

COMMENTARY

Contextualizing cases for neuroatypical inclusion in the workplace

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We believe that readers of the focal article by LeFevre-Levy et al. (2023) would benefit from aligning neurodiversity in the workplace and broader arguments for pursuing and researching organizational diversity in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology. Often referred to as the “case for workplace diversity,” practitioners and scholars have offered various arguments in its defense. In this commentary, we adopt the labels from van Dijk et al. (2012) of (a) the business case, (b) the equality case, and (c) the values and virtues case to discuss the approaches for arguing why organizational diversity ought to be pursued. We briefly summarize each case and its consequences. The goal of this commentary is to connect the key points made by LeFevre-Levy et al. to each argument, clarify the values being promoted, and identify who may (and importantly may not) stand to benefit. We encourage the field to consider the implications of oversimplifying claims about neuroatypical individuals and their impact in organizations. In doing so, we hope to further contextualize the important points made by LeFevre-Levy et al.

The business case

In the broader diversity literature and practice, the “business case” prioritizes benefits to the bottom line, with diversity being valuable because it financially benefits the organization (van Dijk et al., 2012). This case is fitting to use when the audience values organizational outcomes and performance. Practitioners may have to justify external consulting services, hiring support staff, improving recruitment strategies, or updating learning and development programs. Additionally, researchers may use the business case to substantiate the importance of their work. Many points made by LeFevre-Levy et al. stem from the business case, such as the proposition that neuroatypical individuals have unique talents or special skills like creativity, coding, novel thinking, and visuospatial abilities, or that they may be more advanced in these talents or skills than their neurotypical peers. LeFevre-Levy et al. cite examples such as autism and superior visuospatial processing abilities or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and entrepreneurial skills. Under this lens, neuroatypical individuals’ “special abilities” help meet business needs.

LeFevre-Levy et al. isolate the “special abilities” of autism and ADHD that positively influence the bottom line. It may be more effective to consider their etiologies in conjunction because of frequent co-occurrence: 50 to 70% of those who are autistic also have ADHD (Hours et al., 2022). The stereotypical autistic individual possesses highly focused attention whereas the stereotypical individual with ADHD lacks focused attention, which leads many to assume that these disorders do not co-occur. This assumption may undermine the business case considerably, as it reduces the complexity of neurotypical individuals into stereotypes. These categorizations are then used to slot a person into

a job for which that person is “best” suited. Accordingly, examples like those cited in LeFevre-Levy et al., may stereotype neuroatypical individuals into one type of job, making selection decisions ill informed. Thus, one should de-emphasize or avoid stereotyping the “special abilities” neuroatypical individuals can bring to an organization when making the business case.

The business case also typically fails to clarify the cause and effect of diversity on business outcomes: There is mixed research on the causal relationship between diversity (broadly defined) and positive workplace outcomes (see van Dijk et al., 2012 for examples). Mixing the cause and effect of diversity and business outcomes fails to highlight the support mechanisms that promote these benefits, such as a climate for diversity, organizational member inclusive behaviors, accommodation policies, and accessibility.

Given the consequences of misalignment between organizational performance and increased representation of neuroatypical individuals, readers should understand the risks associated with adopting this case for diversity in isolation. If organizational financial performance is the primary pursuit, then organizational diversity efforts that do not clearly improve the bottom line are devalued. Thus, solely adopting the business case for diversity means that diversity may be threatened when it is not seen as profitable (van Dijk et al., 2012).

The equality case

The equality case, in comparison to the business case, values rights and justice: doing what is fair and equitable for all regardless of neurotypical or neuroatypical presentation. The equality case appeals to one’s sense of justice and fairness. In essence, employing neuroatypical individuals is the right thing to do, regardless of profitability. This case is often used when focusing on disparate employment outcomes for neuroatypical individuals and the resulting lack of gainful employment. LeFevre-Levy et al. point out that not only are neuroatypical individuals less likely to be employed but also their unemployment leads to reduced well-being. LeFevre-Levy et al. made a case for equality by asserting that well-being outcomes varying among neurotypicals and neuroatypicals is inherently wrong. Like the business case, the use of the equality case needs to be understood in context. This case may not persuade people who believe that accommodating neuroatypical people is resource intensive or that neuroatypical people do not perform as well as their neurotypical peers. The equality case does not address any accommodation resources needed. Consequently, the equality case may not overcome the budgetary or headcount restrictions required to either overhaul or modify an organization’s recruiting strategy or provide training and education to drive transformation.

Critics of the equality case argue that it assumes that an individual’s characteristics are inconsequential to business outcomes (i.e., performance; van Dijk et al., 2012). LeFevre-Levy and colleagues state that neurodiversity is “deep level, as opposed to surface level” and defined by differences in cognitive processing. This assertion challenges the equality case relative to its application to other groups (race, gender), as neurotypical and neuroatypical individuals fundamentally differ in cognitive functioning. Estimates of neuroatypicality among the population may be inaccurate, especially when considered along with gender (e.g., Hull et al., 2020) and ethnicity (e.g., Begeer et al., 2009), due to inaccurate or inability to acquire diagnoses, leading to an overlooked portion of the population who is neuroatypical, not working, but capable of working. Proponents of the business case may be mindful of the costs of accommodating these individuals, were businesses to acknowledge the ability for neuroatypical individuals to work. This highlights the conflict between the equality and business cases in isolation that van Dijk et al. (2012) note and seek to resolve via their values and virtues case for organizational diversity.

The values and virtues case

Many of the propositions in the equality and business cases fundamentally oppose one another. van Dijk and colleagues (2012) propose a “values and virtues” case, suggesting that the issues of

diversity management should be approached from a virtue ethics perspective. They posit that traits become virtuous depending on the situational context and the role of the individual involved. Thus, each job has its own set of virtues that are associated with high performance, which then informs the job requirements and selection criteria. It is important to note that the use of the term “virtue” by van Dijk et al. (2012) resembles knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (i.e., KSAOs) as discussed by I-O psychologists, and that this use may differ from the colloquial use of the word. Organizational values determine the relevant virtues and how individuals may successfully contribute to their organizations, thus the name the “values and virtues” case. As a result, the pursuit of values and virtues is argued to bring profitability and promote organizational diversity by avoiding prejudice and bias (van Dijk et al., 2012).

This case highlights the lack of adherence to job-relevant criteria throughout the talent management process. It does not matter who the person is—neurotypical or neuroatypical—it just matters whether they are qualified for the job. If they are qualified, the organization should support the individual’s performance, which may entail accommodations. Thus, where the business case prioritizes profit and the equality case prioritizes justice, the values and virtues case suggest that the optimal point between the two is pursuing organizational excellence (e.g., excellence in talent management). Viewing organizational functioning through the lens of neurodiversity can highlight opportunities to improve the organization’s excellence. As an example, the “hidden curriculum” refers to adherence to unstated social rules. Talent management processes including job interviews and performance management meetings may elicit situations in which interviewers or managers look for social signs of interest, such as eye contact, controlled body movements, or positive verbal tones, that may uniquely disadvantage neuroatypical individuals in ways that are not job relevant (Endow, 2010). From the values and virtues perspective, if adherence to the hidden curriculum is not an established virtue of the position, it should not be considered when hiring. Consequently, removing the hidden curriculum would likely address barriers that have prevented neuroatypical individuals from obtaining employment and fair performance evaluations and make talent management more virtuous (i.e., better aligned with KSAOs).

Application of the values and virtues case means that neuroatypical employment will vary by industry or job. In contrast to the discussion of “special abilities” in the business case, it is important to note that potential employment asymmetry from the values and virtues cases is due to an alignment of KSAOs between individuals and jobs rather than the placement of individuals into job programs based on stereotyped abilities. The values and virtues case would create inclusive practices as a byproduct of its application; were organizations to strictly value the alignment of KSAOs between individuals and jobs, diversity would increase and organizational policies and procedures would adapt to become more inclusive to ensure that they continued to hire and retain talent. It is noteworthy, however, that the virtues and values case does not suggest more inclusive behaviors like the equality case, which may be unintuitive for some.

This case is underused compared to the business and equality cases but strongly aligns with best practices in the I-O field such that only job-relevant criteria (virtues) should be used to design talent management systems. The values and virtues case is largely unheard of in I-O literature, and its consideration in performance and selection in theory by academics would be extremely timely. The tendency of the field is to use the literature to guide recommendations; in the absence of such literature, practitioners may be apprehensive to make recommendations based on the values and virtue case. Although this case may feel like an unfamiliar approach, it aligns with what I-O psychologists typically recommend regarding the incorporation of job-related KSAOs throughout talent management.

Conclusion

Considering *why* neurodiversity is a valuable area of I-O work left us feeling uneasy. As with other historically excluded groups, neuroatypicals should not have to justify their identity in the pursuit

of work. In this commentary, we discussed three lenses for articulating *why* neurodiversity, and how each lens provides value to this conversation when applied appropriately: (a) neurodiversity helps businesses make money and businesses value profits, (b) inequality in employment-related opportunity is wrong, and (c) what matters is whether someone can do the job and, by focusing on that, we remove other obstacles.

We, in agreement with van Dijk et al. (2012), advance the notion of values and virtues as being the most rooted in an innate sense of doing things the right way (and reflecting best practices in I-O). Although adherence to the virtues and values case would work to reduce biases that make inclusion challenging (as those biases would not align KSAOs), it is best thought of as an aspiration supported by the equality and business lenses as needed. As van Dijk et al. (2012) describes, different moral cases are often applied simultaneously in practice. For example, an internal I-O practitioner might advocate for better interviewing techniques (focusing on KSAOs rather than body language, eye contact, etc.) with the aim of improving hiring rates for neuroatypical individuals. In pitching the project, they may lead with the importance of hiring people who are most qualified for the job (virtue), recommend manager training that discusses unconscious bias (e.g., being critical of eye contact will create different outcomes between neurotypical and neuroatypical candidates; equality), and show that the only costs are the practitioners' and managers' time (business). Overall, I-O involvement in the intersection of neurodiversity and work is critical, given our expertise and influence in organizations. Applying well thought-out moral cases to justify the inclusion of neuroatypical individuals at work should improve the success of these initiatives by avoiding common pitfalls inherent in one case or another.

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