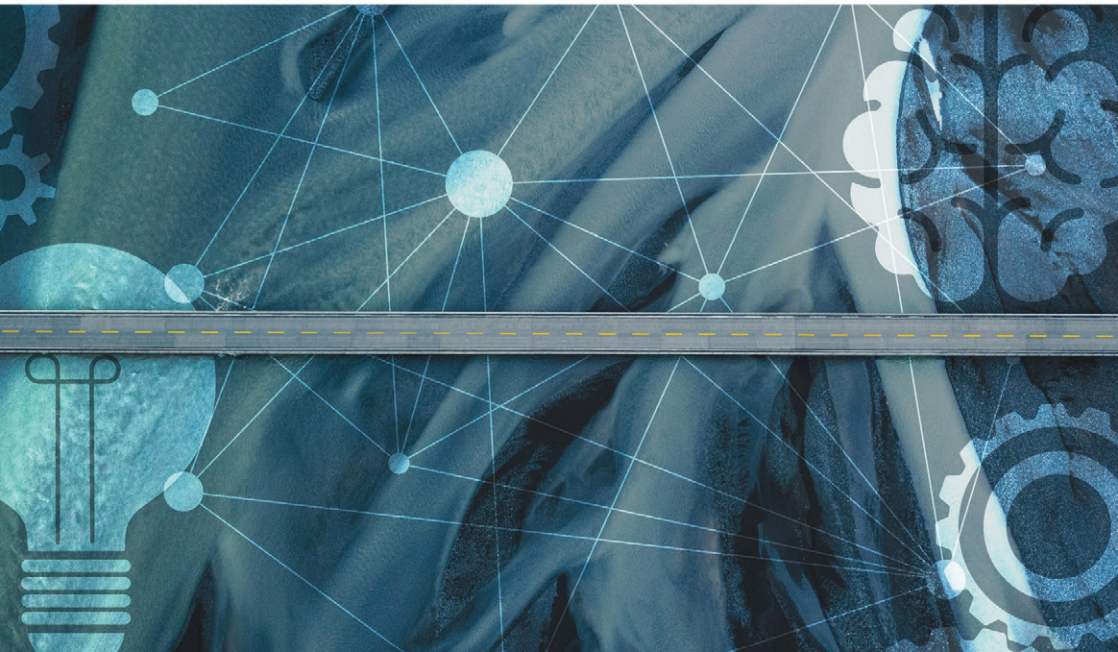
Emerald Studies *in* Workplace Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

Edited by

Karen S. Markel • Matthew E. Hanson
Cristina M. Giannantonio • Amy E. Hurley-Hanson



Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

EMERALD STUDIES IN WORKPLACE NEURODIVERSITY

Series Editors: Cristina M. Giannantonio, PhD and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson, PhD

This important series is designed to make a significant contribution to the development of research on neurodiversity in the workplace. Despite increasing recognition of neurodiversity as a competitive advantage (Austin & Pisano, 2017), little is known about the work experiences and career outcomes of neurodiverse individuals. Neurodiversity is reported to include Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyscalculia, Tourette Syndrome, and other neurological differences. This series will include books, monographs, edited volumes, and practitioner handbooks examining the key individual, organizational, and societal issues surrounding neurodiversity at work, the challenges involved in finding and maintaining employment for neurodiverse individuals, and the need to understand which best practices will lead to positive work, career, and life outcomes for neurodiverse individuals.

The series, *Emerald Studies in Workplace Neurodiversity,* will synthesize critical thinking around the strategic issues associated with hiring and integrating neurodiverse individuals into the workplace. Titles in the series will provide current research in this area. This series will capture contemporary research and practice from a diverse range of international scholars, practitioners, and educators. The series will help to build connections between research and neurodiversity in the workplace.

The series will also explore the role of organizations, educational institutions, advocacy groups, and the public sector in preparing neurodiverse individuals for employment. It will also explore best practices being utilized in the employment process and how these may be adapted to address future challenges. This is a series that is relevant for both academics and practitioners, as it aims to further the research agenda on the topic and influence the ability of organizations to successfully hire neurodiverse individuals. While little is known about the work experiences and career outcomes of these individuals, the individual, organizational, and societal issues associated with neurodiversity in the workplace underscore the importance of this topic.

More information about this series at: https://books.emeraldinsight.com/page/series-detail/Emerald-Studies-in-Workplace-Neurodiversity/

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Generation A: Perspectives on Special Populations and International Research on Autism in the Workplace, edited by Amy E. Hurley-Hanson and Cristina M. Giannantonio

Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

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"All humans are entrepreneurs, not because they should start companies, but because the will to create is encoded in human DNA, and creation is the essence of entrepreneurship."

– Reid Hoffman

To my husband, Don, who has been my biggest supporter in all aspects of my life. Extraordinary Ventures was the inspiration around this project's development. A special thank you to Dr Lizabeth Barclay, who has been instrumental in my academic and professional success.

– Karen S. Markel, PhD

To my loving wife, Grace, for her affectionate belief and tender encouragement. I dedicate my contribution to dismantling stereotypes and unleashing the innate creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship of us all, for us all.

– Matthew E. Hanson, PhD

To my parents, Susie and Joseph Giannantonio, thank you for always believing in me, even when I said I wanted to be an archeologist, a fashion designer, an oceanographer, a high school math teacher, and a management professor. Your love and support made the last one a reality.

– Cristina M. Giannantonio, PhD

To Amelia, Lorenzo, and Sophie, who have captured my heart. Thank you for filling my life with joy, laughter, and love. I am grateful for every moment we share together. The world is yours to explore. May your dreams know no bounds.

– Amy E. Hurley-Hanson, PhD

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Karen S. Markel, PhD, is a Professor of Management at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She is a senior certified by both professional organizations in Human Resource Management. Dr Markel's research centers on workforce development partnerships between educational institutions and private industry. She also conducts research on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce. Her work has been published in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Human Relations, and Employee Rights and Responsibilities* among other peer reviews and professional publications. Dr Markel has an active consulting business supporting organizational and employee development.

Matthew E. Hanson, PhD, began his career in innovation and entrepreneurship as an engineer in the US Air Force on the GPS navigation system, eventually developing national space policy, then retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. On Northrop Grumman's stealth bomber program, he served as an engineer and eventually as a national spokesperson for the program. He and colleagues then launched the medtech start-up Integrated Medical Systems, Inc. Later joining Beckman Coulter as a program manager, Hanson led teams developing an automated diagnostic system and a cloud-based analytics platform. He began teaching entrepreneurship at Chapman University, eventually becoming full-time clinical faculty and entrepreneur center director before taking on his current role as Director of New Ventures at the University of California, Irvine. Dr Hanson holds a patent as a coinventor of a history logging system for biological samples and has a doctorate in aerospace engineering from USC and an MBA from Chapman University.

Cristina M. Giannantonio, PhD, is a Professor of Management in the Argyros College of Business and Economics at Chapman University. She is a Research Associate in the Thompson Policy Institute on Disability and Autism at Chapman University. She is the coauthor of Autism in the Workplace Creating Positive Outcomes for Generation A, published in 2020 as part of the Palgrave Explorations in Workplace Stigma series. Since 2019 she has been an Emerald Publishing Series Editor for Emerald Studies in Workplace Neurodiversity. She is also the coeditor of Generation A: International and Special Populations: Autism in the Workplace and Generation A: Research on Autism in the Workplace, both of which are part of the Emerald Studies in Workplace Neurodiversity Series.

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Dr Garcia uses a neurodiversity lens and person-centered approach when assessing individuals of all ages for features of autism. She believes in working collaboratively with clients and their families throughout all parts of the evaluation process. Dr Garcia also has an active role in supervising practicum students, interns, and postdoctoral fellows and hopes to instill the same passion for helping individuals with autism and their families.

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He teaches courses in sport finance, sport marketing and sales, sport management, statistics, and research methods. Mark also teaches a course on disability in work organizations in ECU's Honors College. He is a wheelchair user and has a noticeable speech impairment. His speech is supplemented through visual aids. Prior to his ECU appointment, Mark was on the faculty at St Cloud State University. Mark's educational background includes postdoctoral training in sport organizations from Temple University. In addition to advanced coursework at Temple University, he holds a PhD in sport management and an MBA in marketing/finance from the University of Pittsburgh. Mark's undergraduate work is in economics from Kent State University.

Mark's professional experiences include stints with the Pittsburgh Pirates, the University of Pittsburgh Intercollegiate Athletic Department and Temple University Athletics in the areas of marketing planning, marketing research, and strategic planning. He also served as an Administrator at Harcum College (Bryn Mawr, PA) with leadership, budgetary, and grants writing responsibilities.

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Marianna Schroeder is a graduate student in Chapman University's EdS in School Psychology and Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC) programs. As a graduate research assistant at Chapman, she contributes to Dr Amy Jane Griffiths' research on helping prepare children from underserved populations for connected, engaged, and meaningful adult lives. Having previously served students in educational settings ranging from preschool to adult transition programs as a substitute teacher and in residential and clinical settings as a registered behavior technician, Marianna currently collaborates with colleagues, students, and families as a school psychology practicum student and clinical counselor trainee. Her research interests include identifying and addressing students' mental health needs and fostering success for diverse student populations throughout and after their K-12 education.

Rachel Torres is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist and Associate Professional Clinical Counselor practicing in Los Angeles, CA. She is also a third-year Doctoral Student and Graduate Student Instructor at Chapman University. Before enrolling at Chapman, Rachel earned a Master of Science in Adolescent English

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Manisha Vaswani received her PhD in Entrepreneurship and Management from the University of Texas at Arlington. She is presently an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls. Her research interests are focused on studying entrepreneurial mindsets, entrepreneurial identity and motivations, leader behaviors, international business outcomes, small business strategies especially in clusters, strategic entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and the role of culture, and the role of storytelling in entrepreneurial ventures and family business. She also has varied interests in human resource management, organizational behavior, business strategy, and diversity. Dr Vaswani is also the founder of a nonprofit organization, The Vaswani Foundation, that provides free educational resources to impoverished children and clean drinking water to villages in India.

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Sharon Zivkovic is the Founder and CEO of the social enterprise Community Capacity Builders. As an autistic social entrepreneur and systems thinker, Sharon has used her innate bottom-up and associative thinking skills, and systemising capabilities, to develop and commercialize a number of social innovations. In 2016, Sharon received a Fresh Scientist Award for her innovative work in addressing wicked problems using complexity science, and in 2021, Sharon's work in Applied Complexity (Social Entrepreneurship and Wicked Problems) was recognized on the Map of the Complexity Sciences. Community Capacity Builders has recently established a Centre for Autistic Social Entrepreneurship, which aims to build the capacity of disability service providers, social enterprise support organizations, and business advisors to support autistic social entrepreneurs in a neurodiversity-affirming manner. Sharon's other roles include Adjunct Research Fellow at Torrens University Australia and member of Emerald Publishing's Impact Advisory Board.

Preface

Matthew E. Hanson, PhD

Entrepreneurship has long been integral to the United States economy, intertwined with its history, and symbolic of the American dream. Entrepreneurial ventures are important contributors to the American economy and labor market. Small businesses alone create two-thirds of net new jobs (US Small Business Administration, 2019), drive US innovation and competitiveness, employ almost half (46%) of America's private sector workforce, and represent 43.5% of gross domestic product (US Chamber of Commerce, 2024).

Entrepreneurs comprise some of the world's richest individuals and represent the mythic heroes of success stories. Among the US adult population, 75% believe entrepreneurs receive high social status (Dunk, 2019), contributing to a culture that celebrates famous entrepreneurs, such as Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, and Bill Gates, each of whom started large-scale global corporate enterprises with products and services that touch virtually every aspect of the way we work, play, and live. Entrepreneurs also include the countless number of less well-known small business owners who choose to become their own bosses, as well as the new breed of entrepreneurs making their mark through e-commerce, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI) platforms.

Academics have devoted considerable research to understanding entrepreneurs' characteristics, alternative models of entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurial intentions among men, women, minorities, and various generational cohorts. Interest in exploring entrepreneurship as a career path among Generation Z (Gen Z) is surging. Research has found that 93% of Gen Z have explored starting their own business (Kratz, 2024; Zen Business, 2024), suggesting that "Gen Z is poised to become the most entrepreneurial generation the world has seen" (Microsoft, 2022).

Far less research has focused on entrepreneurship as a career vehicle for neurodiverse individuals despite an increase in the number of entrepreneurs in society, growth in the number of start-up businesses established, and increasing recognition of the advantages of neurodiversity for entrepreneurial activity. Ninety-two percent of Gen Z recognize the value of neurodiversity in entrepreneurship, and more than half of Gen Z identify themselves as "definitely" (22%) or "somewhat" (31%) neurodiverse (Kratz, 2024). This is significant because, in the current decade, 707,000 to 1,116,000 young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will reach adulthood (Shattuck et al., 2020) and will be entering the workplace in unprecedented numbers. Hurley-Hanson et al. (2020) refer to

these young adults as Generation A. Entrepreneurship may be vital to successful employment for neurodiverse individuals.

Much has been published in the media regarding successful neurodiverse entrepreneurs (Bergemann, 2014; Grandin, 2011; Howard, 2017) The disclosure of neurodiversity diagnoses by well-known entrepreneurs has brought attention to the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship (e.g., Elon Musk's disclosure of Asperger's Syndrome on Saturday Night Live in 2021). Such coverage is important because it lifts up successful role models such as Bill Gates (Asperger's Syndrome) and Richard Branson (dyslexia), who may inspire and motivate neurodiverse individuals to explore entrepreneurship as a career pathway (Doyle, 2019).

The chapters in this book raise interesting questions about the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. There are various reasons why neurodiverse individuals start their own companies (Salter, 2024). They may be uncomfortable working in a corporate environment and believe an entrepreneurial setting would better match their skill sets and needs. Anecdotal evidence reveals much variation in the types of entrepreneurial ventures started by neurodiverse individuals, ranging from selling products online to brick-and-mortar establishments including bakeries, coffee shops, and car washes. Additionally, some family members have established microenterprises to help their neurodiverse adult children have a place to work and have a chance at financial independence.

In addition, entrepreneurship as a path for neurodiverse individuals has been recognized by universities and public agencies (Kirby, 2021). Many universities have specific entrepreneurship centers to help neurodiverse individuals become entrepreneurs and offer majors and minors in entrepreneurship. There are local, state, and federal government programs to support entrepreneurial ventures by neurodiverse individuals. These programs also exist in countries worldwide to support entrepreneurial ventures as a path to economic prosperity.

We look forward to this book advancing the context and conversation beyond considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Hogan et al., 2022) and to the greater global good of stronger economies and a higher quality of life. Within this context, chapters were selected to be included in this edited volume. Each chapter examines various factors that may play a role in generating a neurodiverse workforce to the benefit of neurodiverse individuals, organizations, and society. These chapters capture contemporary research and practice from a diverse range of international scholars, practitioners, and educators to build connections between research and practice focused on neurodiversity issues in the workplace.

By convening a critical mass of thought leaders in the area, we hope to advance future theory, research, and practice, as well as advance society's understanding of the creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship that would otherwise be left untapped had we not gleaned the varied information, insights, and opportunities presented by the authors. This book explores entrepreneurship and neurodiversity and is an important addition to Emerald's Series on Neurodiversity in the Workplace. We desire this book to contribute to the emerging literature on entrepreneurship and neurodiversity in the workplace and facilitate employment opportunities for neurodiverse individuals.

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We are particularly grateful to our authors for exploring the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. Their work contributes to the emerging literature on neurodiversity in the workplace and reminds us these constructs are complex, fascinating, and deserving of future research. We appreciate their commitment to improving the work experiences and lives of neurodiverse individuals. Thank you for your patience with us and for putting our deadlines ahead of your other work commitments. We are excited to have worked with researchers from several countries who are exploring this important issue, providing a global context, and enriching this research around the world.

This book would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of Emerald Publishing, especially Daniel Ridge, Commissioning Editor; Madison Klopfer, Book Commissioning Team; Lauren Kammerdiener, Content Development Editor; and Pavithra Muthu, Book Project Editor. We also wish to thank Kiruthika Andappan and the rest of Emerald's publishing team for their help in making this book a reality. Finally, none of us could have produced this book alone. We are fortunate to be colleagues who became friends.

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Introduction

Karen S. Markel

The chapters included in this book are organized and presented along three themes. The volume begins with chapters that introduce the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. The second theme includes contributions that provide insight into the unique support and strategy for Neurodiverse Entrepreneurs. Finally, the book concludes with contributions that report international perspectives on neurodiversity and entrepreneurs. The nine chapters in this book include empirical and theoretical contributions from various disciplines and contexts. The research also focuses on different neurodivergent conditions that include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), as well as comorbid conditions of the above. Many neurodivergent individuals have relatively lower educational attainment and employment achievement levels despite their knowledge, skills, abilities, and accomplishments, often on par with non-neurodivergent individuals. Entrepreneurship can provide a working environment that can be more inclusive of neurodivergent individuals, whether in self-employment or other entrepreneurial organizations. This is commonly referred to as the pull toward entrepreneurship. Also, different models of entrepreneurship can be associated with neurodivergent individuals discussed in this volume; for example, social entrepreneurship, solo entrepreneurship, and other interventions related to the growth of entrepreneurial organizations (e.g., academic and incubator programs targeted toward entrepreneurial skill development). Many chapters also discuss the push toward entrepreneurship when traditional employment excludes neurodivergent individuals. While this volume does not support either the push- or pull-around the engagement of neurodiverse entrepreneurship, the chapters illustrate those factors in different ways.

Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

The first set of chapters explores the existing research and conditions for neurodiverse entrepreneurs. They also explore the opportunity that entrepreneurship presents to neurodivergent individuals rather than the barriers to employment often described in the existing literature. Using primarily guided literature reviews, the chapters in this section present comprehensive suggestions for areas of future research. The chapters included in Section 1 provide rich literature reviews of the existing research, constructs, and a path forward for future

scholarship in examining the relationship between entrepreneurship and neurodiversity.

Chapter 1, "Autism in Context: The Case for Entrepreneurship and Conditions for Success" by Eric Patton, frames the who, what, where, when, and why of the relationship between entrepreneurship and Autism. Patton bases his analysis on the common characteristics of those with autism to identify the context and conditions under which these individuals will thrive as entrepreneurs. Patton frames his research with the underlying assumption that entrepreneurship provides a positive employment pathway for those on the autism spectrum (and also includes those with ADHD and Dyslexia). He uses a contextual approach to their examination to determine the who, what, where, when, and why of the specific work story that makes entrepreneurship a viable and attractive pathway for individuals with autism.

Rachel Torres, Marianna Schroeder, and Amy Jane Griffiths, Chapter 2, "The Path to Success: Engaging and Preparing Autistic Youth for Entrepreneurship," conducts a systematic review to identify school-based interventions available for autistic youth to support the transition from high school to higher education, entrepreneurship, and employment. Neurodivergent youth need intentionally designed interventions in K-12 to support their development into entrepreneurs. Their review discusses a unique type of entrepreneurial organization, micro-enterprises (10 or fewer employees). Torres, Schroeder, and Griffiths also examine the essential skills needed by successful entrepreneurs to guide the development of these targeted interventions.

Chapter 3, "Entrepreneurship and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: A Literature Review and Ideas for Future Research," by Carolin Auschra and Johanna Mai, presents a systematic literature review of 26 articles. Using this review, they seek to provide a common measure for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and entrepreneurship and detail opportunities for future research. Auschra and Mai examine the existing research methodologies employed to conduct the reviewed literature and critically examine the limitations of such data collection strategies to guide their recommendations.

Support for Neurodiverse Entrepreneurs

The chapters included in this section provide rich descriptions of targeted interventions designed to support neurodivergent entrepreneur success. The authors examine commonly used entrepreneurship tools (e.g., business incubators, strategic planning, and workplace practice design) and delve into how they can support neurodiverse entrepreneur success. Together, these chapters highlight how the existing structures often designed to support entrepreneurial success often fall short in the successful support of neurodiverse entrepreneurs.

Caroline Demeyère's Chapter 4, "The Institutional Support to Neurodiverse Entrepreneurs: Insights from Business Incubators," explores how business incubators can support neurodiversity individuals during their entrepreneurial journals by analyzing semi-directive interviews with neurodiverse entrepreneurs. This

chapter provides a rich description of the experiences of neurodiverse entrepreneurs in the business incubator setting. It reveals that these efforts must be designed for and sensitive to the unique needs of these participants to ensure that they foster an inclusive environment.

Chapter 5, "Establishing a Strategic Positioning of Neurodiverse Entrepreneurs," by Mark E. Moore and Lana L. Huberty, develops a persuasive argument for why these entrepreneurs need to employ the tenets of the strategic positioning process to develop successful ventures. They break down the various tenets of strategic positioning and suggest how neurodiverse entrepreneurs can uniquely benefit from incorporating these activities into their development process. Moore and Huberty suggest that utilizing strategic business planning can help a new venture receive legitimacy in the marketplace, which can be an additional challenge for neurodiverse entrepreneurs.

Amy K. Izuno-Garcia and Antonio F. Pagán's Chapter 6, "Neurodiversity-affirming Entrepreneurship: Improving Work Experiences for Young Adults on the Spectrum," provides a backdrop for employer practices that may limit the inclusion of autistic individuals to suggest that entrepreneurship may be a viable option for meaningful employment when organizations are not designed to be supportive. They detail the relevant literature to describe the benefits of entrepreneurship for young adults on the spectrum and the conditions in which interventions need to be designed. For example, the authors suggest that clinicians and scholars should incorporate the role and aspirations of these parents, young adult individual characteristics, and needed support (e.g., coaching and targeted job training) to develop a neurodiversity-affirming environment. The authors then continue their discussion with recommendations for educational and organizational accommodations and conditions conducive to the overall success of youth on the spectrum and how school and work can be designed to ensure high achievement.

International Perspectives on Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurs

The final chapters in this book provide rich descriptions of three countries outside of North America. Because the business conditions, government regulations, and institutional supports vary widely across countries, the authors detail many considerations that must be accounted for in examining this research in different countries. From applying systems thinking in Australia, a review of the development of policies and practices in India, and a self-reported autobiography of an English entrepreneur, these chapters represent the importance of international context in the public policy supports that can impact neurodiverse employment, inclusion, and entrepreneurship.

Sharon Zivkovic's Chapter 7, "Autistic Social Entrepreneurship and Systems Thinking: A Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach," employs social enterprise systems thinking in Australia. The author argues that all enterprises owned by those with autism spectrum disorder or that align with the broader neurodiversity movement are defined as social enterprises. She suggests that neurodiversity-affirming practices that support these individuals should be moved from a deficit view to one of

viewing neurodiversity as a web of differences and abilities respective of everyone. Zivkovic draws on the experiences of Indigenous businesses in Australia to support her proposition that all autistic owner businesses are social enterprises.

Chapter 8, "Neurodivergent Entrepreneurship: The Indian Perspective" by Manisha Vaswani, is a review article about the evolution of government initiatives and support for neurodiversity individuals in India and, more specifically, those initiatives around entrepreneurship. India has developed public policy in relation to aligning with international movements (e.g., United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) as well as specific legislation to support equal treatment in employment (e.g., Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). Vaswani goes on to detail various organizations and targeted support aimed at fostering entrepreneurship and innovation across the country. This chapter illustrates the more recent government, media, incubators, social movements, and education efforts to support the development of new neurodiverse enterprises.

Lastly, Michael Brown and Anica Zeyen's Chapter 9, "It's Just Not for Me: The Reluctant Neurodivergent Entrepreneur," provides a case study of various government programs in England to support entrepreneurs. Through an autobiographical auto-ethnographical account of Michael Brown, a neurodiverse entrepreneur, the chapter describes his experience with entrepreneurship, government program engagement, and reticence in continuing that type of employment. While previous research often suggests that entrepreneurship (or self-employment) could be a more inclusive type of employment for neurodiverse individuals, this may not always be an individual's preference (regardless of neurodivergent status). Through Michael's story, we learn the journey of an entrepreneur with ADHD. Although he often behaves in entrepreneurial ways, he does not define himself as a natural entrepreneur nor enjoy the uncertainty of this form of employment. His ADHD contributed to feelings of isolation as an entrepreneur. The authors suggest that unique interventions must be incorporated into government programs and incubators designed to support start-ups.

Summary

Together, the chapters included in this book provide a rich description of the opportunities and challenges to neurodiverse entrepreneurial success. While entrepreneurship can be viewed as a more flexible, inclusive type of employment for neurodivergent individuals (a positive approach), this type of employment does not always accompany the necessary tools and support for success nor a desired employment pathway. Rather, this volume suggests that future research around the relationships between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship must be sensitive to various dimensions of context (e.g., neurodivergent characteristics, public policy, and social support) and the individual's employment goals.

Section I

Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship

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Chapter 1

Autism in Context: The Case for Entrepreneurship and Conditions for Success

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the contextual conditions around which entrepreneurship is a positive option for individuals on the autism spectrum. Drawing on omnibus and discrete context (Johns, 2006) and on research on other forms for neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, this chapter explains the who, what, where, when, and why of entrepreneurship and autism. Aimed at encouraging future scholarship in this under-research area, the chapter underlines the connections between entrepreneurship and common characteristics of individuals on the spectrum, issues of motivation and self-efficacy, the option of social entrepreneurship, and the importance of formal and informal support networks.

Keywords: Autism; context; entrepreneurship; motivation; neurodiversity; support networks

Introduction

Over the last 10 years, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship around neurodiversity in the workplace, with a particular focus on individuals on the autism spectrum. Much of the research on autism and work has focused on the barriers that members of this neuro minority face in the typical workplace. What has been less prominent is a focus on entrepreneurship and autism. At the same time, there has been strong research involving entrepreneurship and neurodiversity in terms of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other forms of neurodivergence such as dyslexia. There is also a robust stream of

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research on entrepreneurs who have a physical or mental health disability. Furthermore, the popular press and media have featured stories of successful neurodivergent entrepreneurs such as Richard Branson, Jamie Oliver, Michael Burry, Daymond John, Bram Cohen, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Anita Roddick.

- Despite success stories of many entrepreneurs from neuro minorities, a common theme in the scholarship on entrepreneurship and any form of disability is the notion of necessity or challenge entrepreneurship: Individuals being pushed into self-employment due to barriers in the traditional workplace that severely limit other work options (Jones & Latreille, 2011; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017). The purpose of this chapter, however, is to highlight conditions that make entrepreneurship an appealing and positive option for individuals on the autism spectrum. While not seeking to downplay challenges or barriers that members of neuro minorities face, the more positive side of the entrepreneurship option for individuals with autism merits illumination. To explore the positive side of entrepreneurship and autism, this chapter will draw upon existing research on entrepreneurship and disability, including research concerning ADHD and dyslexia.

At the same time, this chapter does not aim to propose a grand theory of the links between individuals on the spectrum and entrepreneurship. Both the nature of entrepreneurship and the nature of autism would make such an approach suboptimal. A famous adage about autism states that, given the wide range of interests, skills, and abilities of individuals on the spectrum, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism" (Palmer & Shore, 2012). An argument can be made that a similar uniqueness characterizes every entrepreneur and that the very notion of entrepreneurship involves something novel and unconventional that is all its own. Given that entrepreneurship for people with disabilities is largely influenced by social contexts, including the societal notions of what kinds of careers they should pursue (Balcazar et al., 2023; Renko et al., 2016), the ideas presented in this chapter will be embedded in discussions around contextual factors that make entrepreneurship a viable and attractive pathway for individuals with autism (Wiklund et al., 2018).

As noted by Johns (2006), context-focused scholarship considers the conditions, sometimes narrow, in which work phenomena occurs. This approach is akin to investigative journalism where the researcher aims to explain the *who, what, where, when,* and *why* of a specific work story. The "story" approach is ideal in considering entrepreneurship and autism. While the *who* are individuals on the spectrum, the conditions for success and a positive experience involves the *what, where, when,* and *why*.

Entrepreneurship, Disability, and Context

Context can be defined as "the surroundings associated with phenomena which helps to illuminate that phenomena" (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991, p. 56). As explained by

Johns (2006), context can represent particular constraints on behavior or represent opportunities for successful behaviors. Johns (2006) notes that context, from a research standpoint, typically operates as a different level of analysis from the individual actor and can be conceived of as a configuration or bundle of stimuli that can help explain how and why things occur. As will be explained in what follows, successful entrepreneurship experiences for individuals on the autism spectrum involve environmental factors that are different from the neurotypical entrepreneur. To explore the interplay between entrepreneurship and individuals on the autism spectrum, two levels of context are important: Omnibus context and discreet context (Johns, 2006). Omnibus context concerns many features or particulars that form the backdrop against which phenomena occur, while discrete context refers to specific elements surrounding a phenomenon. While both forms are relevant to autism and entrepreneurship, discrete context is particularly useful in defining the term entrepreneurship.

By definition, entrepreneurship is a large concept that can encompass multimillion-dollar ventures or a small local service. A venture can be for profit or a nonprofit social enterprise, can be a family business or have no family component, and can have many or only a single employee. It is also common to use the terms entrepreneurship and self-employment interchangeably. This is particularly true in the literature on entrepreneurship and disability. For the purposes of this chapter, a clear distinction between these terms is in order as they involve very different aspects of context.

As explained by Maritz and Laferriere (2016), self-employment simply means working without an organizational affiliation. This can represent any type of short-term gig work or activity that is outsourced to small operators. For example, a person who mows lawns, a graphic designer who finds projects, or a person who provides bookkeeping or tax return services are self-employed, but are not necessarily entrepreneurs. The goal is on creating employment for one individual (Parker Harris et al., 2014). On the other hand, an entrepreneur or an entrepreneurship venture is a person/entity that identifies an opportunity to create or innovate something new and valuable (Schumpeter, 2000).

Research on disability and entrepreneurship often heavily emphasizes self-employment motivations. From a push (negative) versus pull (positive) perspective, the self-employment narrative for individuals with a disability is typically aligned with the challenge or necessity entrepreneurship idea that working for oneself is not a proactive choice but an unfortunate situation that individuals are forced into due to lack of alternatives. From this perspective, challenge/necessity entrepreneurship can be seen as primarily focusing on omnibus context (Johns, 2006) as it positions self-employment of individuals against a backdrop of discrimination and barriers for individuals with workplace disabilities in typical employer organizations.

Entrepreneurship, in general, is subject to omnibus context through what Johns (2006) calls context's role of "shaper of meaning." Specifically, Jammaers and Zanoni (2020) underline that the figure of the entrepreneur is commonly hailed as a modern-day hero who is essential to wealth creation and to making our lives better. This mythical view of the entrepreneur is male, able-bodied and

powerful, and can represent a barrier to entrepreneurs who do not conform to the stereotypes (Williams & Patterson, 2019). Evidence suggests that gatekeepers such as banks, customers, and suppliers can be influenced by this mythical view to the detriment of women, non-whites, and differently abled individuals. The mythical view can also pressure entrepreneurs with disabilities to either downplay any differences (Jammaers & Zanoni, 2020) or take on the necessity entrepreneur identity vis-à-vis hardships in the larger workforce.

To shift the narrative of entrepreneurship and individuals with disabilities, specifically autism, toward a more positive light, the rest of this chapter will focus mostly on the second type of context, i.e., discrete context. Discrete context involves particulars about task, social factors, and physical conditions (Johns, 2006). In exploring the *who, what, where, when,* and *why* of entrepreneurship (rather than self-employment) and autism, the story will be in the details rather than the stereotypes.

Context and the Pull of Entrepreneurship: The Five Ws

The Who *in Autism and Entrepreneurship*

Common definitions of the term disability clearly frame it as a matter of context. For example, the World Health Organization explains that disability "results from the *interaction* (emphasis added) between individuals with a health condition. . .with personal and environmental factors" and makes special mention of the large effect that an individual's environment has on their experience of disability. Similarly, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life *activity* (emphasis added)" which again highlights that disability is inherently linked to a particular context. As such, it is appropriate to view disability not as a personal characteristic, but a situational interaction. The 21st century workplace is an important, but contrived, particular context. It is the result of a long chain of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) that have had an effect of creating physical spaces and behavioral expectations, which can lead to barriers/exclusion of individuals who do not fit in with the typical norms. From this perspective, scholars have worked, especially in the use of language, to avoid conflating disability with an individual's identity; for example, avoiding the term "disabled person" in favor of "person with a workplace disability." This terminology clarifies that the workplace/context is dysfunctional, rather than the individual.

In terms of entrepreneurship and workplace disability, this conceptualization implies that an individual may be considered disabled in a typical workplace but may possibly not be considered disabled in a different type of workplace. Again, while not downplaying the challenging lived experience of individuals with physical or mental health issues, entrepreneurship can be a pathway toward a more positive context for many individuals who are excluded/do not have a fit with typical modern workplaces. For example, in qualitative scholarship concerning identity narratives, disability and entrepreneurship, Hidegh et al. (2023)

and Jammaers and Zanoni (2020) reported that many entrepreneurs with workplace disabilities chose to ignore disability completely in their role of entrepreneur, opting to take on the archetypal view of the entrepreneur. While they also found evidence of individuals who ascribed to the necessity/fallback/constrained choice view of entrepreneurship, other entrepreneurs used their workplace disability to portray themselves as unique entrepreneurs. For entrepreneurs on the autism spectrum, each of these represents a viable identity narrative.

The uniqueness/special skills aspect of the *who* has been featured in the scholarship on entrepreneurship and neurodiversity, particularly in conjunction with ADHD and, in a lesser way, with dyslexia. As per the American Psychiatric Association, ADHD consists of two clusters of symptoms, (1) inattention and (2) hyperactivity/impulsivity, that may or may not both be present (Yu et al., 2021). Inattention can cause one to become easily distracted and have difficulty sustaining focus, while hyperactivity/impulsivity involves having excessive energy levels, quick and excessive emotional excitation, having problems sitting still, and acting without thinking about consequences. Several studies have highlighted that an ADHD diagnosis is associated with a greater probability of being an entrepreneur (Dimic & Orlov, 2014; Patel et al., 2021). Moore et al. (2021) found that entrepreneurs with ADHD, when compared to entrepreneurs without ADHD, tended to have more intuitive cognitive styles, and higher levels of entrepreneurial alertness and resource-induced coping heuristics, which are important in early-stage entrepreneurial activities. In fact, the link between ADHD, specifically hyperactivity/impulsivity, and entrepreneurial orientation (Thurik et al., 2016), intentions (Verheul et al., 2015), and venturing (Lerner et al., 2019 has proven to be particularly strong. At the same time, while orientation and early entrepreneurial activities appear to be enhanced by ADHD, Wiklund et al. (2016) did not find a link between ADHD and entrepreneurial success in terms of profit or survival rates, likely due to the inattention dimension. A more recent study by Yu et al. (2021) did find that hyperactivity/impulsivity had a significant indirect effect on firm performance, with entrepreneurial orientation acting as a mediator. Yu et al. (2021) mention the importance of context in their theorizing and in interpreting their results, stating: "More realistically for practitioners (such as venture capitalists), the implication is that they could capitalize on ADHD entrepreneurs' risk-taking and proactive styles in specific context…" (p. 109).

In terms of dyslexia, Logan (2009) found a significantly higher incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs than in corporate business managers and in the population in general, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, while also finding that entrepreneurs with dyslexia were able to grow their businesses more quickly and that they usually own more businesses than entrepreneurs who are not dyslexic (Franks & Frederick, 2013). Franks and Frederick (2013) highlight highly successful entrepreneurs with dyslexia including Richard Branson, Jamie Oliver, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Anita Roddick and suggest that characteristics of the condition such as excellent mechanical skills, logical problem-solving skills, global visual spatial skills, enhanced creativity and innovation, and conceptual thinking make entrepreneurship a context within which individuals with dyslexia can potentially thrive.

But what about individuals on the autism spectrum? The DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interactions, and skills in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships. As a spectrum condition, there is a wide range of severity levels within the autism umbrella. However, the three primary characteristics of the disorder for highly functioning individuals on the autism spectrum concern: (1) difficulties with social interactions, (2) difficulty in verbal and nonverbal communication, and (3) a pattern of ritualized and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2013). Related to social interactions, individuals on the spectrum often have difficulty initiating conversations, may not respond when called by name or spoken directly to, may not respond or take an interest in the feelings or preferences of others, may not respond to praise, have difficulty comforting others, and may have an aversion to physical contact with others. From a communications perspective, individuals on the autism spectrum often have difficulty with the use of pragmatic and idiomatic language, difficulty in expressing wants and needs, and do not offer clarification when misunderstood. Individuals on the spectrum may also speak with unusual volume, pitch and rhythm, may have great difficulty in understanding sarcasm and humor, and often fail when it comes to making eye contact and understanding facial expressions and body language. Individuals on the autism spectrum's ritualized behavior may also follow routines very tightly, resist change or unplanned events to an excessive degree, adopt rule-bound and inflexible thinking, and repetitively question and speak on the same topic. Individuals with autism who find employment are generally intelligent, very hardworking, detail-oriented, have extraordinary memory, visual learners and thinkers, very loyal, honest, perseverant and reliable, nonjudgmental, and highly skilled in particular areas (Parr et al., 2013). They are also willing to do repetitive work and are able to develop a high level of expertise in narrow and specialized areas (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Wright, 2016).

While there has been less empirical research on entrepreneurs with autism, there are specific reasons to suggest that entrepreneurship could represent a valuable context for employment for this neurominority. The research on entrepreneurship and ADHD offers some clues. As noted above, the hyperactivity/impulsivity aspect of ADHD has been linked to entrepreneurial orientation and to early entrepreneurial activity (intentions, creation of an enterprise, etc.). At the same time, the inattention/distraction element of ADHD has been found to be detrimental to entrepreneurship, and has been posited as the reason why early-stage success for entrepreneurs with ADHD does not lead to long term success. It could be posited that the opposite dynamics could be active for entrepreneurs on the autism spectrum, as social interaction deficits could be detrimental to early-stage activities, while the high level of expertise in narrow and specialized areas could lead to operational success. Specifically, one manifestation of neurocognitive disorders that is positively associated with successful entrepreneurship is hyperfocusing (Antshel, 2018):