

'Becoming' an autistic psychologist in a neurotypical world



Introduction

The current focus on increasing diversity in the psychological professions (BPS, 2020) is long overdue and acknowledges the lack of (neuro)diversity in professions such as clinical psychology. This begs the question, what are the barriers to inclusion for those of different neurotypes such as autistic people, and for those fortunate few who do make it into the profession, what challenges might they face as their careers progress?

Current literature

British Psychological Society. (2020) Declaration on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.
Santuzzi, A. M. & Keating, R. T. (2022). Neurodiversity and the disclosure dilemma. In Neurodiversity in the workplace. Routledge.
Patton, E. (2019). Autism, attributions and accommodations: Overcoming barriers and integrating a neurodiverse workforce. Personnel Review, vol 48, no 4, pp 915-934.

Method

Post-diagnosis reflections on my experiences of pursuing a career in clinical psychology and as a practicing clinical psychologist.

Themes

The retrospective lens:

"How do I get on *the course*?"-

- An aspiring clinical psychologist depleted by social communication and navigating change, within a system that values networking and transitioning between roles for experience.
- Reinforced social camouflaging (masking and assimilation) that sets template for burnout.
- No wonder it took me so long!

"I'm on!" – a doctorate to do and the hidden challenges:

- Monumental transition for someone who seeks routine and predictability.
- Social debt of new relationships, e.g., cohort, staff and turnover of placements.
- Sensory overwhelm in busy environments.
- Regulating with special interests in a way that competes with course demands.
- Of course, that one CBT session on performance anxiety didn't help.

"I did it, oh no, another life transition!"

- Double imposter syndrome:
 - 'My best normal' and now 'my best psychologist'.
- An open-plan working environment. That's why I kept looking for quiet spaces?
- Experience of autistic burnout before I even knew what that was.
- Post-work emotional leakage and shut-down.

Themes

The challenge of integrating autistic and professional identity:

- A person-focused role I love AND feeling exhausted and depleted by it.
- How can I own my diagnosis, be authentic and be a psychologist?
 - Perceptions of professional competence.
 - Modelling vulnerability – creating safety.
 - Challenging 'them and us' narratives
- Communicate the strengths of my neurodivergence.
- It's not just the square peg that needs to change – seeking reasonable adjustments.
- Knowing my own values and qualities now I'm not so focused on camouflage.

Discussion

Existing career pathways create invisible barriers to neurodiversity. Each stage should consider support and adjustments, e.g., flexible communication; inclusive networks; job planning to reduce burnout; meeting sensory needs. As we move to more inclusion, we need safe working environments that embrace the strengths of neurodiversity and promote lived experience as part our professional identity and practice.

**Dr. Anthony Redhead (Clinical Psychologist),
TEWV NHS Foundation Trust**