

ETHICAL ASPECTS IN MANAGING NEUROATYPICAL EMPLOYEES: A MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Purpose: The considerable presence and steadily increasing proportion of neurodivergent individuals within contemporary societies, together with the relatively underdeveloped state of ethics-oriented research in the field of management and quality sciences, has prompted the author to articulate two research objectives. The first objective concerns identifying and analyzing the ethical considerations raised in the extant literature with regard to neurodiversity, with particular emphasis on the management of neurodivergent employees. The second objective aims to articulate research questions that explore managerial perceptions of the ethicality of neurodivergent employees' behavior and the ethical dimensions of their treatment in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach: In order to accomplish the objective of the article, a scoping literature review was conducted, and methodological assumptions together with research questions were formulated to serve as the basis for the development of a questionnaire for the Author's own empirical study addressed to organizational managers. An approach to the topic grounded in the respect for the dignity, autonomy, and agency of neurodivergent individuals was adopted and criteria of ethical competencies - considered significant from the perspective of the challenges of the contemporary economy - were also incorporated.

Findings: Scoping literature review showed that early research perspectives in medicine and social sciences contributed to the stigmatization of neurodivergent individuals. Contemporary studies highlight the strengths of neurodiversity and ethical dimensions of inclusion, yet, research within management and quality sciences remains scarce.

Research and practical implications: The intended outcome of the planned empirical research is, in part, to address the clear research gap identified in the scholarly literature and, in practical terms, to enable the formulation of recommendations for organizational stakeholders to ensure the integration of ethical considerations in neurodiverse workplaces. The proposed research agenda may also serve as a stimulus for further exploration in this area.

Social implications: Results of the planned empirical research might positively influence public attitudes and affect quality of life neurodivergent individuals.

Originality/value: The originality of the present study is associated with the linkage of themes: neurodiversity and the ethicality.

Keywords: neurodiversity, neurodivergence, ethicality, human resource management (HRM).

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

The term *neurodivergence* refers to the naturally occurring neurological diversity (*neurodiversity*) within the human species (Jaarsma, Welin, 2012; Blackburn, 2023) and encompasses, inter alia, autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), Tourette's syndrome, and learning difficulties (Baumer, Frueh, 2021). In the present article, the terms *neurodiversity*, *neurodivergence*, *neurological difference* and *neurodevelopmental difference* will be used interchangeably. It is estimated that the prevalence of neurodivergent conditions currently extends to as much as one-fifth of the global population (Doyle, 2020) and continues to rise dynamically. This trend is exemplified by the number of autism diagnoses, currently estimated at 1 in 100 children in Europe and 1 in 54 in the United States (polskiautyzm.pl, 2020; Wright, 2020), compared to only 0.05% in the 1980s. However, this growing representation in society has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in public awareness regarding the characteristics of neurodivergence. One of the most critical consequences of this lack of awareness is the unjust perception of neurodivergent individuals as unethical or lacking empathy (Stenning, 2021), which in turn may result in reluctance to employ them (Bernard et al., 2023). In light of these considerations, it has been deemed essential to identify the issues addressed within the scholarly discourse on the ethicality of neurodivergent individuals, as well as to explore how, from a managerial perspective, the ethicality of their conduct and their treatment within organizations is understood. To achieve these objectives, the Scoping Review of the literature was undertaken, and methodological assumptions for the Author's own empirical research on the subject matter were developed.

2. Neurodivergence and Ethicality – A Scoping Review of the Literature

The review of the theoretical foundations was undertaken in accordance with the rigor of of methodological research procedures (Czakoń, 2011; Ćwiklicki, 2020). To ensure methodological transparency and analytical robustness, a scoping review approach was used. This method has been recognized as particularly suitable for synthesizing knowledge in emerging or underexplored domains and for systematically identifying research gaps (Ćwiklicki, 2020). The structured research procedure adopted in this study is presented in Figure 1.

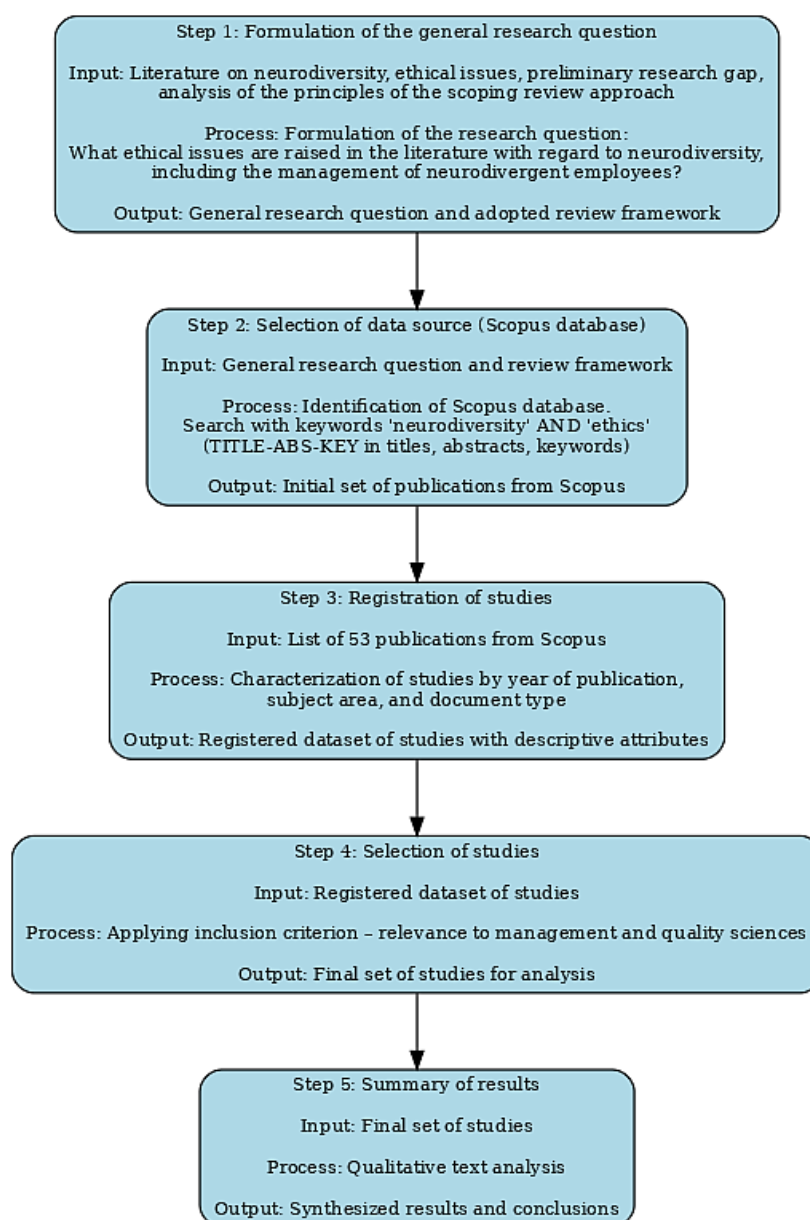


Figure 1. Procedure of the Conducted Scoping Review of the Literature.

Source: (Ćwiklicki, 2020).

The starting point of the adopted procedure was the formulation of a broadly framed research question aligned with the first objective of the study, which is considered characteristic of the scoping review approach. Furthermore, in articulating the research question, the requirement of employing “defined concepts, including the context and discipline that allow for the precise specification of the intended meaning of terms” was satisfied (Ćwiklicki, 2020, pp. 60-61). The Scopus database was selected due to the high quality of its indexed resources (Rollnik-Sadowska, Grabińska, 2024). The literature search was conducted using the keywords *neurodiversity* and *ethics*, combined with the Boolean operator (AND) within titles, abstracts, and keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY). This procedure yielded a total of 53 documents, of which as many as 43 were published from 2022 onwards. This outcome underscores both the topical relevance of the issue and the dynamic increase in scholarly interest. An analysis of the thematic

distribution of results indicates that the largest share (23.9%) falls within the field of medicine, followed closely by social sciences (21.1%). Psychology ranks third, accounting for 13.8% of the publications, while the remaining subject areas are represented only sporadically. This distribution further substantiates the appropriateness of the scoping review as the chosen method of analysis (Ćwiklicki, 2020). The majority of the retrieved works were journal articles (56.6%), followed by book chapters (13.2%) and reviews (13.2%). The studies identified through the search were subsequently examined for their relevance to the focus of this article, particularly in relation to management and quality sciences, based on their keywords and abstracts. The qualitative content analysis of the selected texts is presented below, preceded by a definitional framing of the concept of neurodiversity and a characterization of the current state of research in the discipline.

The concept of *neurodiversity* - with reference to the equality-oriented notion of “neurological pluralism” promoted by online communities of individuals on the autism spectrum - was first introduced by the Australian sociologist J. Singer in her correspondence with the journalist H. Blume. In 1998, Blume subsequently wrote in *The Atlantic*: “Neurotypicality is just one type of mind, and when it comes to working with advanced technology, it may in fact be an inferior type (...); neurodiversity may be as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life itself; who can determine which type of mind is best suited to a particular situation?” (Silberman, 2021, p. 441). At present, the concept of neurodiversity extends beyond the autism spectrum to encompass other neurodevelopmental differences, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette’s syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, among others. As a perspective on neurological and neurodevelopmental differences, this concept - contrary to the medical model - emphasizes the strengths of neurodivergent individuals, grounded in the conviction that they should not be regarded as “deficits or dysfunctions, but rather as naturally occurring forms of cognitive mechanisms characterized by specific advantages that contribute to technological and cultural development” (Silberman, 2021, p. 23).

In the management and quality sciences literature, a shortage of research devoted to neurodiversity has been identified, particularly with regard to the employment of neurodivergent individuals in organizations (Whelpley, Perrault, 2021), as evidenced by the limited scope of existing studies on neurodiversity (Doyle, McDowall, 2021). This may be associated with the extremely low employment rates of neurodivergent individuals in organizations (Krzemińska et al., 2019), primarily linked to difficulties in sustaining long-term employment (Mellifont, 2019). The unemployment rate among people on the spectrum has remained persistently high, reaching as much as 90% in both the European Union and the United States (Gerhardt, Lainer, 2011, p. 39). Scholars have also pointed to the insufficient adaptation of human resource management practices to the specific needs of these individuals (Wehman et al., 2016). This concern is particularly evident in relation to tailoring leadership styles to the individual needs of employees on the autism spectrum (Austin, Pisano, 2017),

as well as management practices directed toward individuals with learning difficulties (Sumner, Brown, 2015). Empirical findings suggest that this phenomenon is largely attributable to employers' limited awareness and the challenges they encounter in recruiting and retaining autistic employees. It has been emphasized that sustaining satisfactory employment among individuals with autism necessitates the provision of an environment characterized by diversity, psychological safety, and inclusive leadership (Muhammad et al., 2023; Vogus, Taylor, 2018, pp. 514-516). The literature suggests that a strong culture of organizational identification can pose challenges to the implementation of diversity practices, since deep engagement with the organization is often linked to a diminished willingness to recognize and acknowledge the need for such initiatives (Guisard et al., 2025). With respect to the leadership, empirical studies conducted among employees of Australian public sector organizations have indicated that emotional engagement and sustained participation in neurodiversity initiatives are, among other factors, contingent upon the perceived support of supervisors (Spoor et al., 2021). Direct insight into the experiences of both autistic individuals with an employment history and individuals who have managed autistic individuals in the workplace demonstrates, in the context of relations between these two groups, the importance of managerial support (Whelpley et al., 2021). At the same time, it has been shown that for first-line managers "adjustments deemed essential to support neurodiverse employees require a myriad of hidden, complex, time-consuming and often emotionally draining interactions with disabled employees, the employee's wider team, HRM and occupational health (OH) practitioners" (Richards et al., 2019, p. 1903). Case studies demonstrate that top management support for neurodiversity practices enhances the capacity to achieve competitive advantage (Whelpley, Perrault, 2021). Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of workforce diversity, management practice continues to lack coherent and systematic actions in this area. While 95% of CEOs report an intended focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the coming years, evidence shows that 40% still lack a DEI strategy, and 25% have yet to implement DEI objectives (Hawkins, 2022). It is also worth emphasizing that a conceptual model has been developed which articulates how cognitive characteristics associated with neurodiversity (i.e., sensitivity and attention to detail, pattern recognition, visual thinking, and the need for structure and routine) may lead to task-based leadership behavior and traces the influence of such behaviors on both leader and follower outcomes (Roberson et al., 2021). In light of the unique psychological profiles of neurodivergent employees, and the challenges they experience in terms of social interaction and organizational integration, researchers have explored the potential use of digital technologies (Walkowiak, 2021). With respect to the ethical dimensions of treating neurodivergent individuals, attention has been given to the risks of stereotyping (Whelpley et al., 2021; Priscott, Allen, 2021), the prevention of workplace harassment (Mellifont, 2020), and the need to provide adequate support (Richards et al., 2019).

Beliefs regarding the ethicality of neurodivergent individuals are, among other factors, informed by neurocognitive theoretical explanations, including the theory of mind, according to which autistic individuals are assumed to possess deficits that hinder their ability to understand others' perspectives (Hens et al., 2019). Extending the theory of mind hypothesis, some scholars have argued that individuals with autism display difficulties not only in interpreting the mental states of others but also in recognizing their own (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985, Frith, Happe, 1999). For a considerable period, research on autism was dominated by the belief that autistic individuals were even devoid of emotions (Mundy, 2009). Within this line of thought, the following view was also expressed regarding the inability of autistic individuals to achieve a "full life": *the absence of theory of mind dramatically affects the ability of the autistic individual to live a full life regardless of societal intervention* (Barnbaum, 2008).

It is worth noting that claims derived from the theory of mind do not differentiate among individuals across the full autism spectrum, assuming instead that they share identical deficits. In contrast, theories positing that individuals diagnosed with autism are incapable of experiencing emotions or empathy have been challenged both by autistic individuals themselves (Pentzell, 2013, as cited in Hens et al., 2019), and by psychologists who distinguish multiple forms of empathy (Blair, 2005; Bollard, 2013, as cited in Hens et al., 2019). For example, according to the Empathy Imbalance Hypothesis (EIH) in autism, autistic individuals score low on cognitive empathy while simultaneously achieving very high scores on affective empathy - making them so sensitive to others' feelings that they may, at times, shield themselves from them (Smith 2009, as cited in Hens et al., 2019). Similarly, the "double empathy problem" highlights the bidirectional mismatch between autistic and non-autistic individuals in the cognitive and communicative domains, leading to a breakdown of reciprocity and mutual understanding (Milton, 2012). It should therefore be acknowledged that the relationship between empathy and autism is complex and that autistic individuals vary in their empathic capacities in much the same way as neurotypical individuals do (Praslova, 2021). Furthermore, in light of recent research, neurodivergent individuals - particularly those on the autism spectrum - demonstrate emotional lability, which underscores the necessity of providing emotional support (Prizant, Fields-Meyer, 2017), thereby challenging earlier claims that they lack emotional expression.

Contemporary scholarship also challenges the assumption that there exist objective criteria for evaluating individual quality of life, advocating instead for the adoption of autistic individuals' own perspectives and for granting them the right to define life achievements and subjective well-being as meaningful from their standpoint. Consequently, the quality of life of these individuals should be assessed, at least in part, in terms of the extent to which lived experience aligns with personal aspirations. This approach is grounded in the recognition of dignity, agency, and respect for all individuals, including the neurodivergent (Pellicano, Heyworth, 2023) and, in the Author's view, constitutes an expression of the ethics of their treatment.

Beyond the unfounded assumption of a lack of empathy and emotionality among autistic individuals, other stereotypes concerning neurodivergence remain deeply entrenched. One mechanism that reinforces the negative perception of neurodivergent individuals is the pathologization of their strengths and positive attributes. Praslova (2021) refers to the results of a study in which autistic participants, unlike their neurotypical counterparts, behaved with consistent ethicality regardless of whether they were being observed. The moral consistency of autistic participants was interpreted as a moral deficit - a pathology. Objections raised by the autistic community led to revisions of the research report, although much of the “pathologizing language” remained.

In light of numerous irregularities in the conceptualization of the ethicality of neurodivergent individuals, the literature highlights the legitimacy of establishing a distinct research domain within philosophy, referred to as the ethics of autism. Within this domain, scholars advocate for addressing ethical questions concerning, among others (Hens et al., 2019):

- understanding autism not as a disease or disorder but as a neurological identity or personality trait, and embracing and valuing the worldview of autistic individuals,
- considering whether only autistic individuals can truly define the scope and aims of autism research, and consequently how social practices can be organized to adequately understand them,
- recognizing the value of autistic testimony and its influence on policy formation, including the experiences of individuals who do not rely on verbal communication,
- taking into account the cultural representation of the term “autism” its meaning, and its portrayal in media, literature, and art,
- addressing the globalization of the concept of autism and the transfer of its Western interpretation into other cultural contexts,
- examining the rights and responsibilities of parents in connection with a child’s autism diagnosis, as well as the scope of interventions aimed at improving the child’s functioning,
- ensuring social justice that reflects the complexity of autism and entails practical support from social, economic, political, educational, and labor market institutions,
- assessing the ethical implications of the heterogeneity of autism concepts with regard to granting autonomy in light of social justice assumptions and the idea of paternalism.

According to its proponents, this program of the ethics of autism may be informed by insights from the more established literatures on disability ethics, bioethics, the philosophy of psychiatry, moral psychology, metaethics, normative ethics, as well as social and political philosophy, in addition to public health, medicine, and the social and behavioral sciences. At the same time, the ethics of autism cannot be reduced to a case study in which insights from these other fields are simply applied; rather, it requires the direct participation of autistic individuals and active engagement with them (Hens et al., 2019).

In characterizing autistic ethics, Stenning (2020) draws on Greta Thunberg's autobiography *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* (2019) and Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation* (2005). In her work, she emphasizes that autistic ethics extend not only to other human beings but also to animals and non-human entities, while simultaneously cautioning against the risk of perceiving autistic individuals as somehow closer to nature (Stenning, 2020, as cited in Nygren, 2023). Building on this perspective, Nygren (2023) argues that the autistic orientation toward more-than-human relations can be interpreted both as an act of resistance and as an alternative mode of expressing empathy.

Current scientific research in the field addressed by this article also engages with the ethical dimensions of early autism care (Vanaken et al., 2024), emphasizing the necessity of direct insight into the lived experiences of autistic individuals and their close relatives, and the value attributed to such experiences for advancing knowledge about the condition. In this literature, autism is portrayed as a developmental phenomenon, which entails recognizing the multilayered meanings of the condition in relation to how it is experienced and perceived by individuals on the spectrum. Aligning explanatory models with the experiences of autistic persons may help to prevent various ethical dilemmas (Hens, 2021). Conversely, studies designed and interpreted exclusively from neurotypical assumptions - without incorporating the perspectives of neurodivergent individuals - may hinder the understanding of autistic cognition and impede their employment opportunities (Bernard et al., 2023). Within autism research, ethical frameworks have been proposed to guide the evaluation of specific intervention goals (Ne'eman et al., 2023). Furthermore, scholars argue that avoiding moral dilemmas requires a redefinition of autism, grounded in the recognition of autistic experience as central (Bervoets, Hens, 2020). Research linking ethics and neurodivergence has also examined how mothers' orientation toward an "ethics of care" influences their understanding of experiences of violence perpetrated by a neurodivergent child (Holt, 2024, p. 824). Within the management and quality sciences literature, however, these issues have been shown to be almost entirely overlooked. These considerations further reinforce the legitimacy of addressing the ethical aspects of managing neurodivergent employees in empirical research.

3. Methodological Assumptions of the Planned Empirical Research

Based on the analysis of the relevant literature, an exploratory gap was identified that necessitates the conduct of empirical research. This gap concerns managerial perceptions of the ethicality of neurodivergent employees' conduct, as well as the ethicality of their treatment in the workplace. The planned study will therefore not evaluate the employer's ethical behavior but rather the perception of employee ethicality as seen through the eyes of organizational managers.

Given the preliminary stage of research on the ethics of neurodivergent individuals, as well as the scarcity of studies in management and quality sciences that address the concept of neurodiversity, it was deemed necessary to situate the research questions within the well-documented domain of diversity management. Diversity management is understood as a process of “continuously discovering people and their contributions, as well as the value they can bring to the organization and society” (Gross-Golacka, 2018, p. 10). This assumption is based on the premise that managers - who are presumed to have greater awareness of other dimensions of employee diversity such as age, origin, or culture - will find it easier to situate issues of neurodivergent employees’ ethicality in this broader context. Furthermore, it was considered important to determine which dimensions of workforce diversity managers encounter in practice and on what basis they infer employee neurodivergence (formal diagnosis, observation of employee behavior). In this regard, managers whose teams do not include neurodivergent employees will also be invited to participate in the study. For these respondents, the questionnaire will include a brief description of neurodivergent conditions. Their perspectives may also prove valuable, offering insights into the state of awareness, prevailing beliefs, and perceptions of neurodivergent employees’ ethicality.

Taking these premises into account, the following research questions were formulated:

1. In the opinion of organizational managers, does employee ethical conduct in professional and personal life depend on dimensions of diversity?

This question refers to whether managers perceive differences in ethicality depending on dimensions of diversity such as age, gender, origin, race, religion, culture, gender/sexual identity, and neurodivergence (autism spectrum, ADHD, learning difficulties, dyspraxia, Tourette’s syndrome, etc.).

Having contextualized neurological differences alongside other dimensions of workforce diversity, a key step in understanding managerial perceptions of neurodivergent employees’ ethicality is to verify whether, in their opinion, particular conditions influence the development of ethical competencies, and if so, how.

2. Do managers perceive neurological difference as influencing the development of employees’ ethical competencies? If so, which differences (autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Tourette’s syndrome, etc.) and in what way?

The literature identifies the support of human dignity and the development of all individuals as a fundamental ethical principle in the treatment of neurodivergent persons. Dignity is described as “the value of values” and is considered central, inalienable, inherent, and permanently attributed to every human being (Mazurek, 1995, p. 754). The unconditional respect for dignity should underlie the motivation to employ neurodivergent individuals; without it, the business case for diversity is insufficient. In this context, a lack of workplace integration violates the principle of fair treatment (Praslova, 2021). Moreover, direct accounts of autistic individuals emphasize their declared empathic respect toward others - often grounded

in experiences of being outsiders - and their orientation toward equal treatment: *there is an autistic tendency to value all people equally* (McCowan et al., p. 372). Drawing on these insights, two further research questions were formulated:

3. In the managers' opinions, does an employee's neurological difference influence their respect for the diversity of coworkers? If so, which conditions (autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome, etc.) and in what way?
4. Do managers perceive that an employee's neurological difference requires a different managerial approach compared to other employees? Does this raise an ethical dilemma related to ensuring equal (fair) treatment of all employees?

According to insights from the literature, responsibility occupies a central place in the moral experience of every human being and is, in a sense, equated with humanity itself (Galarowicz, 1993, as cited in Furmanek, 2013). Responsibility is seen as evidence of maturity, involving the understanding of the consequences of one's actions, bearing their outcomes, fulfilling duties to the best of one's ability, and acting with courage but above all prudence (Tischner, as cited in Furmanek, 2013). It may therefore be considered crucial for the proper performance of professional responsibilities. At the same time, as other scholars note, theories of moral responsibility do not sufficiently explain why autistic individuals, unlike neurotypical persons, are sometimes exempted from responsibility for actions that transgress social or legal boundaries (Stout, 2016). In seeking explanations, researchers have pointed out that autism is often framed as a deficit in cognitive and emotional functions, which are central to theories of moral responsibility (Hens et al., 2019), and that the theories themselves may be flawed (Richman, Bidshahri, 2018). In light of these considerations, the following research question was posed:

5. According to managers, does an employee's neurological difference affect their sense of responsibility? If so, which conditions (autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome, etc.) and in what way?

Direct insight into the perspectives of autistic individuals reveals their particular openness, honesty, strict adherence to rules, and pursuit of social justice, all of which are recognized as expressions of integrity: *Such actions are grounded in our prevailing sense of honesty and fairness* (McCowan et al., p. 372). This dimension is captured in the following research question:

6. In managers' views, does an employee's neurological difference influence their honesty? If so, which conditions (autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome, etc.) and in what way?

The ethical values embedded in these research questions - dignity, responsibility, and honesty - simultaneously represent criteria of ethical competencies recognized as vital in the context of the challenges of the contemporary economy (Raś et al., 2024).

Perceptions of neurodivergent employees' ethicality, however, do not exhaust the broader issue of the ethical dimensions of managing such employees in the workplace. The literature has drawn attention to the unethical treatment of atypical individuals in both historical and contemporary contexts, where norms established by and for non-autistic communities have led to the stigmatization and exclusion of neurodivergent persons as consumers, advocates, and citizens, thereby depriving them of human rights (Dawson). Against this backdrop, it is equally crucial to determine how managers perceive the ethics of treating neurodivergent employees by their colleagues. The corresponding research question is as follows:

7. According to managers, what constitutes the ethics of how neurologically different employees (autism spectrum, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome, etc.) are treated by other employees within the organization?

These questions do not exhaust the full scope of ethical issues in managing neurodivergent employees but, as intended by the Author, serve as a point of departure for further inquiry and analysis in this area.

4. Conclusion

Early literature on autism and neurodivergence, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, was dominated by deficit-oriented frameworks, often emphasizing presumed limitations in empathy, responsibility, and social functioning. These perspectives contributed to the stigmatization of autistic individuals and reinforced managerial practices that pathologized difference. Over time, however, scholarship has shifted toward recognition of neurodiversity as a dimension of human variation, informed by autobiographical accounts, critical disability studies, and organizational diversity research. Contemporary studies highlight the ethical dimensions of inclusion, focusing on dignity, agency, and fairness in the treatment of neurodivergent employees. Yet, despite the growing visibility of neurodiversity in psychology, medicine, and the social sciences, research within management and quality sciences remains scarce. This gap underscores the need for systematic inquiry into managerial perceptions of the ethicality of neurodivergent employees and the ethical frameworks that shape organizational practices in increasingly diverse workplaces.

The originality of this study lies in linking two highly topical yet insufficiently explored themes within the field of management and quality sciences: neurodiversity and the ethics of employee conduct. The joint treatment of these issues has been pursued through a Scoping Review of the literature and the formulation of research questions addressing managerial perceptions of the ethicality of neurodivergent employees and their treatment within organizations. The Author's contribution thus consists in systematizing the existing findings

from various disciplines on the ethical aspects of neurodivergence and situating them within the perspective of organizational management.

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