

# Autism and Whistleblowing: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a heterogenous condition broadly characterised by social-communicative deficits and restricted and repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; White, 2016). Autistic individuals also generally exhibit unusual processing of sensory information (Sibeoni et al., 2022). Researchers and clinicians typically regard ASD as a developmental condition because its symptoms tend to appear within the first two years of life, although it persists throughout the lifespan and there are therefore also many adults with ASD (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Many autistic adults experience difficulty in finding employment, due to their social-communicative deficits and atypical sensory processing (Bury et al., 2020; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020) as well as co-occurring mental health conditions and societal discrimination against autistic people (Bryan et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2019; Solomon, 2020). The Office for National Statistics (2021) found that the employment rate for autistic adults in the UK is only 21.7%, compared to 81.3% in the general population and 52.1% in the disabled population. Even when autistic people find employment, they often find workplaces to be more stressful and difficult environments than their neurotypical counterparts and may require additional support to continue working (Brooke et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2023). Indeed, maintaining employment can be difficult for autistic adults; Taylor and DaWalt (2017) analysed longitudinal data for 36 families of autistic young adults, finding that half of the young adults had experienced disruptions in their employment or vocational progression.

A common disruption was employer-initiated terminations. Additionally, even when autistic adults can both find and maintain employment, they may be employed in positions which do not match their skills or qualifications (Davies et al., 2024).

Despite autistic adults continuing to face challenges in finding and maintaining employment, there has been increasingly positive attention towards autistic people as potential employees – at least rhetorically. Researchers, the popular press and employers alike have argued that autistic people have unique strengths which could make them particularly talented and diligent employees (Scott et al., 2017; Whelpley et al., 2021).

## **Autistic employees as Whistleblowers**

Lewis and Evans (2021) argue that organisations which seek to identify and correct misconduct could benefit from hiring autistic employees, as a rigid sense of morality and possible indifference to, or unawareness of, social consequences in autistic people could lead to them being potential whistleblowers. Whistleblowers are organization members (former or current) who report illegal or immoral actions under their employers' jurisdiction to an internal or external authority capable of taking action against it (Near and Miceli, 1985). In theory, this could lead to long-term benefits for companies and organisations, including prevention of reputational harm or loss of profits (Transparency International, 2017). However, there has been little research investigating the likelihood of autistic people whistleblowing, compared to neurotypical employees. This article will assess the currently available evidence, make inferences based on autistic individuals' moral reasoning in other contexts, and consider directions for future research, along with a consideration of the ethical and societal implications arising out of the topic.

# The Currently Available Evidence

At the time Lewis and Evans wrote their initial commentary on autistic employers as whistleblowers, there had not yet been any research directly investigating the issue. However, Lewis and Evans proposed that the strong sense of right and wrong which characterises autism, difficulty in reading social cues, and disregard for social consequences, could potentially lead to autistic people being potentially valuable whistleblowers. However, it is important to remember that autistic traits can influence behaviour in variable and sometimes contradictory ways, both between different people and even for the same autistic person at different times (Wozniak et al., 2017).

While autistic people may have difficulty reading social cues suggesting that reprisals could occur, as Lewis and Evans suggest, it is equally possible that for other autistic people, their desire to fit in could lead to them engaging in a mental process known as compensation. Compensation refers to both conscious and unconscious strategies used by neurodivergent individuals to behave in an overtly 'neurotypical' manner (Livingston et al., 2021), despite underlying neurocognitive differences persisting between themselves and neurotypical individuals (Cook et al., 2021). Autistic adults often state that their reason for compensating is to socially fit in with their neurotypical peers (Livingston et al., 2019). The process of compensation often involves suppressing behaviours which would be seen as undermining this goal of socially conforming to neurotypical standards, and consciously learning neurotypical 'rules' of behaviour (Livingston & Happé, 2017). An autistic person may observe the fact that some companies impose disciplinary measures on employees for whistleblowing (Katz et al., 2012), and the fact that whistleblowing can be met with bullying and social ostracism by coworkers (Bjørkelo, 2013). Specifically, Park et al. (2020) not only found that whistleblowers were not only over twice as likely to have experienced workplace bullying than other employees, but also that they found this type of bullying more distressing than other types of workplace bullying unrelated to whistleblowing. Against this social backdrop of hostility towards whistleblowers, some autistic employees could find that their inclination to report wrongdoing is 'overridden' by their desire to avoid exacerbating the existing social barriers they can face as autistic people.

However, since Lewis and Evans' paper, Hartman et al. (2023) have published a paper concerning the organisational advantages of neurodiversity, appearing to at least somewhat support their suggestion that autistic people could be particularly inclined towards whistleblowing. Hartman et al. (2023) investigated whether autistic individuals could be less susceptible to the bystander effect and hence facilitating empirical and direct investigation of the question. To investigate whether autistic employees were more likely to report inefficient or dysfunctional aspects of an organization's systems and practices, they administered an online survey to 33 autistic and 34 nonautistic employees. The survey comprised demographic questions, the Autism Quotient, the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (Hull et al , 2019) and the Moral Disengagement Survey (Detert et al., 2008). The intervention likelihood, degree of influence, and the influence of others were measured using the Organizational Scenarios Survey. This survey seeks to assess how people would respond to potentially problematic workplace practices or actions, specifically investigating their moral reasoning. The study findings indicated reduced susceptibility to the bystander effect in autistic employees.

However, the sample Hartman et al. (2023) recruited may lack applicability to the general behaviour of autistic employees surrounding whistleblowing. There were 23 females in the autistic sample, compared to 10 males; most of the autistic sample were female. Other studies suggest females generally have a greater likelihood of intervening in both emergency and non-emergency situations than males (Amar et al., 2014; Cox & Adam, 2018). Hence, the greater resistance to the bystander effect in the autistic sample could have reflected differences in the gender composition of each sample; the non-autistic sample had a comparatively even gender distribution of 18 males and 16 females.

Furthermore, there are some limitations to the applicability of Hartman et al.'s study to the question of whether autistic people are more likely to be whistleblowers. The bystander effect describes the phenomenon by which the likelihood of intervening decreases with increasing group size (Latane & Darley, 1968). Although the findings do suggest that autistic people may be less easily influenced by external social influences upon behaviour, the study design cannot account for other reasons why an autistic employee may choose not to engage in whistleblowing. For example, the definition of whistleblowing specifies that it involves reporting concerns to a person or organization who can change the situation, but some autistic employees may not report concerns as they do not feel that they will be addressed, even if they do not necessarily experience social influence as a function of group size in the same manner as neurotypical people.

## **Directions for Future Research**

Lewis and Evans (2021) suggest addressing questions surrounding autism and whistleblowing using case studies of two cohorts: a group of whistleblowers possessing the key characteristics of Autism, and the other comprising whistleblowers without these traits. This could be a useful direction for future research. Distinguishing between these groups using the presence or absence of a clinical autism diagnosis could be a useful and coherent way of addressing one of the questions proposed by Lewis and Evans. Their third proposed question asks, "What additional needs might a whistleblower with autism spectrum condition have compared to a whistleblower without this condition in order to be effective at raising concerns and how can this inform reporting arrangements?". Highlighting the different experiences of autistic and nonautistic whistleblowers by using clinical diagnosis as a criterion to distinguish between different groups could be beneficial and informative, insofar as diagnosis can come with significant stigma and hence the experiences of repercussions by each group could be different.

Conversely, the proposed study design comprising two discrete groups may be less useful when seeking to answer some of the other questions which Lewis and Evans propose. Their second question asks, “If there are common characteristics demonstrated by whistleblowers that differ to the population in general, how do these correlate with common characteristic traits to be found in people with autism spectrum condition?”. Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that, although some individuals have autism diagnoses and others do not, autistic traits can be found continuously distributed among the general population (Abu-Akel et al., 2019). Accordingly, studying autistic traits and their relation to particular behaviours using a trait-wise approach affords various advantages (Taylor et al., 2021). Firstly, it can be difficult to conduct large and well-powered studies when seeking to specifically recruit participants with clinical diagnoses of autism, due to a relative scarcity of participants (Taylor et al., 2021). Secondly, measuring autistic traits in a general sample of participants rather than splitting them into discrete autistic and non-autistic groups is an inclusive approach, as it allows for consideration of those with autistic traits who cannot access diagnostic services, as well as those who may have autistic traits but fall below the diagnostic threshold (Livingston & Happé, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021). The latter group could be an especially important demographic to include and consider when researching whistleblowing in the workplace – these individuals may fall below the threshold because they deliberately limit their observable autistic traits (Livingston & Happé, 2017). Neurodivergent employees frequently report engaging in such strategies to limit overt autistic traits, to fit in in the workplace through the appearance of ‘neurotypical’ behaviour (Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023), and so individuals with relatively high levels of autistic traits, but who fall below the diagnostic threshold, are especially relevant to a study primarily investigating whistleblowing behaviour, which usually occurs within workplace contexts. Indeed, these individuals may be more likely to find employment than individuals with formal clinical autism diagnoses, due to the aforementioned reason of societal discrimination against autistic people.

Accordingly, it would be beneficial for future research into autism and whistleblowing to tailor the study design to each question being asked. A design using discrete autistic and non-autistic groups could be useful for investigating the distinct experiences of autistic whistleblowers in relation to neurotypical whistleblowers through the lens of societal ableism and discrimination. However, when investigating whether there is a correlation between the general characteristics of whistleblowers and common autistic traits, it could be beneficial to administer a continuous measure such as the 10-item Autism-Spectrum Quotient (Allison et al., 2012), to a general sample of whistleblowers through avenues such as the Protect Advice Helpline for whistleblowers.

Finally, although the scarcity of evidence means that it is not currently possible to do so, a long-term goal for research into autism and whistleblowing should be to conduct meta-analyses comprising multiple prior studies investigating, or containing data relevant to, the question of whether autistic employees are more likely to be whistleblowers. Meta-analyses can convert the findings of numerous studies to a common metric (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001), therefore more accurately estimating the size and direction of an effect than any single study (Lakens, 2013). Thus, a meta-analysis could provide particularly strong support for the assertion either that autistic employees are or are not more likely to be whistleblowers, and would arguably be necessary to form a strong research base concerning this question.

## **Ethical Implications and Conclusion**

Although some employers may view the possible imperviousness of autistic employees to external social influences as a valuable trait, it is possible that other employers may regard these traits as a liability - Whistleblowers have often been met with harsh repercussions from employers. Being autistic and hence contending with societal ableism could further exacerbate these consequences; Kenyon (2018) points out that the social and professional repercussions of whistleblowing are likely to vary in severity depending upon the whistleblower's existing status in society and the workplace. Ameri et al. (2018) conducted a field experiment where it was found that applications disclosing ASD received 26% fewer expressions of employer interest than otherwise identical applications containing no disclosure.

The findings of Ameri et al.'s study suggest that autistic employees would find it more difficult to be re-employed if they were fired for whistleblowing. This suggests that the already potentially negative consequences of whistleblowing would be particularly exacerbated for autistic whistleblowers; the fact that the applications were otherwise identical demonstrates that the applications disclosing ASD were rejected because of negative societal stereotyping about autistic individuals rather than genuine differences in ability or qualifications.

Furthermore, decision-makers tend to rely more heavily on stereotypes when facing uncertain or potentially threatening conditions (Stainback, 2015). Kenyon draws upon this tendency to argue that bias is especially relevant in the threatening and complex situation of whistleblowing. Indeed, whistleblowing presents many potential risks to those higher up within a company, such as sizeable financial losses when the wrongdoing is exposed (Katz et al., 2012). Hence, it is possible that the particularly harmful consequences to a company potentially caused by whistleblowers could heighten the stress of higher level leaders in management, causing them to fall back upon judgements of autistic employees rooted in stereotypes.

Moving forward, research investigating whistleblowing in autism must consider the suitability of study designs for answering research questions concerning the experiences of autistic employees and their likelihood of whistleblowing. Representative samples should be recruited to the extent that this is realistically possible, and measures used should accurately reflect the intended constructs. Additionally, ethical considerations should be factored into any research, as researchers should be concerned not only with the accuracy of their findings, but also their potential implications. Although highlighting a potential inclination towards whistleblowing among autistic employees could cause them to be regarded more favourably by employers with an interest in transparency and accountability, it is evident from the measures taken by many employers to cover up the potentially incriminating findings of whistleblowers that not all companies hold these values (Katz et al., 2012). Hence, researchers must consider how their work could be used to lend support to a narrative of autism employees as more outspoken, potentially further harming their employment prospects at a time when societal ableism and employment discrimination are already rife.



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