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COMMENTARY

Conceptualizing neurodiversity as individual differences in self-regulation

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A core assumption of the neurodiversity movement is that neurological differences such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia stem from naturally occurring variability in the brain and thought processes, rather than disease. This idea is quite in line with I-O psychology's tendency to conceptualize individual differences as continuous and multidimensional. Although comparing the experiences of neurominority groups with those of other marginalized groups will undoubtedly prove informative in guiding diversity and inclusion efforts, there is also much to be gained by conceptualizing neurodiversity through an individual difference lens. In this commentary in response to LeFevre-Levy et al. (2023), I give examples of existing bodies of knowledge on work motivation and associated individual differences in self-regulation that show conceptual overlap with descriptions of neurodiversity. I then point to advantages of conceptualizing neurodiversity as a set of continuous individual differences as opposed to a limited number of discrete, diagnosis-based categories.

Theory and research on self-regulation highlight the internal processes involved in managing one's own attention, emotion, and volitional behavior—processes directly affected by neurodiversity. Further, research on work motivation has long recognized between-person differences in self-regulation and explored the interaction of these person-level variables with the situation or job context. Thus, the plethora of individual differences examined in the work motivation literature hold direct relevance to the work-related strengths and weaknesses attributed to different neurominority groups. Consider, for example, the following descriptions of one employee's challenges with self-regulation:

- difficulty down-regulating negative affect to focus on the task at hand
- lack of willpower to get started; frequent procrastination
- easily pulled off-task during goal pursuit by the initiation of new activities

In the context of neurodiversity, one might assume these statements are describing a person with a condition such as ADHD. In fact, these statements were pulled from descriptions of the "state-oriented" ends of three different dimensions of action-state orientation (ASO)—a set of individual differences put forth in the theory of action control (Kuhl & Goschke, 1994). Several studies in our field have examined the dimensions of ASO in relation to work motivation and performance (see Diefendorff et al., 2017, for a review). In doing so, this research may have illuminated some of the mechanisms linking ADHD characteristics with work behavior. For example, state-orientation on the hesitation dimension, characterized by difficulty initiating action on a task, was negatively related to both in-role job performance and organizational citizenship behavior. On the other hand, state-orientation on the preoccupation dimension, characterized by a tendency to become distracted by thoughts of negative outcomes, was found to be positively related to job performance and citizenship behavior.

The ASO findings described above offer but one example of how an existing body of work on individual differences in self-regulation can offer clues as to the job-related challenges and strengths associated with forms neurodiversity. Other individual differences studied by work motivation researchers hold similar promise. For example, Kanfer and Heggestad's motivational traits and skills framework describes a set of stable traits and malleable skills that govern the self-regulation of motivation and emotion (Kanfer & Heggestad, 1997). Additionally, researchers have linked differences in self-regulation to the sensitivity of the behavioral activation and behavioral inhibition systems (e.g., Richard & Diefendorff, 2011). Each of these individual difference constructs show substantial overlap with descriptions of neurological characteristics observed in people with ADHD and autism.

A focus on individual differences in self-regulation could contribute to neurodiversity inclusion in several ways. First, by directly assessing multiple dimensions of self-regulation, and conceptualizing each of these differences along a continuum (or spectrum), we would hold true to one of the key ideas behind the neurodiversity movement—the assertion that neurological differences represent natural variation in human cognition rather than a disease to be cured.

Second, quantifying differences in self-regulation along multiple, independent dimensions may help reduce the stigma of disease and discourage overgeneralizations about people with certain diagnoses. A person with a diagnosis of ADHD may very well have difficulties with beginning tasks and with shielding attention from negative thoughts, but others with this diagnosis may have difficulties in only one, or neither, of these processes. Assessing a person's standing on a set of continuous characteristics may therefore prove more informative than a categorical diagnosis—particularly when it comes to designing workplace interventions or inclusion strategies. As an example, research has shown that the negative correlation between the hesitation dimension of ASO and self-regulation effectiveness disappeared in jobs with high levels of routine (Diefendorff et al., 2006). This finding might suggest that individuals who score high on this particular dimension of ASO may benefit from greater routinization of their work, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis of ADHD. By focusing on specific self-regulatory weaknesses and strengths, rather than categorical diagnoses, we can move beyond legally mandated accommodations and contribute to best practices that benefit broad sections of the workforce. In fact, doing may become increasingly important as a growing portion of the population experience symptoms that mimic the characteristics of ADHD. Many people suffering from the after-effects of COVID-19, for example, report long-lasting neurological symptoms, such a difficulty concentrating and the experience of "brain fog" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Sub clinical levels of distraction and trouble focusing also may be brought on by environmental changes (such as exposure to constant stimulation brought on by technology). To account for such phenomena, Hallowell & Ratey (2021) recently coined the term "VAST" (or Variable Attention Stimulus Trait) to refer to ADHD characteristics that exist on a continuum across the population. According to the researchers, people with high levels of VAST may demonstrate difficulties and strengths quite similar to individuals with ADHD, regardless of whether these individuals meet the strict criteria for an ADHD diagnosis.

In summary, I-O psychologists and other organizational scientists have much to offer the neurodiversity movement based on a rich history of individual differences research. The examples offered above represent a small portion of the theories and research from which we might draw to inform policies and practices surrounding workplace neurodiversity. My emphasis on the continuous nature of differences in self-regulation should by no means suggest that we ignore the very real experiences of marginalized neurominority groups in our quest to promote inclusion. My primary goal in this commentary is to point out that concepts of neurodiversity are not so foreign to I-O psychologists as medical or disease-based models of neurodiversity might suggest. Our field's emphasis on defining and measuring between-person differences in work-related cognition, affect, and volitional behavior offers a solid foundation on which we can draw to provide a nuanced view of individual weaknesses and strengths in an increasingly neurodiverse workforce.

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