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Is coaching really neuro-inclusive? A qualitative study on the experiences of choice and personalisation in a neurodiversity coaching program

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Title: Is coaching really neuro-inclusive? A qualitative study on the experiences of choice and personalisation in a neurodiversity coaching program

Abstract for reviewers

This study investigates the experiences of young adults with autism and their coaches within a coaching program, with a focus on how choice and personalisation of the coaching process is experienced. To date, there is minimal research on how this group experiences coaching, and therefore, how coaching can be more inclusive. This study aims to close this gap and therefore enable workplaces to provide better support for this growing population.

Purpose

Autism diagnoses are significantly increasing among working-age populations, compelling companies to harness the unique strengths this population offers by providing appropriate support, such as coaching. However, mainstream coaching favours neurotypical norms and is not always neuro-inclusive. This study addresses this gap by identifying how coaching could be made more inclusive.

Design/Methodological Approach

Data was collected from 11, hour-long interviews with the participants (autistic young adults and their coaches), and analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

Findings

Two overarching themes emerged: (1) the importance of maintaining fundamental coaching practices, such as building trust and rapport, and being client-led, and (2) the role of choice and personalisation in creating an inclusive coaching experience. It was found that identifying the right level of choice for the clients was key to minimising stress and anxiety.

Research Limitations/ Implications

This study employed stringent sampling criteria; thus, the sample size was small and homogenous. Due to autism's heterogeneity, this limits the transferability of the findings.

Originality/Value

As an increasing number of individuals with autism enter the workforce, companies need to find ways to make proven support mechanisms, like coaching, neuro inclusive.

Introduction

"Neurodiversity" refers to the naturally occurring diversity in human cognition (Singer, 1999) and is an umbrella term for neurocognitive conditions, including Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) (Doyle, 2020). The term was created by scholars influenced by the social model of disability, which challenges the historical view that those with neurological differences should be considered "less than" others (Doyle, 2020). This perspective emphasises adapting social structures (such as workplace practices) rather than "fixing" individuals (Kapp et al., 2013).

Autism Spectrum Conditions [ASC] are estimated to affect 1.7% of the UK population (O'Nions et al., 2023), with a 787% increase in diagnoses from 1998 to 2018, most notably in teens and young adults (Russell et al., 2022). ASC is typified by persistent difficulties in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviours (National Autistic Society 2023), which can cause the world to feel overwhelming (Williams et al., 2021). However, many individuals with autism also possess strengths such as exceptional pattern recognition, attention to detail, honesty, and reliability, which can offer significant value to workplaces (Austin and Pisano, 2017), if they are provided with the right environments and support.

Research has consistently shown that individuals with ASC experience worse outcomes than their neurotypical peers do in terms of employment and social participation (Diener et al, 2020). Managing important life transitions, such as moving from school to workforce, can be particularly difficult for this population (Shattuck et al., 2018). These transitions often involve changes in routines that individuals with autism rely on to mitigate anxiety (Clark & Adams, 2020). Furthermore, as individuals move into adulthood, support networks tend to diminish, reducing the support available to navigate new social and work environments (Taylor & Mailick, 2014). While employment programs exist, gaps in support during the critical transition to adulthood mean that individuals with autism are at risk of long-term social and economic exclusion (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009). Additionally, in the UK, this is a contributing factor to individuals with autism having the highest unemployment rate of any disabled group, four times higher than the general population (Department of Work and Pensions 2024).

Coaching has emerged as a potential intervention to support individuals with autism in managing these transitions and achieving employment success. Companies such as Ernst & Young have integrated neurodiversity coaching into their diversity and inclusion strategies (Hennekam and Follmer, 2024). Studies have demonstrated that coaching can increase individuals' chances of obtaining and retaining employment (McDowall et al., 2023), and, although high-quality research on effective workplace support is limited, one study found that coaching was a critical component in onboarding and integrating autistic employees into new roles (Di Francesco et al., 2021). The potential economic impact of effective coaching support is significant – estimates suggest that doubling the employment rate of autistic adults in the UK could create annual savings of up to £1.5bn (Knapp et al, 2024), in addition to potentially reducing the £32bn p.a. economic cost of autistic unemployment (Department of Work and Pensions, 2024).

Despite its benefits, current workplace coaching models have been designed for neurotypical individuals. Standard coaching practices, such as the client-led approach promoted by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), whereby clients are asked to make key decisions about coaching (e.g., which topic/s to cover), may not sufficiently accommodate the specific needs of neurodivergent individuals. Research suggests that individuals with autism experience unique challenges in decision-making, particularly when choices need to be made quickly or involve social interaction (Luke, 2011), as would be required in a standard coaching session. Furthermore,

individuals with autism can experience sensory overload during video calls (Zolyomi et al., 2019), which is the most frequently used coaching medium (Passmore et al., 2023). This underscores the need for adaptations during coaching to ensure inclusivity.

This study explored how coaching can be made more inclusive for young adults with autism by adapting practices to meet their needs. By examining the experiences of autistic clients in a neurodiversity-focused coaching program, this research aims to identify key adaptations in coaching methods that can foster greater inclusion, particularly in relation to communication preferences and choice, two key components of coaching engagement. In doing so, this study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusion by highlighting how coaching can be made more inclusive of this increasing demographic within the workforce.

Literature Review

Given the rising numbers of young adults with autism entering the workforce, it is critical that coaching approaches be adapted to meet their unique needs. Standard coaching models, often designed around neurotypical individuals, may not fully support the distinct cognitive and communication differences exhibited by adults with autism. Therefore, this literature review explores the necessity of neuro-inclusive coaching by focusing on decision-making processes, communication preferences, and the need for personalised coaching interventions.

Decision-Making Differences

Coaching typically aims to empower individuals by increasing their capacity to make choices, a practice that has been shown to enhance intrinsic motivation, performance, and well-being across various populations (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). For individuals with autism, increasing choice and promoting decision-making is especially important, as societal stigma and limited opportunities have historically restricted their freedom of choice (Ysasi, Becton, & Chen, 2018).

However, research suggests that individuals with autism often face specific challenges in their decision-making. These difficulties include stress over complex or ambiguous choices, the fear of negative judgment, and the need for rigid routines (Luke, 2011). Luke et al. (2012) found that decision-making was most problematic for individuals with autism when decisions required rapid responses, involved social interactions, or where too many options are presented without sufficient structure. The resulting anxiety, stress, and avoidance behaviours indicate that, while increasing choice enhances engagement, the decision-making environment must be structured to mitigate these challenges, for example, by using closed questions or allowing additional time for decisions.

Within coaching, decision-making typically centres on the client choosing the session's topic or goals and working with the coach to explore options. Commonly referred to as a "client-led" coaching approach, coaches often use open questions to generate new options and insights (Myers and Bachkirova, 2018). However, research on how clients with autism experience decision-making during coaching is limited; this study seeks to address this gap.

Communication Mediums in Coaching

The medium through which coaching is delivered is another critical factor influencing its effectiveness in neurodivergent populations. While face-to-face and video-based coaching have become the predominant mediums (Passmore, 2021), these formats can present challenges for some individuals with autism because of sensory sensitivities and difficulties with non-verbal cues (Zolyomi et al., 2019; Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). For instance, video calls may exacerbate sensory overload, leading to increased stress and the need for additional coping strategies (Yuruki and Inoue, 2023).

Face-to-face coaching often assumes eye contact, which may lead to discomfort for autistic clients (Madipakkam et al., 2017) and may be misinterpreted by a coach if they apply neurotypical social expectations.

Alternatives, such as text-based coaching or audio-only sessions, may provide more accessible options for individuals with ASC. Text-based coaching can reduce the pressure of immediate verbal responses and allow for more thoughtful communication, which can be beneficial for those who find verbal communication challenging (Ritzman & Subraiman 2023). However, text-based communication also presents difficulties for individuals with co-occurring conditions such as dyslexia (Brimo et al., 2021). Given the heterogeneity of autism and frequent co-morbid diagnoses, providing flexibility in choice of medium is crucial, if coaching is to be inclusive.

Despite these findings, in practice, the choice of coaching medium is often made by coaches rather than clients, with many coaches defaulting on the methods they are most accustomed to, often video calling (Passmore, 2021). This highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that recognises the diversity of communication preferences among individuals with autism and involves clients in choosing the communication medium that works best for them.

The Role of Personalisation in Coaching

In recent years, governments and researchers have pushed for a more personalised approach to autism support (Walsh & Hall, 2012). Coaches can build on this research by offering personalised approaches that account for neurodivergent traits, such as difficulty with open-ended questions or preferences for different mediums, as referenced above. Such personalisation may reduce client anxiety and increase their engagement.

However, the concept of personalisation in coaching extends beyond simply offering choice. Coaching practices that are flexible and responsive to an individual's neurodivergence are essential for fostering trust and building a supportive environment. For example, incorporating an autistic client/individual's special interests into a learning environment has a positive correlation with social engagement in some situations (Ninci et al., 2020). Research on personalised and inclusive coaching practices for individuals with autism is still emerging (Johnson et al., 2020), demonstrating that there is a growing recognition of the importance of adapting coaching practices to accommodate autistic needs. The existing literature indicates that certain interventions that focus on building behavioural and social skills, delivering strategies for managing transitions, and providing job coaching can be impactful for adults with autism (Ezerins et al., 2024). The development of behavioural and social skills can be enhanced through technology, such as using mobile apps to embed new behaviours (Anderson et al., 2017). Although not extensively researched in autism coaching, some researchers advocate using tools such as strengths-based coaching, clean language interviewing, and transactional analysis to support neurodiversity coaching (e.g., Doyle and McDowall, 2024). This study seeks to further this area of research by investigating how personalisation could make coaching more inclusive.

Summary

In summary, while coaching has a significant potential to support young adults with autism during critical life transitions, standard approaches to coaching require significant adaptation to be fully neuro-inclusive. Decision-making and communication have emerged as areas that present challenges for autistic clients. Therefore, personalised approaches that accommodate neurodivergent preferences. This study contributes to the growing literature on neurodiversity coaching by exploring

the experiences of young adults with autism and identifying practical adaptations that can make coaching more accessible and equitable.

Research Methods

Research Objectives

As highlighted in the literature review, there is limited research on the coaching experiences of young adults with autism, particularly in relation to communication mediums, appropriate personalisation, and decision-making processes. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how individuals with autism experience and choose between different coaching communication mediums, such as text, audio, and video calls, and how they make choices throughout the coaching process. Additionally, this study explores how these experiences inform the adaptations and personalisation needed to make coaching more inclusive. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study gathered data from clients and coaches involved in the program, allowing for the triangulation of perspectives.

Overall Research Design

An inductive qualitative approach was adopted, as appropriate for a study on under-research topics (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014). This design allows for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perspectives, which is particularly important for individuals with autism, who are often underrepresented in research and have historically faced barriers to having their voices heard (Nicolaidis et al., 2019). This research approach aligns with the principles of inclusion and equity, aiming to amplify the experiences of individuals with autism within a coaching context.

Thematic analysis was chosen for data analysis. Thematic analysis allows for the identification of shared patterns, which is crucial for developing practical recommendations to enhance inclusivity in coaching practices (Braun & Clarke 2022). Themes were derived inductively to ensure that they emerged from the data set rather than being imposed by neurotypical researchers' preconceptions.

Research Process

Sampling Approach

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study, reflecting the constraints and accessibility issues of engaging vulnerable populations in the research. Twenty young adults with autism [YAA] were initially targeted for the study through the YMCA network (see Table I). The YMCA supports over thirty thousand young people transitioning to adulthood annually (YMCA, 2022). Anticipating high dropout rates, a common challenge in programmes involving autistic adults (e.g. Wentz et al, 2012; Sehlin et al., 2018; Pillay et al, 2022), the sample was intentionally larger than needed to accommodate potential attrition and ensure sufficient data could be gathered.

Strict inclusion criteria were applied to ensure that the YAA participants were representative of the target population, while balancing ethical considerations and the capabilities of the coaching team. YAA participants had to be between 18-30 years old, verbally proficient, with no diagnosed learning difficulties, and assessed by the YMCA as having low levels of challenging behaviour (see Table II). This decision was due to the limited experience most professional coaches have with vulnerable adults (see Appendix A) and by the need to ensure a safe and supportive coaching environment. One YAA participant was recruited externally from the YMCA via a LinkedIn advertisement, which helped broaden the sample. While the selection criteria ensured safety and provided a manageable scope

for the coaches, it resulted in a sample that was not fully representative of the broader autistic population, especially those with greater support needs, including non-verbal individuals.

A separate convenience sampling approach was used to recruit coach participants. Nine professional coaches volunteered to participate in this program. To ensure the quality of the coaching sessions, all coaches were ICF-accredited and had over 100 hours of coaching experience. Coaches were required to attend a 3-hour neurodiversity training session and completed a criminal record check. The coaches were not financially compensated.

Table I: Participant breakdown (Source: Author's own work)

	Participating (Total)	Participating (non YMCA)	Dropped out (YMCA)	Dropped out (Non YMCA)
Target	20	5		
YAA Participants agreeing to take part	12	2		
YAA Participants taking part in coaching	5	1	7	1
YAA Participants taking part in interviews	6	1	6	1

The Coaching Sessions

Each client was offered four one-hour sessions that began with text-based coaching. Clients were informed that they could change the communication medium at any point, and that flexibility was emphasised to accommodate individual needs. This emphasis on choice is consistent with inclusive practices that allow clients to exercise autonomy in how they engage with the sessions.

The decision to limit coaching sessions to one hour was informed by expert recommendations in neurodiversity coaching. While email-based coaching was offered between sessions, none of the participants used it.

Data Collection Approach

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with both YAA clients and coaches. Interviews were conducted up to four weeks after the final coaching session. This timing allowed participants to reflect on their coaching experience while it was still recent. The semi-structured format provided a balance between guiding the conversation and allowing space for participants to raise issues most relevant to them, allowing for a flexible exploration of key themes while ensuring that participants had the opportunity to share their unique experiences and perspectives (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Given the high dropout rate among YAA participants, coach interviews became especially valuable for capturing information about the coaching process. This triangulation of data strengthened the credibility of the study (Patton 1999).

To accommodate sensory and communication preferences, interviews were conducted via video calls, with the option of turning off the camera if participants found it more comfortable. This approach considered an YAA's potential discomfort with eye contact while still enabling an interactive

interview discussion. Previous studies have demonstrated that video and audio-only interviews are comparable in quality (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). All interviews were transcribed using AI transcription software (Otter.ai) and then manually reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were subsequently imported into NVIVO for thematic coding and analysis.

Data Analysis Approach

Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method allowed for the identification of key themes related to communication mediums, decision making, and personalisation within coaching. The analysis was inductive, ensuring that themes were grounded in the data without imposing predetermined categories, thereby reducing the influence of research bias.

Coding began with familiarisation with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by the generation of the initial codes. These codes were then organised into broader themes, which were refined through mind mapping and re-evaluation. The resulting themes provided insight into the participants' experiences and informed the study's recommendations for neuro-inclusive coaching practices.

Results

Through thematic analysis of interview data, two overarching themes emerged: (1) the importance of maintaining fundamental coaching practices and (2) the role of choice and personalisation in creating an inclusive coaching experience.

Coaching encourages clients to explore various options and have breath of choice in potential solutions (Siminovitch, D. and Van Eron, A., 2008). Overall, the ability to increase choice was well received, but there were coaching scenarios when the choice was perceived as too open-ended, which caused anxiety for the YAA. The choice of the coaching medium was valued; however, clients rarely chose to change the medium during the sessions. It is apparent that this choice was not a significant part of delivering a neuro-inclusive coaching experience. However, personalisation of the content and structure of the coaching session was extremely well received and considered beneficial.

Table II: Client Sample Criteria (Source: Author's own work)

Area	Criteria	Previous studies
Diagnosis status	Diagnosed or pending diagnosis	Griffith et al (2012)
Age	18 – 30 years old	N/A – Target Group for the Study
Learning difficulties/ability to make decisions	No issues reported	Griffith et al (2012) Efeoğlu and Kılınçarslan (2024)
Troublesome behaviour	Classed as "low" under YMCA assessment	N/A
Verbal proficiency	No non-verbal individuals	This is widespread practice given the challenges with engaging this group (e.g. Stedman et al, 2019)

Theme 1: Basics are best - Fundamentals of Coaching – Trust and Rapport

Both clients and coaches consistently highlighted that the foundational practices of coaching are critical to success. Establishing trust, active listening, and creating a non-judgmental space were repeatedly cited as essential. These core coaching competencies, aligned with ICF standards, were particularly valued by autistic clients, many of whom had experienced trauma or negative therapeutic experiences in the past, and were initially cautious about coaching.

Participants described how trust was built through empathetic listening and creating a safe, open environment in which clients felt heard and accepted. The coaches took time to find common points of connection with YAA clients. For example, Participant C1 stated: *"She built that initial connection, which allowed me to develop trust a lot quicker… We discussed things we're passionate about… that allowed us go further in the coaching.*" Developing trust is particularly important for individuals with autism, who have been shown to have lower levels of trust (Zhao et al., 2024), making the coach's efforts to build a trusting relationship paramount.

The coach's ability to listen without judgment is noted as a key trait. Several clients shared that having someone listen without passing judgement made them feel safe and willing to be open. For example, participant C4 said: *"…Like, [the coach] is amazing…I shared a lot of things that I did not really get, that have never really been shared before."* The coaches echoed this, commenting that clients appreciated being heard and accepted.

The emphasis on providing a judgement-free space is important, given that YAA commonly experience societal bias and judgement, which can be compounded due to stigmatised comorbidities such as Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria, where perceived rejection or criticism can create extreme distress (Rowney-Smith et al., 2024). Knowing that coaches would not judge helped clients overcome their hesitation and speak more freely.

In addition to listening skills, the participants mentioned specific coaching behaviours and traits that helped build trust. Coaching behaviours included being open-minded, leaving space, showing empathy, and "checking-in" with the client in the moment. Responding to questions about what helped build trust, clients mentioned *"genuineness"* [Participant C2]*,* and the coach's *"patience and her mannerisms" [Participant C4]* as influential. The coaches' comments echo the fact that these approaches are helpful. Participant H3 commented: *"So I think from being open-minded with him, and listening, being empathic…it just created sort of a partnership, where he felt he could trust me".*

These findings affirm that fundamental coaching principles are not only applicable to autistic clients but are in fact pivotal. Specifically, trust and rapport form the foundation upon which tailored neuro-inclusive coaching strategies can be effective.

Theme 2: Choice and Personalisation – Navigating Decision-Making and Communication Mediums

Participants appreciated having choices in the coaching process, particularly regarding how the coaching was conducted (communication medium) and what was discussed (session content). Personalisation was broadly a positive experience; however, the data revealed that the way choices are presented and managed is important. The range of options and lack of one "right" answer created by open-ended questions created overwhelm and anxiety in some clients, indicating that unlimited choice is not helpful for all clients. Finding a balance between offering choice and reducing overwhelm was key to creating a less anxiety-inducing, more inclusive environment.

Participants expressed that further personalisation of coaching content, for example, personalising coaching tools and incorporating a client's special interest into metaphors, made for a more effective coaching outcome. Additional techniques, such as using visual aids to increase attention, were also found to be effective.

Several sub-themes emerged:

Choice of Coaching Medium

All clients began with text-based coaching, as it was perceived as less anxiety-inducing, but quickly transitioned to audio or video calls, remaining with this thereafter. Several participants found text coaching slower and less effective for deep emotional communication, particularly for those with dyslexia. One YAA participant mentioned how difficult it was to express their emotions in text form, and that it had caused miscommunication in the past. Multiple participants commented that text-based coaching was particularly challenging because they could not see it in real time when the other party was writing.

Participants who switched to audio or video reported feeling more comfortable, as these mediums allowed them to better interpret emotions. For instance, Participant C2 stated:

"with camera, it's easier for me to see the emotion of the other person, because I sometimes can't pick up people's emotions properly. I've been basically … over analysing people since I was very little, so I can't tell emotion"

The same participant noted how having their camera off helped manage their neurodivergent traits such as stimming (repetitive movements used to manage energy and self-soothe).*"I did do my call with [my coach] as audio. I think that's because I kept fidgeting quite a lot. "[Participant C2]*

However, participants who preferred not to use the video emphasised that audio coaching provided sufficient engagement without introducing sensory overload. One YAA client, (participant C1) stated video was "*not something I'm absolutely comfortable with*" reflecting the diversity in communication preferences across the autistic spectrum and highlights the importance of offering flexible communication options and allowing changes.

Choice of Coaching Topic

Choosing the topic for the coaching sessions was another area where personalisation proved essential. Many participants enjoyed the autonomy to choose topics and/or goals, some expressed anxiety about the open-ended nature of these choices, and the client-led approach of coaching was often compared to the more structured approach of the therapeutic environments YAA are more accustomed to experiencing.

"As much as I love my choices. And I love choices no matter what. …. I was just here [in the coaching session], I just feel like there is so many possibilities... Whereas if you go to like therapy, … there is a set goal in mind that person has, in this session, we are fixing something…" [Participant C3]

This client articulated an additional common feeling that the very open-ended, client-led nature of coaching is a double-edged sword that can be liberating and disorientating for YAA.

[Coaching is] "…very hard to predict…. And that's why that will be out of a lot of people's comfort zones. Also, will be very beneficial to those people because it's not so far out of a comfort zone that you want to run away from it. Because you have your own choices there like you still have your own agenda" [Participant C3]

While the unpredictability of coaching can be uncomfortable, having choice within a structured framework prevented it from being overwhelming to the point of ceasing coaching; coaches reported that they learnt to offer more structured guidance, such as using questions or visual aids to narrow down topics, or employed techniques for focusing on the present, this helped alleviate client anxiety, and made the coaching experience more manageable for the YAA.

Choice to attend

Not all participants completed the program; dropouts, either temporary or permanent, were found to be driven by reasons linked to autistic traits and provide additional insight into the personalisation and support needs of delivering neuro-inclusive coaching. Such reasons included anxiety driven by a lack of clarity on what coaching entailed and open questions, sleep disturbance, and memory challenges. There was mention of past negative experiences with therapy, which might have led to distrust or anxiety about engaging with a new support program such as coaching. In one case, a participant's anxiety about the unfamiliarity with coaching (not knowing what it would be like) contributed to their decision to quit before starting. Coaches and program staff observed that uncertainty about what coaching entailed was a significant barrier for some young adults. Those who did persist often credited the personalised video-based coach introductions for providing reassurance and certainty before the program started. This suggests that focusing on personalisation and creating certainty can increase engagement and reduce dropouts.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was smaller than planned and consistent with a relatively homogeneous subset of the autistic population, as discussed in the Research Methods section. Convenience sampling of participants supported by the YMCA limits the diversity of experiences captured. It is reasonable to argue that the findings may not extend to all YAA or adults with autism from other age groups or other cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, previous studies have had similar sample sizes (White et al. 2016). Furthermore, as participants self-selected into the coaching program, there may have been an inherent selection bias, where YAA with higher tolerance for uncertainty may have been more inclined to participate. This limits the generalizability of the findings to wider neuro-populations.

Attention was paid to ensure an inclusive methodological approach, and positionality was considered through reflection as part of the thematic analysis review. Despite this, research led by neurotypical individuals such as this one may still have a neurotypical bias (Derwent, 2022). The study design was reviewed by a neurodivergent individual; however, co-production with individuals with autism would have made for a more inclusive participatory research approach. Authors such as Milton (2014) have highlighted the differing sociality of individuals with autism potentially impacting research outcomes. A more participatory research approach (Vaughn, 2020), such as following the principles of neuro-inclusion in research (Dark, 2024) or the AASPIRE practice guidelines (Nicolaidis et al., 2019), could strengthen the validity of this research and remove any existing bias (Keating, 2021).

Discussion

This study contributes to the emerging body of research on neurodiversity coaching by demonstrating how integrating the social model of disability can reshape coaching practices for individuals with autism. The findings highlight the importance of combining fundamental coaching principles with personalised approaches and adaptations to account for the unique needs of individuals with autism and suggest how dominant coaching approaches could inadvertently prevent individuals with autism from fully engaging in coaching programs. This aligns with the social model of

disability which emphasises that aspects of the environment (in this case the coaching methods, mediums and setup) are what "disable" the individual, rather than the person's diagnosis or condition. By identifying the taken-for-granted coaching practices that could be barriers, this study underscores the need for adaptations in coaching approaches to remove those barriers and foster greater inclusion, particularly by providing clients with the right amount of choice and personalisation of the coaching process to their specific neurodivergent traits. In doing so, the findings also align with the neurodiversity paradigm (Singer, 1999) recognizing that neurological variations are a natural and valuable part of human diversity. Rather than expecting clients with autism to conform to traditional coaching norms, coaches and coaching systems should change to accommodate the natural variations in how neurodivergent people communicate and make decisions.

Inclusive Coaching through Greater Choice and Personalisation

Fundamental coaching principles, such as building trust and rapport, are not only valued by individuals with autism, but findings also propose that they are even more crucial for neurodivergent populations. YAA greatly valued coaches who took time to establish rapport. Thus, efforts to make coaching more neuro-inclusive should be especially attentive to these fundamentals. Furthermore, neurotypical coaches should be familiar with the wider societal challenges ASC individuals may experience, such as the prevalence of comorbidities and trauma (Taylor and Gotham, 2016), so that they can be aware of how fundamental coaching practices need to be further personalised to ensure inclusivity.

Other principles of coaching, such as the need to be client-led when considering topics or setups, must be further nuanced to create an inclusive environment. The results align with Schwartz's (2020) theory that too many choices can lead to decision fatigue. This is especially prevalent when options are complex or ambiguous and the possible outcomes are extensive (GreifenEder et al., 2010). For individuals with autism, this difficulty is amplified by factors such as time pressure, fear of judgment, and cognitive overload (Luke, 2011). Therefore, inclusive coaching practices should maintain client-led ethos but incorporate a more structured approach to choice making, such as, for example, using more closed questions to help clients choose, rather than presenting open questions. A practical coaching tool highlighted by participants was the use of visual aids to focus attention "in the coaching moment," effectively providing a starting point and scaffolding to narrow the scope of topics. Furthermore, visual aids can help reduce the cognitive burden of decision making and improve working memory by providing clarity and improving focus. These approaches ensure that coaching remains client-led (the client ultimately still chooses and directs content) while accommodating for neurodivergent styles and aligning with core coaching principles of fostering empowerment and self-efficacy (International Coaching Federation, 2025).

This study reinforces the importance of personalising coaching experience. For example, incorporating a client's special interests into the coaching process can, in some situations, help to build rapport faster and create a more engaging experience, as supported by Ninci et al., (2020) in educational contexts. Similarly, tailoring the session length, frequency, and structure to the client's needs can reduce anxiety and increase coaching effectiveness. Personalisation is particularly important during the pre-contracting and contracting phases of coaching. Providing detailed information about what coaching entails, allowing clients to review materials in multiple formats (written, visual, and audio), and offering flexibility in scheduling can help reduce anticipatory anxiety and increase client retention. This approach is consistent with inclusive practices that seek to create equity by accommodating the diverse needs of all clients, recognizing the range of preferences and the heterogeneity of autistic traits (English et al, 2021).

A key implication of integrating the neurodiversity paradigm is the recognition that individuals with autism have different and equally valid approaches to self-development and social interactions. Findings suggest that neuro-inclusive coaching practice requires a reframing of the accepted client-led ethos, drawing instead on the co-creation and partnership aspects of coaching (International Coaching Federation, 2025), so that the coach's role expands if necessary to be a facilitator who actively ensures the entire process is personalised to fit each client's neurodivergent needs rather than accepting neurotypical-defined standard practices.

Communication Mediums in Inclusive Coaching

This study also highlights the importance of flexibility in communication mediums as part of neuro-inclusive coaching. While video-based coaching is increasingly common and is the default choice (Passmore et al., 2023), it may not be the best option for all individuals with autism. Sensory sensitivities, difficulties in interpreting non-verbal cues, and experiences of anxiety can lead to video-call issues, thus making coaching stress-inducing (Zolyomi et al., 2019). Although the findings illustrate that preferences vary considerably, offering clients a choice between mediums, allowing them to switch as needed, creates a more inclusive coaching environment respectful of their individual needs. The key implication is that coaches should proactively offer these choices and be willing to switch modes, as needed.

Coaches should be adept with each communication medium and trained to recognise the impact of sensory overload on their clients' ability to engage in the coaching process for each medium. Coach training seldom covers "how to coach" outside of face-to-face and video-based coaching, and as participants noted, a seemingly small technical detail, such as knowing if the other person is typing, can significantly affect sessions. Platforms that provide both coaches and clients with visibility when the other is typing can alleviate uncertainty, and coaches should familiarise themselves with such tools.

There are also sensory and emotional factors that should be considered. For example, some autistic clients might prefer audio, so they can stim or move around more freely (off-camera) or avoid self-consciousness of being watched. Others might prefer videos at times to read the coach's face better. Flexibility around coaching medium should be explicitly and proactively discussed with clients. Providing this choice is empowering, demonstrates to the client that their comfort is a priority, and can reduce anxiety.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Building on these findings, several recommendations can be made for future research and coaching practice, including adopting participatory and co-designed methodologies to ensure that individuals with autism are involved and represented in shaping research design and methodological processes. The autistic community has long advocated for greater involvement in designing services that affect them, arguing that traditional research excludes neurodivergent voices on what support should look like (Milton, 2014; Dark, 2024). Additionally, research with a larger sample size is required in order to increase generalisability.

This study highlights that further exploration of the social model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm within other types of workplace coaching, such as leadership, team, and career transition coaching, is urgently needed to understand whether current practices are neuro-inclusive. Current coach training reinforces social disabilities by using a setup and approach created solely for the majority. It is recommended that neuro-inclusive principles be included in coach training, such as proactive offering of different communication mediums, tools to reduce anxiety before and during

sessions, how to respond to different clients' needs for, and challenges with choice-making, and personalisation of the coaching experience using autistic strengths and special interests. We call for bodies such as the ICF to mandate neuro-inclusion in accredited training programs to reinforce this shift, and companies can ensure that they hire only coaches that have gone through such programs. With these kinds of changes, it is possible to increase the success of individuals with autism to gain and maintain employment, in turn creating individual, organizational, societal, and economic benefits.

By integrating these recommendations, coaching can become an actively inclusive practice.

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Appendix`

Appendix A: Coach profiles

Table III: Coach profiles (Source: Author's own work)

Pseudonym	H2	H3	H4	H1	H5
Hours of ND Training before program	5	0	0	0	0
Coaching hours	More than 500 hours	Between 100 and 300 hours			
Gender	Female				
Number of sessions completed	4				
Coaching qualification – ICF ACC or another equivalent	Yes				
Autism Diagnosis	Not Applicable			Not diagnosed / Suspected	
DBS check passed	Yes				
Previous experience of working with vulnerable adults	No				
Date of coach/client pairing	7/11/2023	22/11/2023	22/11/2023	6/11/2023	4/1/2024
Date of final session	12/12/2023	31/1/2024	28/12/2023	22/12/2024	2/2/2024
Date of interview	7/1/2024	3/2/3034	14/1/2024	22/1/2024	6/2/2024