whether difficulties come directly from the effects of noise and lighting levels in some workspaces or whether they come from social interaction with other people. Working out complex social meanings has been noted in both clinical (Frith 2008; Vermeulen 2015) and employment-based studies (Muller et al 2003; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004) as well as more specific problems with '*getting jokes*' (Richards 2015:11). Whichever is the cause, these findings reveal that noise and social interaction are poorly understood by managers and a more nuanced understanding of these difficulties would improve matters for both managers and autistic employees. Noting these effects but not knowing their cause, also reinforces the need to challenge taken for granted assumptions about what is 'normal' in a working space, so that they can better appreciate how manipulating these areas could promote greater inclusivity. At the same time, managers need to remain mindful that autistic people differ from each other, meaning that not everyone will be inevitably disabled by these norms.

9.6. Applying competency frameworks for autistic people

Chapter 7 closed by suggesting that the behaviours managers identified in their autistic employees could be integrated into or used as an alternative competency framework. It is interesting to speculate that some of these areas; work ethic, high detail and directness in style, do not fit neatly into either the hard or soft classifications which HR specialists commonly use, which may be why they do not feature in competency frameworks as such. Skill is an expansive and ambiguous concept (Lafer 2004; Grugulis and Lloyd 2010) meaning that employers may easily miss areas that are not immediately

labelled or placed as skill. Expansiveness and definitional issues aside, the following section explores how the explicit behaviours specified in competency frameworks could impact the decision managers make about performance and career development in regard to their autistic employees.

9.6.1. Team working or Team contribution?

The descriptors relating to teamworking from organisation 5's competency framework refer to displaying empathy, seeing others' perspectives, being engaged and fitting into day-to-day interactions with colleagues. Many of these are behaviours that managers have noted can be problematic for AS employees, making it hard for managers to rate an AS employee as a 'good' team worker. From this long list, just one statement, that of team contribution, is a descriptor that an AS person could fit into easily. For clarity this is placed at the top of the list and shown in bold type (Annex 15). Considering how fervently the autistic people interviewed wanted to fit into and contribute to their teams against the reality that frameworks like this make it hard for managers to formally assess that they do, this is problematic for both managers and employees. Thus, it becomes important to recognise that there is potential for those using these frameworks to make discriminatory valuations of capacities. Teamworking is an expansive and ambiguous category covering all manner of behaviours and attributes (Bedwell et al 2012), which provides an opportunity for HR specialists to use phrases such as 'team contribution' or 'team integration' rather than teamworking. These would better capture the contribution that an AS employee can make to the team, in response to the reality that these documents represent multiple interpretations as to what is considered desirable and effective behaviours.

9.6.2. Flexibility

Despite making some positive interpretations of someone's inflexibility, employees who lack flexibility represent challenges for their managers, who pointed out how deeply locational flexibility through hotdesking or career progression was embedded in their organisations. The requirements for functional flexibility through changed technologies emerged clearly from managers in both organisations 1 and 5, exemplified by the HR manager in organisation 1 (p.200) viewing flexibility as '*within our notion of skill*', somewhat naively assuming that variety is automatically what her staff want. Organisation 5, undergoing significant technological change, also made it clear how this will increase expectations that everyone will be become even more flexible.

Looking in more detail at the competency framework used by organisation 5, some of the statements specify flexibility, describing this as an individual's willingness to embrace and accept change; "*be open to take on different roles*". When this statement is considered against the preferences for routine work discussed in Chapter 7, it is apparent

that this behavioural descriptor of flexibility represents a standard which is disproportionately more difficult for autistic people as they seek to adapt to changes in location or processes. This discomfort with change can also apply to having to work with different colleagues or managers, another variation likely to happen where, like organisation 5, peaks and troughs in demand cause managers to switch people around often at very short notice; *'literally we have to stop x and start working on y'* (p.209). This context causes Gavin to worry about the impact this continual *'speed of change'* caused by digitisation of services could have upon him, echoing the reality that anyone who cannot work as flexibly as expected will experience poorer employment outcomes than someone who can (Foster and Wass 2012).

Other statements equate flexibility to improving processes, where people need to be creative in generating better ways of working, for example *"put aside preconceptions and consider ideas on their own merit"*. This statement does not appear particularly disadvantageous for AS employees, who in contrast may not find this as difficult as their colleagues on account of the emotional detachment and logic considerations that clinical accounts have shown autistic people make (Dvash 2014; Brosnan, Lewton and Ashwin 2016) in their decision making. Employers could perhaps utilise these capacities for detachment and objectivity to facilitate useful ideas for improvements, even if as the previous section has shown, these may be articulated directly and somewhat insensitively. This would certainly represent an opportunity for the discretionary and multidimensional aspects to full inclusion mooted (Winters 2014; Nishii 2013) in a very deliberate strategy to seek out and use diverse thinking perspectives.

The findings that some managers like H and J, questioned whether if it would be fair or even possible for their autistic staff to comply with these requirements, supports criticisms that competency-based HRM systems specify behaviours that some employees, particularly disabled people will find difficult (Hall and Wilton 2011; Ajzen and Fischbein 1980). It is likely these descriptors of the skills and behaviours required by organisation 5 have been developed without consideration that some behaviours are not within some individual's capacities. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this present investigation to identify precisely which statements would definitely disadvantage AS people, some of the behaviours classified as effective, for example; *"be constructive in raising issues with managers about implemented changes"* or *"taking initiative to suggest ideas for improvement, sharing this feedback with others in a constructive manner"* imply ways of working which may be counter to how AS people work. Certainly, what one person means by constructive can differ from another making this statement prone to problems of interpretation. These different interpretations are magnified where neurodiverse and neurotypical people are concerned. For ease of reference both these examples are shown with bold outline at the bottom of the table in Annex 15.

The critical point is that managers use these descriptions to make decisions about performance and career progression and may be unwittingly discriminating in decisions they take fairly regularly, given these are so much a part of organisational life. Some managers may seek to control their autistic employees, so that they behave in a certain way, a 'bending into shape' which creates tensions, given the ways that they work are often so distinctive from neurotypicals. It is certainly possible that some managers may feel pressurised to mould employees into organisationally accepted ways of working and interacting with others, both to protect their employees and to make their own lives a little easier where they operate under fixed systems and processes. This investigation recognises that knowledge is constructed at both macro and micro levels (Cunliffe 2008), in that these managers have to 'push back' upon these macro-level organisationally prescribed competency frameworks, whilst at the micro level they are required to make day to day assessments of their employees based on what they see.

9.6.3. Employees' perspective

These findings are showing that autistic employees appear to have differential approaches to career progression, bluntness in style and find intense social interaction uncomfortable. In combination, this could mean an autistic person is less ready to engage with line managers in discussing and describing their performance in what is frequently, although not universally, an intensive and stressful conversation usually carried out face to face. Assumptions that autistic people will find it as straightforward as their neurotypical colleagues to prepare and take part in their appraisal meeting should be challenged, as employees may find the requirement to justify or negotiate performance ratings more difficult, whether this is in writing or simply spoken about. The possible source of inequality from participating in what is a highly prescribed aspect of working life is apparent, echoing the unintentional discrimination arising from HRM policies designed without this minority in mind.

9.6.4. Section summary

It appears that managers see strengths in their autistic employees, yet problematic situations remain, which come from other people, working environments, organisationally valued notions expressed in competency frameworks and in everyday conversations about teamworking, productivity and flexibility. These are all features of organisational life that managers have to respond to and represent the structural impositions identified by social relational approaches to disability.

The following section explores further the examples where managers have been able to use the skills of their autistic employees, seeking to understand the constraints that they face in doing so.

9.7. Utilising skills

9.7.1. Sculpting jobs

This investigation found only one example where deliberately and substantial crafting of someone's role took place, occurring where Manager A allowed Tom to swap some of his daily management tasks with greeting customers entering the restaurant (p.211). The role was changed not because no-one else was willing or available to do this, in fact the other team members expressed their relief from not having to take their turn at what many considered an unpopular task. This manager was also able to use Tom's interest in environmental matters on company audit work, another change made following his request to discuss what he wanted to do, rather than making the environmental changes which legislation prescribes. Tom's proactivity is consistent with job crafting studies (Petrou et al 2012; Tims, Bakker and Derks 2014; Lyons 2008) which note that more often it is employees rather than managers who craft their own roles. Other managers also talked about giving their autistic employees additional tasks, usually those they felt their other team members would probably not want to do. The findings indicate autistic employees are more likely to take on rather than avoid the unpalatable tasks identified in crafting studies (Tims, Bakker and Derks 2015). These choices represent another work preference that managers are likely to find unusual, if they do not know what is behind these choices.

Some managers did attempt to harness the strengths they recognised in their employees, although staying very much within the broad confines of the roles. These ranged from altering communication preferences for their employees, Manager D using face to face and Manager L using written, acknowledging he could do this '*wherever we can*'. Another of Manager D's employees was Aaron, who she asked to perform tasks which used his strong detail preferences for mutual benefit. Some, but not all of the AS employees expressed their preferences for written rather than telephone communications, highlighting the unsuitability of working in noisy environments with a high degree of telephone work such as call centres. Employers could consider how these preferences, as well as some of the acknowledged difficulties in talking with other people, could be used to deliver customer service through on-line, 'real-time' help or chat, rather than face to face.

None of the managers or the HR specialists talked about or reflected upon the possibility that they might deliberately combine neurodiverse and neurotypical team members to improve the team's output. This is consistent with the literature which is also sparse with examples of deliberately combining neurodiverse and neurotypical skills, although Morris, Begel and Weidemann (2015) have shown technology companies can use the differential and superior abilities that autistic people have. Perhaps managers did not craft roles

because most of the roles had little scope for changing, like Manager F who described Keith's role as akin to a '*production line*'.

Findings show that job role is a strong shaper of manager's perceptions as well as employees' satisfaction with their job, thus the fact that strong crafting was an under-used approach is particularly concerning as studies have shown how changing the content and reach of jobs is of particular benefit for disabled employees (Demetriou 2014). A further observation is that expectations that employees should be flexible abound in most organisations, and so it is somewhat ironic therefore that managers do not appear to show the same degree of flexibility in more innovative approaches to modifying roles. In considering why a manager's scope for extensive job crafting might be limited, it is important to look critically into equalities legislation. Paradoxically the law steers people to be treated the same, rather than as different, which shapes manager's views they need to be fair when allocating tasks. A further constraint is the embedded notion of the '*ideal*' worker, which is also a reality faced by managers who wish to adapt roles in more creative ways.

9.7.2. Limits of legislation

Managers in these organisations allowed their autistic employees extra time and provided frequent breaks, in the face of knowing these adjustments would probably reduce someone's productivity, as well as impact upon their own personal performance ratings. This is bound to be concerning for a team leader who knows that performance will be measured at both team and individual level, as unless the performance of that person's team is also adjusted for, the team may react negatively from these adjustments to productivity. This finding is common to studies of physical disabled people and consistent with the dominant ableist discourse of productivity (Mik Meyer 2016). They also echo criticisms that legislative prescriptions are ineffective as they are based on a model which provides only limited protection to disabled employees (Oliver 2004). Feeling pressurised to maintain performance, either of a team or an individual, creates an impact upon managers which is another outcome that the law does not explicitly protect against.

Most managers in this study gave their autistic employees notice of imminent changes to their work as legislation requires, which done thoroughly involves explaining to the individual the impact of the change and then repeating this process to the rest of their team a little later. This 'doubling-up' requires that managers expend additional time and efforts and is very likely to impact negatively upon the team's productivity or performance levels.

Considering further the constraints managers face in making legislative accommodations, Managers F and C reported difficulties from moving desks in the large open plan call centre and from changing light bulbs in a hospital corridor. Both managers are employed

in large, heavily regulated and bureaucratic organisations, one being a government agency and the other a health trust. In the government agency, Manager F was able to move Keith's desk to a quieter area, whereas in the NHS Trust the lights could not be dimmed to suit Derek or Sharon, working night shifts on the ward. Organisational restrictions are structural matters and show how even where legislation dictates adjustments have to be made, managers may struggle to secure accommodations which will help.

Noting the findings established earlier in Chapter 7 which have showed how important job role is in shaping managers' perceptions, it seems reasonable to assume that trained and informed managers would consider transferring an autistic person out of a role where working environment are like those above, rather than being reactive and merely moving someone's desk. This may not always be possible if there are no alternative roles available, which was the explanation offered by Manager F citing ongoing headcount reductions. However, given that more than 60,000 people were employed in organisation 5, other possibilities could be he is too remote from talent planning and redeployment activities to unlock access to other more suitable roles. Even if they do know about wider opportunities, they may be so focused upon their day to day management work and efforts to meet demanding performance targets, that time pressures prevent them exploring and expediting such developmental matters further. Another outcome from lacking the time to pursue transfers especially if they can see that this would help someone, is they could become somewhat disheartened and give up trying. A further constraint is that of interpreting legislation, in that the law uses very generic terminology regarding reasonable adjustments and does not specify how managers are to interpret these.

Whatever a manager's reason is for not pursuing job transfers for people working in jobs they know to be difficult, they are likely to find it challenging to know what to do for the best, if they do not understand why and how autistic people experience working life as difficult.

9.7.3. Section summary

While some managers did deliberately shape roles to accommodate strengths, this was not as extensive as the findings connecting job role to positive perceptions would suggest. Thus, the finding that they make legislatively required adjustments rather than flexing roles is important. Earlier discussions have established that one of the consequences of poor knowledge about autistic people is that employers are only just beginning to understand that autistic strengths can be used outside of stereotyped industries, so perhaps this is not too surprising. Other explanations for this imbalance are that managers may view legislatively prescribed adjustments as quicker and easier to make,

rather than considering how to creatively change roles, or may simply not recognise that job crafting is a strategy at their disposal.

These findings suggest that managers of autistic people could consider job crafting more actively and extend opportunities. One suggestion is to follow Bizzi (2017) who notes that the networks and contacts that an employee has can be catalysts for creating subtle changes within a role. By thinking about the expectations and needs of others outside the immediate team, perhaps suppliers and customers, managers may also locate such opportunities for their employees. Managers could also act as role models, crafting their own roles to create positive effects for both employee and the organisation (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). This is a strategy which has potential for mutually beneficial outcomes, provided managers can reconcile any tensions they have in negotiating what feels to them like an appropriate balance when redistributing various tasks within their teams. Taken together with the findings from Chapter 7 that AS employees are often overqualified for roles, it may also be the case that managers could exchange the more tedious but important aspects of their job, mindful too that doing so would open them up to claims of unintentional victimisation, which may not necessarily come from their employee.

9.8. Challenges for managers

9.8.1. Ignorance of socio – cultural forces

Earlier discussions have noted that Callum, who was rated as an exceptional performer, worked in a role which utilised his strengths well. Additionally, his desk was in a quiet environment, an observation which highlights the significance of the socio-cultural factors identified in the theoretical framework. The previous section has also showed that simply being at work and interacting with other people in working environments which are 'typical' (at least according to valuations of skills that appear to favour neurotypicals), combine to have detrimental effects upon autistic employees. This necessitates returning to the important theme emerging from the findings, which is that most of the managers and HR specialists did not recognise when or how much socio-cultural forces were shaping their employees' difficulties. This finding lies at the heart of the problem, in that the additionality (Reindal 2008) identified in social relational approaches to workplace disability, points to the absolute need to know how these shape experiences of disabled people. Another example comes from listening to the explanation given by HR specialists as to why disclosure is low. They appear to prefer the surface level explanation that many people have not yet been diagnosed, rather than the more likely one, which is that they have downplayed the worries autistic people have about being labelled and stigmatised if they disclose.

This ignorance, perhaps naivety, was also evident when examining what managers did *not* say in talking about disabling effects in workspaces, in that not a single mention was made that these environments might actually have been too noisy or in any way unsuitable for their autistic employees. Managers were assuming that everyday environments suit everyone, despite being very clear in their responses that their autistic employees, who are very much the minority in most workplaces, find them problematic. They did not always connect the source of these disabling effects to the simple fact of working in teams with social demands. Manager D talking about the '*normal stuff going on the office he can't cope with*', indicates that ignorance of the socio-cultural forces makes life more difficult for autistic people. This ignorance could also impact managers directly by rendering them unconfident in pursuing the adjustments that will work best for their autistic employees. Where HR specialists are also unaware how much accommodations could help or where autistic people avoid asking, further disparity for AS people is created from difficult working environments.

Returning to the bodily aspects of being autistic, the theoretical framework has identified how important it is for managers to understand the issues related to managing someone with a hidden condition. It was certainly apparent that managers and HR specialists felt this invisibility was a major source of the difficulties they experienced. Autistic employees reinforced this lack of understanding is because others cannot see how they are different, for example Colin, who knew that looking the same as other people means they cannot appreciate how difficult work can be, or Gavin thinking others will say he is exaggerating the effects of being autistic (both p.160). The following section discusses how invisibility shapes managers' experiences, challenges and perceptions.

9.8.2. Believing someone is autistic, believing in accommodations

Manager F referred to the comparison that people make between someone who drives a car to work and someone who comes to work in a wheelchair, as a way of explaining why it can be hard for them to understand that an autistic person like Keith needed accommodations. While most people can readily understand that a ramp allows a wheelchair user to negotiate steps, they are perhaps less keen to accept someone with a hidden condition finds it hard to work in a noisy environment or needs extra time for change. Low tolerance for making accommodations for someone who does not look disabled was also recognised by the reasonable adjustment specialists and the experienced HR Manager, who had all heard managers question why neurodiverse employees needed any accommodations at all and knew they were very likely to resent the time these took up. Taken together with the difficulty, highlighted by the rainbow analogy in Chapter 2, of understanding something that cannot be seen, the risk that managers will withhold accommodations increases. This has particular relevance for autistic people who are already inhibited from disclosing through fears of stigmatisation

or discrimination (Sarrett 2017; Morris, Begel and Wiedermann et al 2015). Not accommodating is likely to set up a vicious circle, exacerbating their employees' difficulties, as well as managers' subsequent interpretations of what autistic people can and cannot do.

An interesting observation about how others react to autistic people being offered accommodations comes from considering what happens to those who wear glasses at work, which in effect means they are accommodating the disabling impact of sight restriction. Glasses are unlikely to be seen as assistive equipment or accommodations, like the hat or headphones an autistic person wears, because someone wearing them does so of their own volition. Instead, this represents what is 'normal' and mirrors precisely the distinctions between who is disabled and who is 'normal', which are entirely socially constructed as Shakespeare and Watson (2002) have suggested. Not being aware of these distinctions is a very visible reminder of how hard it is to achieve full inclusion, especially when people feel they have to conform to the values and norms of a dominant group (Nishii 2013).

This study did not explore reactions from other team members to working alongside an autistic person. However, consider what might happen when, for example, a manager decides to move an AS employee to the quietest part of the office, if this also happens to be the most attractive, perhaps next to a window with good views and natural light. Not only can this stir up reactions from other team members because they resent the special treatment autistic people receive, but they could also think that the accommodations requested are odd. In organisation 5, where Keith wears a hat to minimise noise disruption, he is marked out as different *only* because no one else is allowed to in this large somewhat old-fashioned bureaucratic organisation. Keith would blend in much more easily in less rigid workplaces. This is a small example but shows just how subjective the concept of 'reasonable' is when talking about reasonable adjustments. Subjective views like this about what is 'typical' could mean that managers, especially if inexperienced, may find it challenging to decide exactly what is and is not reasonable when making legislative adjustments.

It is also interesting to think about the oddities that managers described in someone like Colin, who did not want to take lunch or breaks with his teammates. In a way these could be considered as reasonable adjustments 'engineered' by the person themselves, realising their managers might not think to offer these. Exacerbating these subjective views and decisions is the spectrum nature of AS and autism, which creates another challenge for managers, who have to weigh up the precise nature of what will be helpful for any particular individual before they can be confident which accommodations will help. Improved understanding as to what being autistic is means managers could recognise a far wider range of adjustments outside legislation which would protect against these

effects, particularly in regard to crafting someone's job role or reallocating tasks within that role.

All the employees in this investigation knew they were entitled to reasonable adjustments, but not all took them up, perhaps considering the reactions this may create. For example, Joseph the technical data specialist who tried to cope by 'manning up' (p.159) and refusing support to help the noise disruption from other people talking. Knowing the law treats an autistic person as disabled and in need of accommodations is something of a double-edged sword. This is because on the one hand accommodations can help, but if that person sees themselves as neurodiverse, rather than disabled (Kapp et al 2013), they may feel inadequate, a feeling common to those experienced by many employees with disabilities. These feelings are likely to be exacerbated immensely when they hear other people question why they receive these accommodations.

Low disclosure rates, together with low employment rates, for autistic people make it likely that most managers will not yet have knowingly worked with or managed an AS individual. Additionally, some people will not know they are autistic (Aggarwal and Angus 2015; Hickey, Crabtree and Stott 2018) and whilst they may well have privately felt that changing some aspects of their work would be helpful, they will not have reached the stage of requesting accommodations. This means that managers will not be readily able to fall back on prior experiences of managing an autistic person, making it further unlikely employers will be proactively able to adjust environments to enable rather than limit the contributions that AS employees can make, for example modifying lights or considering tweaking tasks or jobs. It is interesting that the focus group of HR specialists in organisation 1 could offer only one example of a time when they had to make reasonable adjustments for autistic person, which was in a selection, not a promotion interview, suggesting that their experiences and knowledge are limited in this area.

9.8.3. Managing performance and misunderstanding performance difficulties

All the managers in this study knew their employees were autistic, yet some still found it hard to handle the unusual behaviours they noticed, attributing this to the fact that they could not easily 'see' someone is autistic. An important finding from Chapter 6 was to show that employers are unsure as to whether autism is an innate condition, creating huge potential for managers to think someone is being deliberately awkward or incompetent, particularly in how they handle social interaction. Managers are then open to temptation to blame autistic employees for issues connected with capabilities or attendance, at the expense of seeking to explore the root causes of adverse performance outcomes. The discussion so far has established that these may be socio-cultural in nature or come from the condition itself. Rather than engage in time consuming

performance discussions, managers may side-line the employees they have labelled as problematic and avoid difficult conversations. Their actions may then be negative rather than positive or neutral, perhaps targeting autistic people when selection decisions are made in future downsizing operations or instigating disciplinary action. These responses reinforce the exclusionary outcomes for AS employees introduced at the outset of this thesis (Baldwin and Costley; NAS 2016; Riddell et al (2010)). Yet another outcome is that managers may be completely wrong in the decisions they make about performance. A good example of this was the major disagreement between Manager A and Tom prior to disclosure, as it reinforces the connections between absence and performance problems when employees are undiagnosed and undisclosed. On the other hand, the performance problem may be genuine, like the nursery assistant who found it nigh on impossible to be as empathetic with the children as the organisation needed her to be in this role, or where Shelley's lack of 'mirroring' (p.196) resulted in conversation that was assessed by her manager as clearly unprofessional.

Where performance issues give managers reason to think someone may be autistic but for whatever reason has not declared this, ethical concerns are raised as to whether it is appropriate for anyone, manager or HR specialist, to decide to confront any employee with their views that they might be autistic or steer them towards a diagnosis. This is the case even though doing so has the potential to be helpful to AS employees who may appreciate such individual consideration (Snyder et al 2010), whether they identify themselves as disabled or not. An autistic person might also construe such interventions as unwanted, insulting or arrogant and an imposition of neurotypical norms through being labelled, illustrating again the difficult choices that managers face in deciding when and how to intervene. Although managers may think that someone's performance or anxiety issues could be because that person 'is' autistic, HR specialists may feel no reason to intervene, or may not be close enough to notice (Evans 2015; Bainbridge 2015). Managers are then left to manage in their own particular ways, resulting in idiosyncratic outcomes which may work for or against their employees and creating further pressures for themselves.

9.8.4. Distinguishing between personality and being autistic

Some of the managers wondered why their employees thought, acted and spoke in particular ways, being unsure if it this was because they were autistic or a facet of their own personality. Neither Manager C or K (p.173) knew if their employees' directness and eagerness to please came directly from being autistic or is a '*personality thing*'. Manager G talked about how effortful it is for her to decide which of these it is, something she feels she has to do before deciding how to react. This constant weighing up, which she refers to as '*overthinking*' (p.180), as to why someone is as they are, represents another complication that managers have to address. Manager C believes that the source of

someone's differences is unimportant until it '*impacts on the job*', which of course for that person is more likely to be an ever present and underlying worry. Knowing they should not connect being autistic directly to disciplinary action might tempt managers to assign problems to someone's personality, using this to justify to themselves why they should not try to change someone's actions. This conflation between personality and being autistic is recognised in the concluding chapter as a limitation of the investigation.

9.8.5. Talking about autistic people with the team

Most of the employees in this investigation had disclosed their condition and so as far as their managers are concerned this is now a socially accepted 'fact'. However, none of the managers said they had told their teams that someone they work with 'is' AS and both they and their managers spoke about the sensitivities in disclosing. Managers' references to tensions from being unable to 'see' someone is disabled could mean they genuinely believe telling others would improve matters for all concerned, supporting findings (Scott et al 2015) that colleagues' understanding is key in positive employment experiences for autistic people. However, someone's medical diagnosis is a private and confidential matter, enshrined in legislative and organisational protocols, making it likely that managers will be further frustrated as they seek to balance their duty of care alongside weighing up whether this will improve understanding or create an unhelpful label. Turning to the practical reality that a manager may deliberately or accidentally breach confidentiality, or indeed may be asked by their autistic employee to tell others, they may become justifiably concerned that labelling someone as disabled could increase that person's anxieties about stigmatisation. Equalities legislation classes autism firmly as a disability, not as a strength, making managers' options in talking about autism quite narrow. It is another manifestation of the limitations of the law in protecting managers of autistic people, not just their employees.

A further observation relevant to disclosure is that some of the managers felt that labelling people as autistic was not necessarily the right thing to do. However, they did not go as far as connecting these feelings to Campbell's view (2008) that disclosure is itself an ableist practice. This may explain why neither they nor any of the HR specialists came anywhere close to criticising current legislation, which requires someone to disclose before accommodations which might help can be secured. If they do disclose, an autistic person may choose to blend into neurotypical ways, or instead speak about what being autistic actually means and in doing so hold onto their neurodiverse identity. It may well be the case that powerful ableist norms exist in these organisations which shape disclosure decisions, and a very practical implication of this is managers will be frustrated because they cannot provide accommodations unless their employees have declared their condition. For managers, who know from their previous experiences that even minor accommodations can help, this is likely to be very hard to accept. Certainly, managers

will struggle to explain to colleagues why someone has particular accommodations, adding weight to the need to understand the bodily aspects of being autistic and not decide that being autistic is purely a socially constructed matter.

9.8.6. Disclosing and developing trust

Managers spoke about the importance of a good working relationship, suggesting if someone lacks trust in their manager, or like Callum and Tom in HR, they are likely to be reluctant to disclose. This places line managers rather than HR as more likely to encourage disclosure. Where trust is not so much the issue, more a pragmatic matter of knowing who to talk to, an autistic person may find that disclosure is a lengthy process especially if the only route is through a distant and devolved HR team as is the norm in many organisations (Bainbridge 2015; Shipton et al 2015). None of the autistic employees in this investigation had shared their condition with their colleagues, contrasting with students in 'younger' environments (Blockmans 2015) who felt disclosing to their peers was an effective approach to building trust. In one way, the decision an autistic person takes to disclose their condition is a very rational one, in that without doing so they cannot formally request workplace accommodations. Similarly, unless they tell their colleagues, they may experience some 'kickback' from people who cannot understand why they need accommodations, as earlier sections have shown. Managers who do wish someone to disclose should consider that this is an important and difficult decision to make, as although an individual knows it is necessary to secure accommodations, they also risk being labelled in a way that feels pejorative, even though, like for most of the people in this investigation, this turns out not to be the case. It is the case that when an autistic person discloses their condition, they know that legislation immediately places them as disabled, and so in the eyes of their managers or employers they will be problematic in some way. Employers should expect that disclosing is a decision which relies heavily on an autistic person trusting their immediate line manager and not one which should be reduced to ticking a box on the annual disability disclosure survey. Unsupportive climates and low trust relationships will increase the likelihood autistic people will keep their condition hidden, reinforcing the association between trust and effective inclusion.

9.8.7. Section summary

Findings show that managers are aware they have to make protective accommodations, most of which involved giving extra time or changing physical working environments. These adjustments can help redress inequalities, by reducing noise and other sensations or can give someone more time to handle change, yet they can also mark a disabled person out as needing special attention and treatment. Managers felt that invisibility made this even more the case for their autistic employees, reflecting the 'trap' of the social model' that Procknow and Rocco (2016:5) have identified. Invisibility makes it

hard for managers to believe autistic people need adjustments and is a major reason that the accommodations that AS people would find helpful are either not asked for, not offered or provided imperfectly. In combination with their organisational remit to meet performance targets underpinned by ableist productivity discourse, invisibility conspires to make managers ineffectual in implementing adjustments. All these outcomes are compounded even further where autistic people are steered away from being open with their managers.

9.9. *Managers and managing*

Central to this thesis are line managers' perceptions and experiences, areas earlier discussions have established are often constrained by structural matters affecting how they operate. However, this investigation recognises that who these managers 'are', termed their '*personhood*' (Archer 2003:165), is also a critical consideration in this study in that the relationship between any employee and their manager is so key to the quality of that person's working life. This section explores further how the individual capacities of managers can shape the quality of the relationships they have with their autistic employees, the actions they take about allocating tasks, making accommodations and judging performance. From a relational perspective to understanding disability these are important areas to consider.

9.9.1. *Individual considerations*

On the whole, managers in this study did step back and reflect upon what might be causing problematic workplace issues, rather than make automatic and pejorative judgements. Reflexivity surfaced, where some like Manager A, (p.184) told me how being involved in this study forced him to think about why and how he judged Tom. During his interview, perhaps because he could reflect outside his day job, Manager F realised that not being able to see Keith's condition was the probable cause of team members' low sympathy as well as his own difficulties as a manager; '*actually, I hadn't considered this right now until now.*' (page 158). Manager M (p.190) also knew he could not be confident in saying precisely flexible or not someone is, recognising that he simply may not have enough knowledge to be definite about this. Sometimes, managers' thinking was less informed, suggesting they can make decisions from their assumptions about what someone would do or say, rather than what they actually know. Manager H spoke about Colin's reaction to office gossip saying she '*didn't think he would have had an opinion on it*'. Guessing at what they think another person may do is expected in this interpretivist study as managers' perceptions are based upon their actual experiences of their employees. It is also possible that managers may be responding only with what they recall from recent events or what they think another team member has said, reducing the accuracy of their accounts.

On the whole managers appeared to appreciate their employees' directness in style and readiness to challenge, welcoming rather than resisting challenges and criticisms. Their responses to the difficulties they noticed were supportive and caring, giving feedback about performance issues usually in a coaching style, although on one occasion Manager G (p.214) used a very directive style. All these responses are closer to those behaviours Parr and Hunter (2014) identify as individual considerations, showing these managers are skilled in deciphering their employees' situations. Managers may not always be as curious or able to appreciate differences like the managers in this investigation, nor always feel they need to improve their knowledge. They will certainly differ in the depth of their connections to autistic people and again in their reflexive capacities (Archer 2003). It is also possible that some will not feel they are responsible for making additional efforts to manage someone, especially if they have not recruited that person and instead abdicate decisions about accommodations and performance to HR. It is also apparent that structural constraints may interfere with a manager who wants to craft someone's job or make helpful accommodations.

Asperger, Kanner and Wing were all clinicians accredited with discovering and labelling autism and AS, deriving their notions about these conditions from the knowledge they acquired from clinical studies. However, Robison (2016) has argued that these notions were also shaped by their own and their colleagues' very personal ideas and values about the human condition. For Wing and Kanner, these came from knowing that differences need to be understood in relation to how someone conforms to societal 'norms'. In contrast, Asperger saw such differences as deviations from what was acceptable, despite recognising strengths in a small minority of his sample. The managers and specialists in this study are not clinicians nor do they have ready access to clinical studies about AS. However, just like these clinicians, they also have their own ideas, values and beliefs about difference which appear in their individual considerations in managing AS employees.

9.9.2. Strategies

It did not appear that managers had any particular strategy to address situations they reported as difficult or where they encountered unusual or unexpected behaviours, either directly themselves, or in relation to others in their teams. In theory, managers can consult and apply established protocols found in competency-based performance management systems, which frequently require them to provide feedback about behaviours as well as outcomes. It is interesting to speculate if existing feedback systems would facilitate such conversations as they are unlikely to contain characteristics like 'obsessive', 'boring you senseless', 'inappropriate'. Yet these were all words managers used to describe how some of the employees in this study were perceived. Even if they did include such descriptions, managers may still feel uncomfortable about

providing such direct feedback as these areas are so close to someone's innate personality characteristics, which they probably feel is unlikely to change, whatever they say.

Turning to how managers could use experts to support their autistic employees, it was interesting that none referred to securing one to one support from specialist advisors, although Scott et al (2015) has shown this is support which autistic people value highly. This may be because studies have discussed how these advisors support people working in very unskilled roles, so even if managers knew they were available, might feel they are not needed. If they do not have access to these experts, then either support needs remain unresolved or managers have to handle these directly. Apart from organising support through occupational health avenues, a challenge for managers is to think about how they could optimise someone's contribution by using their specific skills and knowledge. Friedrichs and Shaugnessy (2015) note teachers can help autistic students identify that their specialist knowledge may be both a strength, where it connects to the academic requirements of their subject, or that others may feel this is irrelevant, uninteresting or sometimes aggravating. This may also be the case in the workplace, making it challenging for managers to find opportunities which allow the exercise of specialist knowledge or interests in such a way that fits with the work and the team rather than distracts or annoys colleagues. The continuum of autistic characteristics identified at the end of Chapter 7 should also support managers by improving their understanding of where and when an autistic person's strengths can be utilised.

The fact that some managers viewed autistic behaviours as unusual, inappropriate or sometimes just not 'normal', shows the importance of allowing them time to explore situations from neurodiverse perspectives. Giving managers access to specialist neurodiverse coaches has potential to do this, improving their chances of being able to handle differences they might not have yet encountered, optimise an autistic person working environment and handle issues created by the wider team's lack of understanding. As it is a form of support that is not visibly directed at an AS person, this coaching can be viewed as a form of accommodation that does not 'mark out' the person like so many accommodations do.

Accepting it is the invisible nature of autism that creates challenges for themselves, as well as their employees, would better place managers to lever accommodations their employees will value, alleviate some of their own challenges and ultimately increase the likelihood that autistic employees will enjoy positive rather than negative employment experiences. A caveat on this guidance is that even where managers can make helpful accommodations, give up some of their own valuable time and resources, tolerate difficulties, act sensitively and preserve confidentiality, powerful workplace norms mean that they cannot be sure others will do the same. They can provide their teams with

useful knowledge about autism yet cannot dictate how people should adapt their behaviours, especially where day to day, people are expected to 'join in' and be sociable with their teammates.

9.10. *Knowledge and awareness*

A final observation about these managers is that even though they work in organisations with established and well-intentioned diversity and inclusion policies, they still appear to be struggling. This is likely to be even more the case in smaller businesses where resources are far less available. The findings from Chapter 6 pointed to the need for far better awareness about autism and about autistic people, not just managers and HR people tasked with legislative compliance. Therefore, whilst this investigation did not set out to explore the workforce wide awareness programmes operated by the six organisations, the following discussion draws upon the findings so far to comment critically upon their potential efficacy.

The first comment is the fact that training about autism was offered to improve the experiences of customers' autistic children in the leisure services organisation and to improve the care of autistic patients in the NHS Trust. This provision is driven by the belief that improving knowledge would benefit their organisations by better understanding of their diverse customer bases. However, none mentioned similar awareness training for managers dealing with autistic employees or applicants, and significantly for managers who had not yet worked with autistic people. This dichotomy in prioritising knowledge for employers is consistent with the weaknesses identified by the government review published as 'Think Autism' (Local Government and Care Partnership Directorate 2016).

Secondly, it is difficult to capture this kind of tacit knowledge about autism and significantly how it varies between individuals, which as this investigation has shown is in short supply. It is also hard to sustain this knowledge, in that when managers leave their role, they take with them their knowledge about autism and about the autistic person they have been managing. However, the learning managers acquire from these situations represents a deeper level of understanding beyond the knowledge provided by organisationally prescribed and legislatively driven training, yet if embedded into awareness programmes would support future managers. Doing so is likely to necessitate many employers revisit the content of their diversity and inclusion programmes.

Thirdly, as younger autistic people enter the workforce, they are more likely than those in this investigation to have disclosed and expect that employers have caught up with some of the more positive sources of knowledge this investigation has shown are available to them. They may also expect employers to understand that being autistic

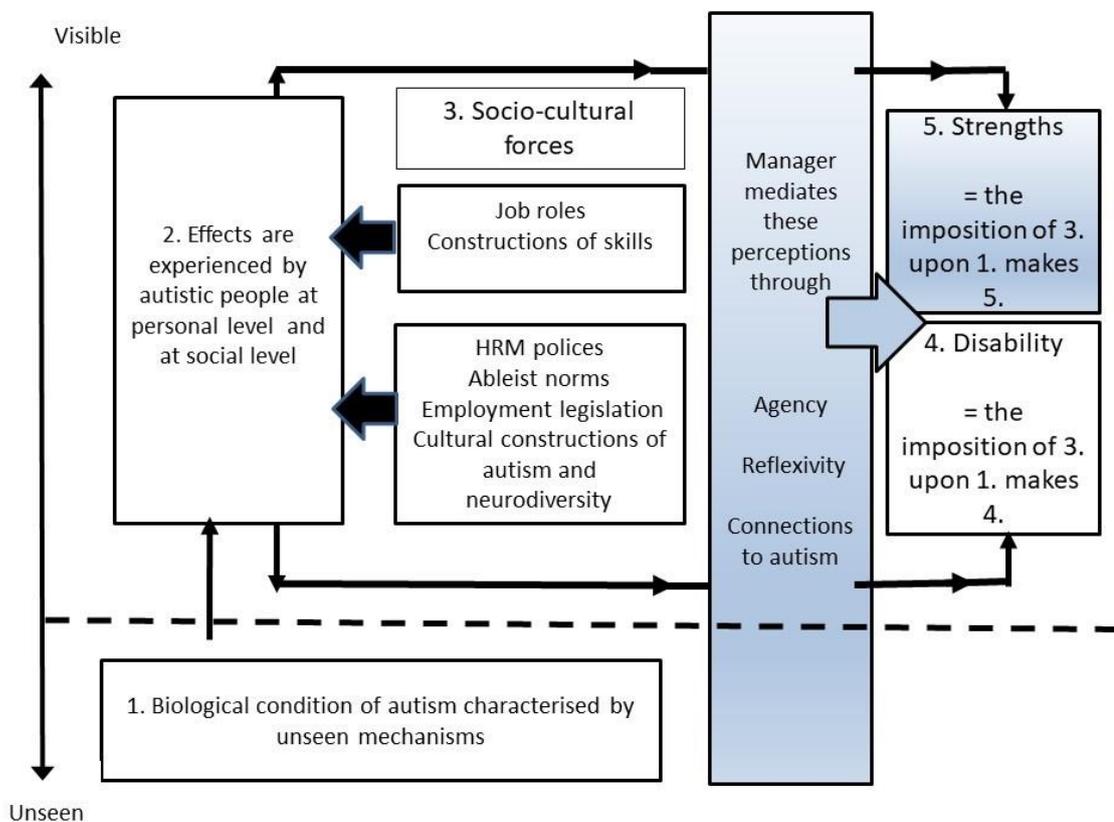
attracts individual considerations of legislative accommodations, as well as how their strengths can be best used in specific roles.

A final observation about the knowledge available to HR specialists and managers about autism and autistic people is that it comes from a plethora of sources emanating from many dimensions of the social world. This sheer variety almost certainly impedes organisational understanding, which is particularly relevant to the main aim of this investigation, which was to deliver improved knowledge and understanding for employers in regard to autistic people.

9.11. Conclusions and contribution of this discussion

The discussion has established that socio-cultural forces, as well as the condition itself, are both important components of an autistic person's working experiences. Therefore, both are essential in understanding how managers experience and respond to managing someone with an autistic spectrum diagnosis. This analysis of findings has resulted in an extension of the conceptual framework, captured in the figure below. Employer can use this framework to better understand how strengths and problematic disabling experiences come about in their autistic employees.

Figure 9-1 Managing autistic people – a framework for employers



The theoretical framework has already identified the significance of unseen neurological mechanisms and the review of clinical and employment literature has highlighted how these are relevant to workplace situations. Thus, placing Box 1 underneath the dotted line indicates the hidden nature of these mechanisms. Findings have shown that these mechanisms are sufficiently powerful for managers to be clear that their autistic employees are distinctive from neurotypical people and have particular attributes which managers have to contend with. These are the attributes Chapter 7 has identified, seen in broad clusters of work ethic, attention to detail, IQ, honesty and directness, social interaction, inflexibility and hypersensitivities.

From a manager's perspective, these social effects can be viewed as strengths as illustrated by the inclusion of Box 5 (shaded) in the figure above. Managers are clear that being autistic does bring strengths, such as attention to detail, work ethic, IQ, honesty and directness, social interaction, albeit these are hard to optimise without some consideration of a person's job. It is also apparent that others can view their employees as disabled or with strengths, as well as being different to someone who is not autistic.

Throughout this discussion the balance between simply being autistic and the socio-cultural forces surrounding workplaces has been explored. It is apparent that the disabling effects come from socio-cultural forces as well as the condition itself, as the conceptual framework presented at the end of the literature review suggested. Figure 9.1 includes both to reinforce the critical importance of distinguishing between what it is about being autistic and what else is happening in regard to the structural aspects of organisational life, in order to fully understand what actually 'is' the disability.

The contents in Box 3 are detailed to illuminate why and how managers vary in their perceptions of an autistic person. Whilst the discussion has provided many examples of the strengths which emerge, particularly when managers adapt roles, it has also shown that shaping roles is not common. This is one consequence of poor knowledge about autism and naivety about how socio-cultural forces impact autistic employees. On the other hand, disabling effects come from the ways of working that employers and neurotypical people believe to be 'typical' and their assumptions about what 'typical' working environments are. These assumptions are related to skill valuations and ableist norms expressed within HRM policies in contemporary workplaces. Ignorance of the extent to which socio-cultural forces impact autistic people and the invisible nature of the condition are all matters which constrain managers in pursuing the adjustments that will work best for their autistic employees as well as creating frustrations. In combination this makes it unsurprising they face challenges and frustrations in managing.

In regard to the inclusion of legislation in this figure, the discussion has shown that not all the differences that autistic people have can be addressed fully by legislatively prescribed adjustments, highlighting the limitations of the social model of disability. Managers too experience frustrations in managing, which the law does not recognise and is certainly a factor in the ineffective accommodations which are made. This chapter has also shown that organisational actors have views about autistic people and about autism which are reconstructed and constructed by publicly available views of neurodiversity advocates, the popular media, extended knowledge about why their perceptions can vary.

Although it is evident from this discussion that managers often lack control over many aspects of organisational life, for example, navigating tightly prescribed competency frameworks and rigidly laid out physical working spaces, the framework affirms their pivotal role in this investigation. The shaded area in the figure above places them as

mediators operating within the socio-cultural forces surrounding themselves and their autistic employees and their eventual perceptions. It indicates that in enacting their responsibilities as line managers, their varying capacities for thinking and for action, as well as their actual knowledge of autism are all powerful shapers of their eventual challenges and responses in managing their autistic employees.

9.11.1. Bridge to Conclusions

This framework prompts consideration of how the disabling socio-cultural matters can be adapted. The social model suggests this is possible and doing so would certainly offer some steps to change policy and practices to promote inclusivity in workplaces. The concluding chapter offers some thoughts as to if or how organisations can adapt ways of working and valuations of skill, arguing this depends upon macro societal matters such as the law. It also depends upon how prepared employers are, who happen to be mostly neurotypical, to understand what matters to the neurodiverse minority, a challenging matter and as Shelley (p.156) has questioned, who it is that makes these distinctions.

Chapter 10. Conclusions

10.1. *Introduction*

This chapter summarises how the aims of this investigation have been addressed, provides an overview of the methods used and details the themes that have emerged from the analysis of findings. It demonstrates that the thesis has delivered empirically derived contributions as well as an improved theoretical understanding of autism as a disability, to help employers and line managers understand more about the challenges and opportunities inherent in managing AS people. The research approach and methods chosen are appraised and the limitations identified. The thesis offers suggestions for HRM policy and practice which will improve inclusion for autistic people, arguing this depends upon internal structural matters as well as developing legislation at macro-society level. It concludes with suggestions for future research.

10.2. *The aims of this investigation*

The primary aim of this investigation was to explore the experiences of those who manage autistic people, thereby improving their knowledge of matters pertinent to the employment context. Indirectly, the thesis also aims to improve employment experiences for people with autistic spectrum conditions who are seeking or are already in employment.

10.3. *Overview of methods*

The interpretivist stance in this thesis was premised upon the subjective nature of the interpretations made by managers and HR specialists about their autistic employees. The subject-object distinction (Cunliffe 2011) was felt to be important in that whatever label or perceptions that they hold about someone diagnosed with an autistic spectrum condition, once that individual discloses their status, it becomes a socially accepted fact available to the subjects to construct varying interpretations.

The eventual sample of three large organisations (employing more than 10,000) and three small/medium sized organisations (250-5,000 employees), yielded interview data from thirteen managers and eight HR specialists. Managers and HR specialists were asked to respond to statements about AS to identify their existing knowledge and next invited to comment upon what they knew about neurodiversity, autism and AS. Prompt cards were used in the interviews with managers to explore their observations of autistic employees and the constraints they faced in carrying out their management role, which produced rich textual descriptions. HR specialists were also asked questions to gather data about their organisational policies surrounding reasonable adjustments and how they valued skills. Following organisation 5's access stipulations, nine AS employees were

interviewed and two completed a questionnaire which contained questions very similar to those used in the interview.

Template analysis (King 2012) identified ten themes in total, including the hidden nature of autism, an apriori theme, given its inclusion in the theoretical framework. A new theme related to the impact of having an autistic person in their teams also emerged. The findings were reviewed in light of all the themes and the literature, focusing upon how managers and employers have responded to autistic people. The analysis drew on existing approaches to disability to consider the extent that socio-cultural forces within organisations shape managers' perceptions.

10.4. Key discussion themes

The first theme to emerge is that poor knowledge and misunderstanding of autistic people in the workplace frequently means employers downplay the difficulties autistic people face, rendering their managers poorly equipped to respond to them. Another important theme is that working environments and neurotypical valuations of skill are socio-cultural factors which disable autistic people and certainly impact their managers. These same features of organisational life also expose strengths and a particularly interesting finding is the underused potential that job role has for an autistic person's strengths to be realised. The ongoing difficulty managers have in distinguishing between what it is about being autistic and what else is happening in regard to the structural aspects of organisational life is significant, as it affects their ability to fully understand how someone can become disabled. The pivotal nature of the managers' role in their autistic employees' experiences is clear, with recurrent themes emerging that it is ignorance of socio-cultural forces and the invisible nature of the condition that frustrates managers.

10.4.1. Answering the research questions

The research questions developed represented three broad areas of exploration, firstly to ascertain employers' levels of knowledge about this complex hidden condition, secondly to understand the challenges and opportunities managers face and thirdly to assess the implications of this knowledge for HR specialists and employers. They are restated below:

RQ1 What levels of knowledge and understanding of Asperger Syndrome (AS) exist amongst those who make decisions relating to employment in organisations?

RQ2 How do line managers and HR specialists conceptualise the condition of AS?

RQ3 How do line managers conceptualise the talents and abilities of AS individuals?

- RQ4 How do line managers' perceptions of, and attitudes towards the AS condition, shape their responses to the AS population?*
- RQ5 What constraints (and enablers?) do managers identify in managing AS individuals?*
- RQ6 What areas for support do they identify?*
- RQ7 What knowledge do HR specialists draw on in framing policy and related procedures?*
- RQ8 Are there particular practices, policies or procedures that discriminate, directly or indirectly, against those with AS?*
- RQ9 What approaches should HR consider in optimising the contribution of the AS population in regard to skills, job roles, career paths?*

The first two research questions aimed to identify what knowledge and understanding of Asperger Syndrome exists amongst those who make decisions relating to employment in organisations. The findings revealed that most managers and HR specialists are guessing about the clinically established facts pertinent to autism and autistic people, making it unlikely they know what being autistic is like for an autistic person and by extension the workplace issues that might face autistic people. Not only does this lack of knowledge contribute to exclusionary outcomes for autistic people, but inevitably imposes difficulties for those that employ or manage autistic people as they seek to deal with the consequences of misunderstandings. Regarding autism as a condition placed somewhere along a spectrum of infinite variations in human characteristics on one hand signposts the potential for employees to value autistic employees for their differences, yet on the other hand creates huge potential that they downplay the real difficulties that being AS can confer. These differences are further downplayed, perhaps inadvertently, as when managers referred to similarities with other people in their teams, for example; *'all my staff are good at timekeeping'*, *'I am working with clever people'* or *'everyone here has a degree'*. These statements further weaken the argument that real differences exist between autistic and neurotypical people.

In addressing question 3, the thesis has shown that managers noticed their autistic employees can be more skilled than their comparable neurotypical employees in some aspects of some roles, for example where Tom's insistence upon routine delivers consistently high service standards. Sometimes what they construe as strength is more unexpected, for example Sharon's emotional detachment from patients was seen by her manager as helpful, despite empathy being a valued skill. Directness in style is not often talked about as a skill, but Callum's open and honest approach to delivering bad news was rated as such by his manager, citing the absolute value of having confidence and

trust. Question 4 explored how managers' perceptions shape their responses and it was apparent that how they viewed disability, difference and autistic people were related to their internal capacities for thinking and individual considerations, qualities which were key in how they coped with the challenges they faced and their responses. An uncommon response was to shape someone's job to deliberately utilise their strengths, instead managers relied more heavily on internal directives driven by external legislation, to modify work environments. Neither managers nor HR specialists recognised explicitly that their perceptions were shaped strongly by employment legislation, nor that it could provide only limited protection for autistic people in the workplace, despite the known limitations of its origins in a model which has been heavily criticised (Oliver 2004). Findings in relation to question 5 showed that some managers recognised their responses may create further discriminatory outcomes, and that the constraints they face are because they have to operate within HRM policies in relation to skills, roles, and career paths. The role of HRM policies, particularly how skills are valued and specified was apparent in their perceptions, but again few recognised how powerful, yet subtle, these are.

In regard to the support managers would find useful, the findings showed first of all that it is unlikely that the relevant knowledge will be found within their organisations. The expertise of HR people is neither as accessible nor as deep as managers need, and very tentatively the role of the Occupational Health advisors emerges as a more accurate source of advice, which given its medical placing may not sit comfortably with autistic people or indeed their managers. The thesis has shown that HR specialists access their knowledge about autism mainly from their experiences in dealing with problematic situations, making it more likely they will hold negative rather than positive perceptions about autistic people.

Turning to the questions concerning HRM policies and practices the thesis concludes that there are particular practices, policies or procedures that discriminate, directly or indirectly against autistic people. For example, career progression pathways often specify employees demonstrate the softer skills and attributes of empathy and political 'nous' linked to leadership qualities. Flexibility in one form or another is frequently specified across many skill levels and roles. Both of these requirements are more difficult for AS employees to fulfil than neurotypicals, creating potential for discrimination which may be unintentional. HR specialists could optimise the contribution of autistic people in regard to skills, job roles and career paths by recognising the inherent discrimination that comes from seeking to comply with the law, which seeks to treat autistic people in precisely the same ways as neurotypical people. They could rethink how they value the soft skills that can be genuinely difficult for AS employees in relation to their neurotypical counterparts and question whether positive valuations are always appropriate. For example, what aspects of working count as 'team-working', is team integration a more inclusive term

than team working and when and where might different levels of directness be best deployed? They could also more precisely specify the attributes or skills that are required for any given role, rather than relying upon generic, expansive and overarching headings within competency frameworks.

The following section outlines the contributions to knowledge this investigation has made:

10.5. *Contribution to knowledge*

10.5.1. *Empirical contribution*

This thesis has contributed to knowledge by exploring what it is like to manage autistic people working in contemporary organisations, in jobs with a fair degree of skill and intellect. Previous studies have been of supervisors' experiences of managing autistic people working in low or unskilled roles, working as volunteers and frequently been set in very small or supported community employment sites (Hughes 2012; Krieger et al 2012; Haertl et al 2013; Muller et al 2003; Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008; Griffith et al 2011). It is known that managers find it challenging to manage people with hidden neurodiverse conditions despite being trained in reasonable adjustments and having some knowledge of neurodiversity (Richards et al 2013) and this investigation has added specific details of the challenges they face in managing autistic people.

A key contribution has been to show clearly that managers view their autistic employees as distinctive from neurotypical people in their preferences for routine, detail, directness, flexibility, social interaction and environmental sensitivities. This supports the accounts autistic people have given that they too regard themselves as different to neurotypical people in both their working and whole lives, (Owren 2013; Higashida 2013; Badone et al 2016) and gives employers confidence that autistic people are not exaggerating either their difficulties or their differences. Existing accounts have shown autistic people find employment negative (Haertl et al 2013; Muller, Schuler, and Yates 2008; Hughes 2012), usually because they find it hard to meet performance expectations, whereas this investigation identifies that managers can see that autistic people have valuable skills which can enhance performance.

AS individuals' preferences for routine have been noted for low skilled roles (Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004; Muller, Schuler and Yates 2008; Morris, Begel and Weidemann 2015). This study has shown these can also be strengths in roles needing higher level skills too, adding to knowledge about the skills autistic people have to offer, thus rejecting the automatic placing of someone with an autistic spectrum condition as disabled. Being able to use these preferences in roles with managerial elements and qualitative, rather than quantitative, detail has further demonstrated the potential for far greater use of autistic strengths, indicating recruiters could be more open-minded when they consider roles for

autistic people. Managers have provided examples that autistic employees can exercise their strengths in quality assurance, health and safety, administrative roles, caring and customer service jobs, a finding which reinforces the varied career preferences Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) have shown autistic people have. Knowledge is extended from studies showing employers have deliberately sought superior capacities for detail in software engineering and technology industries (Austin and Pisano 2017; Grant 2015; Wang, 2014).

The identification of work ethic as a strength adds another dimension to the consideration of the exclusionary outcomes experienced by autistic people in employment (NAS 2016; Richards 2012; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Kanfsizer, Davies and Collins 2017). Knowledge is improved by showing that an autistic people may experience harmful discrimination, critically identifying that this can either be unintentional, where managers are convinced someone wants to work like this, or much more deliberate, where they are well aware that someone's output will be delivered at the expense of burnout.

The seven clusters of behaviours managers regard as common in their autistic employees, yet distinctive from comparable neurotypicals, provide employers with improved understanding of how their existing competency frameworks can discriminate against autistic people and hide their strengths. The findings reinforce calls for HR specialists to consider whether to treat AS individuals in precisely the same way as neurotypical people, (Sumner and Brown 2015), which if they do, will accord with the conclusion drawn by Sang, Richards and Marks (2016:578) that *'human resource management practices designed to reduce inequality for one section of the workforce may create inequalities for others.'*

The environment and the job an autistic person works in are described by autistic people as important factors in whether they experience working life as positive or negative (Krieger et al 2012; Haertl et al 2013; Baldwin, Costley and Warren 2014; Baldwin and Costley 2015; Chen et al 2015). This study has reinforced these are powerful determinants by adding the weight of their managers' opinions. Job crafting literature signposts the potential for shaping experiences by initiating changes to roles outside employment legislation (Berg, Dutton and Wrzesniewski 2013; Tims, Bakker and Derks 2012; 2013; 2014) but has not considered specifically how managers have crafted jobs for autistic employees. An important contribution has been to show that autistic people may benefit even more than disabled employees in general from shaping jobs (Demetriou 2014).

Moving beyond recognising autistic people are different, this investigation has also identified that managers' constructions of and responses to their autistic employees are shaped by ableist norms, particularly in respect of an individual's capacity to be flexible

and productive. Critical disability studies (Williams and Mavin 2012) identify that ableist norms and notions of the ideal worker (Foster and Wass 2012) frequently place physically disabled employees (Hall and Wilton 2011; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall 2014) and people with hidden disabilities (Sang, Richards and Marks 2016; Bierama 2010) at a disadvantage. This is the case despite the existence of supportive inclusion policies and protection from the law. Specifically, the valuations employers place upon flexibility (Rubery, Keizer and Grimshaw 2016) are likely to be even more disadvantageous to AS people. The 'marking out' experienced by physically disabled people when receiving accommodations is also experienced by autistic employees, showing too that this has a detrimental impact upon their managers.

It is known that neurotypical norms in regard to day to day working life disadvantage autistic people (Richards 2012; Sang, Richards and Marks 2016), knowledge which has been extended by drawing upon the detail managers have provided about the different ways that autistic (neurodiverse) people, in comparison to their neurotypical colleagues, socialise at work, use their preferences for detail, routine and directness, focus their efforts at the task in hand, take breaks and make career plans. Understanding of why managers and their autistic employees face challenges has been improved by showing that an autistic employee is different, not just in their legal status as disabled, but also from their status as a neurodiverse person. Critically, neither these differences nor the neurotypical norms that surround autistic people in workplaces can actually 'go away', firstly as autism is an irreducible non curable condition (Wing 1981), and secondly that workplaces consist, in the main, of people who are not autistic (Brugha et al 2012; NAS 2016).

The empirical findings in regard to invisibility have improved understanding of why working life is challenging for their autistic employees and for their managers. The thesis concludes this is one reason why autistic people working in 'ordinary' organisations will choose not to disclose, adding to studies showing this is also the case in technology companies (Morris, Begel and Wiedermann 2015). The investigation has also extended knowledge as to who benefits from disclosure, showing that as well as positive outcomes for autistic people (Punshon and Skirrow 2009; Hickey, Crabtree and Stott 2018) managers are also likely to benefit. The thesis has shown that invisibility is a major reason why managers do not appreciate that the immediate working environment represents an institutional barrier for autistic people, whereas studies of physical disability show managers are much clearer about the impact of physical working spaces. (Kulkarni and Lengnick- Hall 2014).

10.5.2. Theoretical contribution

The thesis set out to consider how effective theories about workplace disability are in understanding the experiences of those managing autistic people. The evidence presented so far has shown clearly that medical models are inappropriate for understanding how autistic people experience the workplace as they ignore strengths and in extreme would suggest autistic people can and should be cured. It has shown clearly that an autistic person is not automatically disabled, supporting the social model which allows that working environments can be a strong disabling force (Oliver 2004) for physically disabled people.

Turning now to social relational approaches to disability, this investigation has confirmed that, as with physical disabled people, both socio-cultural forces and the particular condition shape whether an autistic person is viewed as disabled. It has supplemented understanding about how autistic people become disabled by showing that no matter what legislative accommodations are made arising from socially constructed models of disability, autistic people will find some aspects of their social world and specifically the employment world, difficult and confusing. Theoretically, hidden disabilities are noted as relational (Sang, Richards and Marks 2016) and this investigation shows this is very much the case in regard to how managers view autistic people. It has extended the framework in two main ways. Firstly, recalling that social relational approaches do not explicitly address the question of how an autistic person could be seen as skilled, the framework developed in Figure 9.1 shows clearly that skill is another possible outcome. It has returned to the separation of impairment from disability (Shakespeare and Watson 2002), and by '*writing the body back in*' (Williams 1999) deepens knowledge about the potential autistic people have to contribute to organisations. This will help employers be much more confident that autistic people can be highly skilled, as shown by clinical research (Happe and Vital 2009; Baron Cohen et al 2003) and mirrored in studies of autistic students (Griffin and Pollak 2009; Friedrichs and Shaughnessy 2015). At the same time, the investigation brings into focus the very real nature of the bodily difficulties that accompany being autistic.

Secondly, both the social model upon which current legislation is predicated, and the social relational model of disability adopted in this thesis are person centred, where the views of those managing are peripheral to the experiences of the person. Social relational approaches were developed with the experiences of the person with the disability uppermost (Finkelstein 2001; Reindal 2008), leaving the role of their managers less discussed. The framework has been extended by showing how managers shape the experiences of their autistic employees. Extension comes from providing further detail as to what managers know about autism and autistic people and whether or not they can

connect socio-cultural forces to their employees' experiences, for example whether or not they recognise the disabling role of the environment.

This thesis did not set out to examine in detail how managers' perceptions and responses are shaped by their own 'self' but has shown that this concept of 'personhood' (Archer 2003:165) is important in understanding how managers interact with their autistic employees. This 'self' impacts the level of trust that managers can engender in their autistic employees, critically so in disclosure considerations, thus knowledge about the role of trust for all employees (Gill 2008), including disabled people (Petronio 2002; Blockmans 2015) is extended. Contribution comes from showing that reflexive capacities of managers are even more important in the quality of an employment relationship between an autistic person and their manager than for employees in general, as these shape their views as to whether HRM policies are fair, effective and inclusive in managing someone who is different to themselves. Hence Figure 9.1 has shown how central their role is. Such observations support the very limited literature linking leadership style to employment outcomes for AS employees (Parr and Hunter 2014; Hagner and Cooney 2005). Tentatively for employers in general, these are likely to be the qualities which effective leaders and managers of AS employees will display.

Thirdly, social relational approaches have suggested organisational factors are important but have discussed these at an abstract level and not specific to the line manager. Studies have established managers are constrained in their role by HRM policies (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007; Townsend et al 2012; Alvesson and Wilmott 2012). Managers are also known to experience stress when translating these policies into day to day responses and decisions about their employees in general (Evans 2015; Bainbridge 2015). This investigation has exposed the specific tensions and frustrations that managers of autistic people experience when applying these policies.

10.5.3. Methodological contribution

Until now researching the characteristics that autistic employees have has taken an objective and somewhat medical focus. This investigation has built on these foundations and enriched these by adopting an interpretivist lens to develop knowledge of these characteristics. This approach has also made it possible to contribute knowledge about the experiences of their managers, which hitherto have been studied more extensively in very specific employment contexts. It is acknowledged that researchers are now calling for more organisationally based studies (Hayward, McVilly and Stokes 2018; Vogus and Taylor 2018), in order to further understand this complex condition.

10.6. *Limitations of research process*

10.6.1. *Sample size, demographics and attitudes*

The access difficulties outlined in Chapter 5 meant that the eventual sample size was small. This meant that whilst the gender and ethnicity of managers and HR specialists could have influenced their perceptions and responses, there was simply not enough material to draw conclusions from the fact that there was a slight majority of female managers in the sample and that all considered themselves to be white British. Such features are an artefact of both the recruitment and promotion policies of the organisations concerned and of the restrictions in the sample size. This makes it impossible to draw firm conclusions as to whether male and female managers differ significantly in how they manage their autistic employees. Neither were there enough autistic employees in the sample to discuss confidently if or how autistic men and autistic women experienced differential treatment, acknowledging the lack of intersectional studies in this emerging area. Therefore, it cannot conclude if or how the issues for AS women in the workplace are likely to differ from those of their male counterparts, which is noted as an important area that Annabi (2018) is seeking to explore further.

Another limitation of this investigation is that it did not establish if any of the managers or HR specialists were themselves autistic. It is therefore not possible to assess if or how this particular juxtaposition of 'states' might have affected their responses and experiences. Similarly, it cannot be clear how their age and background impacted their decisions and experiences, although Manager F's response suggests tentatively that older managers closer to retirement may be more inclined to fight battles on behalf of their autistic employees than those who are younger or more newly appointed.

Some limitations in relation to the nature of the six organisations that took part in this investigation are acknowledged. The bulk of the respondents worked in organisation 5 which had an advanced knowledge and interest in inclusion as well as rigorous procedures in place for handling and supporting disabilities. This is likely to have meant that the HR specialists and the managers there had greater levels of knowledge than other organisations and would certainly have meant that resources for diversity management training and specialist advice for managing reasonable adjustments were available. It was also quite likely that the managers interviewed would have an inclusive approach to managing their teams. All except one of the other five organisations were either public sector or very large with similar resources, with only the smallest organisation, a privately-owned software house having few resources and advisory services.

Consistent with this interpretivist investigation, where the perceptions that have surfaced have all been shaped by individuals' prior knowledge experiences and backgrounds, is

that all of the HR specialists and managers were very keen to find out more about autism. The self-selecting nature of those who volunteered meant they approached the interviews with curiosity and interest and certainly many spoke about wanting to improve not just their own knowledge, but also the outcomes for their autistic employees. It is likely these participants, with their connections with autistic people make them predisposed to consider more fully what it is like to be autistic and to take seriously the employment exclusion experienced by disabled people. They are likely to be 'meta-reflexives' (Archer 2003), concerned about the 'underdog' status of their AS employees. Exploring the intersubjective space in the preparation and interview itself made it apparent that these managers reflected deeply as to what is meant by difference and why autistic employees struggle with some aspects of working life.

A further limitation is that the AS employees in this study, who were either the subject of the line managers' interviews or who offered me directly their own experiences and views, were all skilled. Some like the qualified engineers and data specialists were highly skilled, whereas others working predominantly in administrative roles were less so. They could all therefore be classed as those who have 'survived' employment and had a level of security in their own employability. None of the managers talked about AS employees who were no longer working, perhaps as they had left their jobs on account of difficulties of the kind introduced in Chapter 1.

10.6.2. Personality

Findings showed that managers were unsure as to how someone's personality was a factor in the differences they noticed in their employees, a complexity of this interpretive and exploratory study that previous studies have also recognised (Friedrich and Shaughnessy 2015). Employment tribunals have reached the same conclusion, shown in the case of *Hartley vs FCO* (2016), where confusion about what is and what is not personality made it hard for the employers to stay within equalities legislation. A limitation of this study is that it is not possible to say categorically that 'being' AS confers abilities to work hard, have strong detail, or find it hard to work in a team.

10.7. Appraisal of the investigation

This qualitative investigation adopts the criteria outlined in Chapter 5 (Cunliffe 2011:667) for evaluation. In regard to 'careful' crafting, this investigation has had to consider at length how best to access knowledge about this hidden condition and to decide who is best placed to provide useful and new knowledge. Despite it being significantly harder to identify managers and HR specialists than it would have been to approach autistic people directly, this investigation has been 'persuasive' and tenacious to overcome access challenges. Another challenge was to find ways of translating existing clinical knowledge in a manner that met the aims of improving understanding of this complex condition.

Reviewing clinical literature was key in developing this understanding and whilst this is not common in business school studies, it has provided credibility to the research design and captured data about both skills and difficulties. It also prepared me to talk informatively to people who were eager to find out more about the AS condition. Investigations like this should remain open to the need to adapt research methods (Willis 2007; Cunliffe 2011), which has been achieved by adapting the research strategy and developing or dropping various lines of questioning.

Robust qualitative research should also make clear the connections between meta theoretical positioning, methods, theorising and their practical consequences (Cunliffe 2011). Critical realism was adopted as a meta-theoretical perspective in this investigation in order to improve understanding of managers' experiences of managing autistic people. Using these principles has strengthened the theoretical framework, firstly by helping 'see' and understand what autism 'is' as a precursor to beginning this study. Knowing that conditions comprise seen and unseen levels was instrumental in developing the theoretical framework in Figure 2.3, specifically by including the dotted line. This signifies that both levels are important concepts for employers and managers to grasp, if they are to understand what being autistic is like in a workplace. An observation is that whilst organisational researchers do not need to fully understand the genetic and neurological causes of a hidden condition like autism, it is absolutely critical that they 'see' these levels in order that they do not shy away from researching hidden conditions. Another observation is that this critical realist approach has revealed the positive aspects managers observed from 'being' autistic, adding to the negative effects studied by critical realists in physical disability (Martin 2013) and of hidden neurological conditions (Mooney 2016).

The distinction between subject and object in Cunliffe's subjectivist problematic has developed understanding of how the prime subjects, who were the managers, perceived their autistic employees. This interpretivist stance recognises their perceptions, experiences and responses are subjective and their knowledge can only be understood by reference to the context managers operate within. This has been made possible by exploring the structural aspects of the employment context and the agentic qualities of the main subjects in this investigation. Recognising the dialectic nature of structure and agency (Archer 2010), has allowed both to emerge as significant shapers of the experiences that managers and their employees have talked about.

Constructing the theoretical framework from critical examination of existing theories of disability and continuing to ensure the literature review examined structural and socio-cultural matters, has provided a sound basis for the development of the conceptual framework. This has allowed themes to be identified and findings to be presented which captured the experiences, perceptions and challenges of the managers to address the

aims of the investigation. This stance has also informed the discussion of findings in regard to ableist norms and other forces shaping constructions and responses, allowing multiple interpretations in regard to the responses to questions about constructions of disability. Consistent with an interpretivist stance, strengths, skills and problematic disability have not been considered as fixed constructs, but as much more arbitrary classifications determined by line managers and others in workplaces.

Depth has been added to my interpretations of managers' accounts, allowing discussions of the environment and that of social others, alongside being autistic *per se*, to explore managers' experiences. Both are indeed very important in understanding how managers manage people with hidden conditions in the workplace. A good example is the situation described, (top p.211) where a manager wants to allocate routine work to an AS employee, but feels constrained by expectations that this is not appropriate. The condition itself brings about a preference for detail that is governed by unseen mechanisms, whilst the interpretivist stance allows consideration of the managers' assumptions about what is meant by an acceptable level of routine, acknowledging this can vary greatly between neurodiverse and neurotypical people. Knowledge has been examined at micro and macro levels, for example recognising that macro considerations like equalities legislation push back upon the micro level, for example where managers have to use competency frameworks.

This investigation has heard from autistic people as well as their managers, consistent with calls to explore disabled and non-disabled constituent groups (Williams and Mavin 2012). This lends it a critical and emancipatory focus, following calls for autistic adults to be partners in autism research (Gillespie-Lynch et al 2017). Emancipatory research has been criticised for inadvertently missing the significance of the environment in which the experiences of those the study seeks to empower are shaped which in this case is the workplace. This study resists those criticisms, because as well as highlighting how disability can be better managed in the workplace, it has also developed understanding of how employment lives for AS individuals may be improved through finding out how AS characteristics can be better utilised for mutual benefit in workplaces. Further criticality has been achieved by challenging the disabled status the law places upon autistic people by exploring the potential connection of AS characteristics with valuable organisational skills.

It is important that my role and experiences are made transparent to identify how these 'sparked' the investigation and how they have affected the interpretations I have presented. My parental role, experiences and starting belief that an autistic person can be both skilled and disabled have informed the theoretical framework adopted, steered the literature review and been instrumental in formulating the research questions. They continued to influence the strategies for gaining access, choosing respondents, methods

for collecting data, presentation of findings and analysis choices, evidenced by the gathering of data about impairments as well as abilities. Each and every aspect has been touched by my prior experiences and I believe firmly that these have been helpful in the design of the study as well as in the conclusions drawn.

Theorising about the challenges, opportunities that line managers and HR specialists face has been made possible, and new learning and knowledge for practitioners has been provided. Caution in generalising these conclusions must be exercised, leaving others to conduct future research (Clive 2016). Where these findings are taken forward, broader investigations are needed, using a more diverse set of approaches and measures. Whilst the study recognises the findings may be a source of learning for other organisations, it also notes that they may not easily transfer, especially into smaller and under resourced organisations.

10.8. Policy and Practice Implications for employers

The exclusionary outcomes experienced by AS people merit a commitment to using this knowledge for their benefit. Thus, this section considers how the contributions could generate better inclusion for autistic people and translate into supporting managers.

HR specialists will need to identify how contemporary practices may unintentionally disable someone, a task that will likely involve reviewing assessment and development protocols. A recent EAT decision (*The GLS v Brookes 2017*) held that an established assessment centre process created significant disadvantage to an autistic person and was therefore discriminatory, a ruling which encapsulated many of the tensions employers face in adjusting such practices. A practical implication following is that autistic people are likely to become more confident in disclosing, as well as in challenging decisions made in regard to their performance and progression. Therefore, HR specialists will need to decide if existing people management and development processes require adaptation, as well as establish the merits of doing so. This will require knowledge not just of how to recognise difference and avoid legislative sanctions, but also how to appreciate the subtleties of what creates difference, what might contribute to disclosure tensions and that exclusion, even when unintentional, creates hidden inequalities for AS people. This will depend upon how prepared employers are (who are mostly neurotypical) to understand what matters to the neurodiverse minority, a challenging matter and as Shelley has questioned, who it is that makes these distinctions. Such reflections will involve examining and challenging the tools HR people rely heavily on such as competency frameworks and person specifications.

Turning to those who manage autistic people, it is imperative they can distinguish between what it is about working life and workplaces, versus what it is about being autistic, that makes life difficult and disabling for autistic employees. If so, they will be

better equipped to decide which socially imposed matters they can actually control, often which are few as they are circumscribed by their HR colleagues above. If managers can also recognise what they and others regard as 'normal' and as valuable skills, they will be better equipped to respond to autistic preferences. This might mean changing how team meetings are run or adjusting their expectations as to how much 'social' interaction someone can handle, not easy matters given that none of these areas are prescribed by equalities legislation. The barriers to translating knowledge into HRM policy and day to day practice relate to a context where neurodiverse and neurotypical employees work together and are both groups that employers have to manage. Changing policy will be difficult for HR specialists as they are steered by legislative directives and their professional codes of conduct towards treating neurodiverse and neurotypical people with similar assessment protocols and standards in the interests of equity and fairness, even though they know that both groups differ in their needs as well as their capabilities.

Another major barrier that employers face is the current employment legislation which the discussion has shown is narrow when it comes to hidden disabilities. Modifications must neither discriminate against people with an autistic spectrum diagnosis nor disadvantage neurotypicals, challenging given that many areas of working life have been designed based upon assumptions made by neurotypical people as to what constitutes team contribution, fulfilling work and good office design. At macro-societal level this would require lobbying the law-making bodies to extend legislation so that accommodations account for the matters that are not easily seen, as well those that are more 'physical', critically also noting how these accommodations impact managers.

10.9. Opportunities for further research

10.9.1. Utilisation of specific skills and team contribution

Observations made predominately through the literature review in Chapter 3 (Dvash 2014; Brosnan, Lewton and Ashwin 2016), were that AS employees consider information and emotions differently from neurotypical employees via their preferences for deliberative reasoning. Exploring how these differential capacities are used to make significant and difficult decisions without being overly influenced by others' emotions would be worthwhile, addressing an area that study could not, on account there were not enough AS employees working in roles with sufficient scope for these kinds of differences in decision-making to be explored. The examples managers gave of those who were prepared to challenge policies or ask awkward questions is also interesting. Future research could explore how this capacity might be harnessed as strength.

10.9.2. Intersectional studies

This study focused upon just one area of difference which was that of 'being' AS, both for those interviewed as employees and as the subjects that line managers spoke about.

Without doubt there are arguments for understanding how being autistic intersects with other differences and managers should be aware that someone can be doubly disadvantaged. Autistic people, just like anyone else, can be different from others in an infinite number of ways. For example, they may be AS and female, AS and male, or AS and any one of many non-binary identities. Another possibility is that they may 'be' AS and from various different ethnic and cultural origins, 'be' AS and a manager, 'be' AS and successful and so on. Thus, future studies should be intersectional in nature.

10.9.3. Impact upon managers

Research could build upon the impact that managing autistic people has upon their managers, exploring in more detail how they arrive at performance assessments, promotion decisions, and how they conduct disciplinary and grievance procedures.

10.9.4. HR activities

Building upon findings that competency frameworks can lead to exclusionary employment for autistic people as well as frustrate their managers in applying them, researchers should pursue the challenges facing HR specialists in modifying these policy areas to suit neurotypical and neurodiverse employees.

10.9.5. Autistic people and employment

The study did not set out to explore in detail unsuccessful employment experiences of AS employees, but the fact that so many mentioned problems with working environments and interpretation of HR policies merits further exploration. Studies must seek access to AS people who are underemployed, as well as those for whom employment has been so hard, whether intentionally or not, that they have disengaged from seeking meaningful employment. The change in classification part way through this study means that more people are now classified as autistic. Future studies will need to decide which term autistic people identify with in seeking respondents.

Interviewing pairs of employees and managers offered some insight as to how AS and neurotypical people experience the same workplace. Future research could be adopted to find out how these different parties in the employment relationship view matters, comparing their perspectives on team contribution, working hard, colleague relationships, performance assessments, career progression and how useful are the reasonable adjustments provided. Ethical protections will be paramount here and researchers must consider very carefully informed consent form both parties.

10.9.6. Neurotypical or neurodiverse researchers?

A final consideration is who should be involved in studying these areas. AS researcher involvement has been criticised for limiting the generalisability of findings (Jivraj et al 2014) whilst non-AS researcher involvement has been recognised as effective in

disseminating key messages which empower AS people (Martin 2015). However, these attributions have been confined to clinical studies not the employment context. AS researchers would certainly be better placed to overcome the access difficulties that dogged this study and probably more likely to uncover different interpretations of the AS condition. Since an aim of this study has been to challenge deficit views of autism and AS, actively denying AS people the opportunity to become meaningfully involved as researchers seems deeply troubling as well as limiting understanding.

10.10. *Chapter summary*

This thesis has established that inaccurate knowledge and contradictory views about autism have consequences for managers and employers, making it imperative they better understand this clinically recognised condition. Improved understanding is absolutely key to improving managers' experiences of managing autistic people to make better use of autistic strengths and alleviate some of the negative employment experiences and disproportionately high dismissal and disciplinary outcomes.

Knowledge about autism in employment has emphasised working life from the employees' perspective and this exploratory study has added knowledge by clarifying how line managers respond and react to their autistic employees. It has shown that there are differences between physical and neurological 'disabilities' and emphasised that autistic people have more strengths across a wider range of roles than previously considered. It has pointed to the importance of structural organisational constraints and the key role managers have in knowing the implications that autistic differences have for employing AS people as regards using skills, sculpting roles, managing performance and career development. Significantly, many of these findings will resonate with the experiences of managers working in 'ordinary' organisations rather than those reported from supported employment sites or heavily technology focused industries.

The empirically derived contributions offered by this thesis provide valuable information for employers, addressing criticisms that research about employment matters for autistic people has until now neglected workplace realities and failed to transmit knowledge grounded in clinical facts about this complex condition (Richards 2015; Vogus and Taylor 2018). Theoretically, social relational theories of disability have been extended, showing how being autistic impacts line managers by surfacing the problematic experiences and frustrations they deal with in contemporary workplaces. It is clear that socio-cultural forces are key in the struggles autistic people experience in working life and that these also shape the experiences of those who manage. Very critically, the thesis has shown that employers and managers need to weigh up both socio-cultural forces and the condition itself in managing autistic people in workplaces where, in general, many more neurotypical people work.

This thesis yields generalisable conclusions which position employers to respond to the issues faced by AS applicants and employees. It has closed some important gaps in knowledge about managing autistic people in the workplace and highlighted many further avenues to explore. Overall, I feel it has represented the matters which are significant in the employment context to those managing AS individuals, and as such has improved their knowledge of this under-explored condition.

10.11. *Concluding comments*

As more knowledge about autistic people is uncovered in workplace contexts, employers will have an opportunity to find out more about the contributions AS people can make through their differences. This should improve employment outcomes for AS people who just like most other people, will benefit from having meaningful work which plays to strengths. As regards how they react to this new knowledge, managers and HR specialists can choose between harnessing these differences in a productive manner or side-lining difficult issues. Their choices about how they respond to someone whose behaviours and ways of working differ from their own may be determined by their desire to fit people into neurotypical norms and ways of operating in the workplace they consider as 'normal'. Their choices could also be driven by the desire to seek out and utilise ways of working, which may appear idiosyncratic or unusual to neurotypical others, but which can also be harnessed in a productive manner. Whatever the underlying motivation for pursuing such adaptations, these will be substantial challenges. Mindful of the experiences which sparked my study, this thesis ends on a personal reflection urging employers to steer towards the latter.

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Case Law

Bowerman v B&Q plc and others [2005] ET/1400375/05

Brookes v The Government Legal Service [2017] EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Doolan v Interserve Facilities Management Ltd [2013] EqLR 1014.

Everitt vs Regal Consultancy Ltd [2016] ET/3400093/2016

Fotheringham v Perth and Kinross council [2013]

Galo v Bombardier Aerospace UK [2016] IRLR 703. 2016. Northern Ireland Court of Appeal, (NICA).

Hartley v Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services [2016] EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Hensman v Ministry of Defence. [2014] EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Hewett (appellant) v Motorola Ltd (respondents) - [2004] IRLR 545. 2004. Employment Appeal Tribunal, (EAT).

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Perratt v The City of Cardiff Council [2016]. EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Rackham v NHS Professionals Ltd. [2015]. EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Sherbourne v Npower. [2019]. ET/ 1811601/2018

Taiwo v Department for Education [2013]. EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

Thomson v Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust [2015]. EMPLOYMENT APPEAL TRIBUNAL.

APPENDICES

Annex 1 Description of experimental studies; key concepts in AS and autism

The Unexpected transfers [false beliefs] Test (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985))

This test assesses how a subject locates a missing object by listening to a story enacted by dolls. The only way the subject can discover the true location of the object is by inferring the mental state of the doll. ('I think that the *doll* thinks x'). About 80% of children diagnosed with autism did not pass this test and about 20% of children did, highlighting that being autistic does not automatically equate to being unable to infer another's or their own mental state. The test was modified so that subjects were required to complete a similar but more difficult task. This time the only way in which the subject could pass this test was to be able to infer second order false belief "I think *he* thinks *that she* thinks x". None of the autistic children passed this test, leading Baron-Cohen (1989) to conclude that autistic children could not categorically infer another person mental state. This study did not include children with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome.

The **Strange Stories test** (Happe 1994) presented subjects with vignettes of everyday situations. Subjects were asked to assess what was happening and provide a response to explain why they thought x had done y. All subjects with autism provided incorrect mental state justifications to answer the 'why' question. However, it is not clear from this study whether or not any of the subjects had a diagnosis of AS. The study was replicated by Joliffe and Baron-Cohen (1999) with a group of AS subjects and a group of those with high functioning autism (HFA), both groups showing similar levels of intelligence. All subjects had severe difficulty comprehending non-literal language, the use of facial expressions and other non-verbal communications, supporting the theory that autistic children at the high functioning end of the spectrum including those with AS do experience difficulty in understanding what is going on in another person's mind. In everyday life, this is likely to translate into responses which are unempathetic or socially awkward in some way. In efforts to overcome unrealistic experimental conditions, Murray et al (2017) used '**The Strange Stories Film Task**', concluding it was a more effective measure at differentiating the ASD group from the control group.

The block design test (Shah and Frith 1993) requires subjects to identify a pattern from the detail of individual elements and concludes that autistic individuals perform this task faster than non-autistic individuals. The '**embedded figures test**' (Joliffe and Baron-Cohen (1997) asks subjects to locate a small shape in a drawing of a much large scale. Autistic children find it much easier to complete the task than typically developing children, who find it difficult and confusing to locate the small target shapes. The **Tichtener illusion** (Happe 1996) assesses if individuals can spot visual illusions from the 'real' thing, and by showing autistic and typically developing children two and three-dimensional images. Autistic subjects were much more likely to spot illusions, possibly as they process illusions in a piecemeal and detailed manner without looking at the overall

representation of the illusion which is what typically developing individuals would do. These tests led to the development of the concept of weak central coherence theory, where autism is associated strongly with attention to detail.

The 'Above and Beyond test' (Jameel et al 2014) asked subjects to generate responses to scenarios which involved low, medium and high prosocial actions. Using DSM 5 as an indicator of an individual's autism quotient and thereby including AS individuals, they investigated prosocial differences. Subjects were presented with a scenario in which they were told that they were in a hurry to get to a particular destination. They were then asked to decide what they would do when they came across a man who had tripped over in the street. A low prosocial response was defined as continuing to walk past the man and a high prosocial response would be to stop and help him sit down. Conclusions drawn were those who had higher autism scores behaved less pro-socially than those with lower scores across a range of scenarios but could not say whether this was because AS and high functioning autism are more honest and so less tempted to provide socially desirable responses, or that they misunderstand the situation through limited cognitive abilities

Annex 2 Case law summaries

Case name & citation	Court/ Tribunal	Judgment date	Area of interest
The Government Legal Service v Brookes	EAT	28 March 2017	Selection procedures and reasonable adjustments
Everitt v Regal Consultancy Ltd	ET	8 Sept 2016	Direct disability discrimination because of AS, and employer's failure to make reasonable adjustments at disciplinary interview by not allowing family member to attend. As the Claimant did not resign his claim of constructive unfair dismissal failed and the ET ordered a remedy hearing, yet to take place.
Hartley v Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services	EAT	27 May 2016	Employer had erred by focusing on employee's <i>perception</i> rather than considering how much this was related to AS. Reasonable adjustments for communication support was interpreted differently by claimant and employer.
Perratt v The City of Cardiff Council	EAT	28 June 2016	Capability dismissal – AS and multiple other conditions
Galo v. Bombardier Aerospace uk	NI Court of Appeal	2 June 2016	Employer not knowing that employee had AS
Rackham v NHS Professionals Ltd	EAT	16 December 2015	Reasonable adjustments for AS were not put in place for attending the ET
Islam v Abertawe Bro Morgannwg Local Health Board	EAT	1 June 2014	Disability discrimination, employers failing to make reasonable adjustments
Doolan v Interserve Facilities Management Ltd	ET	8 August 2013	Employer should have known that the employee's external difficulties with social interaction meant that he had a condition which had a substantial and adverse effect on his day-to-day activities.
Taiwo v Department for Education	EAT	29 May 2013	Capability dismissal - AS and other multiple conditions
Fotheringham v Perth and Kinross Council	EAT (Scotland)	17 April 2013	Employee was unfairly dismissed and suffered direct disability discrimination, once employers discovered he had AS. They made assumptions without following their own procedures or considering the employee's own views about what type of role he could perform
Airey v Cancer Research UK (2011)	CA, CIVIL DIVISION	8 Sept 2011	Employer did not have sufficient awareness that employee had AS and so was justified in concluding that there was no disability-

Case name & citation	Court/ Tribunal	Judgment date	Area of interest
	N		based reason for his conduct.
Lowe v Cabinet office	ET	2011	Employer was reasonable to require AS applicant to complete competency driven assessment centre activity
Isles v London Borough Ealing	ET	19 October 2005	Employers did not know enough about how AS would have affected the employee's ability to perform in a progression post. They made an assessment without discussing this with the employee first.
Bowerman v B & Q PLC.	ET	04 May 2005	Employers fail to understand AS and should have known that AS was associated with misunderstanding social encounters in the workplace. Employers lacked knowledge of how to make reasonable adjustments to the disciplinary policy, and so were unable to adjust it.
Hewett v Motorola Ltd	EAT	16 February 2004	Employer did not understand the social interaction characteristics associated with AS and should have accepted that the employee's argument that AS was a factor in his difficulties and so not contested his expectation for Reasonable Adjustments. Employers also criticised as they relied on their existing knowledge only about AS.
15 employment related cases			

Brookes vs GLS [2017] UKEAT/0302/16/RN

Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) ruled that Brookes, a woman with AS, was discriminated against when she was asked to take a situational judgement test. This is the **first case of indirect disability discrimination** – where a workplace rule or policy that applies to all employees leaves a disabled person at a disadvantage – has succeeded at EAT level. Brookes was asked to take the multiple-choice test as part of the first stage of her application to the Government Legal Service (GLS). She argued that she should have been allowed to submit short written answers to the questions, as the black and white nature of the multiple-choice test placed her at a disadvantage. GLS argued that, even if Brookes could successfully show that the multiple-choice test placed her and others with an autistic spectrum condition at a disadvantage, the testing was a proportionate method for assessing the best candidates for the position. Brookes took the multiple-choice situational judgement test in July 2015 but was told she had failed and her job application would not be progressed any further a few days later. She scored 12 marks out of a possible 22, and needed 14 or more to pass.

An employment tribunal ruled that there was no other reason to identify why she had failed and agreed that she did not pass the test because of her disability. By asking Brookes to take the test as it stood, the GLS had indirectly discriminated against her, had

failed to make reasonable adjustments that took into account her disability, and had treated her unfavourably. Although the tribunal accepted that the testing served a purpose and the multiple-choice format made the assessment process more efficient, the methods used were ultimately disproportionate to the outcome the GLS was trying to achieve, it found. The GLS, which introduced psychometric testing to its recruitment process in 2010, appealed. The EAT agreed **multiple-choice testing was discriminatory** and urged employers to reconsider recruitment practices, refusing further appeals.

Everitt vs Regal Consultancy Ltd [2016] 3400093

Everitt had been diagnosed with high-functioning autism in 2013. He worked for Regal Consultancy Ltd a supplier of staff to Subway stores in Suffolk. The case dates back to October 2015. He had informed his line manager in Subway of his condition. A hygiene inspector visited the branch and the store failed its evaluation, with the workplace found to be a "mess" containing out-of-date food that had not been thrown away. Everitt was summoned to a disciplinary hearing a few days later, which he attended alone. He was dismissed by letter as a result of his behaviour at the meeting, and his inability to explain the hygiene inspection, which was described as "wholly inadequate". A colleague in the store was given a written warning. Everitt appealed the decision and was offered his job back, but refused as he felt "bullied" by the disciplinary process. The tribunal found he had suffered disability discrimination as a result of his treatment, and his employer's failure to make reasonable adjustments to the disciplinary interview by not allowing a family member to attend with him. A claim for constructive dismissal failed as Everitt was judged not to have resigned his position. The employer failed to put special measures in place when it began a disciplinary process against him, the tribunal ruled. As a consequence, he was treated less favourably because of his disability. The award was £15,484 after a tribunal judge ruled Everitt was dismissed as a direct consequence of being autistic.

Hartley v Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services [2016] (0033/15).

H, a female, diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome in 2009, began working for the FCO as a senior mechanical engineer in August 2012 on an initial six-month probation period. Her condition caused communication difficulties; a tendency to take other people's communications literally; difficulty understanding and being understood; difficulty in handling stressful situations; inappropriate reactions such that she could be too abrupt and impulsive and could appear rude to other people; and difficulty with memory and recognition of people. H had disclosed her disability during the recruitment process and a reasonable adjustment plan was created with the assistance of the National Autistic Society's Employment Advisory Service. Three months into H's employment, F, her

manager, undertook a review of her performance, attendance and conduct: all were regarded as satisfactory. Although H had been absent for six days for a variety of reasons, the FCO diversity team had advised F to make an allowance for this owing to her disability. However, by the time of the six-month review, her performance, attendance and conduct were all regarded as unsatisfactory. F recommended that her employment be discontinued, but the FCO decided to extend her probation period and make her subject to a performance improvement plan (PIP). Further adjustments were put in place, including more help with communication.

A first PIP meeting took place in March 2013 and a follow-up was held on 11 June between H, F and B, who was F's manager. At the meeting, a spreadsheet of comments about H's performance was being discussed when F questioned whether she (H) was intelligent enough to understand the spreadsheet. At the meeting, B referred to H constantly being rude, and said something to the effect that she believed that this was a facet of H's personality rather than her disability. B later apologised via e-mail for upsetting H, but repeated the point that she saw a difference between being tenacious, which she recognised could be related to Asperger's, and being rude and aggressive, which she understood as more related to H's personality. On 25 June, F reported that H had not met the PIP objectives despite the adjustments and support that had been provided. By this time H had taken a further 17 days' sickness absence. She was dismissed with notice the following month. The manager hearing her internal appeal against dismissal determined that he would not have upheld dismissal on the basis of the sickness absence alone, but the quality of the reports she had produced was some of the worst he had seen and so the two matters combined warranted dismissal. H brought an employment tribunal claim, arguing that her dismissal constituted discrimination arising from her disability and that the employer had failed in its duty under Ss.20(3) and 39(5) to make reasonable adjustments. The tribunal dismissed the claims and said the FCO had taken all reasonable steps to alleviate the disadvantage caused by that disability.

The EAT said that the tribunal had not asked itself whether, objectively, such remarks related to H's disability and they should have looked at the overall picture, including its own findings that H's disability could lead her to appear rude or come across as abrupt and impulsive. The tribunal had itself identified an issue relating to understanding communication as well as expressing communication and had erred by focusing on F's **perception** rather than considering in the round whether the remark related to H's disability. As regards reasonable adjustments claim EAT also highlighted that reasonable adjustments for communication support was **interpreted differently by claimant and employer**. H had no difficulty in the process of communicating in writing, but the organisation of the report was problematic. The tribunal had wrongly drawn a narrow distinction between 'the process of writing' on the one hand and the 'content and/or

organisation of the content' on the other and should have seen them together and recognised that H's disability (AS) placed her at a disadvantage and so should have addressed the need for written communications training at an earlier stage in H's employment, and in fact commented that the quality of these reports had improved considerably after training.

This case shows that both tribunal and employer had wrongly treated the perception of the alleged perpetrators as conclusive when instead it should have evaluated the evidence presented in the round. They also highlighted that it was wrong to draw such a narrow distinction between the process and the content of writing and should have upheld H's complaint that FCO did not make reasonable adjustments by providing written communications training.

Lowe v Cabinet Office ET/2203187/10

Lowe was an AS applicant for a skilled role, but was rejected as a result of his scores from an assessment centre. Although the tribunal agreed it was *unreasonable* to exempt Lowe from the online testing assessment, they disagreed that it was *reasonable* to do the same for the group exercise within an assessment centre. Candidates were required to demonstrate capability in the behaviours articulated in the employers' competency framework, which related to building productive relationships and high-level communication skills. Lowe's scores against these competencies assessed fell below the standards required. The tribunal concluded that these were absolute requirements for an exacting and highly skilled post, and so upheld the employer's defence that his rejection was fair, on the basis that changing these would be an '*unacceptable dilution*' of the selection process.

Galo v. Bombardier Aerospace UK [2016] IRLR 703 at 703

Patrick Galo, the claimant, suffered from a disability (AS). He was employed by Bombardier Aerospace UK as a composite operator. He was suspended following allegations of gross misconduct. At a disciplinary hearing, the company determined that his behaviour had constituted gross misconduct and his employment was terminated. He appealed. The company secured a report on him from a clinical psychologist, who made a diagnosis of AS. The report said, for example, that the way he thought, communicated and behaved socially was significantly different in nature to most people. However, the company dismissed Mr Galo's internal appeal. Meanwhile, he had lodged proceedings in the industrial tribunal, including for disability discrimination and unfair dismissal. The tribunal held various case management hearings ("CMH"s). At one, the company conceded that Mr Galo suffered from a disability, but apparently no enquiry was made as to the precise nature of that disability, notwithstanding that the company had the

medical report. At that and subsequent CMHs, those representing him did not apply for any particular adjustments in order to ensure his effective participation in the process. He was not represented throughout the proceedings. He failed to provide information as ordered by the tribunal. No requirements for specific procedural adjustments for his case were considered. Eventually, all of his claims were either struck out or dismissed. On appeal, the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland held Galo's appeal as the requirements of procedural fairness had not been met in relation to the disabled claimant. It is a fundamental right of a person with a disability to enjoy a fair hearing and to have been able to participate effectively in the hearing. Courts and tribunals should pay particular attention to the Equal Treatment Bench Book published by the Judicial College (Revised 2013) (the "ETBB") when the question of disability, including mental disability, arises. It points out that adjustments to court or trial procedures may be required to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities. Practical advice is given to particular situations when they arise. An early "ground rules hearing" is indicated. Such a hearing would involve a preliminary consideration of the procedure that the tribunal or court will adopt tailored to the particular circumstances of the litigant.

In the present case, the requirements of procedural fairness were not met. First, the case should have been recognised from the outset as one involving a person under a disability of mental health. There was already in existence a fulsome medical report to that effect. As soon as it emerged, enquiries should have been made as to whether reasonable adjustments to the process were necessary. In particular an early "ground rules" case management discussion should have been convened to meet the specific challenges of Mr Galo's AS condition. Had that been done, the procedure to be adopted and the adjustments that were necessary would have been considered through a completely different prism from that which occurred. It was not a sufficient argument to state that even when Mr Galo had been represented, no application for adjustment had been made on his behalf. The duty is cast on the tribunal to make its own decision in these matters. There were clear indicators of observed agitation and frustration on the part of Mr Galo. These should have put the tribunal on notice of the need to investigate the precise nature and diagnosis of his condition. It was a matter of great concern that the tribunal appeared to have made no reference to the ETBB. This case highlights perhaps the need for there to be better training of both judiciary and the legal profession in the needs of the disabled.

Doolan v Interserve Facilities Management Ltd ET Case No.2300082/12

D, who is autistic, was employed by IFM Ltd as a mail room operative. He had poor social communication skills and was not able to read other people's emotions. He also found it difficult to manage any change in his routine. IFM Ltd claimed to have no idea that D had autism. However, the employment tribunal considered that a reasonable employer would

have concluded that the manner in which D presented himself meant that he had a condition which had a substantial and adverse effect on his day-to-day activities. In its view, IFM Ltd's approach 'almost crossed the threshold into wilful blindness'. The company should at least have made some enquiries into the nature of D's condition and considered whether its redundancy process and selection criteria could potentially place him at a disadvantage as a result of that condition.

Isles v London Borough of Ealing [2005] ET 7863726

Isles was already employed by LBE and applied for a role as business project officer. The managers concerned knew that he had AS and that this was a disability. They downloaded information available online on AS in order to consider his application and suitability for the role. After doing so they turned down his application as they felt they could not make reasonable adjustments to accommodate somebody with AS in this particular role as it required competencies in several areas that they believed that someone with AS may find difficult, such as building and maintaining relationships, close team working, leading groups of colleagues in workshops, dealing positively with change and helping others to do the same". Isles lodged a formal grievance against his declined application. The tribunal found that the employers were at fault in refusing to shortlist the employee, **without first discussing with him how AS affected his normal day-to-day activities and his work environment.** The tribunal concluded that the rejection was due to the organisation's **perception of the employee's disability** and its impact were he to be offered one of the project officer posts. The tribunal said that the employers should have met with the employee and assessed and not simply decided that he could not do the role based on the online information and their perceptions of the effect this would have. Had they done so they could have discussed how the disability affected performance against the competencies required for the role and scored him against these. Although this scoring process may still have meant that the employee was not considered suitable and therefore not shortlisted, the fact that the employers made an automatic decision based on perceptions meant they were not complying with the EA

Bowerman v B & Q PLC [2005] WL 7863629.

Bowerman worked for B and Q and had a diagnosis of AS. The environment he worked in had an atmosphere of horseplay and sexual banter which he found hard to understand and so misinterpreted his colleagues' behaviour. Medical evidence available to the employer recommended that a mentor be provided to assist both the employee and his colleagues in understanding each other respective position so that the likelihood of inappropriate behaviour would be reduced. No mentor was appointed, the employee continued to have difficulties in the day to day working environment, resulting in his

behaviour towards some female colleagues becoming inappropriate. This led to a sanction under the company's disciplinary procedure of gross misconduct and eventual dismissal. The tribunal said that the employers had acted unreasonably in dismissing the employee for inappropriate behaviour, i.e. unintentional sexual harassment and **they should have known that AS was associated with misunderstanding of signals from others**. Applying the sanction of gross misconduct which would ultimately lead to dismissal placed the employee at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with individuals who do not have AS. The employers failed to take into account submissions made on his behalf in relation to the disciplinary process, to take account of his disability and provided no explanation as to why they had acted in the way they did. Despite repeated employee requests and medical evidence which recommended a mentor, neither did they appoint a mentor. The employers did not know how to make reasonable adjustments to the disciplinary policy and so were unable to adjust it.

Hewett v Motorola Ltd [2004] I.R.L.R 545

Hewett was an AS individual employed as a firmware engineer by Motorola and was dismissed on account of problems with working with others, described by the employers as "failure to participate in human interaction, social relationships and communication". Hewett claimed that his dismissal was discrimination under the DDA as his condition of AS was directly related to his ability to concentrate, learn or understand. The tribunal upheld the employer's decision and said that these areas were not related to his disability and so were not covered under the 1995 Act. On appeal, EAT said that the tribunal had failed to deal with the issue as to whether an inability to understand through "the subtleties of human interaction" could fall within the definition of disability. They should have inferred a reduced ability to understand subtleties arising from the employee's difficulty in understanding non-verbal and nonfactual communication and should have accepted H's argument that his ability to understand was affected by AS. The tribunal and by implication the **employers were also criticised as they relied on their existing knowledge only** and did not refer to the Code of Practice 1996, which placed autism as a disability affecting normal social interaction and so fell well within the scope of the 1995 Act.

THE EAT held that an employee with AS, suffered a mental impairment which had a long-term adverse effect on his ability to "understand". Accordingly, if that adverse effect was substantial, he would fall within the definition of a disabled person for the purposes of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. They also stated that the word "understand" should be construed broadly in accordance with the purposive approach that should be taken to the Act, and, in this case, the employee's difficulty understanding normal social interaction among people and his problems with interpreting non-verbal signals, affected his ability to understand within the meaning of the Act.

Annex 3 CIPD Classifications of soft skills

Self- related soft skills	Self-management	Balance and cope with the competing demands of work and life. Take initiative and rise to a challenge when it is appropriate to do so. Maintain personal appearance, self-esteem, resilience, confidence and control
	learning	Reflect on and learn effectively from one's experiences. Give and take constructive feedback and criticism. Show inquisitiveness and mindfulness
	integrity	Committing to and acting in accordance with professional and moral principles and values. Speaking out when it is appropriate to do so. Being honest with oneself and holding oneself accountable
People-related soft skills	communicating	Sending messages (verbally and non-verbally). Receiving messages (listening and asking, responding and clarifying). Negotiating and bargaining. Convincing and persuading.
	relating	Being approachable and accessible and developing rapport. Creating a positive impression and earning respect. Empathising with others and eliciting their opinions, emotions and needs. Asserting oneself and influencing others.
	leading	Coaching and developing others. Acting with authority, instructing and delegating. Enthusing and inspiring others. Holding others accountable when necessary
Task-related soft skills	organising	Prioritising goals, actions and resources. Co-ordinating own and others' actions. Planning, monitoring, reviewing progress and reflecting on outcomes
	problem solving	Creating and innovating novel and practical solutions. Judging risks and taking decisive action where necessary. Achieving an acceptable solution by being pragmatic, being prepared to compromise or resolving competing demands.
	knowledge of business	Recognising opportunities and being intra-/entrepreneurial. Behaving in accordance with the unwritten (tacit) rules where appropriate. Showing cultural and political awareness and acting accordingly

Annex 4 Declination to take part in the study from organisations X and Y

Hello XXX

Thank for your time this week to have an initial discussion of the work I am doing here on neurodiversity, and for your offer to take a look at the study I am proposing. Attached with this email is the **information sheet** which I have sent to all my participants so far. This has been approved by the College of Business Law and Social Sciences Committee. What I would like to do is to meet with a group of your HR people (hopefully to include someone from Equality and Diversity) and gather information about their knowledge of the condition, how they interpret and operate policy in this area and what their experiences are of supporting line managers.

The other half of the time I would like to share with them my findings so far from other organisations with this group. A copy of the **preparation note to the HR focus group** is attached. In parallel I would also wish to interview line managers who have people working directly for them that a) have a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and b) have disclosed this to the HR function and to that same line manager.

I would need about 90 minutes of their time, and will be talking to them about their day to day experience of managing someone with this condition. A copy of the **preparation note for the interviewees** is attached. I hope this is useful, and I realise that there may be some way to go in identifying the relevant line managers. A sample of 2 or 3 from Organisation X would be super.

Please do let me know if there is any more information that would be helpful to you. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Many thanks

Anne Cockayne

Reponses|

14/11/2014

Cockayne, Anne

Inbox

Dear Anne,

Thank you for sharing this interesting project. I have to tell you that the **senior staff have declined** to take this forward. I wish you well with your study.

Best wishes,

XX, Head of Equality and Diversity, **ORGANISATION X**

/08/2014 Keegan, Anne Inbox

Hi Anne

I have spoken to XXX about this –she is the Head of HR Operations– and does **not feel that the HR Managers would be able to be part of a focus group on ethical grounds**. I have copied XX in on this email.

Best wishes XXX Equality & Diversity Manager, **ORGANISATION Y**

Annex 5 Targeted organisations

HR and Customer Services Director, Nottinghamshire County Council

Head of Equality and Diversity, Nottingham University Hospitals Trust

Head of Equality and Diversity, Nottinghamshire Mental Health Trust

Director of Organisational Transformation, Nottingham City Council

HR Director, Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)

HR Director, HMRC

Annex 6 Focus groups – Topics and Responses

Topics

- Understanding of neurodiversity, autism and Aspergers
- Has anyone has had experience of someone with AS before getting job?
- Disclosure - what happens when you see as on the application form?
- Was the word 'Asperger's' used in that interview?
- Does disclosure adversely affect their chances of employment?
- Good culture - Q where does this 'good' come from?
- What issues do you think managers face?
- What support do you offer?
- Show cards and explore cases - exploring responses to autistic employee before and after disclosure
- Is EA helpful piece of legislation?
- What RA do you make in Recruitment and selection?
- Do you see your procedures changing further?
- If you see someone presenting with symptoms but not disclosed - how you would deal with that?
- Any roles difficult to recruit for?
- Do you test for flexibility ? How – is it flexibility in hours or in skills

	I know this statement to be TRUE	I know this statement to be FALSE	I have no idea if this statement is true OR false (in other words I would be guessing)	What is the source of my knowledge/ (or educated guess)
More men than women have Asperger's syndrome			✓ ✓ ✓	
People are born with AS	✓		✓ ✓ ✓	
AS is a disability	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	
AS is becoming more common			✓ ✓ ✓	
AS can be diagnosed by a clinical professional			✓ ✓ ✓	
AS has no cure	✓ ✓ ✓			
AS is covered by the Equality Act 2010	✓ ✓ ✓			
How prevalent do you believe AS to be?	?	1-1000	1/1000	1-100
Are AS (and autism) seen with more positive perceptions than 'pure' mental health states? (for example, depression)	?	NO AS it is a life long condition		

Annex 7 Statements about AS

Do you know anyone who has a formal diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome? (that we haven't already discussed). Which group do they belong to?				
family/ friends/associates/ colleagues/prefer not to say				
	I have no idea if this statement is true OR false (in other words I would be guessing)	I know this statement to be TRUE	I know this statement to be FALSE	What is the source of my knowledge/ or educated guess)
More men than women have Asperger's syndrome				
People are born with AS				
AS is a disability				
AS is becoming more common				
AS can be diagnosed by a clinical professional				
AS is a condition which has no cure				
AS is covered by the Equality Act 2010				
How prevalent do you believe AS to be?				
Explore the perceptions of autism vs. other mental health conditions, for example depression)				
<p>The responses to these statements form the first theme in the analysis of data gathered from the interviews. This theme is shown in Annex 15</p>				

Annex 8 Derivation of prompt cards

	Prompt cards
<p>Clinical definition; the diagnostic criteria (DSM-5)</p> <p>Persistent deficits in social communication (and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history:</p> <p>1) deficits in social emotional reciprocity (2) deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, (3) deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships.</p> <p>Findings from clinical and employment studies</p> <p>socially aloof; difficulties in understanding personal space; reading facial expressions and body language (Wing 1981)</p> <p>difficulty in getting jokes (Richards 2015; Morris, Begel and Weidemann 2015)</p> <p>difficulties in recognising social rules; (Haertl et al 2013; Muller et al 2003; Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working in a team • a loner? • empathy • working with customers • strong desire to help others
<p>Clinical definition; the diagnostic criteria (DSM-5)</p> <p>Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least 2 of the following, currently or by history</p> <p>1) stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech</p> <p>(2) insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour.</p> <p>(3) highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus</p> <p>Findings from clinical and employment studies</p> <p>problems in response shifting and adapting to change (Hendricks and Wehman 2009); willingness for repetitive activities (Howlin, Alcock and Burkin 2005; Morris, Begel and Weidemann 2015).</p> <p>keen attention to detail and intense focus may result in increased work output (Happe and Frith 2006). may enjoy tasks often disliked by others due to social isolation or the repetitive nature of the task</p> <p>above average capacity to perceive fine detail (Shah and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attention to detail • flexibility • ability to handle change • high work ethic • level of work output • timekeeping • attendance • enjoys tasks (or will do without complaining) tasks that others find boring • conscientious in

<p>Frith 1993).</p> <p>keen attention to detail, willingness for repetitive activities, trustworthiness, reliability, timeliness, and low absenteeism (Hendricks and Wehman 2009; Hillier et al, 2007; Howlin Alcock and Burkin 2005).</p> <p>methodical and conscientious in carrying out job duties; performing work of especially high quality; dependable, punctual, and consistent (Hagner and Cooney 2005:93).</p> <p>job performance of autistic employees including those with Asperger syndrome rated as average or above by their supervisors (Hagner and Cooney 2005; Hillier et.al 2007)</p>	<p>finishing a task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • obsessive with a task • often an expert on specific topic
<p>sensitivity to sensory stimuli (Smith and Sharp 2013). Higher than average levels of anxiety, especially when experiencing change or novelty (Wing 1981).</p> <p>trustworthiness (Parr and Hunter 2014).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sensitive to bright lights/noise • Handling stress • Honesty, finds it difficult to lie • trusting • objective • detached from organisational politics
<p>extremely high levels of cognitive ability, verbally articulate with good imagination but have learned social skills through their intellect rather than by social intuition (Wing and Gould 1979).</p> <p>higher than average levels of IQ (Assouline et al 2012; Chiang, Tsai and Cheung 2014).</p> <p>special abilities (Happe and Vital 2009; Sloboda 1985; Humphrey 1989).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dealing with complex data • understanding complex systems • level of intelligence • has savant skills
	<p>26 prompt cards</p>

Annex 9 Preparation note to HR specialists and Focus groups

In preparation for the HR focus group here is an outline of the themes I would like to cover.

Parts 1 and 2 – Context, and your existing knowledge about Asperger’s Syndrome

Part 3 - Your experiences of Asperger Syndrome in the employment context

Part 4 - Views about skills which are important to your organisation

In relation to **Parts 1 and 2**, I will be asking you to tell me what you know (and even more importantly what you don’t know!) about Asperger Syndrome. It’s really important that you resist the temptation to go off and find out anything at all about the condition, as doing so will bias the responses somewhat. So, if you could just come with the knowledge that you have already, that will be super.

In contrast, **for Part 3**, it will be really helpful to think beforehand about the individuals you have recruited or supported line managers with. Think about the experiences you have had. What has been challenging, inspiring, difficult, straightforward, surprising, worrying.

It is possible that you may want to say things like “when I was interviewing (NAMED INDIVIDUAL). To avoid anyone being identified I will ask you all to refer to individuals as C (if its Charlotte, or Charlie), rather than x and y.

Part 4 - Your views about skills which are important in your organisation

Do you use the terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ when talking about skills in your organisation? If so, briefly tell me what you think the difference is. [If you do not use these terms, just say NO, and go straight onto q2]

What skills do you believe to be most valuable in your organisation?

Are there any particular parts of the organisation (thinking about job roles, job levels, job titles) that demand these skills more so than other parts?

Are any of these skills you have mentioned hard to recruit for?

Which roles do you currently find hardest to recruit for?

If you have experienced difficulty in recruiting for particular skills, briefly describe why you think this is the case

Do you experience skills shortages in your organisation?

What skills do you think will become more difficult to find in the future?

In an ideal world what would be the three skills that you would like more people in your organisation to have more of?

Thank you

Anne Cockayne

Annex 10 Preparation note for managers and interview guide

Purpose - To give managers time to reflect upon the experiences they have had/having of employing someone with AS. Also to think about the skills that are valuable in particular roles or areas within their organisations

Note: They must have an employee who has a declared AS diagnosis

In preparation for the interview here's an outline of the themes I would like to cover.

It will be really helpful to take a little time to think about the individual/s who are now working with you in terms of the experiences you have had as a line manager of someone with Asperger syndrome. It is important that this person has had a clinical diagnosis of AS and also that they have disclosed their diagnosis to you and the relevant HR department. I would like you to consider the type of job the individual is working in, the skills they have and how these are used in the job. Also, please think about what has been challenging, inspiring, difficult, straightforward, surprising, interesting, or maybe even worrying for you as a line manager. I am also interested in your views about skills in relation to the area you manage, and my aim is to see if and how, skills of AS individuals are utilised.

Annex 11 Structure of Interview for Line managers

What	How /When	Purpose and research question being addressed
Part A - Their job role	Questions, factual	To know who the managers are- how long they have been managing for, what functional areas are they working in (and therefore that of the people they are discussing). Find out how much substantive experience they have of managing someone with AS.
Part B - Their experiences of recruiting and employing an individual with AS	Questions, longest part of the interview Keep focused on the experiences Use prompt cards	What experiences do line managers have in employing someone with AS? What particular skills does someone with AS bring to a role? How do these skills (or do they at all?) differ from those without AS? What difficulties or surprises have they encountered? What support do they need? Do they have any kind of 'road map' available to support the employment experience? How do they get support? How, if at all, do organisations use and develop the talents of this specific (AS) population? Do ideas of neurodiversity play any part in such decisions
Part C - organisational context. Find out what kind of organisation they work in relation to climate for diversity and inclusion, type of roles, specific organisational constraints.		
Part D General levels of knowledge and understanding about AS	Statements. Answer true/false/ guess	What level of knowledge and understanding exists in organisations regarding Asperger's Syndrome amongst those who make decisions relating to employment? What is the source of this knowledge? Do employers recognise any association between particular skills and specific (neurodiverse) groups? Outside of your workplace experiences of AS, do you know of others with AS? If time, ask about perceptions of AS but this is not as relevant as the actual day to day experiences
Part E Views about skills	Questions	What skills do organisations assess to be valuable? How do employers assess their need for skills in employment decisions? How have changes in technology, society, economics and legislation affected the skills required in the role? Do employers value soft skills in preference to hard skills? If so, why might this be? Are hard skills relatively downplayed?
Summarise	check responses are 'as meant'. Set out arrangements for next steps.	

Annex 12 Preparation note and interview guide for AS employees

In preparation for the interview, here's an outline of the themes I would like to cover:

- Your career related decisions
- Your skills, jobs and preferred roles.
- The support you have experienced at work.

Your career related decisions

What careers have you thought about at any time from leaving school onwards (16)? Is your current job an 'ideal' job or career for you? If so, why is it a good match? If not, what sort of job/industry do you think that you might like to have worked (or work) in?

What sources of information have you come across in thinking about jobs and careers?

Does your organisation provide career advice? Is it helpful to you?

Your skills, jobs and preferred roles

It will be really helpful to take a little time to think about the job you work in now (and previous jobs). Think about the skills you have as well as the skills that the job allows you to use.

Ask yourself which parts of the job you do now (or have done in the past) have been challenging, easy, inspiring, difficult, straightforward, surprising, interesting, or worrying for you.

How have changes in the job (for example in technology) affected the skills required in your job?

The support you have experienced at work

I am also interested in your views about the support you have at work. What do you think about the support you have had; how could it be improved? Are there areas that you want support with and are not sure if you are entitled to? Has a diagnosis changed any aspect of how you operate? I will also be asking you to tell me what advice you would give to young people with a diagnosis, coming into the workplace in relation to jobs and careers.

Thank you

Anne Cockayne

Annex 13 Participant information sheet for all respondents

Investigation of neurodiversity in the employment context, focusing upon Asperger syndrome

Welcome

Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in this research project. Before you decide whether to take part it is important that you understand the reasons why I am carrying out the research and what your participation will involve. I would be grateful if you read the information in this document carefully and discuss it with colleagues or other people if you wish. Please feel welcome to contact me if anything is unclear.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study arises from the growing awareness and interest in 'neurodiversity'. The term neurodiversity covers many conditions, including autism, which affect individuals in respect of their skills and abilities. Asperger syndrome is a particular form of autism and my focus will be on identifying what knowledge exists about this condition within organisations as well as individual employment experiences. At a national level complaints are also heard that there are insufficient skills, both 'hard' and 'soft' in the workforce. The CIPD (2010) differentiate between 'soft' and 'hard' skills as follows:

Characteristics of Soft skills	Examples
resistant to being reduced to formulaic rules and routines, procedures and prescriptions Tend to involve judgements and ambiguities less replicable and/or predictable than their harder counterparts and may have multiple (that is, diverging) acceptable solutions	communication skills; emotional intelligence; teamworking; resolving interpersonal conflict in the workplace; being able to assess a customer's state of mind; creative problem-solving
Characteristics of Hard skills	Examples
goal-directed behaviours that draw on well-established and clearly discernible rules and principles. have technological or scientific bases are typically thought of as industrial, mechanical or technical involve the application of specific tools and techniques (are specialised and/or industry-specific) Tend to be procedural and methodical as well as replicable Aim towards outcomes that are relatively predictable "	Tend to avoid any interpersonal component of skill and focus upon skills related to both basic and advanced levels of literacy, numeracy and data analysis; operation of procedures equipment or tools, such as project planning software; software programming; data management.

I am particularly interested in finding out your views about how the skills and abilities of those with Asperger's syndrome are used within your organisation.

What will I be doing?

I will be studying up to 10 organisations, and interviewing employees with a declared diagnosis of Asperger syndrome; as well as human resources management/development staff, and line

managers with operational responsibilities. I will also be contacting organisations who are interested in the research to gain a policy perspective. These will include:

The National Employers Disability Forum

National Autistic Society Prospects- which is the Employment Division)

Graduate Recruitment Associations

Who is running this study?

As this study is for my PhD I will be solely running the study. I am a senior lecturer in HRM, at Nottingham Trent University, qualified as a fellow of the CIPD. I am acting under the guidance of my supervisors, Dr Valerie Caven (Director of Studies) and Professor Alistair Mutch.

Who is funding this study?

The study is not funded by any organisation outside Nottingham Trent University. It has the backing of the Employers Disability Forum and Prospects (which is the employment division of the National Autistic Society). Trade union organisations have also expressed their support and interest in the study, for example the TSSA. All have expressed their wish that the outcomes of this research are made available to policymakers at national level.

Why have I been chosen (or self-nominated) to take part?

If you are an employee with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, I have identified you as a suitable participant because I feel you will have interesting and useful views to contribute about how the particular skills associated with the condition of Asperger syndrome are, or could be used, within your organisation.

If you are an HR representative with designated responsibility for human resource management, development, or graduate recruitment in your organisation, I have identified you as a suitable participant because I feel you will have interesting and useful views to contribute about how the particular skills associated with the condition of Asperger syndrome are, or could be used, within your organisation.

If you are a line manager with designated responsibility for employing and managing people on a day to day basis, I have identified you as a suitable participant because I feel you will have interesting and useful views to contribute about how the particular skills associated with the condition of Asperger syndrome are, or could be used, within your specific functional area.

What do you want me to do?

I would like you to take part in an interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. It will take place at a location of your choice and will be arranged at a time convenient to yourself. The interview will be carried out by me and I will ask for your written permission to tape the interview, to ensure that the information you give me is accurately recorded. If at any point in the interview you would rather not answer some of the questions, I ask then please let me know.

At the end of the interview you are free to ask any questions you may have about the interview or research in general. Support information about Asperger syndrome and neurodiversity will be made available so you can find out more about this topic if you so wish. There will be no detrimental impact upon you as an employee of this organisation in regard to your employment relationship or security of employment from taking part in this study. It is possible that some sensitive issues may arise during or as a result of the interviews, for example you may consider that you, a colleague or a family member has Asperger syndrome but has not received a formal diagnosis. If this happens, I will be able to signpost you towards the specialist organisations for advice and support on such matters.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep, and you will also be asked to sign the consent form (part 2) attached. You will still be free to withdraw at any time: this includes the right to withdraw your interview from the study after it has taken place. If you decide not to take part, or to withdraw at any stage, you will not be asked to give us any reasons.

What will happen to the information I give in my interview?

The tape of your interview will be transcribed. I will then analyse the information and feed it into my results. At the end of the study, all the transcripts will be deposited in NTU's research archive

How will you protect my confidentiality and anonymity?

Confidentiality

The tape and transcript will be handled only by me and a transcriber. The transcriber will not be able to identify any individual as initials only (not names) will be used in discussing experiences. Hard copies of research notes are kept in locked filing cabinets, and electronic files are kept on password protected computers which are not accessible to any other university staff. Only myself has access to recordings. Once the transcripts have been deposited in the NTU archive, the tape of your interview will be destroyed, and the relevant files erased from NTU and my home computer. All data will be destroyed after the final thesis has been written up and has fully satisfied the requirements of the university's examining bodies for a PHD. This is likely to be 1 January 2020.

Anonymity is assured because identifying information will be removed, for example your name, job title, organisation and geographical location. Participants and organisations will be known only as 'organisation x', or 'participant 1'. You will not be named or otherwise identified in any publication arising from this project unless your role forms part of a narrative that is already in the public domain (for example, if you were the named author of a published document or gave evidence to a public inquiry relevant to the study). No unpublished opinions or information will be attributed to you. All transcripts will be fully anonymised before they are archived. Any information that identifies you or your organisation, or that gives any clues to your identity, will be removed.

What are the possible benefits?

I hope that you will find the interview interesting and will take satisfaction from helping to develop knowledge of this important topic. Ultimately the research will inform policy makers, organisations and the neurodiverse population in general, in supporting individuals in their search for employment of mutual benefit to individuals and organisations.

What will happen to the results?

I will publish an executive summary of my results and recommendations which I will circulate to all participants and those organisations listed as supporters of the study. My aim is also to publish some of the results in journals that are widely read by practitioners for example People Management. The finished work will be made available via the British Library

Has anyone reviewed the study?

The proposal for this project has been vetted and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee. Throughout the research there are stringent reporting requirements back to this committee and my team of supervisors as regards the progress of the research and any issues or concerns are raised here. NTU is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the project. The university's ethical approval procedure has been consulted and as I am working only with adults in employment, there is no requirement for a DBS check.

For more information, please contact me at the address below:

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Burton Street,

Nottingham NG1 4BU Email: anne.cockayne@ntu.ac.uk

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Annex 14 Informed consent for all participants

Investigation of neurodiversity in the employment context, focusing upon Asperger's syndrome

Please read through **Part 1 - Participant information sheet** attached which provides all the information you need about the research, before reading and signing **this consent form**. Participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated. If you are happy to take part in this research, please sign and date below. If you have any questions or concerns before, during or after your participation in this research, my contact details are on the bottom of this form.

Agreement to consent

Please read and confirm your consent to being interviewed for this project by ticking the appropriate boxes and signing and dating this form

1) <i>I confirm that the purpose of the project has been explained to me, that I have been given information about it in writing, and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
2) <i>I understand my part in the research</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
3) <i>I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without any implications for my legal rights</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
4) <i>I give permission for the interview to be tape-recorded by research staff, on the understanding that the tape will be destroyed at the end of the project</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
5) <i>I agree to take part in this project</i>		<input type="checkbox"/>		
		Organisation	Date	Signature
Name of researcher taking consent				
Anne Cockayne Email anne.cockayne@ntu.ac.uk Telephone: 0115 848 8020	Researcher	Nottingham Business School, Burton Street, Nottingham NG 1 7BU		

Please sign and date two copies, which should also be counter signed and dated by the researcher (Anne Cockayne). You should retain one copy and the other will be retained by me. **Thank you very much indeed for taking the time to read this sheet and for your interest in my research.**

Annex 15 Extracts from Competency framework (Organisation 5)

<i>effective behaviours</i>	<i>ineffective behaviours</i>	<i>Closest AS Characteristic</i>
Proactively contribute to the work of the whole team	Focus on own objectives at the expense of supporting colleagues	Teamworking, (or Team contribution)?
Express ideas effectively, both orally and in writing, and with sensitivity and respect for others	Demonstrate no awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others nor consider the potential reactions of others to the ideas put forward	Empathy
Listen to, understand, respect and accept the value of different views, ideas and ways of working	Adopt a biased, exclusive or disrespectful manner in their dealings with others	
Try to see issues from others' perspectives and check understanding	Look at issues from own viewpoint only	
Listen to the views of others and show sensitivity towards others	Not treat all colleagues fairly, equitably or with respect	
Put forward their own views in a clear and constructive manner, choosing an appropriate communication method, email/ telephone/ face	Miss opportunities to contribute positively to discussions about the organisation or team	Social interaction
Write clearly in plain simple language and check work for spelling and grammar, learning from previous inaccuracies	Make little effort to ensure they express themselves in an effective manner that others can easily understand	
Ask open questions to appreciate others' point of view	Withhold work information and refuse to share knowledge that would help others do a better job	
Demonstrate interest in others and develop a range of contacts outside own team to help get the job done	Ignore the knowledge and expertise that a wider network of colleagues and partners can bring to the work of the team	
Actively encourage team working, changing ways of working to facilitate collaboration for the benefit of the team's work	Continue to work in set ways that make it difficult for colleagues to contribute to or benefit from the team's work	
Listen attentively to others and check their understanding by asking questions	Show a lack of interest or skill in interacting with others	
Take responsibility for creating a working environment that encourages equality, diversity and inclusion	Adopt a biased, exclusive or disrespectful manner in their dealings with others	
Get to know fellow team members/colleagues and understand their viewpoints and preferences	Is overly critical and blaming of people who have different working styles or development needs	
Seek help when needed in order to complete own work effectively	Miss opportunities to generate better outcomes for the customer through	

	collaboration with others	
Confidently handle challenging conversations or interviews	Unable to deal objectively with conflicts and disputes when they arise	
Confront and deal promptly with inappropriate language or behaviours, including bullying, harassment or discrimination	Avoid challenging inappropriate language or behaviours	Honesty and directness
Be open to taking on different roles	Assume specific, unvarying role responsibilities	Flexibility
Conduct regular reviews of what and who is required to make a project/activity successful and make on-going improvements	Stick rigidly to the original brief, not adapting support/input to changing needs	
Put aside preconceptions and consider new ideas on their own merits	Avoid considering different approaches, accepting the established way of doing things	
Understand and apply technology to achieve efficient and effective business and personal results	Avoid use of technology and stick to tried and tested means of delivering business objectives	
Learn new procedures, seek to exploit new technologies and help colleagues to do the same	Adopt new processes without reporting difficulties that occur	
Respond effectively to emergencies	Resistant to sudden changes to usual work routine	
Help colleagues, customers and corporate partners to understand changes and why they have been introduced	Dismiss colleagues' concerns about change and miss opportunities to discuss with them what is behind their concerns	
Identify, resolve or escalate the positive and negative effects that change may have on own role/team	Implement change in a thoughtless and unstructured way, having not considered the possible effects it may have on others	
Be constructive in raising issues with managers about implemented changes and the impact these are having on the service	Be resistant to listening to ideas or plans for change, showing little interest in the reasons for change and how they can adapt their behaviour to thrive in the new environment	Flexibility or Social Interaction
Take initiative to suggest ideas for improvements, sharing this feedback with others in a constructive manner	Be reluctant to consider ways to improve services in own area, even when improvements are urgently required	Flexibility

Annex 16 Transcript from interview with Manager F, organisation 5

		Colour code
1	Knowledge and beliefs about autism	
2	Invisibility	
3	Difference between autistic and non-autistic employees	Brown text
4	Organisational context creates difficulties	
5	Differences between managers themselves	
6	Causes of managers difficulties (integrative theme)	
7	Impact on manager (frustrations)	
8	Team issues (new theme)	
9	Support issues	
10	Disclosure and diagnosis	

Notes on coding:

The first theme is formed from the analysis of the data generated by respondents divulging their knowledge about AS. This data is based upon the statements presented (which are shown in Annex 7)

Where differences between an AS employee and comparable others in the team were mentioned, these are highlighted in brown text, instead of block brown shading. This is purely for ease of reading.

Annex 16 Interview with Manager F, organisation 5 (2 March 2015)

Manager F is anonymised as Duncan (initialised here as D]. The interviewer's emphasis is indicated by capital letters.

Note - DSE – acronym for Display Screen Equipment

D gave me his consent form. I am sensing he is nervous about this interview and seems anxious about confidentiality and disclosure. I also had a look at the work environment whilst I was waiting to begin the interview – my first impressions are that it is quietish, although he said it will get noisier as the day goes on.

Part A – Introductions, background and finding out about the manager's experiences in managing an autistic employee

PI: Introduce research – this project is finding out about what it's like on the ground to manage an autistic person. It is going to inform policy decisions down the line, but not immediately. I will be collecting the data and then give it back to [project sponsor, organisation 5, in CITY].

D: I want to know about employing people with autism and how to get the best out of them and how to help me manage. I look at this as part of diversity which [organisation 5] takes really seriously as well as mental health. So, I was looking to see how I can best manage my adviser, how can I help him and how can he help himself. If you can give me guidance that would help me, or give me some hints about managing please? I'm looking for general advice, not just specific to my advisor - that would be really helpful.

PI: yes of course

The other thing is that I'm assuming that this interview only has value if it's open and honest - however I don't want to be burned because I'm outlining some of the frustrations and difficulties. Do you understand that?

PI: Yes of course. Let's make sure we got the confidentiality sorted. When I write up the data, it will say the data is drawn from a large public sector organisation. I won't be specifying location or actual name of the organisation.

D: One of the things that's different about the role we are talking about is that the actual role is quite constrained. If you were in a more creative industry, e.g. graphics, advertising, that could be helpful. The role we have here is so well defined and the room to develop is quite constrained which isn't as helpful for someone who has different abilities.

PI: This research is aiming to improve employers' knowledge about autism, so that younger people (16-18) can be more informed about roles, career choices and be aware of what roles and what environments are going to be Ok and what aren't. Let's find out what it is like for you as a manager. How do you deal with someone who is different?

D: I've managed some delicate situations, someone who was deeply depressed. I have dealt with bereavements or serious illness. The element that's difficult here [talking about managing K] is the communication with him on a DAILY basis. I do want to help. I think that we [organisation 5] should have an element of social responsibility. However, I have some natural concerns. I used to work in private industry where it was very cutthroat, and anything goes as long as you are making money. That's a very different environment to here, where there are so many hoops to jump through (talking about handling disability). At the same time, there's still a real demand for productivity and there is pressure from above to

produce results. This has to be balanced against equalities act legislation and the desire for [organisation 5] to be seen as a diverse organisation. Sometimes I think the organisation needs to look at what it wants to be, because we can't demand top productivity AND be diverse. Maybe we can't take people on who will never achieve the required standard?

Adjusting targets never happens here. It's all management by exception – this means that what happens, is that you get to the end of the year and write up your explanation of what hasn't been met (i.e. the exception). Rather than set in advance different goals to suit the person which take account of adjustments. For example, K gets additional investment time for any training. He has DSE breaks which are used to help stress so he can go away from screen for 10 minutes. We have adjusted screens- they are different colour and has a double headset. One of the things I find quite frustrating is that he doesn't seem to recognise that there is actually already quite a lot of support in place. It's as if he feels that he is being left to flounder, rather than actually thinking- 'do you know what, every adjustment that can be made they have actually been made'. I find that very difficult because there's no recognition of what's already in place. I make huge adjustments.

I'm absolutely certain he does not understand some of the simple things that others do, for example he finds it hard to fill in leave sheets. So, I buddied him with someone whose leave sheets are immaculate. It's good for her- so she can show it as one of her competencies. Really, I genuinely don't know what to say, as I find that when he is talking to different people about different things, his level of communication and understanding can vary from one extreme to the other. However, when we're talking about this role, it is difficult to pull out a positive as sometimes he struggles to do the role that we need. The role is to listen to people (customers), distil what their complaint is, their 'upsetness' on the phone and get to the crux of the call. Then the advisor should use our company guidance to resolve this. Candidly, I don't think this is the best job for someone with AS. The other thing is that K also has dyslexia diagnosed – there's masses of stuff in his file about this but not much about AS. So, that's the background and why I am looking for help. I do feel caught between a rock and a hard place. I'm either perceived to be pressuring him to achieve something he can't, or sometimes failing in my own role.

D: How do I get 1 to 1 support for K?

PI: Anne mentions Access to Work support via DWP, explain how it works- which is about 5 hours in a 40-hour working week. This 'time-out' can be used for working 1 to 1 support, with a specialist coach, not the line manager.

I feel that I'm taking his anxiety on board, although I'm not an anxious person. I'm acting as a barrier between the pressure of the business and him. I feel he isn't even aware of the pressure I am under. I won't transmit this onto him as I don't want to be in a position where I'm making someone else anxious and off sick. I'd like to find out about the DWP support. He has an OH assessment on Thursday. Anyway, I feel I've done nothing but moan!

PI: Let's find out more about you and your background

D: Did civil engineering at university, land survey, construction work for about 14 years, then 7 years in surveying. I went to Shetland for 3 weeks, stayed there for 1 year. This was very tiresome - my working week was very stressful as I was working at weekends and doing paperwork in the week. I was working really hard 2000-2004 and decided the extra money wasn't worth it, so came here. I started here in 2004 as a Part-time advisor and was promoted to TL 2006. Since then I've been running a part-time team until 2014 then went full time. The team all had same kind of family issues as me. Some had severe health issues,

but there's a difference between those health issues you can see and those health issues you can't. I feel there's a lot more emphasis and sympathy given to someone with one leg than somebody with a different brain chemistry. It's easier to make adjustments as you can highlight why somebody is different. Since 2006 I've been a line manager- it's been interesting, but I do feel that LM role here is undervalued here, most of the advisors are looking for someone to take responsibility for their particular life. Personally, I've been quite grateful for this opportunity – it means I have been able to use this job to stay home and run the kids around and give parental support (their talents come from their mum!). There's a need to make sure they get off and back from school – and this became more valuable as they got older - they talk to you less but need you more! (*Anne thinks he is using humour here but still looks a bit stressed*). These are perks they do not get if they are sitting in an after-school club. I'm not looking to build a career here. I'm 55 this year, looking to get out at 60. That doesn't mean I don't want to work or do the best job I can. I'd like to retire early enough to enjoy it. I don't want to be in the same situation as my mum, she died of lung cancer early, I don't want to be putting things off then not get the chance to enjoy life.

PI: *Apart from K, have you line managed anyone else with a hidden disability?*

D: Depression - does that count?

PI: *Yes, it does.*

D: Yes, I Have – but is it a disability (*wondering*)? The reason I think depression isn't a disability is that it can be cured. Although it can come back, there are still times when you aren't depressed, whereas AS will be there permanently. I've managed several people with depression – it seems like a modern plague, I think.

PI: *Any other experiences of managing or working with people on the spectrum?*

D: No.

Part B – Experiences of managing autistic employees, probing for AS characteristics using the prompt cards

PI: *How did K come into your team?*

D: K was already in the team I was recruited as line manager to. He was recruited on a fixed term contract and got permanent job when it came along. I was managing him through this transition from fixed term to perm. There's been a lot of support in place in past, lots of various different coaching. To be honest, it's all been ineffective and there's not been a eureka moment. Frankly, he's had a sick history in the past, but touch wood he's not been off sick with me, but I think that's partly as I am holding back some of his stress. We used to have this element of 'optimum performance' recognising that people are performing at optimum level. I watch K and I genuinely believe he is performing at his optimum level. He's not somebody who is swinging the lead, he is doing his best - I honestly believe this. When he applied for the permanent role, he brought me the competency set for the role. He wasn't happy with the support he had from the previous TL. When I read what he had written in his competency set, it seemed to me to be an apology for all the things he could not do. I helped him rewrite these so that he got the job. But again, I suspect that K never remembers that I did that.

Now our policy has changed, many lines of business are winding down, people recruitment is being frozen, and people are being squeezed out the door. We need people to answer calls – to avoid too long waiting times. Budget constraints mean we can only get money to employ

people on a permanent job if they can work 12 to 8 pm shifts (not a day shift). That's the only shifts on offer. Now, I don't think it's a great shift for K either. Maybe I'm making an assumption, but he has put in a request for a day shift instead.

I'm pretty confident K ended up here simply because he needed a job. Not everyone has this middleclass obsession with a career or job that is best for them. I think he has worked with graphics, some kind of graphics qualification- his previous job was with X [media firm].

PI: How long have you been managing K?

I have been managing K for just about 1 year.

PI: What's been the worst experience for you in managing this condition?

D: When he says 'I don't understand'- this is his default answer to whenever there is any pressure. The most difficult thing for me, is that I'm always feeling I'm in a position of apologising for K. If I was in a position where I could say 'this is the optimum performance this person is going to be and it's good enough'. But, here there is a constant demand for performance, but he (K) has reached the level he can.

PI: Have you spoken about these with your managers?

Yes- but we have a culture of continuous improvement which is a tension in getting optimum performance - this is the ethos now. We used to have a 'master coach' facility - where we recognised that people have different talents and different levels of skills, and that some are more productive than others. Whereas, someone else could be not as productive, but still be working at their best. This was about recognising what's been achieved - and what optimum performance that person has been able to achieve. We don't have this anymore. It's been replaced by CI, everyone has to show how they are continuously improving, all the time. That's part of performance management now.

PI: That sounds pressurised for everybody. Tell me about how you handle this situation?

I don't talk about targets with K. I completely avoid this because if someone is doing their optimum performance, it's just a stressor. What I am looking for is enough evidence so that I can say confidently that he is giving his optimum performance; as he is already trying as hard as he possibly can. I am left in catch 22 - in that I can actually make somebody feel under pressure and being a bully. This is what I mean by being stuck between a rock and a hard place. K's performance is likely to reduce if he is stressing AND he thinks that I'm stressing. So, yeah, the most difficult thing is being caught between a rock and a hard place. I have left myself vulnerable from my boss about productivity targets. It is stressful and worrying for me because I don't want to be a bully.

Going back to what I find frustrating is... Whenever I ask for anything, I get "I don't understand". At first, he wouldn't ask me for help, but now I can see that when he is on a difficult call, he will know this and will come and ask me straightaway. What he was doing before was just sitting there, zoning out staring at the blank the screen. I'm hoping that if he does this enough, he will remember what to do!

D: Another important thing - this is a new diagnosis. I think there's just as much lack of understanding about dyslexia as about what Asperger's is. Dyslexia isn't seen as a mental health issue, just word blindness.

PI: Have you noticed any other difficulties?

Just that K can look completely blank, as though you've never spoke to him about something, and like he can't remember what I've said. This sounds really bad as actually I personally really like K. I genuinely feel that K is doing the very best he can. I feel there is a lot more support and understanding placed upon someone who has a disability that you can see, rather than someone who has different brain chemistry. It'd all be so much easier if it was one arm or leg... then people get it.

PI. How has K's diagnosis changed your experience in managing?

D: The fact that your daughter has got AS has raised some concerns for me because I feel like I'm being very critical. I feel like you might have a defensive reaction to what I'm saying.

[Anne reiterates why I'm doing the research- my personal connection, experiences and motivation for the study, as well as my HR background]. End by talking about how important it is for a young AS person to knowing what the job role demands when they are thinking about a career].

D: That's quite interesting because what K will need to understand is that the job will not change as there isn't another opportunity to move. Ironically, the more he struggles in this role, the harder it will be to move into one that suits him better. When you look at moving in this organisation, we have to look if they are doing their current job really well already! Then we end up in the position where the competencies read like an apology. So, what we need to accept is that K is in this job for the foreseeable future – the job CAN'T change, and if anything, we have already made adjustments.

How has the role changed?

The big change is that advisors are expected to deal with several lines of business at the same time. People literally don't know what type of calls will come in – could be all kinds. We have taken K right out of this – he won't be able to cope with this, which I bet is an adjustment he isn't aware of. He would really struggle if he had to keep moving about and changing from one type of call to another.

He developed techniques to deal with [type x] calls, but when he has to jump onto the helpdesk this is stressful for him. If he was moved onto online support and was only doing this, then I'm sure he would develop skills to cope. But the problem is we are not dealing with just one type of query - we are moving from one to the other as the business demands. He's not unique in this [*talking about someone else's struggles with flexibility*] - I've had someone else who had Aperts syndrome.

PI: What's that?

It is a visible disability- face is distorted, hands twisted. This person had mental health issues too. He also couldn't easily move from role to role. Again, he had Higher Educational qualifications, in IT. This disability was so visible and obvious there's something wrong. There's fewer queries [from the team] than for someone like K, who seems to be able to live his life perfectly normally and is able to drive his car. The point is, you understand, that is a real stressor for me. Do you (*meaning I*) then take the role of 'explainer' of this to other people? Whereas if someone has this very visible facial disfigurement and hand problems, then it's easier to understand the issue and why we are making the adjustments. Not everyone wants to know about someone's disability. Can I be really clear? Not all TLs would protect K. I protect him. It's because I'm 55. I'm glad to have this job but it's not the end of the world if I lose it. I've been around. If you are a young team leader, and you want to get promoted, there would be a temptation not to take the flack.

Not everyone will want to know [about Keith's disability]. Some don't care or aren't sympathetic, actually I hadn't considered this until now. If you are just sitting there and getting hammered by lots of phone calls, and someone else is getting twice as much time off the phones, then you might not be very sympathetic. You might understand, or you might feel aggrieved that they are getting more time off the phones. It's like your first question about non-visible/visible. That's it in a nutshell, it would be just be a lot easier if someone had one arm or one leg. I don't want to sound flippant - But if its visible, it's so much easier for people to get sympathy.

PI: Any strengths at all that you have seen? [Not necessarily in relation to this job]

D: If I want people want to know more about their systems, I suggested that people speak to K – he is the person to speak to. He does know about this stuff - for example when I lost the auto spell-check once - K just knows where it is. I've got some more mature staff members who aren't so tech savvy.

In relation to our guidance, some of the questions on our forms that we ask our customers aren't clearly written. They are ambiguous. So, if K comes to me with a query as to what this guidance means, **this is very useful for me as it highlights why customers also find it difficult to understand.** He is clearly motivated and does want to help people. He struggles with remembering times, but he is always here and in on time. For example, today he booked annual leave, even though he didn't have to. He'll probably find this interview stressful so that's why he took annual leave, so he doesn't have to go straight back to calls.

Using the Prompt Cards to help recall

PI: I am going to show you some cards which might help you recall some of the behaviours and situations you have noticed in regard to K. You might find that we have already mentioned some of the areas. When you answer, please think about these in comparison to the rest of your team doing the same job, as these are the differences I want to explore.

Expert on a specific topic	Strengths in IT issues, knows his way about, call recording screen adjustments, lots of technical knowledge about PCS. Good technical knowledge, about Windows and the mechanics of making the pc fit.
Attention to detail.	Attention to detail. yes definitely
Team working	Yes, he wants to work in a team
Obsessive with task.	Being obsessive, a definite. I see this when he is pedantic about if the customer doesn't understand the guidance. This is really useful to me as we've just talked about before.
Ability to handle change.	Referred back to previous example of finding it difficult to handle varied calls and then having to move onto the helpdesk. This is stressful for K and if he was moved onto just one line of business, that would help.
Flexibility	See above

<p>Sensitive to bright lights, sudden noise</p>	<p><i>This is a really key area.</i> He is definitely sensitive to noise. He can't cope because of the noise.</p> <p>He needs light from the back not the front. His desk is the optimum one we can get for the light conditions. It's has been set up from week 1. His best option is to be near me, in an area where I can support him.</p> <p>So what I've done is moved desks about so he's next to someone who is very quiet and as far away from the noisy ones as I can. . He just can't function if desk lighting is too bright, so wears a hat He is the only one in the building wearing a hat, as no one else is allowed to. I don't know why - seems sensible to me. We are not allowed to wear a hat at work, even though we can walk into work with a hat. I've no idea why that rule is in place! (<i>Anne also thinks why not?</i>). This is like a production line- the phone calls are like the widgets they produce. The focus is on productivity and the idea is to have good quality calls time after time. This is not a creative environment, we're not an advertising agency. He has hat, laptops and double headset. I can't move this teams about, these are national procedures; we can't change it for him.</p>
<p>Conscientious in finishing a task*</p>	<p>Yes he is conscientious, there's no doubt. I want to help him. I need evidence to support him. Candidly, I really need some help. I need you to tell me what is common to people with Asperger's, so I have some evidence to back me up. I should know about this. I need someone helping me. He has an OH appointment next week and I can get him time to attend this.</p>
<p>Level of work output</p>	<p>I think he is an optimum performer with what he can do without additional support. But, I am not qualified to give him this</p>
<p>timekeeping attendance</p>	<p>Attendance is a real positive. He always comes in plenty of time and is not desperate to leave. We are really highly monitored on our breaks. If he goes on a break at 10 past, he may forget and come back too early or too late. This makes him anxious.</p>
<p>high work ethic</p>	<p>He has a high work ethic.</p>
<p>Enjoys tasks (or will do without complaining) tasks that others find boring</p>	<p>I don't really have any experience of that- the role is the role, which is call handling and each call is different. There's isn't any data entry work on its own. It's a constrained role.</p>
<p>Trusting</p>	<p>Not sure – I have not seen anything.</p>
<p>Honesty, finds it difficult to lie</p>	<p>I don't know about being blunt, but I would say he is very open. For example, I wouldn't tell anyone in the team he has AS – its confidential and I can't say why someone is off sick. But, K has told everyone when he is off sick.</p>

Empathy	Empathy. K is no different to anyone else within this team.
Loner?	K takes his lunch with partner... they hold hands. K wants to work in a team. He definitely wants to work in a team. He is not a loner within this team, far from it.
Working with customers. Strong desire to help.	Clearly wants to help people, that's one of his strengths. He wants to be here and do the best job he can, I have no doubt whatsoever. The difficulty is that customers don't structure the call, they give a mass of information that advisors have to distil. When he comes to me, to help him, I always ask him to think why the person is on the phone, so that he can see the big picture and not get lost in the detail.
Objective Detached from organisational politics	He definitely couldn't care less about organisational politics. I just don't think he recognises that's what he should say; I think he is just concentrating on K and being at work.
handling stress	K struggles with stress – definitely. I don't know how much is due to AS There have been examples of meltdown and taking time out. To handle the meltdowns I've created investment time, told him to get away and make a cup of tea. I've got him half hour of additional time to try and take away from the jumble that's going on around about him.
dealing with complex data understanding complex systems	I don't think so, but he isn't dealing with complex data as such. When dealing with a call, K is as effective or more effective than others. He has got good skills moving around from screen to screen, he can capture detail on the screen quickly. His PC usage is good, sharp, quick and accurate, whereas others are more ponderous moving from screen to screen. He can flick through this as quick or quicker than anyone else. This is ok if it is a straightforward query, e.g a change of bank details. We have to tell customers certain things [company specific information] – this is very important. When guidance is there, he can flick through that really well. What he won't be able to do is remember all these (whereas someone else, who is less quick and capable of flicking between the screens, will compensate by doing things from memory and catching up.) This can be a strength as you don't miss anything out. However, most of our guidance isn't perfect and most of our customers do not give perfect information. The role requires the person to make judgments about what the customer is telling us, often which is incomplete information.
level of intelligence	I have got a wide range of people in the team. Some are degree qualified people. K seems a bright guy to me, but I don't think he is particularly above or below. There are people who are more effective but less bright. He clearly does a lot of research into his own condition. But again, there are constraints in the role.

has savant skills	Do you mean like Rainman? Savant, definitely not- I haven't seen this, but maybe its because the role doesn't allow this to come out?
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Comfort Break (10 mins)

Still Part B - moving onto support issues

PI: I'm going to ask you about the support you have had in managing K

Nothing as yet because it's a relatively new diagnosis, in fact part of the reason for doing this is for me to search out and ask for help. There's loads of stuff on file about dyslexia, lots of stuff for this is already in place, but not about autism. K has asked for other stuff which isn't available- like the best set of headphones – these aren't approved by us, so I can't do this, we are constrained by what we can offer. He has double headset, screen correcting colors, got various different mice, DSE breaks and additional IT time for learning, additional time for completing his timesheets.

PI: Who calculates these DSE breaks?

D: The DSE breaks are quite small – 5 mins every hour. As TL, I have a lot of flexibility to say to K that when you are in stress mode, you need to take a break now. This is where I'm really looking to you and to OH for written back up as to why I am allowing this time, so that I can adjust K's targets. I haven't had enough day to day support. This isn't a criticism of my boss, it's a factor to do with the invisibility of the disability. It's not really there. In contrast, we have someone here with a hideous condition, he lost one leg and the other leg doesn't work. He is in a wheelchair and in agony a lot of the time. He comes in, does his job. In comparison, its quite a hard sell (to the team) to say that K is overcoming challenges to do the best he can. There's not been a lot of support. I'm hoping that OH can support K and we can get some 1 to 1 DWP support, that would be excellent as it is specialist help. I am really hoping that the one to one support will happen. I know that it takes up most of management time. That's who takes my time, I have always got an eye on K, to see if he is getting really stressed. I could do with something that is a little more structured and more defined.

PI: Does K know how much support you give him?

D: I don't think that he recognizes that he gets support from me. This is one of the stresses I feel. I don't think that he is aware of how far I hold the pressure back. I think a less experienced manager would end up pressurizing K to achieve things that he can't achieve. When he was in a meltdown situation, I told him that he makes me stressed. I think he understood this and took it on board.

There's so many things I write up and just do on his behalf. In the past I would walk away from him as he was so stressed. I think I have really tried to help K and now I am at the stage where I'm looking for help for me. I think that if he were in the right role there would be some strengths. But, this is NOT one of them, at the end of the day this is the tensions in this.

Part C – exploring the organisational context further

PI: What happens if anyone asks for a job change here?

D: It's all call handling jobs. There is a review on currently as we are trying to reduce our staff numbers. Trying to get rid of as many non- phone people and towards as many customer facing roles as possible. Quality support teams have been reduced from 8 to 4. Already got

rid of support roles, they went some time ago. We are moving people back to customer facing roles. Within this organisation there are lots of jobs that are complex and aren't directly related to call handling. But if you have a laptop and headset then you can take calls. There will be roles available but will mostly customer facing or compliance roles.

PI: From what you said it's not dealing with customers that the problem. It's the variety?

D: K would be ideal for online support, but he chose not to do this... whether it was because he was moving from one line of business to another- I don't know. But again, online support is different from dealing with just a screen. He would be OK, if you could take over the screen for the customer (remote), but we don't do this, and rely on the customer to say what the issue is. K struggled because he still has the problem of distilling what the person on the other end is saying.

PI: What other roles exist in this organisation? Are there any other sites?

D: To move out of contact centres you would have to move into a [specialist technical] role. It's quite difficult to make a jump from a contact to a non-contact environment. Why, because you will be competing with someone who is already demonstrating the competencies that are those you need in the job you are applying for. What on earth can we do, if he [K] is handling contact centre calls? There is not a role here, but his job is THIS role, as much as this is a huge organisation.

It gets back to the competencies I mentioned earlier. Maybe I shouldn't have helped, but I didn't like it and I didn't think this was fair. The statements he wrote down were more like apologising for what he can't do instead of saying I've done this and that. I protect him. But not ALL team leaders would have protected him. It's because I'm 55. I'm glad to have this job but it's not the end of the world if I lose it. It depends. If you are a young team leader, and you want to get promoted, there would be a temptation not to [protect] and take the flack. So together we rewrote them.

As much as this is a huge organization there is not much scope to move. You need to understand that if we push to K the idea of getting another job too hard, he might end up going down the the HR capability route. I don't want this for K. As an organisation, I think what we need to do is to put in place that we are going to accept this (K's disability). We have a duty to employ people with a diverse set of skills, I think we have to accept this. There isn't an obligation to consider moving, but if there isn't a role then there is no obligation to provide jobs. So that's the background of where we are.

PI: It would be good if other roles could be explored in this huge organization?

D: Yes, that would be valid for you to feedback to the project sponsor.

This is an organisation that does give adjustments. The key issue I have is the non-visible and the visible. Fortunately we have a diagnosis now and we can use this to put in place the right kind of support [talking about AS not dyslexia]. After K's appointment with OH next week, OH will give me a report. I've asked for adjustments. It's just an OH nurse, not a specialist. I want to highlight that this is someone who is trying their hardest on a daily basis; there is nothing worse than this. What I need, I'm looking for support, there's nothing in place yet - this seems to be taking ages, it's frustrating that it's taking so long.

Part D- Knowledge and understanding about autism and AS

(Also probe: For the statements you said you knew to be 'true', where do you get your knowledge from?)

More men than women have Asperger's syndrome	I don't know, I would be guessing
People are born with AS.	I don't know, I would be guessing
AS is a disability	I know this to be true. I know this from our Intranet in this organisation.
AS is becoming more common.	I would be guessing
AS can be diagnosed by clinical professional	I know this to be true (I know this from the letter K showed me and my discussions 1 to 1 with my employee, K)
As is a condition that has no cure	I would be guessing
AS is covered under Equality Act	I know that this is true. I know this from our Intranet in this organisation. I also know this form my experience of dealing with other mental health issues, e.g depression and other physical disabilities. I am aware of other criteria about classification, which is if the disability has a significant impact on functioning. It's not knowledge about AS its more knowledge about disability.
How prevalent do you believe AS to be?	No idea, I'm guessing at 1 in 300. It's a spectrum, I'm confident there would be lots of people on spectrum.
Explore the perceptions of autism vs. other mental health conditions, for example depression)	As I said at the beginning of the interview... The reason I think depression isn't a disability is that it can be cured. Although it can come back, there are still times when you aren't depressed, whereas AS will be there permanently. I've managed several people with depression – it seems like a modern plague, I think.

Part E: Views about skills

PI: What skills does this organisation assess to be valuable?

D: We look for telephony skills or need specialist finance skills.

PI: How have changes in technology, society, economics and legislation affected the skills required in the role?

The opportunities for moving shifts have shrunk. This is a contracting organization - we want fewer people who are more highly skilled and more flexible. We are about moving to less people with higher skills and high flexibility

PI: Are soft skills valued differently to hard skills?

D: I'm not sure what the difference is, we need customer facing skills

Thank you for your time – you've given me lots of useful information. I will contact you separately with details of the support we have talked about.

End

Annex 17 Primary source of knowledge - Line managers and HR specialists

		From dealing with /managing an employee with a diagnosis	Do I know anyone other than the employee with a diagnosis of autism/ AS	From my family/ friends/ colleagues	from media
Organisation					
5	F (Line manager)	Yes	No		
5	G (Line manager)	Yes	No		
5	H (Line manager)	Yes	No		Yes
5	I (Line manager)	Yes	No		
6	M (Line manager)	Yes	No		
1	a (HR manager)	Yes	No		
1	b (Occ. Health)	Yes	No		
1	C (HR advisor [a])	Yes	No		
1	D (HR advisor [b])	Yes	No		
5	E (D &I)	Yes	No		
2	C (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Friend	
3	D (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Colleague	
4	E (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Friends child	
5	J (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Friend	
5	K (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Friend's child	
5	L (Line manager)	Yes	Yes	Friends	
5	F (Talent Planning)		Yes	Family/friends	
5	G (RA Specialist)		Yes	Own Child	
5	H (Disability Support)		Yes	Own Child	

Annex 18 Beliefs about prevalence

	Number of line managers	Number of HR/EDI specialists
No idea	4	0
1 in 10	2	0
1 in 50/ 60	1	3
1 in 100	0	2
1 in 200/300	2	1
1 in 1.000	1	2
1 in 10,000	1	0

Annex 19 Knowledge and Understanding of Asperger syndrome

	I have absolutely no idea if this statement is true or false (in other words I would be guessing)		I know this statement to be true		I know this statement to be false	
	Line managers	HR	Line managers	HR	Line managers	HR
People are born with AS	8	3	2	5	1	0
AS has no cure	1	5	10	3	0	0
AS can be diagnosed by a clinical professional	1	4	10	4	0	0
AS is becoming more common	6	3	2	5	3	0
More men than women have Asperger's syndrome	10	2	1	6	0	0
	26 guesses	17 guesses	25 non-guesses	23 non-guesses	4 non-guesses	0 non-guesses

Annex 20 Responses about Autism as a disability

	Is AS covered under the Equality Act?	Is AS a disability?	
Organisation	Line managers and HR specialists		
2	C	yes, it is	yes it is
3	D	guessing	depends on personal opinion
4	E	yes it is	yes it is
5	F	yes it is	yes it is
5	G	yes it is	yes it is
5	H	yes it is	I know this to be false
5	I	yes it is	yes it is
5	J	yes it is	yes it is
5	K	yes it is	am guessing
5	L	yes it is	yes it is
6	M	guessing	yes it is
1	HR manager	yes it is	yes it is
1	Occ. Health	yes it is	not sure.
1	HR advisor [a]	yes it is	yes it is
1	HR advisor [b]	yes it is	yes it is
5	EDI specialist	yes it is	No
5	Talent Planning	yes it is	yes it is
5	Disability support lead	yes it is	Depends
5	Reasonable adjustment specialist	yes it is	yes it is