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## Research Article

### The Lived Experiences of Employed Middle-Aged Adults Having Autism Spectrum in Batangas Province

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#### ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of the working middle-aged autistic persons, who live in the province of Batangas, Philippines. A qualitative research design was implemented, targeting five respondents aged 35-60 years old, formally diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and have 6 months working experience and basic literacy. Purposive and snowball sampling was used. From the data gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, five main themes were developed. These include: (1) Navigating the work place, (2) Social connections and support, (3) Navigating Emotional Terrain in the Workplace, (4) Resilience Drivers in the Workplace, and (5) Growth and self-development. The themes reflected the challenges of participants in their ability to adapt to organizational routines, build interpersonal relationships, and self-regulate emotions as well as the interactions of personal strengths and external support systems that promoted resilience and development. Repeatedly, participants emphasized the importance of support from family members, co-worker and supervisory personnel when dealing with day-to-day problems. Notwithstanding recurring adversities, the participants demonstrated a great sense of pride, belonging and a constant drive to self-development. This study underlined a need for more inclusive and flexible workplaces that were aware of the needs of people with ASD. Creating supportive environments can help neurodiverse employees thrive and reach their full potential.

**Keywords:** *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Coping Strategies, Middle-Aged Adults, Neurodiversity, Social Support, Workplace Inclusion*

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## Background

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a condition that affects the brain development and ability to interact and socialize with others. Oftentimes, people with autism spectrum disorder have to cover up their symptoms or deficiencies to make it easier for the other people to interact with them. However, most of the time, people with ASD admit that there are difficulties and challenges in hiding and adjusting to the societal standards and sometimes feel exhausted and isolated due to being the only ones who have to change.

It is common for people with autism spectrum disorder to experience unique and complex challenges in their daily life, particularly in the workplace. Many experiences sensory sensitivities, struggles with social communication and the pressure to conform with neurotypical social norms resulting in feeling isolated, anxious and exhausted (Hull et al., 2017; Robertson, 2010).

Due to the difficulties most employers have in employing people with autism spectrum disorder, many have chosen not to hire them anymore or give them the option to work from home to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed or overstimulated and also reduce the turnover rate among their employees. A research conducted by Fong et al. (2021) demonstrated that many employers made the decision to introduce interventions that could help their employed middle-aged adults with ASD to adjust and perform well in their workplace without experiencing any challenges or discomfort. They elaborated that most companies offered training for their employees to understand autism spectrum disorder better which helped them interact and collaborate with them in a better way at work. In addition, many employers will offer some incentive such as therapy benefits, paid leaves, and options to work from home whenever feeling overwhelmed. Interventions that focus on improving treatment towards employees with ASD at their workplace encourage them towards their dream career.

Despite the struggles in socializing and performing their job, most individuals who have autism spectrum disorders choose to work in an office setting as a result of not

wanting to limit and confine themselves to stereotypes. Cooper and Mujtaba (2022) explained through their findings that despite the discrimination in the workplace, many employees with ASD report much better workplace experience than earlier due to how their companies introduced mental health interventions and training in their employees.

To offer a broad basis, the Philippine laws on persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the research studies related to the topic are reviewed. In the Philippines, the employment rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs), including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are protected under different laws. The Republic Act No. 7277 or the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons guarantees the equal rights of PWDs in the workplace, banning discrimination and requiring reasonable accommodation (National Council on Disability Affairs [NCDA], 1992). This was later reinforced by Republic Act No. 10524 which amended RA 7277 by increasing the positions reserved for PWDs. This law mandates government agencies to reserve at least 1% of their positions for PWDs and encourages private corporations with 100 more employees to do the same (LawPhil, 2013).

In the Philippines, even though several companies are unfamiliar with mental health conditions and policies yet current employers and management still make an effort to become inclusive. According to Seva et al. (2022), despite the fact that the Philippine population is estimated to have only 1.23% of those experiencing a disability in 2010, with 58.3% of persons with disabilities (PWDs) working in Metro Manila as of 2008, the efforts are undergoing to establish the ideal workplace environment and treatment for employees with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They elaborate that Filipino employers are trying to be more inclusive as they adapt to modern and open-minded corporate trends, perceive the possibility for employees with ASD to perform better and feel safe in their workplaces.

Despite these legal frameworks, there are still challenges experienced by people with ASD in the workplace. Gan et al., (2018) reported negative attitudes to be a significant factor affecting the opportunities for employment to

people with autism. Furthermore, a survey about the vocational experiences of adults with ASD highlighted key barriers to employment such as the absence of workplace accommodations and the lack of support services (ResearchGate, 2018).

The study was carried out in Batangas in the Philippines. According to the 2023 census, the population of the province Batangas is 2,894,016 citizens who live in Batangas has a total of 4812 citizens with psychosocial/mental disability.

This study was particularly relevant in Batangas Province as although there has been a large amount of qualitative research on the topic of autism and work, and particularly an emphasis on the areas of employment rates and job satisfaction, there was still a great deal to learn about the real-life experiences of employed people with autism. This study was focused on the lived experiences of the employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum disorder in selected workplaces in Batangas Province. The study set out to understand the challenges and strengths that these individuals face in their workplaces, what coping strategies and support systems they are using, and insights that can be gained towards inclusive workplace practices and policies. By highlighting the experiences of individuals with autism in society, this study may stimulate greater community engagement and cooperation between businesses, educational institutions, and government organizations for a more inclusive society that appreciates and supports the contributions of individuals with autism in the workforce.

This research examined the life worlds of the employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum disorder in selected workplaces in Batangas Province.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum?
2. What themes and sub-themes can be generated from the experiences of employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum?
3. Based on the results of the study, what program may be developed to support

employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum in the workplace?

## Methods

The research design adopted in the current study was qualitative, considered appropriate for the study of investigating and understanding the experiences of the participants through their point of view, experiences, and beliefs. Qualitative research allowed the researcher to dig deeply into the real-world problems by using the ideas, perceptions, opinions, and experiences of the people who belong to the group being investigated by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was consistent with the aim of this study, which was to conduct an examination of ways employees diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) cope with challenges in the workplace. The researchers likely used open-ended questions so they could allow participants to elaborately articulate their responses, possibly leading to a deeper understanding of their individual experiences.

Furthermore, this study proposed a program designed to alleviate some of the challenges faced by individuals with ASD who engage in employment. Such a program could offer specific interventions, foster a culture of accommodation within workplace environments, and establish support systems to facilitate the development of inclusive and supportive workplace environments. The input from the participants was invaluable in shaping the interventions and programs that were being initiated within workplace settings to support the success and mental health of employees with ASD. For this study, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized as it offered the most insight into the lived experiences and the different meanings that people ascribe to those experiences (Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. 2009). To achieve a high level of order and completeness in the data collection process, Roberts (2020) advocated for the use of an interview guide to facilitate the logical progression of the interview process and to enable participants to provide thorough and

substantial responses to the interview questions.

### **Participants of the Study**

The research participants consisted of individuals on the autism spectrum and currently employed. The research was conducted by five (5) middle-aged employed adults with ASD. Specifically, Smith et al. (2009) suggested that a sample size of 3 to 6 participants was usually sufficient for qualitative studies aimed at understanding lived experiences of the participants.

The inclusion criteria for the study were (a) the employees were clinically diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder; (b) were employed middle-aged adults, with ages between 35-65 years old, in private or public sectors; (c) were employed for at least 6 months during the data-gathering period; (d) had basic literacy abilities, i.e., could read and write; and (e) were currently employed in Batangas Province.

Studying the lived experiences of employed middle-aged adults with autism spectrum disorder, they were able to give informed consent to participate in research studies. This ensured that the study was conducted ethically, with respect for the autonomy and rights of the participants. As per Barrett and Lee (2018), middle-aged adults were persons between the ages of 35 to 60 years, which is the early adulthood to older age transition. This was a time of diverse life transitions such as career advancement, family obligations, physical changes (Barrett & Lee, 2018).

Proof of diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by a licensed professional, based on the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-5-TR was required in order to participate in the study. Only people who are classified under Level 1 ASD were eligible. Level 1 ASD was described as those who need support but are relatively independent functioning especially when it comes to communication and adaptive skills without requiring much support or supervision (APA, 2022). This criterion was selected to target the research into literate, well-employed adults of middle age, who are able to participate in meaningful interview and reflect on their experiences in the workplace. Individuals with Level 1 ASD usually had the

cognitive and verbal skills to describe their lived experiences and interact with professional environments with minimal support, so their perspectives can be of particular importance in terms of understanding workplace adjustment, coping mechanisms, and personal growth. Eligible participants were invited to take part voluntarily, and can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

### **Sampling Technique**

The study employed a purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that the respondents experience and characteristics met the purpose and goal of the study.

According to Nikolopoulou (2023), purpose sampling is a form of non-probability sampling method mainly where the researchers would select the respondents depending on their criteria. The criteria would include the certain characteristics, experiences, and anything that would make the respondent a good data source for the study.

Following to Hassan (2024), snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which current subjects recruit future subjects from their circle. This method is especially helpful in studies where it is difficult to reach a population, such as when the study is based on marginalized populations or people with specific characteristics. This study would use referral-based snowball sampling that would rely on the participants to refer other individuals who are meeting the criteria for a study. The method embraces the networks of people who have common traits and therefore facilitate recruitment within populations that have been difficult to reach. This approach, while effective, may introduce bias, as participants are more likely to refer others with similar characteristics, resulting in a homogeneous sample (Baltar & Brunet, 2018). However, it is important to point out that, despite the limitations, referral-based snowball sampling has been used in a wide range of research involving marginalized communities and has paved the way to uncover the realities of these individual and collective experiences.

The snowball sampling method combined with purposive sampling made it possible to capture the voices of a sample of workers diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders

(ASD), whose experiential knowledge was likely to be more pertinent and valuable in exploring occupational experiences.

## Result and Discussion

Table 1. Presentation of superordinate theme 1

No.	Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1	Navigating the Workplace Environment	Adjusting to Work Demands Workplace Reactions and Challenges Supervision and Task Roles

### Superordinate Theme 1. Navigating the Workplace Environment

The negotiation of employed middle aged critically disabled adults with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the workplace is a deeply personal, continual journey of the individual guided by internal influences and external demands. The participants in this study shared that their experiences at work involved daily adjustments, pressure to conform to certain expectations, and increased emotional burden that led to work in environments that did not consider neurodiverse needs. While we found that participants wanted very much to contribute in a meaningful and positive way, they were able to convey the feeling that they were stressed and fatigued as their autonomy was impeded or when their routines were disrupted. Despite these challenges, some issues were resolved with the aid of strategies like time management, task organization, and self-motivation. However, these strategies often resulted in an emotional toll through the need for continual self-control. Their experience is showing that in addition to resilience and adaptability, people with ASD require more immediate, inclusive, and flexible approaches in the working environment that recognize and accommodate their individual needs. This overarching theme is spanned by three subordinate themes adjusting to work demands, workplace reactions and challenges, and supervision and task roles.

#### Subordinate Theme 1.1. Adjusting to Work Demands

Participants described management of ordinary work duties as one of the great challenges, in particular the unpredictability of

the assignments, and the changing expectations as part of their job. This unpredictability was especially challenging to those people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who tend to thrive in environments with routine and structure. Participants said that they get overwhelmed when work responsibilities change or when there is no clear instructions will cause them to be anxious and stress more (Hedley et al., 2018).

Participants described their efforts to cope with different workplace environments. Their narratives revealed that tasks frequently presented challenges that were hard to anticipate, having to be flexible and learn on the job. For example, Archer (P1), one of the participants, shared experiences of adapting to client interactions and Samuel (P5) emphasised the ever-shifting demands in the tasks:

*“Challenging... for someone like me. I do office jobs like... entertaining clients to lead them to my co-worker of what they needs.” (P1) [1-2]*

[“It’s challenging for someone like me. I do office jobs, like entertaining clients to connect them with my coworker who knows what they need.”]

Archer's description of his experience carries the challenge of dealing with socially interactive tasks, which often require both adaptability and communication in real time. To the individual with ASD, these tasks can include sensory and social overload. The research supports the fact that structured expectations and decreased ambiguity is vital in supporting task performance for autistic individuals (Scott et al., 2019; Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008).

Samuel (P5) has emphasized the ever-fluctuating demands allied to tasks:

*"For me, everyday ay challenge. Like, s'yempre mahirap kasi may pabago-bago yung sa mga nararanasan sa workplace." (P5) [526-527]*

["For me, every day is a challenge. Of course, it's hard because the experiences in the workplace are constantly changing."]

Such experiences do indicate that adaptation is a continual process especially if occupational tasks are dynamic.

Beyond the simple level of coping mechanism, a few participants showed a mature and growth-oriented perspective on workplace learning. For example, Clarence was open to challenges and oriented toward deriving lessons from mistakes:

*"I'm willing to ano... I want to take these challenges and I'm willing to open the... whatever the mistakes we will do... we will do it right." (P2) [88-89]*

["I'm willing to... I want to take on these challenges, and I'm willing to face whatever mistakes we make and then correct them."]

Clarence's openness to learning through mistakes is an instance of adaptive coping, in conformity with internal resiliency. Emotional flexibility and problem-solving strategies may be one of the contributing factors to success at work when fostered (Hirvikoski & Blomqvist, 2015).

On the other hand, Roland spoke about how some rules in the workplace including restrictions on movement and communication restricted his sense of freedom and made it harder to function independently:

*"Tahimik talaga as in hindi ka... limitado ang galawan... kung бага nakalimita ng galawan tapos kung ano ano pa... kasi minsan bawal kaming mag communicate via... bawal kaming selpon actually pag ganyan." (P3) [217-219]*

["It's really quiet, as in you're... your movements are limited... restricted, and so on... because sometimes we're not allowed to communicate via... cellphones are actually prohibited in those situations."]

Restrictions in movement and communication may unwittingly increase the anxiety level and further limit the opportunities for emotional self-regulation,

the capabilities essential to some employees with autism spectrum disorder in order to function successfully.

Despite these obstacles, participants showcased enthusiasm, initiative, and strategic thinking in the area of task management. The participants' ability to plan work and allocate time effectively was particularly noteworthy. For instance, Clarence (P2) laid emphasis on,

*"Time management is the key. So... in everyday task, we have... we have a timeline as ahh... an employee." (P2) [94-95]*

["Time management is the key. So... for everyday tasks, we have... we have a timeline as an employee."]

Similarly, Samuel (P5), explained:

*"For me sa... time management po talaga sa... sa work po. Pagka, nakita ko pong mahirap-hirap, pinag-aaralan ko po kung paano po mapapadali ang trabaho." (P5) [539-541]*

["For me, it's really about time management at work. When I see something difficult, I study how to make the job easier."]

He further elaborated how he made adjustments in his work:

*"Pinag-aaralan ko muna kung paanong ilalagay siya nang maayos. Yung mga parts, yung mga gulong. Pag na-ano ko na po yung gagawin, do'n ko pa lang ia-ayos." (P5) [542-544]*

["I am studying first how to put it properly. The parts, the wheels. When I have figured out what to do, only then will I arrange it."]

These results indicate that adaptive ability depends on both task requirements and individual's mind set, personal coping strategies, and overall environmental context.

Scott et al. (2019) explored the coping strategies used by autistic adults to cope with challenges in the workplace. The study highlighted the strong link between self-advocacy, disclosure of the status of autism, receiving appropriate accommodations and then being able to adapt to work demands and maintain employment. Additionally, Nicolaidis et al. (2019) are advocates for neurodiversity affirming practices for workplaces to embrace and build on the strength of autistic employees. Such an approach promotes an inclusive organizational culture where adaptation to job requirements is achieved through a mutual

process of employee and employer employees since job satisfaction and the retention of employees are enhanced.

### **Subordinate Theme 1.2. Workplace Reactions and Challenges**

The emotional work that goes into helping middle-aged adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through the workplace challenge is an example of inner resilience that is often unrecognized. Participants said that stress, anxiety and fatigue are not fleeting, in-the-moment experiences, but are more often persistent occurrences that arise in the pressure and stress of deadlines, the fear of losing one's job and the pressure to perform in work spaces that are rarely optimized with neurodiverse people in mind. In spite of these difficulties, many people still sought professionalism and sought to restrict their own personal problems, all the same, often had to follow some conventions at work. The ability to manage emotional responses in situations involving high levels of stress is more than a genetic response developed to deal with challenges. It is a sign of developed emotional maturity and a form of adjusting/strategic resiliency after going through challenges multiple times. That said, their silence and calmness should not be misinterpreted to mean that it is easy. Rather, they highlight the often-silent pressure of being able to function in environments that are often emotionally unsafe (Hensel, 2017).

Several participants shared the emotional burden that they carry around with them as they navigate professional settings. Archer (P1) shared:

*"Well, to be quite honest with you, I feel full of anxiety." (P1) [19]*

["Well, to be quite honest with you, I feel very anxious."]

Highlighting the constant mental strain, he experiences even before engaging in work tasks. Similarly, Ernie (P4) noted:

*"Yung social anxiety... anxiety to crowd." (P4) [380]*

["My social anxiety... to crowd."]

Showing that it is simply existing in the socially dense environments that triggers the increased emotional discomfort. This is

relevant to the fact that social density and sensory overload are often the reasons that autistic people feel uncomfortable. These experiences are consistent with findings that social pressure and overstimulation are a significant contribution to mental fatigue and a reduction of coping resources (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2018).

This underlying anxiety is compounded with task related pressures. As Roland described, stating that tight timelines trigger physical and emotional stress:

*"Palagay na natin deadline... kasi sa totoo lang 'di ako sanay kasi sa deadline kaya ako hina-highblood dahil sa totoo lang at saka sa pressure sa totoo lang." (P3) [252-254]*

["Let's say deadlines... because, honestly, I'm not used to deadlines, which is why I get high blood pressure because of the pressure."]

He further elaborated on the subject in showing the intersection between exhaustion from occupations and apprehension on an individual level like fiscal instability.

*"Kung minsan napapagod kana din... napapagod ka depende sa ginagawa mo... and then also, aside sa yun na nga... kahit pagod... meron ka pang iniintindi... may iniintindi ka pang sweldo na hindi mo alam saan mo gagamitin." (P3) [248-250]*

["Sometimes you get tired, depending on what you're doing, and aside from that, even when you're tired, you still have to worry about your salary, which you don't know how to spend."]

This highlights the severity of combining both emotional burnout and financial insecurity that can cause autistic in the work place to have impaired concentration and jeopardize their long-term job security (Baldwin et al., 2014).

Customer-facing jobs were causing even more stress, especially since they required subjects to explain complex issues with clarity and composure while under pressure. Samuel shared and emphasised the mental strain, having to explain technical problems to clients in a calm and professional manner:

*"S'yempre po pagka... may mga trouble po na matindi, yung... kunware, kailangan maipaliwanag ko ng isa-isa 'yan sa customer. Bakit po nagkaroon ng problema yung isang*

unit, kunware nasira po yung makina niya. Yun po, ipapaliwanag ko ng isa isa yun." (P5) [592-595]

["Of course, if there are big problems, for example, I need to explain everything to the customer one by one. Why there was a problem with the unit, for example, the engine broke down. I will explain all of that one by one.]

In addition to performance pressure, job security was a persistent source of emotional stress. Archer candidly admitted:

*"Well, to be quite honest with you, currently my challenge is to maintain order... the problem is to me that I probably I'm going to lose my job."* (P1) [20-21]

["Well, to be quite honest with you, currently my challenge is to maintain order. The problem is that I'm probably going to lose my job."]

*"Honest truth with you, I can't afford lose this job... that's the truth."* (P1) [23-24]

["The honest truth is, I can't afford to lose this job... that's the truth."]

Research illustrates employers ignorance on supportive work environments and the impact it has on the occupational hazards faced by autistic workers (Chen et al., 2015).

Participants from the study encountered many challenges, but each one attempted to regulate their emotions and perform their job functions. Ernie was the most candid:

*"I keep on working... doing my task even I already feel something like boredom. I have boredom. I have loneliness. I feel no one likes me... no one talking to me but I... I ignore those... scenarios... I ignore those thoughts because in a workplace kasi workplace naman yon so that's not the time to be emotional and I keep on working even in the middle of anxiety"* (P4) [391-395]

["I keep working, doing my tasks, even when I already feel bored. I feel boredom and loneliness. I feel like no one likes me, no one's talking to me, but I ignore those scenarios and thoughts because it's a workplace, so it's not the time to be emotional, and I keep working even in the middle of anxiety."]

This statement highlights the emotion regulation and self-control that is needed just to function in the work environment. Rather than experiencing feelings of exclusion or

distress, this participant decides to internalize feelings of exclusion or distress in order to meet professional expectations. Dean et al. (2017) further highlight the smoothing out of emotion, especially in social demanding environments often leads to internalized stress and fatigue. Similarly, Wood and Happe (2021) argue that autistic employees tend to suppress their distress in an attempt to preserve the integrity of their person within the "working world," which, conceivably, may cause a lack of disclosing a need for support and may result in mental health difficulties over a long period of time.

Studies by Lorenz et al. (2016) show that autistic adults will often face misunderstanding and stigma from their colleagues and bosses, with a physically adverse impact on workplace relationships and job performance. Cage et al (2018) shows evidence that sensory overload, which is caused by working in a busy or noisy environment significantly contribute to stress and burnout. Moreover, social expectations, such as informal networking and teamwork, can give rise to difficulties and thus, one may feel isolated or excluded.

### **Subordinate Theme 1.3. Supervision and Task Roles**

For employees with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), having a supervisor, as well as the way tasks are assigned, can influence their job performance, as well as impact their feelings of inclusion and their professional self-image. Structured and transparent supervisory practices can reduce what can be an unpredictable and anxiety-provoking situation, as well as provide a framework within which employees with ASD can focus and best achieve their performance. On the other hand, inflexible job roles, as well as task avoidance/rejection, can involve a lack of self-authorization which may inadvertently strengthen existing perceptions of limitations and dependencies, therefore, reducing self-confidence and blocking the person's potential, and, more so, when waiting for job authorization is a prerequisite for developing new skills. Conversely, the potential for engagement within the given constraints of a role with ownership, even when facing

operational challenges and shifting requirements, increases the likelihood for further improvements. There is a sense of satisfaction from a lack of differentiation from ASD and other colleagues, which highlights the relevance of integrating ability-focused, as opposed to deficit-oriented, approaches. It is possible to provide supervision that involves a balance of oversight and trust, allowing for incremental increases in responsibility. This is true for the development of competency, as well as for the self-esteem and sense of ownership that comes from ASD individuals being more self-sufficient and active contributors to their workplace.

For people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the structure of the oversight can decrease the uncertainties and simplify the execution of tasks, but inherent in this structured oversight can be implicit communications about trust and opportunity. Archer (P1) reflected on this saying:

*"There are task that I'm not authorized to do... but they told me, I only... I am only... they are going to teach me this task after I am allowed to." (P1) [16-18]*

[*"There are tasks that I'm not authorized to do, but they told me that they are going to teach me these tasks after I am allowed to do them."*]

This is a cautious, step-by-step approach to delegation. While this structure may be the goal of protecting the employee as well as the organization, it may also imply reluctance in terms of the individual's readiness. Research by Baldwin et al. (2014) points out that although structure is necessary, excessive monitoring without progression may lead to lower self-efficacy and motivation by employees with autism.

On the other hand, there were other participants who had a more empowering experience, where clear roles and ordinary expectations were combined with just enough variety to promote engagement and development. Ernie (P2) shared:

*"And that I want to ano... distribute because in each and every individual... they have their own stations. Mine, I have my role to do for the working task... and every... every day is a challenge and every time... there will be another*

*twist and turns of the working task." (P2) [121-124]*

[*"And I want to distribute that because each individual has their own stations. I have my role to do for the working task, and every day is a challenge, and every time, there will be another twist and turns in the working task."*]

Ernie's experience is the power of predictable but dynamic roles as a source of motivation. According to Hedley et al. (2017), employees who have ASD are successful when tasks contain both structure and variability, interests while limiting unpredictability-related stress.

Ernie went on to explain his profound feeling of emotional satisfaction from the help he got, especially in the way that it enabled him to rise above stigmas:

*"I feel very happy. There's no ano... such thing as autism and normal peo... ahm... between autism and normal people. And... it drives me crazy that I want to drive myself and my goal is to reach out to the... to the heights of my work." (P2) [125-127]*

[*"I feel very happy. There's no such thing as autism versus normal people. And it drives me crazy that I want to push myself, and my goal is to reach the heights of my work."*]

His statement helps emphasize upon the transformative value of fair treatment. Cribb et al. (2021), explain that when neurodivergent employees feel that they are not being recognised for their diagnosis but for their contributions, their motivation, sense of purpose, and aspirations are massively improved.

Meanwhile, Samuel (P5) was a case of a different trajectory, that of self-directed adaptation: He shared:

*"Pero nung tumatagal hindi ko na lang masyadong pinagpapapansin. Kelangan pag aralan ko din po na... umm... maging maayos din ako." (P5) [587-588]*

[*"But as time went on, I just didn't pay much attention to it. I also need to learn to... umm... be okay myself."*]

This Demonstration shows how workers lead to the development of internalized norms of the workplace and to intrinsic motivation. Anderson et al. (2016) suggest that the

development of self management competency of autistic employees indicates long term adaptation and resilience among the occupational settings. Rather than depending solely on supervisory feedback, some individuals make more and more use of self-monitoring practices and thus adjust.

In sum, the vocational experience of middle-aged adults with ASD offers some strong challenges and opportunities for resiliency. Unpredictable demands, emotional strain and constraints of supervision are important barriers; however, in reality, many people are active in developing and developing adaptive strategies and flourish with the right support and opportunities. Inclusive work environments that foster clarity, flexibility and equitable treatment can help employees with autism to thrive both personally and professionally (Cribb et al 2021; Anderson et al 2020).

Moreover, there is a growing literature to highlight the significance of workplace accommodations such as the minimisation of

distractions, increasing the predictability, and the availability of visual supports to decrease the level of sensory overload and augment the job performance of individuals with ASD (Wehman et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019).

Notably, intervention efforts aimed at developing executive functions - and more specifically - theoretical skills such as time management, organization, and affect regulation, have shown significant improvements in daily adaptive and work-family skills for adults on the spectrum (Park & Choi, 2021). These findings are reminiscent of the experiences of the present participants, who emphasized regular self-regulation and coping in routine and structured contexts.

Consequently, employers who create structured due process, schedule routines, and offer specific support strategies can ease cognitive and emotional burdens placed on neurodivergent employees as a result, which can then allow them to better and more consistently make contributions in the workplace.

Table 2. Presentation of superordinate theme 2

No.	Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
2	Social Connections and Support	Building Social Relationships Workplace and Peer Support Organizational and External Support

### Superordinate Theme 2. Social Connections and Support

Social connections and support within the workplace yield important information on how employees diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) perceive having a place to work, being able to understand and being supported by their coworkers. Participants expressed a desire for meaningful interactions with others, and identified a variety of barriers to successful experiences attempting to facilitate such interactions. What especially came through their narratives was the need to be recognized, not just on a functional level, but emotionally and socially.. Whether it was through peer relationships, managerial guidance or organizational accommodations, the feeling of being accepted was a vital part of their success at work. For people who are commonly afflicted by the inability to communicate

socially or are misunderstood, being able to commit even small acts of empathy and awareness greatly increased their confidence and motivation. Despite the difficulties, there was a large appetite for participants to connect, grow and contribute to settings that respect and support their unique needs. This superordinate theme is broken down into three (3) subordinate themes: building social relationships, workplace and peer support and organizational and outside support.

#### Subordinate Theme 2.1: Building Social Relationships

This theme represents the efforts of the participants to form and maintain relationships with each other in the work environment. While some could hardly find the courage to start conversations or could not interpret the social cues, all of them displayed an earnest

desire internally to bond with others. The sense of belonging and emotional security that resulted from being socially connected was viewed as being fundamental to their success and self-confidence at work. Clarence (P2) shared:

*“Socialization. Okay... my boss told me last 2023, and I started 2024, I want to interact with other people. For example, during lunch time... at 12 pm, I want to meet other HR teams so I want to get know each other... I want to interact. I want to connect with someone else.” (P2) [140–143]*

[“Socialization. Okay, my boss told me last 2023, and I started in 2024, that I should interact with other people. For example, during lunchtime at 12 pm, I want to meet other HR teams so I can get to know each other. I want to interact and connect with someone else.”]

This need to be connected implies that Clarence did not have relationships as optional social activities, but as a core element of feeling included and accepted in the workplace. The willingness to reach out (despite social discomfort) suggests that there is an internal motivation to get past perceived differences. Research demonstrates that autistic individuals place great value on meaningful relationships, even if the social interaction is difficult and requires them to adapt (Muller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008).

Ernie (P4) shared the view that if socialization was to be successful it depended on the awareness and inclusivity of the environment:

*“I need to socialize well I can function well as long as the what do you call this... the yung paligid... yung taong naka paligid... the place has awareness that one of the team has special needs.” (P4) [288–291]*

[“I need to socialize in order to function well, as long as the environment, the people around me, are aware that someone on the team has special needs.”]

This reflection is important to highlight the importance of cultural competency and sensitivity in work environments. For neurodiverse individuals, the right environment of awareness and acceptance is what reduces anxiety and increases their confidence when interacting socially with their

colleagues. The barriers to engagement among them are not due to a simple social reticence; instead, they are rooted in fears of rejection, misunderstanding or stigmatisation due to perceived difference (Milton, 2012; Cage et al., 2018).

In another example of this difficulty, Samuel (P5) described how he would “pass” as neurotypical in order to avoid negative attention as follows:

*“Kahit na alam kong naiiba ako sa kanila... gagawin kong normal yun kahit mahirap.” (P5) [598–563]*

[“Even though I know I’m different from them... I’ll act normal, even if it’s hard.”]

The above-mentioned act of masking/conforming to neurotypical expectations is an internalized pressure to conform to the prevalent social norms. Although this strategy may breed superficial harmony in social interactions, it can be an emotional tax and something that may actually be detrimental to the person's notion of being authentic. Research calls this “camouflaging,” which is very common among individuals with ASD to avoid stigma (Cage et al., 2018).

Ernie (P4) also quoted social awareness as a decisive factor in facilitating or hindering social connections:

*“Maybe the... the awareness... awareness itself... autism awareness... kasi kung... kung nandun ako sa workplace walang awareness... ang hirap po kasi... hindi alam ng tao kung bakit ganun ka.” (P4) [405–408]*

[“Maybe the awareness... awareness itself... autism awareness, because if there’s no awareness in the workplace, it’s hard because people don’t know why you’re like that.”]

Such insights direct the call for neurodiversity education in the workplace. The group was not demanding special treatment, but understanding, a basic recognition that their experiences, expressions and ways of connecting may differ, but are no less valuable.

Milton and Sims (2016) proposed the “double empathy problem” that posits that it is not a one-sided problem in creating social connections. Instead, the misunderstanding of each other can be a problem, between autistic and non-autistic people, which can stop the effective interaction. This restates the problem

from being strictly a deficit in the autistic person to a mutual challenge of reciprocal adaptation. Crompton et al. (2020) showed that autistic people can feel more comfortable and authentic when interacting with other autistic individuals, where common communication styles result in more positive and affirming relationships. This finding suggests the importance of promoting the development of peer support or affinity groups in the workplace to promote social connection.

### **Subordinate Theme 2.2: Workplace and Peer Support**

Workplace and peer support appeared to be important factors that helped participants to succeed and feel valued in their roles. The presentation of support was through several types of support including explicit directives and evaluative feedback, motivational statements and affective reassurance. Such articulations of assistance were part of an attenuation of anxiety, establishment of normative expectations and the development of more inclusive organizational culture. For a person with an ASD, however, such support was perceived as being far from special treatment, but a fundamental part of experiencing a world that often does not recognize neurodiverse needs in its inhabitants.

Participants shared the experiences in which encouragement from colleagues and supervisors helped them to develop self-confidence and make their work experiences more manageable and meaningful. Archer (P1) stated:

*“My co-workers... ahm they explaining me the instructions specifically... so I clearly know what to do.” (P1) [63–64]*

["My coworkers explain the instructions to me specifically so I clearly know what to do."]

For people with an ASD the ambiguity in communications can cause confusion and stress. As such, clear instructions and repeatable processes are important workplace accommodations (Hedley et al., 2018). One role that was stressed by Samuel was the role of active inquiry and peer mentoring.

*“Sabi po nila sakin nung nagsisimula ako, ‘pag meron kang di alam magtanong ka lang nang magtanong sa amin.’” (P5) [626–630]*

["They told me when I was starting, “If there’s something you don’t know, just keep asking us questions.”]

The supportive culture enabled Participant 5, henceforth known as Samuel, to pursue his questions without concern for embarrassment or criticism. It fostered a constructive, focus-based learning environment where errors were viewed as opportunities for learning rather than as a breakdown of the learning process (Anderson, Stephenson, & Carter, 2016).

Along with emotionally supportive assistance, technical support was also available. Participant 4, identified as Ernie, explains how he was able to gain confidence by using gestures and words of validation:

*“By motivating me... with kind words... encouragement words or sometimes... smiling at me like ‘Ernie good job on this... please keep it up.’” (P4) [473–475]*

["By motivating me with kinds words, encouragement, or sometimes just smiling at me and saying, ‘Ernie, good job on this... please keep it up.’"]

These were small acts that contained deep emotional meaning. In environments where people with ASD frequently experience isolation and invisibility, positive reinforcement enabled people with ASD to counter self-doubt and build self-efficacy.

Archer (P1) affirmed the effect of regular guidance:

*“Every time that... I am having a hard time... my co-workers will explain me the instruction so I... I will know what to do, which help me to do my task easier.” (P1) [65–66]*

["Whenever I’m having a hard time, my co-workers explain the instructions to me so I’ll know what to do, which helps me complete my tasks more easily."]

Clarence (P2) reflected on team collaboration and open communication with management:

*“We want to talk about to the manager and subordinates... the more I work here, the better chance of winning for the next chapter of my career.” (P2) [188–194]*

["We want to talk about them with the manager and subordinates... the more I work

here, the better chance I have of succeeding in the next chapter of my career.”]

The active tendency towards participation in workplace conversations is one way of showing that, when given the right support and an enabling environment, participants were not simply willing to work (Chen et al., 2015).

Ernie (P4) and Samuel (P5) felt empowered through emotional independence, combined with inner strength:

*“Basta ako, may friends man o wala, ang iniisip ko lang po talaga maging positive... tanong lang kay God.” (P4) [584–587]*

[“For me, whether I have friends or not, I just focus on staying positive... I simply turn to God in prayer.”]

*“Ang importante po sa akin, syempre po magsimula po sa pagtitiwala sa sarili. Kasi po yun yung magiging daan eh. Para pagkatiwalaan ako ng mga kasama ko po sa work.” (P5) [631–634]*

[“For me, whether there’s support at work or not, what’s important to me is to start with trusting myself because that’s the way for my coworkers to trust me.”]

These point out that though external support is very important, inner strength and self-trust is the bedrock of confidence and perseverance.

Tomczak (2022) brings to light that autistic adults use work’s peer mentorship both formal and informal as a buffer against work stress. Autistic people benefit from having the opportunity to share experiences, strategies and emotional validation with others who share the nuances of autistic communication and needs. Roux et al. (2017) also mention the importance of external peer support networks from areas outside the immediate workplace. Participation in autism-specific professional communities or support groups helps autistic adults to develop coping skills, to find role models and to counter social exclusion which may be felt in typical work environments.

### **Subordinate Theme 2.3: Organizational and External Support**

Apart from those interactions between individuals, this meant for participants the importance of distributed support through structural and institutional arrangements. Such

arrangements included inclusive workplace policies, advocacy, government support and community recognition. The various outside support showed participants how their efforts and inclusion were valued by society. This created a sense of legitimacy and belonging. By offering job opportunities and involving participants in awareness initiatives, and even offering support through local governing bodies, they [the support] augmented systems of professional longevity and sustained motivation. For some, the recognition from the organization and the community counteracted previous feelings of exclusion and alienation.

Roland (P3) was thankful to his employer for the inclusive policies, saying this was one of the reasons he was able to stay in the job for a long time:

*“Ako talaga ang nag stay from 8 years.” (P3) [268–271]*

[I’m the one who’s stayed for 8 years.]

The statement reflects both fulfilment at a job and the effects of sustained support from an organization. Retention in a job is viewed as an indicator of positive organizational inclusion practices (Anderson, Stephenson, & Carter, 2016). Organizations that adapt to the needs of autistic employees and sustain such support cultivate trust and increased ability, as well as professional growth.

Clarence (P2) discussed his work regarding national awareness initiatives through his organization.

*“We just attended the ASP, the Autistic Society of the Philippines, Angel’s Walk.” (P2) [163–167]*

[“We just attended the ASP, the Autistic Society of the Philippines, Angel’s Walk.”]

These activities go beyond just awareness activities and serve as tangible marks of visibility and validation. Involvement in these activities supports the idea that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are not merely workers, but participants in a greater socio-advocacy movement. Most importantly, this phenomenon exemplifies that the organization does not see autism as a burden, but something that is manageable with the right support and intervention (Sarrett, 2016).

Ernie (P4) appreciated specific workplace incentives and accommodations for assisting him to work more efficiently.

*"They have a lot of motivation like... you have extra earning... if you work overtime." (P4) [447-449]*

["They have a lot of motivation, like the extra earnings you get if you work overtime."]

These forms of structured motivation are useful and meaningful. When autistic employees are given clear incentives this helps to reinforce predictability and goal setting, two areas where structure is often beneficial for those with ASD (Hedley et al., 2018).

Beyond the private sector, aid from the government was recalled as being supportive and symbolical. Ernie (P4) and Roland (P3) had similar experiences of gifts or support from local leaders:

*"Yung mayor meron silang bibigay like grocery pack... cash assistance." (P4) [458-465]*

["The mayor gives something like a grocery pack... cash assistance"]

*"So pagdating naman sa assistance yung local government merong silang pino-provide na 1000 per year. Birthday gift yun lang naman ang kanilang pakonswelo." (P3) [272-274]*

["So, when it comes to assistance, the local government provides 1000 per year, a birthday gift, that's their only consolation."]

These gestures, although small, represent that society is paying attention. Small but repeated demonstrations of support from local governments can signal and communicate recognition and human dignity. Research has demonstrated that social policies and local interventions, even if limited, can have a significant effect on the way that neurodivergent individuals perceive their value in the community (Anderson et al., 2016).

Archer (P1) described how through a neighbor's referral, he was able to find meaningful employment:

*"I go to munisipyo... after telling the head of HR about my situation... they decided that someone like me can work... so they appointed me." (P1) [51-62]*

["I went to the municipal office... and after I explained my situation to the head of HR... they decided that someone like me could work... so they appointed me."]

This account shows the role of community referrals and decentralised hiring decision. Community-based recruitment efforts have been found to be highly effective in expanding access to employment for people with disabilities and, in particular, when combined with social service support (Chen, Leader, Sung, & Leahy, 2015).

Samuel (P5), however, showed reluctance in the formalising of his diagnosis, apprehending that it might have an adverse impact on his chances of getting employment:

*"Dapat po noon mag a-apply ako ng PWD card. Kaya lang hindi ko alam kung makakakuha ako ng PWD card eh. Kasi antagal ko na rin pong nagwowork eh. Kasi noon po, eh natatakot naman po ako na pag kumuha ako ng card, hindi ako makapasok sa trabaho. Yun po ang inaalala ko po kasi iba po noon eh. Iba na po ngayon eh. Mas tanggap na. Pero yun sana yung balak ko Ma'am eh. Yung mag-apply ng PWD card eh" (P5) [620-625]*

["I was supposed to apply for a PWD card before, but I don't know if I can get a PWD card because I've been working for so long. Because before, I was afraid that if I got a card, I wouldn't be able to get a job."]

The collection of accounts suggest on the whole a shift across generations in that while the previous period was seen as stigmatized and uncertainty ridden, more recent experiences are seen as more open and filled with opportunities. Still, they expressed that there were more efforts to be done to ensure continuous accessibility and equity in professional spaces. Despite greater acceptance in the current day, the historical fear of stigma does not go away. It strengthens the importance of not only legal protections but cultural change in the employment spaces (Cage et al., 2018).

Sustaining power of external emotional support through counseling and academic networks was summarized by Ernie (P4).

*"What helps me stay positive... number 1, counseling, talking to someone... did you know even I have a work I'm still going back... bumabalik ako every now and then sa aking... university kung saan ako nag-graduate at... ang ginagawa ko po dun yung pong counseling is yung guidance counselor." (P4) [409-414]*

[“What helps me stay positive is number one, counseling, talking to someone. Did you know that even though I have a job, I’m still going back to my university where I graduated, and what I do there is counseling with the guidance counselor?”]

The coming back to familiar support systems such as universities and guidance offices implies the longing for safe and affirming Plato’s Cave environments. For most people with ASD, counseling relationships are anchors that connect the personal and professional worlds (Ung, Selles, Small, & Storch, 2015).

Scott et al (2019) emphasise that autistic adults benefit from structured environments, expectations and sensory friendly. When employers make specific accommodations, autistic people feel more confident and perform better at work.

According to Lindsay et al. (2019), training leads to an understanding of autistic behaviors, a reduction in stigma, and a more supportive and inclusive atmosphere. This leads to more positive relationships among people and a low risk of workplace conflict or isolation. Job retention rates for autistic adults improved when employers collaborated with outside brokerage employment specialists (Chen et al., 2015).

Previous studies show that social relationships and social support have been identified as essential elements leading to positive employment outcomes for adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Positive results in the areas of social contact and emotional health of participants have been reported in studies that examine Peer- and autistic-led support programmes (Crane et al., 2021). This indicates that autistic-led support programmes have the potential to generate high participant satisfaction. Similarly, the employer-sponsored initiatives in the workplace, such as staff training, mentoring, and advocacy of neurodiversity, promote inclusion and belonging at work. (Wehman et al, 2018). Additionally, the relationships that employees have with their supervisors can have a strong impact on the workplace stress and retention/job performance of neurodivergent employees. Individualised workplace adjustments and supportive managers are associated with increased neurodivergent employee retention and productivity (Hedley et al., 2017; Baldwin et al., 2014). This indicates that the more individuals studied develop empathetic, supportive, and consistent structures for employment activities, the more likely employees with ASD are to experience professional success.

Table 3. Presentation of superordinate theme 3

No.	Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
3	Navigating Emotional Terrain in the Workplace	Life After Diagnosis Emotional Experiences at Work

**Superordinate Theme 3. Navigating Emotional Terrain in the Workplace**

This particular theme sheds light on the complex emotional experiences of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) navigating workplace relational dynamics after diagnosis. Many participants expressed feeling a substantial increase in self-esteem and motivation from supervisors and coworkers who support and include them. Positive feelings about managers and colleagues fostered a space for people to be genuine and build relationships that was not judged or ostracized. In spite of the benefits participants described, they reported emotional challenges

such as anxiety, feelings of social disconnection, a struggle to cope with perceived negative attitudes and judgments, and the need to ‘fight off’ the negative judgments or misunderstandings of others. Some called attention to the need for self-regulation of their thoughts and behaviors in order to be “respected,” which imposed barriers to their full participation. Colleagues’ responses to the news of an employee’s diagnosis varied widely from immediate acceptance to surprise and even disbelief. This variability underscores the need for increasing autism awareness and understanding in workplaces. The studies emphasize the significance of understanding

and supportive workplace cultures and the need for resilience in adults with ASD to succeed in socially intricate and emotionally demanding environments. The overarching theme splits into two sub-themes: The first is life post-diagnosis and the second is emotional challenges in a work setting.

### **Subordinate Theme 3.1. Life After Diagnosis**

This theme reflects the complexity and range of emotional elements of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with respect to the relational aspects in the workplace post-diagnosis. Several participants mentioned that having supervisors and colleagues that appreciate differences in others and do so with understanding and inclusive appreciation, arguably, boosted self-esteem and motivation. The positive view participants had of their superiors and co-workers created a space for authenticity and relational depth that would otherwise not be possible due to ostracism and judgment. Despite these relational and emotional positive effects, study participants also reported, across the board, the emotional impacts of anxiety, feelings of social alienation, and the emotional battle that stems from others presumed to be judgmental or from a lack of understanding. Some participants pointed to the need to 'think first' before acting in a way to avoid posturing that would keep them from fully participating in a context and described such situations as self-imposed constraints to full engagement. Disclosures of an autism diagnosis to co-workers and the subsequent responses varied from acceptance to shock and disbelief. These varied responses to an autism diagnosis show that the need for organizations to improve autism awareness and understanding is strong and persistent.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the emotionally and socially demanding condition in which adults with ASD operate and the need for understanding workplace culture as an urgent priority. The broad theme branches into two sub-themes: life after the diagnosis and emotional journeys at the workplace.

*"They accept who I am and think that I could be... they accepted me as their own because they think I am capable to live a normal life." (P1) [7-8]*

*["They accept me for who I am and believe that I can... they accepted me as their own because they think I am capable of living a normal life."]*

This affirmation shows how social acceptance from the workplace can have a positive effect on one's sense of value and belonging. Nicolaidis et al. (2019) highlighted that often being validated post-diagnosis can contribute to a higher level of mental wellness and less internalised stigma.

Similarly, Roland (P3) echoed feeling of social comfort and approval in his work environment:

*"To be honest with you okay na okay sila... tanggap nila ako..." (P3) [230]*

*["To be honest with you, they're very okay with it... they accepted me..."]*

Such affirmation can have a significant impact on self-esteem and motivation to form a basis for positive engagement. According to Hedley et al. (2017), there is a strong correlation between perceived social support in the workplace and job satisfaction and mental health in adults with ASD.

Central to this acceptance is that of supervisors and institutional culture. Clarence (P2) said how grateful he was to their boss for creating an inclusive atmosphere:

*"I have to thank it for my boss... for accepting me, whatever my... as an autism spectrum, accepting me and embrace their... the diversity, the inclusion and the... they welcome me here in this institution." (P2) [112-114]*

*["I have to thank my boss for accepting me, despite my being on the autism spectrum, and for embracing their diversity and inclusion... they welcome me here in this institution."]*

This observation shows how leadership can foster an environment of acceptance in an organization where neurodiverse individuals do not feel stigmatized, but rather, their presence is celebrated. This sense of belonging and a sense of safety are thus strengthened. According to the arguments by Austin and Pisano (2017), inclusive leadership is one of the decisive conditions under which autistic workers may feel safe and empowered in their work-related settings and environments.

The contribution of the colleagues is highly relevant towards building a free and inclusive

working atmosphere. When other staff members are attentive and appreciative of neurodivergent variations, then they will help to establish a safer and friendlier environment. Clarence (P2) remarked:

*"The colleagues are understanding my... behaviors." (P2) [101]*

["My colleagues understand my behaviors."]

Ernie (P4) then went on to elaborate further about the way this understanding often translated into practical and carefully thought-out accommodations:

*"Well, I can say they are understanding...meron times na talagang they are literally giving me special treatment and example there are group of activities.there are collaboration...talagang yung trato nila iba like they are careful to approach" (P4) [348-351]*

["Well, I can say they are understanding... there are times when they literally give me special treatment; for example, in group activities or collaborations, they treat me differently, like they are careful in how they approach me."]

These reflections align with the findings of Johnson and Joshi (2016) who highlight the role of informal adjustments and interpersonal sensitivity as being particularly influential on neurodivergent individuals' workplace satisfaction.

Participants gave an overwhelming sense of continuity in their relationships and self-identity after their diagnosis. Archer (P1) stated that their relationships with colleagues remained familiar, and did not undergo alteration:

*"I actually treat them as a family member... and they treat me as family also... so nothing changes when they learned my condition" (P1) [12-14]*

["Well, the honest truth is I actually treat them as family members, and they treat me as family too, so, nothing changed when they learned about my condition."]

This represents an environment in which acceptance rises above labels and diagnoses and the individual is able to retain his or her position and relationship with the group. Similarly, Roland (P3) highlighted that the main factor is mutual understanding whether

colleagues think of them as normal or recognise their special needs:

*"Wala namang pagbabago..kahit..kahit ituring ako na normal or meron akong special needs okay lang naman hanggat naiintindihan nila ako wala naman sama ng loob." (P3) [242-244]*

["Nothing changes... even if they treat me as normal or as someone with special needs, it's okay as long as they understand me, and I don't feel bad."]

Such acceptance without resentment suggests a workplace culture that is based on respect and empathy, a factor that is reiterated in qualitative research on the employment experience of autistic adults (Lorenz et al., 2016; Harmuth et al., 2018).

But not all social experiences were good ones. Participant 4: feelings of isolation at work in spite of acceptance:

*"Not just in workplace but in other situation pero when it comes to work naging alone talaga po ako... literal na I'm on my own... I'm a loner... though its fine for me because ganun talaga e... hindi lahat talaga ano maiintindihan." (P4) [316-320]*

["Not just in the workplace but in other situations, but when it comes to work, I'm really alone... literally on my own... I'm a loner, though it's fine for me because that's just how it is. Not everyone truly understands."]

This is similar to what Botha and Frost (2020) call "minority stress" where subtle and repeated invalidations or exclusions lead to emotional isolation even in otherwise supportive settings.

Participant Samuel (P5) articulated the varied responses elicited by awareness of his diagnosis:

*"Yung iba naman po, di naman po na-shock. Yung iba naman po na-shock. "Eh may Autism ka pala." Yun po yung sabi sakin." (P5) [547-548]*

["Some others were shocked. "Oh, you have autism," that's what they said to me."]

The range of responses to acceptance of individuals with autism, from surprise to disbelief, highlights the challenges of awareness and understanding of autism in workplace settings. This observation underscores the need for ongoing, open-ended

learning and communication as key to fostering a more educated and understanding environment for members of the autism spectrum.

Nicolaidis et al. (2018) established that adult diabetes can be associated with validation and alleviation from self-blame due to the individual's context of life struggles. However, acknowledgment without support can be damaging. This new understanding often aids people to self-advocate and request accommodations in the workplace and in the community. Raymaker et al. (2017) explain that adjustment is a lengthy process as it requires the integration of new information, the management of associated anxiety and depression, and the navigation of social stigma.

### **Subordinate Theme 3.2. Emotional Experiences at Work**

People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience a complex mix of suffering, anxiety, acceptance, and resilience. Participants indicated that negative evaluations and workplace misunderstandings directed towards them created their emotional suffering due to the need to endure behavioral adjustments, and efforts to earn their respect from the judges. Many reported workplace anxiety, and for some, the mere presence of others eliciting anxiety and discomfort from them, reflecting the emotional burden they had to endure just to interact (Cage et al., 2018; Brown et al, 2019). However, there were also moments of acceptance and being appreciated for assigned meaningful tasks, which fostered a sense of value and belonging. Effective stress coping is a gradual phenomenon, where the first stress from the novelty of the situation was replaced with some familiarity and competence, as a result of persistence and patience (Hendricks, 2010; Scott et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the isolation and loneliness that Taylor created underscore facilitative gendered social barriers to work engagement. Testifying the vast emotional range left by ASPression and AmyAnswer, the winners appreciate that employees must not only channel their inner selves and draw on the strengths around them, but also that they must be empathetic, and create emotionally charged

safe spaces to support employees and help them go through their experiences and better even help them have an inclusive and safe space beyond simple inclusion (Botha & Frost, 2020)

Participants in this research expressed a range of emotional experiences from the negative (pain, anxiety) to the positive (emotional resilience, validation) and to the neutral (isolation). Psychological pain was often an emotional reaction to being criticized and socially excluded which demonstrates how socially vulnerable people on the spectrum remain.

Samuel (P5) expressed his internal conflict in coping with the emotional pain of unkind comments by emphasizing the constant effort to remain calm and the respect the stigma rather than irrational in the face of unkind comments:

*"Minsan naano din, pagka may mga sinasabi silang di maganda sa kin, pero syempre kailangan ko din talaga mag-adjust. Tsaka kung matutunan kung pano ia-ayos ang sarili ko, paano ko dadalhin ang sarili ko sa trabaho kung nakikita ko namang...mapanghusga sila. Kailangan gumawa ako ng paraan, para kahit papaano po, marespeto nila ako kung paano ko respetuhhin yung sarili ko." (P5) [557-562]*

["Sometimes, I get affected when they say unkind things to me, but of course, I really need to adjust. And I need to learn how to compose myself, how to carry myself at work when I see that they are judgmental. I need to find a way so that, somehow, they will respect me in the same way I respect myself."]

Compounding these challenges are internal mental health struggles that are often tied to the core features of ASD. Ernie (P4) openly shared his susceptibility to anxiety and depression, stating:

*"Yung anxiety... anxiety disorder pati nga yung... depression as part of the spectrum na prone ako dun and... I am... I'm scared or I'm anxious sa ibang tao." (P4) [360-362]*

["The anxiety... anxiety disorder, and even depression, as I'm prone to it as part of the spectrum, and... I'm scared or anxious around other people."]

High levels of anxiety and emotional fatigue are well documented in the literature for

autistic adults in workplace environments that follow neurotypical norms (Hurlbutt and Chalmers, 2004; Raymaker et al., 2017). The pressure to mask or camouflage one's behaviors to come across socially acceptable can further compound the straining of this emotion (Hull et al., 2017).

However, in the middle of these emotional miseries there were moments of affirmation. Archer (P1) articulated a deep sense of worth and validation when given responsibilities which demonstrated competence:

*"It made me feeling... I feel being accepted that... that people around me accept me who I am... that they gave me tasks to prove of my worth." (P1) [3-4]*

[*"It made me feel... I feel accepted, that people around me accept me for who I am, and that they gave me tasks to prove my worth."*]

There are such experiences of having responsibility and trust laid upon them that reflect the ways in which affirming environments may promote a sense of self-esteem and belonging (Bury et al., 2020). Supportive feedback and role clarity can help people to feel not only included, but genuinely valued (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Several participants also spoke about the adaptive strategies that they formed to manage stress over time. Roland (P3) noted that tolerance was produced by repeated exposure to stressful routines:

*"Sa palagay na natin na mai-stress ka minsan...as in minsan nasabay ka na.nasabay ka na kung ano yung pinag gagagawa mo." (P3) [223-224]*

[*"You can expect to get stressed sometimes... but sometimes you get used to it... you get used to what you're doing."*]

Likewise, Samuel (P5) highlighted the role of persistence and gradual learning in reducing task-related stress:

*"Syempre sa una po mahirap po. Pero habang tumatagal naman po, at pinagtiyatyagaan naman pong matutunan yung isang trabaho, eh nagiging madali naman din po." (P5) [531-533]*

[*"Of course, it's hard at first. But as time goes on, if you persevere in learning the job, it becomes easier."*]

These aforementioned reflections set forth that stress management in the adult population with autism is highly felt-based, and not solely a mind-body relationship, is dependent upon the development of habit, the environment and persistence (Hendricks, 2010; Baldwin et al., 2014). Structured routines and predictability have been found to particularly help in decreasing anxiety and enhancing work performance (Scott et al., 2017).

However, emotional isolation was a common experience, even if job related tasks were manageable. Ernie (P4) described this duality, professional engagement alongside profound emotional solitude:

*"There are times... I enjoyed what I'm doing... and I admit not every day I enjoy... because I feel the isolation... I feel the loneliness but I'm... at the end of the day I always think it's a workplace." (P4) [294-296]*

[*"There are times that I enjoyed what I'm doing. I admit I don't enjoy every day... because I feel the isolation... I feel the loneliness, but at the end of the day, I always remember it's just a workplace."*]

Isolation and a lack of social reciprocity are common in the workplace, and have been reported in existing literature, and they can have mental health consequences if not addressed (Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Botha & Frost, 2020).

Cage et al. (2018) found that adults with autism have experienced higher levels of stress in the workplace and emotional exhaustion than neurotypical adults, and this is often related to challenges in social interactions and sensory sensitivities. Such emotional strain may lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction. Similarly, Brown et al. (2019) discussed the issue of emotional regulation strategies in workers with autism, communicating that many participants used masking or camouflaging strategies to cope with how they express emotions. Although these strategies may result in social assimilation, the strategies may result in increased mental fatigue and psychological distress. In addition, Niccolini et al. (2020) highlight the effects of coworker misunderstanding and lack of acceptance, contributing to an employee's marginalization and low self-worth.

This suggests the need for autism awareness training in the workplace. Studies indicate that an official ASD diagnosis can bring a sense of self understanding or a measure of emotional distress. Crane et al. 2018, reported that, for some adults, receiving a diagnosis can be both validating and anxiety provoking. Workplace/situational context can significantly impact workplace disclosure and some workplaces that are supportive and (somewhat) informed of neurodiversity can be supportive of someone being their true self, and workplaces that are stigmatizing and ignorant can foster a sense of detachment (Molloy & Vasil, 2020). ASD adults have noted emotional issues stemming from anxiety, identity crisis, and low self

worth as being particularly relevant when working in a neurotypical setting (Huang et al., 2021). A substantial body of literature suggests that (Hiding, or, masking) i.e., the act of pulling back or suppressing certain behaviors that are associated with being autistic so as to conform to the dominant social framework, is a core contributor to distress, anxiety, and burnout (Bradley et al., 2021). These elements are consistent with the realities of participants in this research and highlight the impact that the lack of sensitivity to autism and inadequate emotional support, social, and inclusive wellness and support systems within the workplace that dimension is to address.

Table 4. Presentation of superordinate theme 4

No.	Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
4	Resilience Drivers in the Workplace	Coping Mechanisms Sources of Motivation

#### Superordinate Theme 4: Resilience Drivers in the Workplace

Resilience drivers in the workplace surfaced as critical elements in the ways that the individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the study managed their lives as working individuals. The narratives showcased a remarkable sense of agency as the narrators described the struggles of internal and external conflicts and the role of their self-imposed obligations and how they attempted to construct a life that transcended a diagnosis to create one that embedded significance, direction and development. This overarching theme reflects their determination and the drive that they controlled and guided in relation to the focus of their work and life commitments, as well as their rational and emotionally structured responses amidst the overwhelming stress and challenges. This superordinate theme is split into two (2) subordinate themes: coping mechanisms and sources of motivation.

##### Subordinate Theme 4.1: Coping Mechanisms

To cope with stress, social problems or personal difficulties, people performed a range of coping strategies. These included keeping the mind strong, trusting themselves, listening

to music, talking to counselors, and praying. Some used routine or focused thinking to calm down and some relied on the supportive people around them. Their ways of dealing with things helped them to keep their feet on the ground and function well even when things became overwhelming. In this case, “coping” involved more than an individual response to stress. It was a process comprising a cluster of intentional, behavioural, and belief-based strategies that helped cope with reality while preserving their dignity and functionality.

When participants were interviewed, they described a variety of strategies they used to cope with stress, social obligations, and personal challenges. These strategies included mental resilience, self-affirmation, sensory self-regulation (e.g. listening to music), seeking professional help (e.g. psychiatrist and counsellor), prayer, and strategic planning. Coping was not merely a reaction; it was proactive and voluntary, and it fostered a particular kind of emotional and cognitive self-regulation that preserved identity and functionality. This confirms Hirvikoski and Blomqvist’s (2015) findings, that adults on the autism spectrum employ self-developed strategies (such as positive self-talk, sensory self-regulation, and help-seeking in a

structured manner) to cope with psychological distress and enhance life satisfaction. These strategies serve to self-regulate emotional responses, as well as to protect one's self-identity in potentially hostile environments that threaten to undermine their authenticity and autonomy.

Clarence (P2) pointed out the importance of mental fortitude and the ability to accept oneself. His approach was to protect his inner self and stay authentic to himself:

*"Kailangan talaga 'yong ano... 'yong strong minds ka, kailangan manatili 'yong good mental health mo. And number 3, do not change whoever you are." (P2) [157-158]*

[You really need a strong mind; you need to maintain good mental health. And number three, don't change whoever you are.]

This speaks of an intentional safeguarding of one's own integrity despite social influences to the contrary. Consider, for instance, how, for Clarence (P2), mental health was, above all, an issue of self-identity as opposed to the mere presence or absence of stress."

Self-trust was the source of Roland's strength. Self-belief, even when the going got tough, was the foundation of his persistence.

*"Siguro tiwala lang sa sarili ko... yun ang nagbibigay sa akin ng motivation para magpatuloy." (P3) [266-267]*

["Maybe just trust in myself, that's what gives me the motivation to continue."]

His method of coping rooted in self-belief as mirrors. Roland's claim of self-trust that shows an important aspect of self-efficacy - seeing yourself as competent even without much outside validation. According to Johnson and Joshi (2016) which suggest that self-efficacy is a protective factor against workplace burnout for autistic employees. Their study stressed that when autistic people are confident in their abilities and think they can affect things in their environment, the more likely that they will push through challenges and the least likely that they will experience emotional exhaustion.

For Roland (P3), belief in oneself was not merely empowering, it was key. Without it, he realized that he could only rely on external support to a certain extent. He also used sensory strategies in order to regulate his

environment and focus better, for instance by listening to music.

*"Yung pagpapatugtog gamit headset... mas komportable ako pag naka headset ako." (P3) [259-262]*

["It's playing music using a headset. I'm more comfortable when I'm wearing a headset."]

This results in agreeing with Robertson (2010) who has found that sensory control tools (e.g., headphones, music) help to reduce overstimulation and to support sustaining of engagement in task environments.

Ernie (P4) in turn, relied on formal emotional support systems such as counselling, psychiatry and peer mentoring, as a way to process his experiences and stay grounded:

*"I have personal psychiatrist... guidance counselor... even a peer coach... she is a social worker din... tumutulong sa akin... maintaining positive mindset." (P4) [420-430]*

["I have a personal psychiatrist... a guidance counselor... even a peer coach...she's also a social worker...who helps me maintain a positive mindset."]

Rather than isolate, Ernie (P4) chose to use people he trusts. His being able to seek and maintain support is active and indicative of his commitment to his well-being and progress.

Samuel (P5), on the other hand, did so with flexible thinking and problem-solving. He knew that he had to face obstacles directly in order to grow personally.

*"Kailangan matuto kang i-challenge yung sarili mo... hanap ka ng ibang diskarte... yun yung magiging daan." (P5) [576-582]*

["You need to learn to challenge yourself... find another strategy... because that's the way to get the job done."]

Samuel demonstrates strategic resilience the ability to respond to obstacles not with avoidance, but with critical thinking with adjustment. He is not only acknowledging challenges but putting them in a place where he can grow from it and be better. Mindset is congruous with the idea of "cognitive compensation" whereby autistic people find their own unique strategies to solve problems independently (Hirvikoski & Blomqvist, 2015).

Lastly, Archer (P1) unraveled a coping position, which was to manage emotional detachment, particularly in relationships. His statement indicated a recognition of limits in the way individuals can be supported by others:

*"Sometimes she rather focus on her family than me. Like, everything that relate to me is secondary." (P1) [36-40]*

[*"Sometimes she focuses on her family more than me. It's like everything related to me is secondary."*]

While challenging, this awareness may have helped him to set boundaries and be safe from emotional stress. His coping in this case was the painful but pragmatic acceptance of emotional distance.

In sum, these coping mechanisms were varied but shared the common intention. Whether through faith, routine, emotional regulation or strategic thinking, the participants were able to demonstrate that living with ASD in a demanding world is not a passive experience, it is one that requires constant adaptation, strength and reflection.

Robertson (2010) explains that self-regulation strategies like stimming, use of noise-canceling headphones or breaks in quiet spaces are often used by autistic workers to cope with sensory overload. While Hedley et al. (2018) stressed the importance of workplace accommodations such as clear instructions, sensory-friendly environments and flexible schedules. In addition, Scott et al. (2017) noted that mentoring relations and peer support structures enhance the ability of autistic employees to cope by providing social guidance as well as social support through affirmation. And according to, Heinitz (2014) task management apps, and visual planners and virtual communication tools help autistic employees to navigate complex tasks and interactions more effectively.

#### ***Subordinate Theme 4.2. Sources of Motivation***

This subordinate theme encompasses the reasons that inspired the participants to persist with their vocations and personal pursuits despite the challenges posed by ASD. Their drive was not simply about fulfilling the job requirements. It also involved emotional ties to

family, personal beliefs, religious/spiritual beliefs, and a wish to show they were able and worthy.

Motivation functioned as an internal asset that helped participants to persevere through external barriers with meaning and determination. In the case of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), motivation was not merely a function of external incentives. It was often driven by internal factors such as self-worth, hope, personal advancement, or emotional support from others. These motivators aided in regulating emotional strain and a sense of direction and resilience. According to Koenig et al., (2012), a self-determined behaviors that are often based on internal values, have a substantial contribution to the psychological well-being and persistence of individuals with developmental disorders. These internal motivators help the individual to construct meaning, sustain perseverance and provide a sense of purpose, especially in an environment where the external motivation may be less motivating or inconsistently applied.

Archer (P1) based his determination in respecting the sacrifices of his father. His narrative revealed the fact that he remembered the efforts of those who supported him and it gave him a sense of purpose that would last with him.

*"With sheer will and persistence. To remember all the sacrifices of your... of what my father did for the family." (P1) [5-6]*

[*"With sheer will and persistence, I remember all the sacrifices my father made for the family."*]

His work thus became a tribute of a sort, something done to live up to what had been done for him. For Archer (P1), motivation was not momentary enthusiasm, it was a moral obligation that was sustained through memory and love.

Samuel (P5) described his motivation as a everyday reaffirmation of the life path he chose, organised around a motto that he thinks of. His words focused on consistency and clarity.

*"Kailangan po kasi... sa totoo lang, sa ano po namin, dapat alamin ko po araw-araw yung aking ano, motto po sa buhay. Kung ano talaga*

*ang hangarin ko po sa pagtatrabaho ng automotive.” (P5) [593–595]*

[“Because, honestly, in our job, I need to know my motto in life every day, what my real goal is in working in the automotive industry.”]

The participant emphasizes the importance of having a personal motto or guiding principle to help them stay focused and motivated in their daily work, and findings on the importance of personal goal clarity in enhancing intrinsic motivation and work engagement (Van Tuin et al., 2020). Samuel showed us how values and routine can go together in order to have long-term motivation.

Ernie’s (P4) account, on the other hand, was based on necessity. Being the primary support for his family brought him the demand to support his family that he took willingly, with the extra challenge of having ASD.

*“Diba I’m employed... I’m working and... ang motivation ko dun... paano kung ano... ikaw lang aasahan... you need to... you’re a breadwinner... something like that. So, you need to keep going even ah you have ASD... you’re not exempted from society” (P4) [431–437]*

[“What if you’re the only one to rely on, you need to... you’re a breadwinner, something like that. So, you need to keep going even if you have ASD, you’re not exempted from society.”]

The participant has a strong sense of responsibility as a bread winner, indicating the internal pressure to continue with having autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their story demonstrates the absence of any diminution of perceived obligation to contribute economically despite having a disability and highlights the nexus of identity, autonomy and social duty. Many people with ASD display internalized societal expectations and demonstrate resilience and adaptive functioning in the workplace (Hedley et al., 2020).

Archer (P1) exhibited an additional form of motivation that was more active, and perhaps more confrontational—the motivation of wanting to show society’s negative expectations of him to be wrong. He talked about succeeding because of others’ disbelief.

*“What keeps me going... the challenge... to prove someone’s wrong... Even though the world*

*is against you... in the long run, you can do everything for yourself and not for them.” (P1) [67–77]*

[“What keeps me going is the challenge...to prove someone wrong... Even if the world is against you... in the long run, you realize that you’re doing everything for yourself, not for them.”]

This feeling of success in spite of the odds is not unique to Archer. For him, success was an act of resistance, and his work became a counter-narrative to the prevailing negative assumptions about the capability of people with autism.

Clarence (P2) showcased a different kind of motivating ideal, which is a kind of excellence and contribution that stems from the desire to be of service to others. This is a kind of motivation that goes beyond self.

*“I want to serve humanity with whatever talents I have. And hopefully... I want to be the best.” (P2) [125–131]*

[“I want to serve humanity with whatever talents I have. And, hopefully, I want to be the best.”]

The death phase participant feels a profound sense of purpose that is grounded in the use of personal talents for the greater good that is seen in prosocial motivation and aspirational self-concept. This is substantiated by research that finds that purposeful-oriented goals promote well-being and performance, especially when they are able to connect their work to the overall contribution to society (Yeager et al., 2020). The aspiration “to be the best” implies the growth-oriented mindset, where excellence is strived for not only for self-advancement, but in service of others.

Together, these stories reveal that the participants were not all motivated in the same way but were multifaceted and just as much motivated by a sense of responsibility, remembrance, self-worth, and social contribution. Each participant had built up a deeply personal framework within which their everyday actions were related to long-term meaning.

Research by van Schalkwyk et al. (2021) had used SDT to examine work motivation in autistic adults. The study identified motivations such as income, daily routine,

internalised social norms, personal interest, and sense of meaning and contribution. Coping mechanisms, emotional as well as behavioral, are equally important to cope. Individuals with ASD use a variety of strategies to handle stress and control their emotions, such as cognitive reframing, use of self-soothing activities, and use of familiar routines (Hirvikoski & Blomqvist, 2015). Warmth and support from others, such as relatives or therapists, and also access to systemic support such as consulting services, can foster resilience and emotional stability in crisis situations or during transitions (Ung et al., 2015). However, coping with daily challenges is often overlooked, though it can make substantial emotional and mental demands. Social masking as a phenomenon, and having to constantly cope with it, can result in long-term emotional exhaustion and burnout, and has been documented in adults with ASD (Cage et al., 2018). Still, those with supportive and culturally sensitive environments to engage with exhibit better coping and emotional regulation, and sustained motivation, and better adaptive behaviors over time.

Coping strategies and motivational factors are essential for the daily functioning and overall well-being of adults with autism

spectrum disorder (ASD) in the workplace. It has been documented that our stress coping strategies include both problem and emotion-based strategies. These include coping strategies based on structure and routine as well as emotional strategies. Self-soothing and cognitive restructuring are stress coping strategies that are documented in the literature for enabling productive work (Garcia-Villamizar, Hughes, 2007, Lai et al 2019). An example of intrinsic motivation is the pursuit of stability, independence and personal growth, which is particularly influential as a motivator, especially when the individual is encouraged and goal attainment is supported (Hedley et al., 2017). In addition, it has been documented that flexible work arrangements and compassionate supervisors are instrumental in the development of self-efficacy and psychological resilience (Scott et al., 2021). Similar to the obstacles that study participants had to overcome, the participants in this study showed evidence of significant internal motivation and coping strategies. The assessment of their self-regulation, perseverance, and goal-directedness, illustrates once more the extent to which work settings need to develop and liberate, rather than constrain, neurodiverse individuals.

Table 5. Presentation of superordinate theme 5

No.	Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
5	Growth and Self-Development	Personal and Professional Growth Journey Toward Self-Improvement

**Superordinate Theme 5. Growth and Self-Development**

Growth and Self-Development focuses on the role that work plays in helping autistic middle adults grow as individuals and professionals. For them, having a job is not just about making money, it's a way to be better at something, gain confidence, and find out what you're good at. Many of them shared ways that their work experiences helped them understand themselves better, learn new things, and strive for bigger goals in life. Through their jobs, they are still working to grow, be more independent, and work toward the best version of themselves. This superordinate theme has been subdivided into

two (2) subordinate themes: personal and professional development and pursuit of self-improvement.

**Subordinate Theme 5.1. Personal and Professional Growth**

The participants shared the fact that they really want to grow as a person and a worker through their jobs. For some, having a job provides them with a sense of purpose and direction. It's a way to work for their dreams, to enhance their skills and eventually, to be successful in their own way.

For others, the workplace is also a place to find out about themselves and develop their skills. Some of the participants said that they

are still learning to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. They shared how making mistakes helps them to learn, and how every day on the job, they have a chance to do better. Whether it be to improve their communication, gain confidence or handle stress, they are constantly working on being the best version of themselves. According to Smith and Johnson (2021), the employees often view their jobs as more than a means for making a living. Their research showed that young professionals in particular look for personal and professional development in their work experiences. Participants expressed having a job gave them a sense of identity and purpose, allowing them to work for the long-term goals, develop critical skills and build self-confidence.

Clarence (P2) shared that he wants to unlock his full potential not just in his work, and but also who he is as a person:

*"For this one, for this job, I want to ano... I want to aim for reach everything in heights and I want to unlock my potential, that I want to unlock whoever I am. And I want to accept this stage of this... this working period and I want to be global competitive and I want to be the best." (P2) [195-198]*

["For this job, I want to aim to reach great heights and unlock my potential, to discover who I truly am. And I want to accept this stage of my working period, be globally competitive, and be the best."]

Clarence's remarkable response truly showcases that there is indeed, an internal drive, a burning desire for self-actualization and a more holistic kind of personal development. He goes beyond simply wanting to do a good job. He states that he wants to transform, to know who he is, to capture the transformative potential of work, and to reach his fullest potential. Ryan and Deci (2021) explain that people are innately driven to engage in activities that are consistent with their sense of identity and purpose. At the heart of their research are the modules of how work can provide a unique context for holistic work development, in which people seek not only just performance, but work for self-discovery and individual fulfillment.

Meanwhile, Samuel (P5) came to the point

that truly knowing yourself is the first step to doing well at work. For him, self-awareness is not simply something that is helpful, but the key to growing and improving, and dealing with everyday challenges.

*"Eh syempre, ang kauna unahan edi yung kilalanin ko araw araw ng mabuti yung sarili ko. Pag merong di ako maintindihan sa sarili ko, anuhan ko na lang din yung sarili ko. Kasi pag di ko inintindi yung sarili ko, hindi ako magiging better. Hindi man ako best, at least, everyday nag wowork out ko na pagbutihin ko yung aking trabaho. (P5) [640-645]*

["Of course, the first thing is to really know myself well every day. If there's something I don't understand about myself, I try to understand it. Because if I don't understand myself, I won't become better. I may not be the best, but at least every day I work to improve my job."]

There is remarkable self-awareness on David's part in his appreciation of his personal and professional development, as noted in Samuel's reflection. He recognizes that knowing the self is not an event, it is a process, it is ongoing and one that suggests a continuum of self-exploration. Self-awareness helps people chart a course, an internal journey; it helps them tune into and notice their internal levels, and adjust their behavior to their core values, and effects change that is self-regulated and enhances the person's values, as well as the person's and the organization's value, and the various levels of their professional development.

Roland (P3) and Ernie (P4) also talked about the skill building process that includes software acquisition for use in their jobs:

*"Pagdating naman sa mga skills na natutunan ko siguro... more on excel saka ibang software...kasi yun naman ang ginagamit nila." (P3) [282-284]*

["When it comes to the skills I've learned, it's probably more on Excel and other software because that's what they use."]

*"Well, I have the chance to memorize the software... the application that we use in the computer" (P4) [507-512]*

["Well, I have the chance to memorize the software and applications that we use on the computer."]

These reflections provide insight into the acquisition of practical skills, especially digital literacy and software skills, that become very relevant in workplace learning for both of them. Both participants reiterate the need to adapt to and master various resources, including Excel and industry-specific software, not just as an expectation, but as an obligation to execute their roles effectively. Ng and Feldman (2021) highlight the growing focus of employers on the development of digital and technical skills, particularly regarding an employee's ability to adapt to new demands and their employability prospects in the long term. Employees, who consistently pursue skills development of a digital and software nature, also report enhanced performance and job satisfaction.

This willingness to adapt came with a pragmatic understanding of their limitations, of which Archer (P1) described as restricted access to certain tasks until more training is provided:

*"There are task that I'm not authorized to do... but they told me, I only... I am only... they are going to teach me this task after I am allowed to." (P1) [78-82]*

["There are tasks that I'm not authorized to do, but they told me that they are going to teach me these tasks after I am allowed to do them."]

When assigned duties are done in an orderly manner, when there is transparency and has the guise of growth, it can still be a source of power. It provides for gradual mastery without overwhelming the employee.

Clarence (P2) went on to contextualize this in terms of evolving technologies in the workplace, stating:

*"Right now, due to the automation. We embrace AI. And I want to unlock the skills in... Microsoft Excel, since 2019 because of the Excel... because it requires the... the skill to unlock the potential." (P2) [199-205]*

["Right now, due to automation, we embrace AI, and I want to unlock my skills in Microsoft Excel, since 2019, because Excel requires the skill to unlock its potential."]

Participants also confronted personal challenges with honesty, as Samuel (P5) admitted:

*"Based on my experience I realized I have many weaknesses like... social interaction...*

*comprehension... to the point that I ask our leader again and again... so yun po yung weakness ko..."(P5) [593-595]*

["Based on my experience, I realized I have many weaknesses, like social interaction and comprehension, to the point that I ask our leader again and again. So, that's my weakness."]

Samuel's frank admission of his weaknesses in particular with social interaction and comprehension shows a high degree of self-awareness and humility, both of which are important for personal and work environment growth. According to Brown and Grant (2021), admitting personal limitations is an important part of growth-oriented mindsets in the workplace. Their research draws attention to the fact that employees who openly recognize and address their areas of development, such as communication, comprehension or interpersonal skills, tend to demonstrate increased levels of resilience, adaptability and learning motivation.

In spite of all these hurdles, Samuel (P5) based his persistence on his own sense of purpose, which he put it thus:

*"Sa totoo lang, sa ano po namin, dapat alamin ko po araw-araw yung aking ano, motto po sa buhay. Kung ano talaga ang hangarin ko po sa pagtatrabaho ng automotive."(P5) [593-595]*

["Because, honestly, in our job, I need to know my motto in life every day, what my real goal is in working in the automotive industry."]

A clear sense of purpose can be a stabilizing factor for employees with an ASD, and can give meaning to day-to-day tasks, as well as provide motivation during stressful or socially challenging times.

According to Thorpe et al. (2024), autistic adults are faced with a range of barriers and enablers in the workplace that directly affect their growth and self-development. However, the research also identified key facilitators such as autism-aware leadership, structured and predictable work environments, peer mentorship and individualized support systems which are significant contributors to the personal and professional growth of autistic employees. Similarly, Jade et al, (2024) stated that a lot of autistic individuals struggle in the workplace, either unemployed or they

work in a job that didn't match their true skills, qualifications and potential. Even for those who are working, there is little understanding of how they grow and advance their careers. And having a strong workplace support like job coaching, clear communication, and inclusive policies would help autistic employees to improve and gain confidence and move forward.

In addition, Loison (2023), in her literature review of high-functioning autistic employees, she stated that access to predictable routines, clarity of expectations and empathetic supervision has been strongly correlated with personal/professional growth. The study highlighted that when autistic workers are kept in surroundings where they will be valued for their strengths and individualized to receive the correct support, they are this much more likely to thrive and develop their developmental goals.

### **Subordinate Theme 5.2: Journey Toward Self-Improvement**

Participants described their journey of learning and growing in real life working experiences. Many of them shared the fact that while school gave them basic knowledge, it was on-the-job training that taught them valuable lessons. They viewed each challenge at work as a stepping stone to becoming more skilled, confident and independent. Ryan and Deci (2021) suggest that when people are intrinsically motivated such as a desire for self-improvement or purpose, individuals will be more likely to continue through challenges and they see challenges as an opportunity for growth. These results are in line with the experiences of the participants and show how work-based learning plays a crucial role in the development of competence and character.

Archer (P1) shared his reflection about the importance of experience in learning in addition to school:

*"Well, with enough time... I can do anything because let's be real here... in school they didn't teach you everything okay... what teach you for the job you seek is experience... then learn it with experience." (P1) [83-85]*

["Well, with enough time, I can do anything because, let's be real here, they didn't teach you

everything in school. What teaches you for the job you seek is experience, so learn it with experience."]

The participants did agree that formal education gives people a foundation, but it is in the real world that people really learn, have confidence and are competent. Not only does Archer (P1) suggest self-improvement is a continual journey, but also one that is determined by the difficulties and challenges presented by the world at that time. Eraut (2021) confirms that, the mastery of a skill and the development of a profession through informal learning in the workplace (which is often learning by doing) is critical.

Roland (P3) also noted, how there is more to being on the job than simply the basics:

*"I think yung mga... mas marami pa akong natutunan sa totoo lang... kesa mag basic lang ako... basic skills like excel... ayan mas may nadagdagan ako kahit papaano." (P3) [285-286]*

["I think I've learned a lot more, honestly, than just the basics, basic skills like Excel. I've gained more skills somehow."]

This illustrates the concept of work places as dynamic learning environments where employees obtain practical and higher order skills that may not be attained through the process of formal education. The reflection by Roland is a case in point that illustrates the great need for the continuous development of skills. This is further testament to the idea that self-improvement is often not a matter of one's foundational knowledge but one's ability to tackle various real world challenges. Tynjala (2021) noted that, learning in the workplace creates a unique context in which employees engage in a process of experiential and social learning that fosters both hard and soft skills.

Clarence (P2) also reiterated their preference of imparting their knowledge to others and aiding the new colleagues in learning the task:

*"I want to ano... apply with other applications, okay. So... for example, if there is a new colleague, then I want to help them, whenever we use the tool in existence." (P2) [206-209]*

["I want to apply what I know with other applications, okay? So, for example, if there is a new colleague, then I want to help them

whenever we use the tools that exist.” (P2) [206–209]

This alludes to an important aspect of workplace learning its transfer of knowledge through peer support and mentorship. Clarence's (P2) willingness to help others is in line with a collaborative learning culture in which employees contribute to the collective competence and create an environment of ongoing development. Research by Boud and Lee 2021 focuses on the role of peer learning and knowledge sharing in the development of the workplace. Their study suggests that employees who take part in mentoring and collaborative learning not only consolidate their own understanding but also help make the transition for newcomers easier to the extent that a more inclusive and effective learning environment is created.

Self-improvement encompassed inner growth, for example, developing emotional strength and resilience. Samuel (P5) underlined the significance of working on yourself in order to succeed, even when you are subject to workplace bullying:

*“Kauna-unahan po, syempre sa sarili pa rin po talaga ang una kasi pag hindi ko inayos sa sarili ko, hindi ko rin po mapagbubutihan yung aking trabaho. Yun po kasi yung magiging daan para mapagbutihan ko po yung trabaho. Kahit na minsan nabully din po ako sa work, eh kailangan matuto pa rin ako mag deal.” (P5) [660–664]*

[“First and foremost, of course, you really have to start with yourself because if I don’t fix myself, I won’t be able to improve my work. That’s the way for me to improve my work. Even though I sometimes get bullied at work, I still need to learn to deal with it.”]

The statement illustrates that self-management and emotional resilience are essential in combatting challenges such as workplace bullying. Samuel (P5) articulates the connection between employee well-being and workplace productivity and encapsulates that one needs to address and overcome psychological barriers as much as one needs to develop skills and competencies. Luthans and his colleagues' research in 2021 affirms the relevance of psychological resilience in organizational settings and in particular among

employees who are likely to experience bullying and conflicts within the workplace. An interesting finding of that study is that individuals who cultivate resilience and emotional control report higher levels of job performance and satisfaction, even in the most challenging situations.

Having a job has become a key factor in enabling adults with ASD to experience functional and personal growth. It allows ASD adults to develop new experience and skills, build a sense of confidence, and find purpose. Recent scoping reviews demonstrate that advancement in a person's career is attainable when there are supportive workplace structures (Green et al, 2024). In addition, decades of research on vocational outcomes show that people with ASD are better off both functionally and psychologically when job positions are sustained (Smith et al., 2022). Interventions, such as career development customized planning and work readiness coaching, increase retention in the targeted jobs, raise aspirations for career advancement, and increase the psychosocial wellbeing of members of the ASD population (Connor et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2020). Participants reported that their jobs enabled them to learn about themselves and significantly increased their drive to pursue their goals, which proves that employment had a positive impact on their personal development.

### **Proposed Program**

Addressing the challenges of middle-aged adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in workplace settings, the existing body of research needs to be acted upon. The challenges noted, including emotion-related difficulties, communication issues, and heightened sensory awareness, point to the requirement to develop specific psychosocial interventions for the promotion of inclusion, wellbeing, and the active work participation of older adults. The ensuing program proposal is designed to address such challenges and provide a sociopsychological framework that is structured, evidence-informed, and tailored to the specific needs of neurodivergent employees.

**Free Workplace Counseling Session for Adults with ASD.** Joyce et al (2016) saw that when employees get access to counseling services and psychological aids, their mental health improves, they tend to stay at work longer, and they report more job satisfaction. Focused help may be more necessary for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Even in adult ASD cases, anxiety, depression, and social isolation occur, especially when they perceive isolation in work environments. (Hedley et al. 2018). Because of ASD, adults have unique emotional and communication challenges. These challenges have been shown to be alleviated by counseling, and at the same time increase the functional capacities of the individual and, more importantly, their integration into the workforce.

**Neurodivergent Worker Skills Coaching.** Studies have shown that workplace coaching and targeted skill-building initiatives are particularly beneficial for neurodivergent employees. Hayward et al. (2020) emphasize the value of autism-specific employment support programs and their substantial impact on workplace communication, social participation, and task management of ASD adults. Additionally, Austin and Pisano (2017) maintain that when neurodivergent individuals are provided with systematic instruction that caters to their particular processing and struggle, there is an enhancement in organizational productivity at both individual and collective team levels, including greater innovation and diversity in teams.

**Flexible Work Arrangement Policies in Local Companies.** Studies have shown that flexible work arrangements can benefit neurodivergent employees. Scott et al. (2017) emphasized the need for specific modifications to work environments that take sensory sensitivities into account, as these modifications can help improve job performance, comfort, and mental health for individuals with ASD. Additionally, Baldwin et al. (2014) found that flexible work schedules and work locations were associated with lower stress and greater job longevity among autistic adults. We study, additionally, the need for inclusive design in

workplaces and the positive impact on organizational performance and employee satisfaction from an ethical perspective.

The aim of this proposed program is to close the chasm between research and practice by fostering the application of the principles of inclusivity, support, and well-being to middle-aged employees with ASD. With sustained effort, the workplace can become a space where ill-regular people are appreciated, empowered, and provided with the opportunity to flourish.

## Conclusion

This research studied the working experience of middle aged adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Batangas Province. Conclusions were drawn from the case narratives of the participants.

### a) *Resilience in the Face of Challenges*

The participants maintained personal resilience and determination in overcoming workplace challenges. Despite misunderstandings, social isolation, and other environmental stressors, the participants adapted and persevered, demonstrating an immense commitment to the dual goals, and to the sustainable growth of their employment and self.

### b) *Success Beyond Task Completion*

The workplace success of individuals with ASD extends beyond the achievement of a particular task. Emotional stability, social adaptability, and mental wellness are vital. As such, participants expressed the significance of being valued and accepted in the workplace, as this was crucial to their success, in addition to meeting job expectations.

### c) *Desire for Fairness and Respect*

The participants were not advocating for special treatment. Rather, a strong concern for fairness and equitable treatment was apparent. Additionally, participants expressed a desire to be recognized for their abilities, as the need for equity communicated the case participants' need for dignity and self-worth in the workplace.

### d) *Impact of Supportive Environments*

The emotional safety and confidence of participants was positively influenced by the empathy, kindness, and understanding of

colleagues and supervisors. Supportive workplace relationships aided stress buffering, and the variance in their daily work experiences was crucial.

*e) Role of Encouragement and Small Wins*

The recognition of success and small encouragements increased the self esteem and professional motivation of participants. These instances increased their confidence in what they could achieve, and as a result, increased the activity in what they were doing.

*f) Potential to Thrive with the Right Support*

The participants demonstrated their ability to thrive and make significant contributions with the right adjustments and a positive environment. Their success highlighted the need to create supportive inclusive frameworks that address and accommodate the needs of the neurodiverse.

*g) Importance of Embracing Neurodiversity*

Valuing neurodiversity in inclusive workplace practices did not only help individuals with ASD, but also enhanced the entire organizational culture. Neurodiversity, when embraced, enhances the culture of the workplace by promoting inclusive, humane, and socially responsive cultures and practices that utilize the lost potential of the human workforce.

These conclusions showed that individuals with ASD can thrive in the workplace given that there are obstacles, and that environments are supportive of inclusivity, respect, and understanding.

## Recommendation

The study outcomes detailed the experiences of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the employment sector. The researchers noted that these individuals presented with pronounced difficulties regarding communication, social engagement, sensory regulation, and the management of emotions. These experiences frequently culminated in the feelings of exclusion, misunderstanding, and the stagnation of personal and professional developmental opportunities.

To promote the inclusion of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the

workplace and to improve their overall wellbeing, the researchers put forth the following extensive recommendations. These are intended to help employers, mental health professionals, policymakers, and advocacy groups address these ways to provide the support that adults with ASD need to thrive in the professional environment, by creating supporting environments, discussing inclusion and best practices, and making it possible to provide long-term support systems to enable adults with ASD to thrive:

1. **For individuals with ASD**, it is important that their individual differences are embraced rather than pathological. Having all essential support, engaging in activities, and being aware of their potential, they have an opportunity to succeed in their careers and lead productive lives.
2. **For employers and organizations**, it is important to establish inclusive practices that promote diversity, enhance team collaboration and productivity in the workplace by recognizing and leveraging the strengths of neurodivergent individuals.
3. **For mental health professionals**, for example, "it is important to offer interventions that are relevant to the workplace and address the emotional and psychological challenges adults with ASD face in the workplace."
4. **For families, colleagues, and communities**, it is important to advocate, support and engage in efforts to create understanding, empowerment, and inclusive environments for individuals with ASD.
5. **For society at large**, it is important to create awareness and embracement of neurodiversity. Creating a future in which people with ASD are able to people with dignity in the workforce and have an autonomous life is not simply a matter of government policy but a test of humanity.

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