Career Counseling for Neurodivergent Individuals: Integrative Theoretical and Intervention Approaches for AuDHD, ASD, and ADHD

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Globally, 404 million adults are diagnosed with ADHD, and 15-25% of this group are also diagnosed with autism, and 50-70% of autistic adults experience the co-occurring diagnosis of AuDHD (Pehlivanidis et al., 2020). Fox Frosh, a Swedish-Native American, AuDHD college graduate will exemplify the intersectional realities of navigating neurodivergence supported by his family, friends, and a multidisciplinary AuDHD care team, representing the important roles community and relational resources play in career development for disabled individuals. Persistent disparities in employment opportunities underscore the need for social justice-focused interventions that value client strengths and confront environmental inequities (Fong et al., 2021; Högstedt et al., 2022; Solomon, 2020). This holistic anti-oppressive approach foregrounds the need for systemic change and ongoing critical reflection in the advancement of equitable career outcomes for neurodivergent individuals across diverse communities.

Understanding the Population

Neurodivergent individuals face compounding cognitive, social, and sensory challenges that are routinely misunderstood or unsupported in workplace settings. These systemic barriers—including pervasive discrimination, lack of accommodations, and cultural bias—contribute to chronic underemployment and compromised wellbeing. This overlap necessitates a nuanced understanding of how these disorders interact, influencing not only cognitive functioning but also social perceptions and support needs in the workplace (Kapp, 2020).

Importance of Career Counseling for Neurodivergent Individuals

According to Kapp (2020) the autistic and neurodivergent community at large face several challenges in the workplace including (and not limited): Difficulties in social interactions leading to misunderstandings or exclusion from team dynamics; Work environments lacking sensory sensitivities accommodations, creating discomfort and hindering productivity. Autistic individuals share how often they are underestimated and infantilized, misjudged based on stereotypes, impacting their opportunities for advancement (Kapp, 2020). AuDHDers also describe how workplaces lack adequate support systems and resources tailored to the unique needs of autistic employees, with many who shared their experiences with Kapp, expressing the lack of training human resources teams have in regard to supporting AuDHD and autistic employees (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Kapp, 2020). Career counseling is crucial for autistic and ADHD populations considering these significant challenges individuals face in cognitive and social skills. Tailored career counseling can help neurodivergent individuals navigate these challenges, develop necessary soft skills, identify their strengths and interests, and improve their vocational outcomes (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Högstedt et al., 2022).

The Average Neurodivergent Support System

The average neurodivergent person's support system includes friends and family who have the most intimate understanding of their needs and challenges, much like Fox Frosh's (Högstedt et al., 2022; Kapp, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2020). Professional supports such as therapists from a variety of disciplines, connections from community organizations, respite providers, specialty doctors, and counselors serve vital roles in supporting the functional aspects of neurodivergent individuals (Kapp, 2020). Additional accommodations the neurodivergent community need are workplace accommodations and additional community resources that promote and advocate for their rights (Högstedt et al., 2022; Pellicano et al., 2020). Fox benefits

from a caring family, friendship networks, and his multidisciplinary team, each contributing emotional, cultural, and practical services and support. Recent global data indicated approximately 4.7% of university students identify as autistic, and at least 37% of these students successfully complete higher education degrees (Vincent and Ralston, 2023).Given the persistently low employment rates and pervasive systemic barriers faced by neurodivergent college graduates, there is an urgent ethical mandate for career counselors to provide neurodiversity-affirming, culturally responsive guidance and sustained support (Fong et al., 2021; Högstedt et al., 2022; Solomon, 2020).

The Neurodivergent Wage Gap, Underemployment, and Improvements

Navigating the transition from education to employment remains a profound challenge for adults with autism, AuDHD, and ADHD, exposing systemic barriers embedded within contemporary workforce structures. Global data from Fong et al. (2021), Patel et al. (2019), Solomon et al. (2020), and Vincent and Ralston (2024), reveals that while roughly 58% of adults with ASD are employed in their 20s, only 15% of autistic high school graduates obtain a job upon completion of primary school, while 47% of individuals with ADHD currently have full-time employment (Fong et al., 2021; MyDisabilityJobs, 2024; Solomon, 2020). In response to these shortfalls, many AuDHD individuals pursue self-employment as a viable means of securing autonomy and essential accommodations, all too often overlooked in traditional employment environments (Patel et al., 2019; Högstedt et al., 2022; Solomon, 2020).

Prevalence of Underemployment, Wage Disparities, and Discrimination

Underemployment is alarmingly common among neurodivergent adults with many finding themselves confined to positions inconsistent with their capacities, qualifications, and interest, leading to losses in personal fulfillment, economic stability, and agency (Fong et al.,

2021; Solomon, 2020). Solomon (2020) notes adults with ASD earn roughly $160 per week, which is markedly below federal poverty thresholds and the median earnings of their neurotypical counterparts. The consequences are not only material but psychological and fuel diminishing self-worth and further marginalizing neurodivergent populations.

From hiring to retention discrimination pervades each stage of employment for neurodivergent folx. Marginalized neurodivergent groups such as women, people of color, and physically disabled individuals experience discrimination at exponential rates. Neurodivergent folx with several co-occurring conditions were found to receive less job offers and fewer promotions, this was even more compounded for individuals with ADHD with depression and anxiety (MyDisabilityJobs, 2024). These practices are often even more compounded by pervasive stigmatization and stereotypes and contributed toward increasingly hostile work environments and limited opportunities for advancement and internal mentorship (MyDisabilityJobs, 2024). Solomon (2020) and Högstedt et al. (2022) note there are very few employers world-wide who have implemented robust, neurodivergent-inclusive policies, resulting in job insecurity and amplified stress.

Common Barriers to Employment for Adults with AuDHD

Several barriers directly attribute toward the exacerbation of neurodivergent symptoms and workplace expectations. Furthermore a lack of acceptance of differently abled bodies and minds reflects a continued failure to design organizations with neurodiversity in mind (Solomon, 2020). As it pertains to the individual, difficulties with organization and attention to detail affect resume quality and interview efficacy (Fong et al., 2021; Högstedt et al., 2022). ADHD and ASD's tendencies toward impulsive and hyperactive thinking or behaviors can sometimes disrupt professional networking and communication, and difficulties with time management leads to

deadline struggles and job search fatigue (Fong et al., 2021; Högstedt et al., 2022; Pehlivanidis et al., 2020). Structural inaccessibility of positions demanding sustained attention or multitasking disproportionately disadvantages neurodivergent individuals (Fong et al., 2021; Högstedt et al., 2022). This results in elevated rates of involuntary job loss compared to neurotypical peers (MyDisabilityJobs, 2024).

While long standing legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates reasonable accommodations, employers remain inconsistent across the board in meeting the needs of differently abled bodies and minds (MyDisabilityJobs, 2024). Accommodations that would be most effective for neurodivergent populations include flexible scheduling, remote work, task variety, and open communication. Research consistently demonstrates when strong supports are present neurodivergent job satisfaction and performance markedly improve (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2021; Jonson et al., 2019; Kapp, 2020). Patel et al. (2019) and Högstedt et al. (2022) point out that while there is ongoing exclusion in traditional job markets, self-employment and contractual work among neurodivergent populations is an increasingly pursued alternative.

Self-Employment Alternatives and Furthering of the Gender Pay Gap

AuDHD workers specifically report self-employment as a means of creating sustainable, meaningful work which offers personally tailored accommodations (Patel et al., 2019; Högstedt et al., 2022). Research also reveals persistent gender pay disparities among neurodivergent workers, with women, especially those who are self-employed, consistently earning less than their male counterparts (Patel et al., 2019).

Solomon (2020) confirms this bias within U.S. job markets noting that societal bias and neurodivergent stigma toward women further exacerbates these disparities, making it more

challenging for women with ASD to secure, retain, and maintain employment. There is a notable gap in the literature regarding employment experiences at the intersections of neurodivergence, indigeneity, race, and ethnicity. Many studies on neurodivergents in the workplace have not had enough diversity in participants, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are needed by researchers in order to generalize data. Until that happens, workplace stigma and bias will continue to negatively impact the earnings, job satisfaction, and abilities of neurodivergent folx (Patel et al., 2019; Vincent and Ralston, 2024). It is imperative that sustainable, inclusive measures are taken to enhance the workability and communal approach to neurodivergent minds in the workplace–self-employed or otherwise.

Evidence-Based Theoretical Foundations for Career Counseling with Neurodivergent Clients

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) foregrounds the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and supportive environment in neurodivergent folx overcoming barriers including ableism in the workplace. Through emphasizing SCCT, neurodivergents may develop new skills gradually, set realistic goals, and experience enhanced visibility of success as their confidence and sustainable engagement with work grows (Högstedt et al., 2022; Lemke, 2020). Complementary to this approach, Constructionist and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) advocates for the autonomy and active narrative construction, empowering clients as experts in their own lives where they may craft identities that align with their personal strengths, needs, and cultural contexts (Högstedt et al., 2022).

Capability approaches as delineated by Pellicano et al. (2022), advances a radical shift from deficit thinking, an issue ADHDers often struggle with, toward centering just opportunity, real freedoms, and systemic transformation. As such, this framework demands career support

move beyond employment access toward creating and fostering conditions for clients to meaningfully thrive (Pellicano et al., 2022). Integrative person-centered and feminist approaches further fuel the call for clients to search for and craft meaning, calling, and occupational sustainability (Pellicano et al., 2022). In turn, counselors are also called to attend compassionately to the wholeness of each client, encouraging them to advocate for themselves in productive formats. Kapp (2020) affirms this through their collection of neurodiverse centered qualitative research. Additional theories include Social Learning Theory and Strengths-Based Approaches further emphasizing identity development (Jonsson et al., 2019).

Research Evidence and Application Efficacy

Mounting empirical evidence supports the use of aforementioned career counseling theories such as SCCT, SDT, SLT, and integrative person-centered, feminist approaches in supporting neurodivergent individuals who are navigating structural and interpersonal barriers in the workforce (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Högstedt et al., 2022; Pellicano et al., 2022). Interventions which bolster self-efficacy, autonomy, and personal narrative better foster job satisfaction and meaningful engagement within neurodiverse populations. Participatory research yields interventions that are both relevant and empowering for these communities when inclusive of strengths-based discovery and identity (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Pellicano et al., 2022). These frameworks consistently linked with improved self-esteem, social integration, and equitable career outcomes affirm the necessity for culturally responsive, individualized support, rooted in social justice principles (Högstedt et al., 2022).

Praxis: Case Study Application of Interventions, Strategies, and Community Resources

Revisiting our case study, Fox Frosh, many options abound as it pertains to Fox seeking employment. In working with Fox, a counselor may focus on three specific strategies that

employ multi-theory approaches: TRANSITION (Jonsson et al., 2019), SUCCESS (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018), and capabilities approaches **(**Pellicano at al., 2022). The capabilities approach guides Fox in identifying his expertise in computer science and creative problem-solving, while personalized goal-setting ensures his career objectives in IT or video game industries reflect his values and sensory needs (Jonsson et al., 2019; Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018). An ecological assessment recognizes the supportive role of Fox's support system, resources embedded in both TRANSITION and SUCCESS models which leverage these supports in collaborative planning, role-playing interview skills and exploring workplace scenarios (Jonsson et al., 2019; Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018).

Through goal attainment scaling, Fox can articulate measurable job-seeking goals such as connecting with inclusive employers and building professional networks in IT (Jonsson et al., 2019). Vocational, communication, and self-regulation skills are intentionally cultivated through role-playing social interactions, accessing mentorship, and practicing self-advocacy (Pellicano et al., 2022). Integrating meaning and spirituality as highlighted by Lemke (2020), Fox's counselor can encourage him to engage in meditation, journaling, and faith community support through both his tribe and spiritual roots.

Addressing Barriers and Leveraging Resources

Neurodivergent people, such as Fox, face significant structural barriers in the work place, including sensory overload, discrimination, and inadequate accommodations (Högstedt et al., 2022; Solomon, 2020). To overcome these issues effective strategies include environmental modifications, employer education, advocacy, and the provision of sensory support to create an inclusive workplace. Legal and policy supports such as Arizona Disability Law, and the Native American Disability Law Center offer robust advocacy, education, and legal representation for

indigenous neurodivergent community members. Additional vocational training and networking groups such as the Autism Society, Lauren's Institute for Education, and Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center (SARRC), can provide community-based support and connection for Fox.

Conclusion

As exemplified through Fox Frosh, true client-centered support for neurodivergent communities requires practitioners to address not only their unique cognitive and sensory needs, but the structural inequities that inhibit success. Practical guidance highlights the importance of robust ecological assessment, collaborative goal setting and leveraging multidisciplinary supports to foster vocational success (Kapp, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2022). In light of this, through critical assessment there are a few feasibility gaps: while targeted interventions and community alliances can improve outcomes, many workplaces and systems desperately lack sustainable neuro-inclusive practices, perpetuating underemployment and wage disparities (Fong et al., 2019; Högstedt et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2019) . Bridging these gaps demands ongoing advocacy for policy reform that adequately resources and responds to the need for action upon anti-oppressive praxis within career counseling and employers (Högstedt et al., 2022; Solomon 2020). The future of equitable career outcomes for neurodiverse peoples relies on individualized interventions and collective efforts to dismantle structural barriers, ensuring all folx have the opportunity to thrive in work that honors their unique identities and aspirations (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018; Högstedt et al., 2022; Kapp, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2022).

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