

**Revisiting Organisational Change Research: On the Border of Autistic Jobseekers and  
Workplace Interactions - An Agency - Positioning Theory Lens**

**BAM Track: Organisational Transformation Change and Development**

**Paper type:** Research paper

# **Revisiting Organisational Change Research: On the Border of Autistic Jobseekers and Workplaces - An Agency - Positioning Theory Lens**

## **Abstract**

Despite the plethora of research on organisational change and its emphasis on the role of agency, there is no study to date which has developed an evidence-based participatory research informed framework relating to autistic jobseekers' resilience to fill the gap between change agents and how their experiences within and beyond organisational borders could be conceptualised using a dual agency – positioning theory lens. By using qualitative case study with autistic employees, an Agency - Positioning Theory lens, participatory research design involving 24 autistic jobseekers, this study amplified how staff navigated/made sense of an intersection of job seeking – in-work employment – focus group discussion to amplify key experiences around 1) 'workplace barriers', 2) 'borderisation' and 3) 'inequality'. These amplified and challenged how previous studies' focus on autistic employees and jobseekers' agency role should be understood as a transitional concept of their quest for and retention of work. I draw on the combined group's experiences of borderisation to build a resilience framework highlighting its key contributions to a reconceptualization of organisational change research and the notion of living in and out and across workplace and social group borders. I highlight how this new framework contributes theoretically and practically to Organisational Change, agency and positioning theorising and draw on the criticality of developing wider networks of resilience to address the adverse impacts of borderisation on people and organisations. An agenda for future research is explicated.

**Keywords:** organisational change, positioning theory, agency, autistic jobseekers, resilience

## **1. Introduction**

Despite the availability of a range of Organisational Change theories and models from agency to positioning theories (Barratt-Pugh & Gakere, 2013; Kjaerbeck, 2017; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Harré, 2009), such scholarly proliferation has not caught up with how people's experiences of organisational change across the autistic employee-organisational-support agencies' nexus/border are studied. This lag serves as the study's justification. As such, we do not know how organisations can use staff's agency at each of these borders/border crossings to advance organisational change scholarship. Recent attempts to address this theorising gap have led to my study on how organisations can address autistic jobseekers and employees' challenges as they navigate each of the tripartite borders particularly via two key models. These models include Affirmative Action (Kim & Kim, 2014; Kurtulus, 2012) and Social Justice. Its proponents believe that their judicious application during organisational change can enhance staff's agency (Rawls, 2020). Other theories used in earlier organisational change studies had primarily emphasised on Agency and Positioning Theories. However, previous scholarship's emphasis on the business benefits that both theories are assumed to bring has been at the expense of people navigating the complex challenges within and beyond the earlier identified borders. Therefore, this study seeks to unravel what types of autistic employees and jobseekers' behaviours organisational change professionals/managers need to know to address challenges they encounter at border crossings to enhance individual, group and organisational resilience.

There is a further gap in OTCD research and literature, particularly in how Affirmative Action and Social Justice concepts (Rawls, 2020) are understood and applied in contexts involving autistic people. The current emphasis is on legal compliance and the safeguarding of organisations' reputation when change is being implemented. Such understanding and application deprive already marginalised communities like autistic staff from realising their

fullest agency and positioning. Additional critique focuses on how organisational change literature has followed a rather standardised approach to managers' token gestures at applying workplace models when faced with change (Kant, 2017; Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore, the literature's neglect of the diverse needs of marginalised staff at work or potential staff has provided the research and practical basis for this study on autistic people.

With the help of empirical research this paper is aimed at examining how organisational change practices are experienced by autistic jobseekers as they navigate non-work and work environments that were applying standardised recruitment and selection practices for all candidates. 24 autistic employees and jobseekers provide the study's empirical data. Further, the aim is to build a Resilience Framework that advances our understanding and knowledge on how the research participants conceptualised and practised their agency (Kinman & Grant, 2010) from multiple borders (family, workplace, focus groups) to tackle the challenges encountered as part of the process. The core research question, therefore, is 'what type of resilience framework can be built that will help autistic jobseekers, employees and organisational change professionals to design, implement and manage the challenges faced by staff as border crossers of in and outside-work spaces?' The paper's structured is as follows. Next is the theoretical and research context setting, followed by an insightful critique of two seminal theories and models on organisational change. Then comes the participative design methodology with 24 autistic jobseekers, which is followed by the presentation and analysis of what was found from the border crossings. Future research directions are explicated.

### ***1.1 Research background***

This multidisciplinary area of work tends to draw from a range of scholarships. For example, Özbilgin et al. (2008) highlighted how most UK-based organisations focus on legal compliance when implementing Affirmative Action. However, little or no knowledge of implementing its

recommendations for sustainable change persists (Szatmari, 2019). As such, how staff may experience the extent to which their firms comply with the legalities of Affirmative Action (or not) implementation and beyond is required. This lag calls for the examination of other scholarships beyond the legal realm/border. In 2008, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) survey highlighted significant productivity and management challenges, particularly in businesses that were constantly implementing changes to work practices. Given the difficulties faced, additional CIPD research (2021) ushered a business case for employees' inclusion or agency in organisational change. The Social Justice Model was highlighted as a way of doing so. Despite this recommendation, the application of such a model in the USA was revealed to have led to a 24-billion-dollar loss to firms' productivity (Forbes Report, 2013). This huge loss was attributable to employees' challenging workplace environments triggered by constant changes and the tokenistic gestures to accommodate varying reactions and preferences during change (Kant, 2017). Despite Fuhl's (2020) focus on how companies' moral challenge, the people and organisational challenges, managing people's experiences during change (Hay et al., 2021; Eisenhardt, 1989) and making sense of the nature and scale of the challenges (Mosadeghrad & Ansarian, 2014) particularly from a dual change agency – positioning perspective has never been previously attempted in OTCD research (see next section).

## **2. Organisational Change Theorising**

This paper's two key theories are Change Agency (CA) and Positioning Theory (PT) with supporting references from allied literatures to ascertain the extent to which agency was navigated within and across institutional and non-institutional borders of change. Defined as organisations' attempts to move from a present to a more effective, future state (Cummings & Worley, 2005) or a new course/strategic disposition (Brightman & Moran, 2001), Organisational Change theorising of agency (or agents) of change seems to assume that people

un-challengingly choose and navigate their positions within the change processes (Hay et al., 2021; Kjaerbeck, 2017). While this theoretical assumption aligns with the earlier examined professional, legal literature on Affirmative Action and Social Justice that seeks to increase more diverse representation within organisations (Szatmari, 2019), there are some critical flaws in such argumentation and claims. Positioning Theory also neglects the agency of border crossers such as autistic employees and jobseekers. Therefore, it could be perceived to negate or, at best, water down in a tokenistic manner (Kant, 2017) how they navigate their agency within organisational change situations. This gap has highlighted that an examination of both management and employees' agency reactions to change are needed to develop a more multidisciplinary approach that could enable both groups of staff to become more resilient to deal with the failure that individual and collective negativities of change could bring about. This gap has also pointed to the need to reimagine significant organisational change debates in border crossing ways that challenge not only people's agency and the extent to which they are resilient in dealing with challenges (Hay et al., 2021) but how they also re-position themselves within and outsider organisational boundaries of change. This gap and reimagining are explored further in the following three sub-sections.

## ***2.1 Change Agency***

Change agency and positioning theories are crucial notions in Organisational Change debates. Change agency (Eisenhardt, 1989; Barratt-Pugh & Gakere, 2013) denotes the role played by staff as they seek to exercise influence on change and its outcomes. However, we have previously been reminded of what could go wrong when people are deprived of agency during change (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) particularly when the organisational changes do not account for the marginalised voices of some staff. They have also offered limited clarification why contemporary change professionals and experts' implementation of change management practices in present-day increasingly agency-diverse organisations are

met with failure and consequently, are not contributing to social good. Change agency (Smith & Lewis, 2011) highlights how management are viewed as doing the ‘proper’/right things whilst staff pose ‘obstacles or barriers’ to managers’ change implementation efforts (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362). Such bi-polarisation accounts neglect organisational change implementation’s complexity (Bovey & Hede, 2001) as well as the anxieties (Sanders et al., 2014), the level of commitment or disengagement from change agents (Caldwell, 2003; Barratt-Pugh & Gakere, 2013) and their marginalisation partly because of being different (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021). The next section examines Positioning Theory to see whether such a gap in thinking has been addressed from a theoretical lens.

## ***2.2 Positioning Theory***

Positioning theory (PT), initially developed by Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) and later developed by Harré (2009), James (2010; 2014) and Kjaerbeck, (2017) tried to address the agency problem in how people play a role in the implementation of change. It is assumed that a key characteristic of PT is that people use their positions as a vehicle to communicate in a change situation (Day & Kjaerbeck, 2013). By doing so they are assumed to enhance the power and authority in their role as well as how they could influence organisational and individuals’ cultural values or even their agency (Orlikowsky, 2007). Whilst James (2014) added the strategic element in the way people communicate to enhance their role, Camaioni (2017) deduced that what organisations really lacked when they tried to implement change was the inclusion of the communicative intentions of *all* the potential change agents. However, the way in which employees and management, as agents of change, can effectively add their voices onto change implementation strategies and practices such that they are conducted successively (Hay et al., 2021; Mosadeghrad & Ansarian, 2014), thereby addressing the role communication problem within organisational borders. However, not all agency - positioning theorisation aspects and practical challenges faced by people in organisations have been sufficiently

conceptualised and theorised. I turn my critical attention to a place where this has been lagging: the border of organisational change.

### ***2.3 The Border of Organisational Change Theorising***

Additional attempts to theorise change agency have been captured in other models associated with how workplaces implement change. These include Affirmative Action and Social Justice. Given the lack of scope for this paper to cover all the models, I have chosen two, which highlight the social responsibilities of both management and employees as change agents and, therefore, how their actions could contribute to wider social and organisational good. The foundations of Affirmative Action (AA), can be seen from Civil Rights Act (1964), highlighting how, from an earlier period, scholars and change management experts had recognised that business firms need to comply with equality-to-employment provisions, irrespective of creed, colour, sexuality, gender, race and so on. It highlights facilitating individuals' agency in fair employment change issues (e.g. pay and rewards, role/task performance, training and development) but it also led to firms' adherence to standardisation of such measures, which have been claimed to be tokenistic-ally (Kant, 2017) imposed (Rawls, 2020). Although this is not a call for businesses to act against a range of discrimination, equality gender-based neglect and violence, racial, sexual and religious ostracisation within organisational change discourse, such critique highlights the key challenges to agency theorisation and the need to reposition the debates elsewhere. The Social Justice (SJ) Model, which is a political and philosophical orientation designed to highlight the extent to which change agents can be socially impacted by what happens when their firms introduce transformation of varying types was initially designed to give minorities and marginalised people unfettered access to employment (see the US's National Labour Relations Act, the UK's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the UK's Department of Work and Pension's 'Social Justice: transforming lives' document, 2012) but it has shown the wider social justice

issue relating to change agents' level of involvement especially when their agency and resilience capability are challenged (Paige, 2007). When this happens organisations and individuals' recourse to the Deficit Diversity (DD) Model (trying to be different from the dominant ideology/philosophy) highlights how contested change agency-type theorisation has become. Such an employee fallback to the Deficit Model' highlights the ineffectiveness of employee agency especially when legislative type models such as Social Justice have been managerially imposed, which paradoxically challenges staff's substantive capability to exercise agency. Therefore, these additional challenges faced by businesses and individuals increase the justification to reposition Organisational Change by using a different set of examples and approach to data collection to the ones highlighted and discussed earlier (see next section).

### **3. Research Approach**

Participatory Design (PD) is a research approach that has been used in the Social Sciences, including Management, to study the challenges faced by autistic employees and jobseekers, a socially marginalised and excluded group when it comes to organisational change. It is based on a bottom-up approach, a shared decision-making process that involves both investigative researcher and research population agreeing on the areas to be researched and the possibility of making improvements in aspects found to be lagging (Brosnan et al., 2016; Nicolaidis & Raymaker, 2015). PD has traditionally been used as a research tool to investigate how excluded groups and communities have been treated to gauge their reactions to major changes to work practices. Given the study's interest in staff with autistic conditions and their efforts to be employed and retained in work (Racadio et al., 2014), the selection of PD methodology is appropriate as it is designed to engage such communities in studying how organisations' attempts to implement change provides agency and positioning to staff operating within different border crossings such as in and out-of-work, similar to autistic jobseekers. This aspect

has been unexplored in organisational change situations and therefore needs critical insights and theorising (Weiss et al., 2016). Other researchers have used PD in looking into how new technologies at work are implemented whilst other scholars have used it to explore the mental health issues of staff (Parsons et al., 2011). The earlier theoretical framework's identification of agency and positioning as major aspects in change implementation therefore warrants the use of the PD methodology to investigate the complexity and dynamism of the issues involved (Hedley et al., 2017b) as well as the extent to which standardised hiring practices may have deprived autistic jobseeker border crossers the ability to exercise their agency in effectively positioning themselves within organisational structures and processes to help firms to positively address issues related to agency and positioning in change.

### ***3.1 Selecting the Research Participants***

The study's data collection focal location is a Department of Work and Pensions sub-station in the UK. A group of 24 autistic employees and jobseekers who used its services to find and retain work were contacted with the help of 2 DWP support officers who worked with this group. A focus group of 24 formally diagnosed employees and jobseekers who were classified as highly functioning (90% with secondary education and the Higher National Diploma) and ranging between 18 and 46 years were set up for data collection purposes on how the organisations they approached were implementing changes that would accommodate people with similar conditions. In the group were 7 females and 17 males. All of them have had various jobs in the past ranging from administration to hospitality and retail and had since been actively seeking work, sometimes for up to 10 years (see table below for summary of research sample).

| <b>Participants</b> | <b>Ages</b>             | <b>Genders</b> | <b>Jobs/role types</b> | <b>Experiences</b>        |
|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Autistic jobseekers | Females (18 – 40 years) | Females        | Administration         | Up to 7 years' experience |

|                     |                       |                   |                               |                            |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Autistic jobseekers | Males (20 – 46 years) | Females and Males | Health and social care        | Up to 5 years' experience  |
| Autistic jobseekers |                       | Females and Males | Retail                        | Up to 4 years' experience  |
| Autistic jobseekers |                       | Females and Males | Hospitality                   | Up to 8 years' experience  |
| Autistic jobseekers |                       | Males             | Computing and Technology jobs | Up to 10 years' experience |

**Table 1:** Survey sample

The diversity of the group (Creswell & Clark, 2011) helped in data generation and in conducting the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). A series of monthly meetings took place at the DWP premises as these were familiar to all participants and its relaxed environment was helpful when studying groups of this nature. The meetings took the form of face-to-face and online for those who cannot attend one of the physically held sessions (see below for main methodological aspects).

| Department of Work & Pensions | Change agency elements                                                                                                     | Autism elements                                                                                        | Focus Group elements                                                                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aspect 1                      | Using standardised hiring that complied Affirmative Action & Social Justice Models and depriving autistic people of agency | What are some of the issues you have faced with standardised hiring mechanisms when you look for work? | The way autistic employees and jobseekers experience standardisation practices in hiring        |
| Aspect 2                      | Organisational climate that does not cater for autistic employees and jobseekers' physical and neurodiverse requirements   | Could you tell me about your interactions with other members of the focus group?                       | Autistic employees and jobseekers' interactions with colleagues and organisational environments |
| Aspect 3                      | Accessibility of hiring and retention process support not aligned to agency theorisation                                   | How do other members of the focus group relate to you?                                                 | Autistic employees and jobseekers' preferences and behaviours                                   |
| Aspect 4                      | Capacity to engage with hiring and retention process and to proceed further in the organisation denied                     | What is your experience of finding work online?                                                        | Autistic employees and jobseekers' capability to engage with hiring process                     |

**Table 2:** Methodological aspects

## **4. Results**

This section reports the results and analyses from the survey questionnaire completed by highly functioning autistic participants. The results are thematised in line with research using a Participatory Design and studies that use a focus group method. There are four major themes in total and these reflect the nature of management's actions during change, how the autistic employees and jobseekers experienced them and the actions and responses from both parties. Whilst three of the thematic categories highlight challenges to respondents' agency, the fourth one showed a key element that had been missing in Organisational Change which is resilience. It is combined with the previous themes to build a 'Resilience Framework'.

### ***4.1 Workplace barriers***

The first category is workplace barriers that were faced by the autistic employees and jobseekers when they attempted to transition into and retain employment in a range of organisations across the UK. This type of study has been missing in organisational change, agency and positioning research. Autistic members talked about how they were being forced to navigate through the standardised language, the interview processes and assessments required when they were transitioning jobs. Each of all the 24 autistic jobseekers commented on the scale that management in different organisations were standardising the hiring practices as part of a major organisational change initiative. They also spoke about how they prevented them from getting far in the process. They commented on not being comfortable to deal with such challenges as they considered the organisational environments hostile. They felt the standardised procedures and structures that were being introduced did not cater for their autistic conditions and deprived them of a sense of belonging, inclusion and agency. Consequently, they felt that the extent to which they were able to position their agency in organisations was being further restricted based on the barriers they were experiencing in and out of workplaces. Examples of the challenges were not being able to fit their 'old' skills and interview

competencies to the ‘new’ job descriptions that they saw on the job advertisements. Some of the autistic participants recounted and even identified some line managers of companies that preferred to use new practices such as group interviews and assessment centres, where groups of candidates would be tested at any one time. They considered these practices as unhelpful to their autistic conditions although they could see the potential claims that management could make regarding a desire to keep the process standardised to give a fair, levelled-playing chance to all applicants. This finding corroborates those of Raymaker (2017) regarding the failure of such an autistic community to achieve and progress within the changing nature of the workplace. As such the autistic jobseekers felt that the application of standardisation measures only served to prolong their feeling of being neglected by HRM processes in the guise of achieving overall fairness and equity within hiring. This is in line with Polleux and Lauder et al. (2004) who earlier postulated the need to understand the developmental needs of autistic people to provide the right type of support. Additionally, the jobseekers also felt that the person specifications reinforced preconceived perceptions that employers had of them when they succeeded to go as far as receiving an interview invitation. It therefore appeared that their autism profiles, which they chose to declare to their potential employers as part of the new process did not improve their chances of success (i.e. being hired). Although Hedley et al. (2017b) found a similar development in their research, the autistic jobseekers also mentioned that their inability to thrive when asked how to deal with unpredictable and sudden changes within the workplace simply added to employers’ preconceived misconceptions about their incapability to nurture and address sudden changes to social interactions within employment settings. These incapacities only helped in further disqualifying them from the use to which the standardised HRM practices in general and highlight the tokenistic gesture of the hiring processes of new staff were being implemented. As such, their confidence in actively looking for work was greatly hampered, and this also affected their hope in having a sense of belonging

and participation. However, Hillier et al. (2007) had earlier found that the employment prospects of marginalised people increased if the conditions of employment were appropriate to their specific support needs and Szatmari (2018) and Lai and Szatmari (2019) reinforced the importance of peer/agency support. However, the new standardisation measures did not render such anticipated support thereby denying autistic staff of the ability to position themselves within changing organisations.

#### ***4.2 Borderisation of autistic jobseekers and employees***

The second result is the ‘borderisation of autistic jobseekers’ (relegated to the fringes/borders). Employees and jobseekers felt that their pursuit of work from the margins, as potential change agents of an employment systems that sidelines certain groups (Barnard et al., 2000) was becoming more frustrating. They needed a more socially just society (Rawls, 2020). The acuteness of this ‘borderisation’ awareness caused by unemployment or the anxiety to retain work, has triggered calls for some action to be taken to address such a workplace change related challenge as confirmed by Guerici (2019). Such ‘borderisation’ exacerbated their financial pain and further complicated their behavioral issues as autistic people, who have been denied the opportunities to be a force for good in society. This is despite the moral viewpoints of Affirmative Action adherents (Kim & Kim, 2014), the Social Justice theorisation in diversity studies and the promises of agency and positioning in change management research. Although Bardoel et al. (2014) had earlier intimated that organisations and society expect autistic and other fringe-habiting communities to adapt to standardisation measures and practices both in life and workplaces, as if they were like other people, the study’s participants felt that despite their attempts to adapt to managers’ adopted standardisation of practice, the new measures were more ‘borderising’ than what their non-autistic peers felt/experienced. Again, they felt being discriminated against as Lauder et al. (2001) referred to such treatment as tantamount to an agent’s self-neglect whilst O’Brien et al. (1999) even talked about change agents being

victimised despite the CIPD's (2021) claims to inclusion. They felt that being 'borderised' from opportunities at work put them in a precarious situation (Iris et al. 2010) and consequently negatively impacted on their ability to demonstrate any agency inside and outside organizational and theoretical borders. This impacted their resilience mitigation skills (Abrams et al., 2002) as they felt abandoned to navigate the additional challenges in social, legal and other borders they had to face.

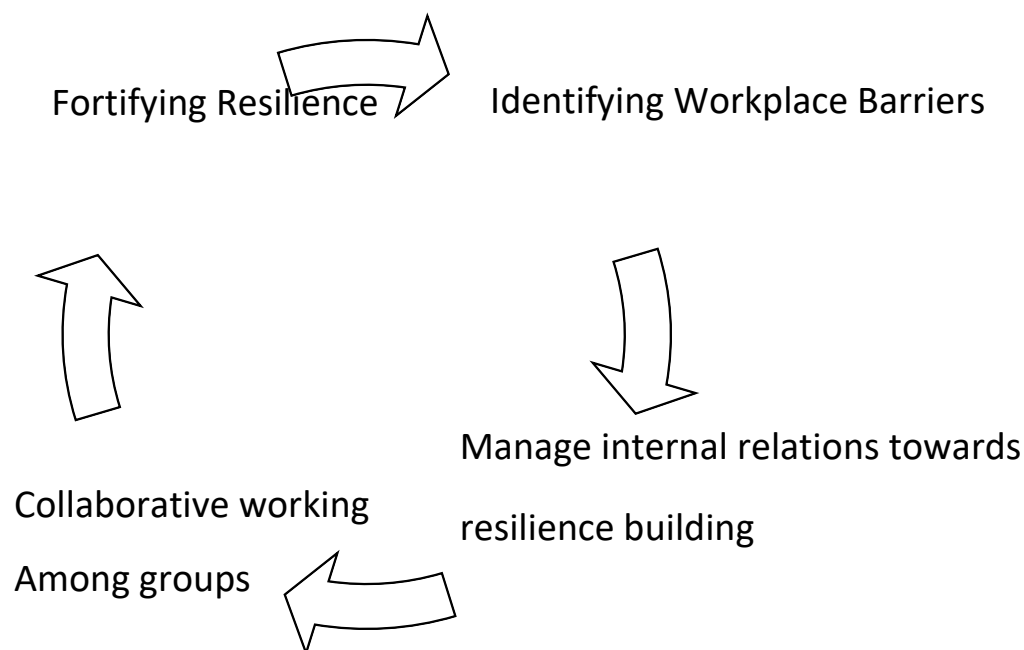
### ***4.3 Inequality***

Inequality is the third result. This was shown in how autistic members highlighted how their lack of employment increased their financial plight despite England's (2009) call for equitable rewards. This finding is also contrary to Hillier et al.'s (2007) claims that communities whose agency to contribute were 'borderised' developed positive self-esteem but only when they were found in a supportive environment of like-minded members. The study's third finding concurs with similar research results from Ngoasong and Groves (2016) who found that 'borderised' communities such as those studied here stood a greater chance of being stigmatised when they look for or try to retain work despite earlier propositions that an autism ecosystem could bring about some hope of better treatment (Nicholas et al. 2018). What the study's first three results show is that 'borderised' communities had greater difficulty in finding work especially in organisational change environments where standardisation of hiring practices is the norm and tokenism is prevalent (Kant, 2017). Therefore, some additional support including autistic people in not only the research but also how change management processes are implemented in a way that advocate for greater agency and effective positioning is required (Nicolaidis et al., 2015b; Kaboski et al., 2017). Despite such a need, a resilience challenge awaits.

### ***4.4 Resilience Framework***

Such type of support was unexpectedly found in the study's fourth result which is the capacity to be resilient in the fluidity of organisational and non-organisational borders. A 'Resilience

Framework’ (or RF) is built out of this to help changing firms mitigate the resilience challenge to change implementation. This framework is proposed because the autistic employees and jobseekers had said that their experiences of the new standardised hiring practices had only succeeded in relegating their and positioning agency further down the organisational change hierarchy. They felt they needed to be resilient to resolve the agency ‘borderisation’ caused by the brick-walls and, as such, the framework identifies activities that would help address change agency ‘borderiation’ and thereby strengthen resilience namely by 1) identifying the workplace barriers, 2) managing internal relations toward resilience, 3) collaborative working among groups, leading to ‘Resilience Framework’ to maintain, and sustain resilience behaviours (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Resilience Framework

The first set of activities is that Organisational Change experts and professionals should work closely with employment advisors, disabled communities, Social Care and line managers (all border crossers) to set up periodic sessions with the aim of identifying workplace barriers that pose threats to active agency and effective positioning within organisational change

implementation. Such a two-to-three-day quarterly activity will provide the space for the voices of all stakeholders to be heard and, more importantly, contribute to surfacing the taken-for-granted assumptions about how differently abled people see and experience the implementation of standardisation measures in organisational change. These practical set of measures are aimed at developing the resilience of autistic people, given that this element and the extent of their agency marginalisation has been missing in Organisational Change and even diversity literature and models. The predominantly legal propositions, reputation enhancement and moral prerequisites of diversity scholarship and the agency-based theorisation of Organisational Change has been found from the findings of this study not to have created the environmental space for greater organisational and social inclusion as valuable contributions from ‘borderised’ communities have been missed due to standardisation of change initiatives.

The second set of activities seeks to manage workplace relations, particularly within and among groups, as border crossing points of interaction between disabled people, including autistic employees and jobseekers, organisational leaders and change managers. The models examined here have demonstrated leaders and managers’ desire to follow Northhouse’ (2010) proposition that leaders know how best to lead, and the reinforcement of Positioning Theory characteristics of power, authority and management voice not only serves to reinforce tokenism in workplaces but also the legitimisation of leadership in organisational change environments. The range of support (such as coaching, counselling and mentoring) from not only the traditional employment support and care workers helping people transition into and retain work but also those in organisational management and leadership roles is conspicuously missing for autistic communities seeking employment in changing environments. A shift from Organisational Change experts viewing professionals and experts conceptualising disability from standardised diversity perspectives to one that focuses on the lived agency experiences of disabled communities is being called for. Secondly, the activities and the shift also include the

development of leaders, HRM professionals and line managers to include the voices of the less powerful and influential in a revised version of Organisational Change's Positioning Theory. Such theoretical adaptation also implies that agency becomes more meaningful and inclusive as other's preferences, viewpoints and aspirations will be included as wished for previously by Cooper et al. (2013) and Kuchinke (2010).

Thirdly, the framework calls for greater collaborative and flexible working that accommodates more diverse backgrounds. Such adaptation involves the requisite training and development sessions that attempts to shift the standardised thinking/mentality of implementing new hiring procedures to one that is more humane and psychologically friendlier. This enables the anticipated transition from unemployment to employment retention and workplace and societal inclusivity. In essence, the development of these behavioural and procedural adaptation hubs in different organisations can then feed into a collective hub of organisationally, managerial and employee-networked hubs that will pool their perspectives, socio-cultural orientations and experiences for the inclusion and welfare of all border crossers.

Fourthly, the framework makes a clarion call for the fortification of resilience around autistic communities and disabled people seeking or retaining work under changing hiring and retention practices and contexts. To this end, the introduction of new standardisation hiring and job retention practices should go hand in glove with the introduction of organisational structures and procedures that are resilience orientated and sensitive to staff's diversity of requirements and needs. Previous Organisational Change studies have neglected the magnitude and complexity of the exclusion problem caused by management's introduction of standardisation hiring policies and procedures, which my 'Resilience Framework' is attempting to address and resolve. This resolution is tantamount to a reimagining of theoretical aspects of Organisational Change and therefore a repositioning towards the nexus of the border crossings and their resilient fortification. Such repositioning includes a recognition of a new

set of activities that need to be involved if successful change involving a diversity of staff is to be achieved. It is by combining the four activities within an integrative framework of resilience development for all stakeholders that workplace inclusion, financial belonging, the desire to contribute to life, society and work environments and a sense of human dignity become a more realistic prospect for all (see Table 3 below for a comparative analysis of theories, the study's results and contributions made).

| Theoretical aspects                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Results                                                    | Similarities & Differences                                                                                                                                                                           | Contributions to Organisational Change                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Agency</b><br>a) Emphasis on staff roles<br>b) Managers doing what is right<br>c) Staff perceived as barriers to change                                                                                                                                                                   | 1. Workplace barriers<br>2. Borderisation<br>3. Inequality | <b>Similarities:</b> none<br><br><b>Differences:</b> jobseekers considered second-class workers and organisational change citizens                                                                   | 1. Autistic employees and Jobseekers experience lack of agency in Organisational Change studies                                                       |
| <b>Positioning</b><br>a) Positioning as communication channels<br>b) An avenue of influence and exuding authority on other members<br>c) Non influencers' voices are sidelined                                                                                                               | 1) Workplace barriers<br>2) Borderisation<br>3) Inequality | <b>Similarities:</b> none<br><br><b>Differences:</b> jobseekers' positioning not considered in Organisational Change environments; needing for greater diversity & inclusion                         | 1. Need to widen Positioning Theory to include autistic employees and jobseekers' agency and positioning experiences in Organisational Change studies |
| <b>Affirmative Action:</b><br>a) Organisations provide equal access to work<br>b) Organisations provide equal access to reward and retention<br>c) Organisations provide conducive work environment and culture<br>d) Organisations legally comply with diversity and employment legislation | 1. Workplace barriers                                      | <b>Similarities:</b> none<br><br><b>Differences:</b> jobseekers' experiences of accessing work; perceived inequality; jobseekers' experiences of organisational climate as inconducive to well-being | 1. Recognition of unequal position power in Agency theory                                                                                             |
| <b>Social Justice:</b><br>a) Minorities should access                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 2. Borderisation                                           | <b>Similarities:</b> none                                                                                                                                                                            | 1. Unemployment and underemployment borderisation - a form of                                                                                         |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>employment without difficulty</p> <p>b) Organisations morally and legally obliged to comply</p> <p>c) Staff should be appointed based on merit</p> <p>d) Organisations to avoid tokenistic hiring</p>                                                           |                             | <p><b>Differences:</b> serial unemployment or underemployment, lack of moral prudence, hiring as tokenism, standardised job descriptions and person specifications used in staff appointments.</p>                        | <p>Organisational, Social and Positional Injustice</p> <p>2. Standardising hiring and retention deny the agency of autistic employees in Organisational Change</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <p><b>Deficit Diversity:</b></p> <p>a) Individuals can choose to be different from dominant organisational philosophy/ ideology</p> <p>b) Irrational application of diversity initiatives could breed conflict, absenteeism, poor performance and productivity</p> | 3. Inequality               | <p><b>Similarities:</b> autistic jobseekers seen as different from other applicants</p> <p><b>Differences:</b> standardised hiring triggered range of adversities - socio-cultural, economic and borderisation issues</p> | <p>1. Economic inequality – a recipe for Organisational Change implementation disaster: a Deficit Model of change</p> <p>2. Socio-cultural inequality: a second Deficit Model of change</p> <p>3. Borderisation: a third Deficit Model of wider socio-organisational change</p>                                                                                                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 4. The Resilience Framework | <p><b>Similarities:</b></p> <p><b>Differences</b></p>                                                                                                                                                                     | <p>a) The Resilience Framework</p> <p>b) Organisational change - identifying workplace barriers</p> <p>c) joint autistic employees, jobseekers-management resilience border programme</p> <p>d) adapt organisational change, workers and management behaviours and workplace procedures</p> <p>e) develop and embed measures to sustain a resilience border and revisit adversities of and to change</p> |

**Table 3:** Comparative Analysis: Organisational Change, Agency, Positioning Theorising and Research Results

## **5. Discussions and Implications on Repositioning Organisational Change**

What the 'Resilience Framework' provides is a new way of conceptualising/thinking about/repositioning how Organisational Change could help address the agency marginalisation and victimisation experienced by individuals and groups such as autistic employees when faced with new hiring and retention practices. It highlights an important facet that was missing in the Organisational Change literature, which is developing resilience for both management and marginalised communities in a way that enhances multiple change agencies and increases an organisation's change implementation effectiveness. This implies that resilience helps in revisiting organisational change, positioning and agency debates. The four sets of activities involved in such revisiting are namely 1) a diversified and non-standardised approach to organisational change implementation; 2) a revisiting of what disability employability means and the embedding of Positioning theory in organisational change; 3) retraining management for vital behavioural and procedural change and 4) building, sustaining and evaluating staff and management's interrelation borders for strategic resilience and collective benefits. These activities signify not only practical interventions but also four stages of implementing a more inclusive organisational change even in circumstances involving marginalised change agent communities in society.

Previous studies such as Gvaramadze's (2008) had earlier advocated for greater interaction between Organisational Change and People Management professionals and potential employees in an environment that fosters agents' learning, adaptation and development (see Smith & Lewis, 2011; Kjaerbeck, 2017). However, they failed to show how the interpersonal influences of those in leadership and management roles (like Positioning theory - Harré, 2009) can be integrated with those in non-management roles within increasingly changing workplace environments. Likewise, Kim and Kim's (2014) and Rawls' (2020) seminal diversity theorisation have focused mainly on the legality of implementing change inclusion initiatives,

but they did not consider how doing so can be experienced by marginalised agents of change. Additionally, the heavy reliance on management's use of Northouse's (2010) leader-subordinate praxis within change situations like the one explained in this study have highlighted tokenism issues (Kant, 2017) and consequentially deprived excluded groups from contributing their fullest potentials. The study's framework shows how traditional and out-of-date these organisational change practices have become and the need to recalibrate/reimagine and reposition the change discourse to include the propositioned four activities encapsulated as 'Resilience Framework'.

The four activity areas as well as the four themes (results) also challenge the dualistic approach to Organisational Change and agency theorisation (Kjaerbeck, 2017; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) and the way the legal praxis of Social Justice and Affirmative Action models are implemented. The first activity area introduces the concept of non-diversification, or the change agency marginalisation caused by organisational change initiatives to help managers and leaders in organisations to recognise some of the key contributors to the negative impacts felt by staff in a changing organisational situation. Such a theoretical angle helps organisational leaders to be better guarded against standardisation and to be more sensitive to the individual and wider societal impact of their actions if they should continue to apply the Affirmative Action model and Positioning theory without taking situational dynamics and agents' complicated needs into consideration. The second theoretical dimension is calling for a re-conceptualisation of what disability means more broadly and how a more change agency strengthening set of measures to Organisational Change discourse could avert the harm caused by management's standardisation measures/approach to change with certain change agents (Szatmari, 2019) depriving them of diversified agency (Kinman & Grant, 2010) and more effective positioning in the change process. The third theoretical addition is a reconsideration and recalibration of the types of training and development programmes for both management

and staff if they are to be truly agency inclusive as Rawls (2020) had propositioned. The fourth theoretical addition is a revisiting of organisational change agency theorisation that includes resilience to enhance overall seamless border crossings within and outside organisations, highlight the barriers and agency marginalisation that can be adversarial to successful change implementation. Kurtulus (2012) had earlier only identified management imposition and employees' resistance as part of such brick-walls without recognising the wider socio-organisational needs, requirements and preferences of change agents such as autistic staff.

Given my framework's departure from the established body of knowledge on organisational change agency and the call to reposition the afore debates within resilience work, I also propose a programme of activities to help ascertain the effectiveness of my proposed 'Resilience Framework'. The first aspect involves researcher-Organisational Change-agent collaboration to identify the effectiveness of change initiatives in diverse environments by assessing their impact on staff and managers, the longevity of the success and the sustainability of the initiatives in the strategic future. The second aspect of the monitoring and evaluation is a cyclical qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the Organisational change initiatives in terms of change agent performance, productivity, retention, reward, motivation, inequality and turnover. The third aspect is the use of micro and macro-Organisational change stories to judge the individual, group/team and multiple change agents' reactions, performances, motivational inclinations and even constraints to what may have or may not have organisationally changed. The fourth and final aspect is introducing a comprehensive 'Resilience Framework' which includes an examination of the longer-term organisational conditions/climate to evaluate the extent of its conduciveness for employees, potential employees, management, customers and other stakeholders and the extent to which it can proffer attitudinal, procedural and behavioural change for personal, group and organisational benefits. The four aspects should be used interactively as a cyclical set of stages for the conceptualisation, design, implementation and

evaluation of Organisational Change. In this way, a more complex, inclusive and dynamic Organisational Change can be enhanced instead of the standardised measures that are still predominant in the Organisation Change debates, which are depriving some communities in society of valuable contributions and more effective agency and positioning within change.

The ‘Resilience Framework’ has a research implication which does not only imply that a new type of conducting research into Organisational Change other than the dialectic approach to study what managers do or fail to do but a new way of studying the longer-term impacts of change initiatives on individuals as well as wider society.

## **6. Conclusion and future research**

This paper has examined significant research and debates on Organisational Change, Positioning (Harré, 2009) and Agency theories (Eisenhardt, 1989; Barratt-Pugh & Gakere, 2013). Although it has found from the debates that the role of agents and their positions within firms experiencing change appear to be the predominant line of organisational change discussion, it has also been shown how management’s use of the two major models of Affirmative Action and Social Justice emphasise firm’s reputational and legal compliance (Rawls, 2020). This predominant business case for change justification has also left a huge void in terms of the use of hiring practices that facilitate the inclusion of marginalised communities such as autistic jobseekers. Given the dearth in Organisational Change scholarship on how People Management and Change experts/professionals can help address the wellbeing and welfare requirements of marginalised change-agent communities such as autistic jobseekers, this paper investigated how the practical implementation of new, standardised hiring policies and procedures on such a group further reinforced their marginalisation/ ‘borderisation’. To unravel the nuanced nature of the challenges, this paper used Participatory Research Design Methodology to survey a selected group of 24 high-functioning jobseekers on the autism spectrum. Three significant results namely 1) ‘workplace

barriers', 2) 'borderisation', 3) 'inequality' and 4) 'resilience development' highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by autistic people. This led to the development of a 'Resilience Framework' to help mitigate the individual, group and organisational change-wide threats.

Future research can focus on bridging the gap between individual and group/team and organisational contributions to resilience development in both internal, external and conceptual borders of organisational change, agency and positioning theorising and issues around Affirmative Action and Social Justice for autistic and non-autistic people combined. However, there is a theoretical implication in doing so. The study has repositioned organisational change beyond the leader-as-change-implementer (Northouse, 2010) to a more stakeholder model that includes all border crossers during change implementation initiatives. Such a shift in conceptualisation suggests that previous and existing models on Organisational Change discourse need not fall back onto the Deficit Model of Change whenever resistance and conflicts surface in the design, (action) implementation, monitoring and evaluation of organisational change (see 4 sets of activities). Future research should include additional models on border crossers during change. Future research directions could also include empirical tests on each of the framework's activities in international contexts to ascertain any additional areas needed in advancing change agency, positioning, and border crossing theorising and practice in and outside organisational boundaries...

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