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Bridges and gatekeepers: Employees' willingness to refer qualified candidates on the autism spectrum

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Abstract

Recruiting neurodiverse talent has increasingly featured on the organizational diversity agenda, yet recruitment practices geared toward locating and attracting neurodivergent candidates remain understudied. While research and practice have shown that employee referral is one of the channels through which a significant part of new talent is recruited, little is known about employees' willingness to refer qualified social contacts who are neurodivergent. We address this limitation by investigating employees' willingness to refer highly qualified candidates on the autism spectrum and some conditions under which they are more or less likely to refer such candidates. We explore these aspects in a study of working individuals, using a mixed-method approach. The quantitative analysis shows that disclosure of an autism condition to potential referrers might pose some advantage, in that it increases the likelihood of being referred, but this advantage accrues only to male candidates. Furthermore, cues that hint at the social dimension of the "ideal worker," commonly used in job recruitment materials, are the strongest deterrent for referrers. The qualitative analysis of the reasons behind decisions to refer sheds light on some mechanisms that might explain these findings.

KEYWORDS
diversity, neurodiversity, recruitment, referrals

1 | INTRODUCTION

Alex is a highly qualified professional employed in a position below their qualification. Recently, Alex started inquiring among social contacts about a more suitable position, if any would open at their workplace. On one of these occasions, Jo, who has known Alex for a while, has a relatively good understanding of Alex's skills and whose organization is currently recruiting, remarks that there are times when they would be hesitant to refer Alex. Alex wonders if disclosing their autism condition to Jo and other social contacts might make a difference, and if so, what difference would that be and why.[1]

Alex's dilemma and the difficulties that Alex encounters in finding work that makes full use of their qualifications and skills are shared by many individuals on the autism spectrum (AS),[2] as the employment gap they face is one of the largest among people with disabilities. Recent estimates suggest that about 80% of adults with autism in the United States are unemployed (Eden, 2019) and that the employment rate remains low, about 58%, even among young adults with a high school education (Roux et al., 2015). Across Europe, estimates indicate that less than 10% of adults with autism are in work, primarily in low-paid positions or in sheltered environments (Branger, 2019). Unemployment appears to disproportionately affect individuals with high-functioning autism and above average education (Espelöer

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et al., 2023), which recent statistics in the US estimate to 39–50% and growing due to previously under-diagnosed rates in adults without intellectual impairments (Katusic et al., 2021; Maenner et al., 2023). In the United Kingdom, the setting of our study, the National Autistic Society estimates that only about 16% of working age adults on the AS are in regular full-time employment, with the rate as low as 20% even for individuals at high-functioning level (e.g., Asperger's syndrome).[3] Such high levels of unemployment and underemployment not only have a long-term negative impact on individuals' quality of life and mental health (Heymann et al., 2014; Jones & Wass, 2013) but also represent a great loss of talent for organizations.

As primary sources of employment, organizations are under social and institutional pressure to address these shortcomings, with a review focused on improving the employment prospects of people on the AS launched in early 2023 by the UK government.[4] Yet, tapping into the pool of qualified individuals on the AS is difficult, as these individuals are not only overlooked by mainstream recruiting intermediaries but also reluctant to apply directly to job openings commensurate to their skills, due to difficulties in navigating the application process and fear of discrimination during the recruiting process.

While recent studies have contributed to our understanding of when and to what extent employers discriminate against candidates who disclose disabilities in their application (e.g., Ameri et al., 2018; Araten-Bergman, 2016), another important recruiting channel—referral recruiting—has been overlooked. A recent review of recruitment strategies for neurodiverse talent finds no research related to the role and effects of employee referral on hiring neurodivergent candidates (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). Yet, referral hiring is not only significant, with between 30 and 50% of positions across industries filled via referrals (Fernandez et al., 2000), but also actively encouraged by organizations, often via a bonus system for recommending and helping to recruit qualified employees. Referral hiring could be especially beneficial for candidates with a minority background, including candidates on the AS, who often do not apply to job openings because they do not understand whether their skills match the job expectations or because of difficulties in navigating the application process (Baldwin et al., 2014; Lorenz et al., 2016). Existing research shows that applicants referred by an employee are more likely to apply for positions that match their skills, are evaluated more positively during the recruiting process, and are better integrated into the workforce (Breaugh, 2008; Fernandez et al., 2000; Yakubovich & Lup, 2006).[5]

The present study is the first to investigate how the referral recruiting channel works in the context of neurodivergent candidates by exploring employees' willingness to refer qualified social contacts on the AS. A focus on AS allows us to make several theoretical and practical contributions. First, because the autism condition is hidden and known to others only via voluntary disclosure, it allows us to theorize about the impact of disclosure to potential referrers (as opposed to the formal disclosure to employers) on recruitment chances. Second, cognizant of a shift in skills that employers openly favor, such as leadership, communication, teamwork, ability to influence, and of the inclusion of such skills in most job ads (e.g., Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Newton et al., 2005), we aim to understand whether and how the emphasis on such aspects might influence referrers of AS candidates. Third, because AS is more often associated with men (Cheslack-Postava & Jordan-Young, 2012), it allows us to heed calls for intersectional research in HRM (e.g., Beatty et al., 2019) and to shed light on whether and how gendered perceptions intersect with AS related considerations when deciding to refer a qualified candidate. Finally, by focusing on AS, we answer calls to better understand how individuals with specific disabling conditions (as opposed to individuals with disabilities in general) are viewed and treated in the labor market (Beatty et al., 2019; Ren et al., 2008).

From a practice perspective, a focus on autism is relevant not only because this condition is severely understudied in the human resource literature (Johnson & Joshi, 2016), but also because of the many benefits that individuals on the autistic spectrum could bring to organizations. For instance, evidence shows that AS employees could bring tangible gains in productivity and innovation in various functional areas (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Ernst & Young, 2018). Furthermore, because many of them have STEM-related skills, which currently constitute an area of talent shortage, they could help organizations reduce their talent deficits in this area. Other evidence shows that employees on the AS have several other highly desirable qualities such as honesty, efficiency, precision, and low absenteeism (Baldwin et al., 2014; Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). Last, but not least, the presence of neurodivergent colleagues in an organization could contribute to enhancing that organization's inclusiveness and its reputation for inclusiveness. Thus, the lack of understanding of how the referral recruiting channel works (or does not work) for qualified candidates on the AS might expose organizations to both loss of talent and unfair recruiting practices.

Empirically, the present study draws from a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collected from working individuals to investigate employees' willingness to refer qualified social contacts on the AS, their reasons for referring (or not) such candidates, as well as potential variations in willingness to refer as a function of the candidate's gender and HRM recruitment practices such as job ads. The mixed methods research design allows us to test original hypotheses about willingness to refer AS candidates, as well as to increase the scope of our inquiry by interpreting the quantitative findings more comprehensively, especially given the dearth of research on the topic of employees' reasons for referring social contacts with disabilities. Following recommendations that emphasize the advantages of collecting quantitative and qualitative data as part of the same study and of integrating the analysis (Creswell et al., 2003; Morse, 2003), we first designed our quantitative data collection to test hypotheses about employees' willingness to refer qualified candidates on the AS, as well as whether and how their willingness to refer is moderated by specifics of the job description and by the candidates' gender. Second, we followed mixed methods design recommendations to include open questions (our qualitative data) to allow the respondents to express, in their own words, the reasons why they would refer or not a candidate. Finally, we sequence the data analysis (Creswell et al., 2003) to

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test the predictions of the quantitative models, and then follow with the analysis of the qualitative data. Overall, by integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings, we aim to shed light on the mechanisms behind employees' acting as either bridges or gatekeepers for neurodiverse talent, thus offering organizations an analytical toolkit to help them take more inclusive actions around this recruiting channel.

2 | BACKGROUND AND THEORY

2.1 | Referral hiring

Referrals represent an important channel through which new employees arrive in organizations. Existing research on referral hiring has provided evidence that being referred by a current employee increases the likelihood that a job seeker applies for a job that matches their skills, is considered for an interview, receives more positive evaluations during the interview, and is eventually hired (Breaugh, 2008; Fernandez et al., 2000; Petersen et al., 2000; Yakubovich & Lup, 2006). Furthermore, this research has also shown that referrals are beneficial for candidates with a minority background (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity). Using unique recruiting data from a competitive US technology company, that tracks all stages of the hiring process, Petersen et al. (2000) show that job candidates from four distinct racial minorities receive fewer job opportunities and are less likely to progress through the recruitment processes; however, once a candidate is referred, the race disadvantage is significantly reduced and, for some minorities, it even disappears. Notwithstanding the advantages of being referred, this literature remains relatively silent about the likelihood of employees' referring social contacts who belong to a minority and the possibility that not only employers' discriminatory decisions but also employees' referring behaviors could drive the low rates of minority hiring. These behaviors need not be discriminatory in intent. Yet, to the extent that they systematically exclude qualified minority candidates, they could end up not only precluding organizations from gaining diverse talent but also raising ethical, legal, and reputational concerns for organizations, and perpetuating existing gaps in employment for minority candidates.

2.2 | Referral hiring for job candidates on the AS

To date, disabling conditions have not been examined in the context of referral recruitment, even though theory and related empirical evidence indicate a good connection between these two research streams. Much like racial or ethnic minorities, people with disabilities also represent a minority whose labor market outcomes are substantially poorer than those of individuals with no disabilities, and whose potential referrers could facilitate access to jobs in line with their skills and qualifications. For people on the AS, who are the focus of this study, support via dedicated referring organizations has been shown to have positive outcomes for both candidates and the organizations that employ them (Ernst & Young, 2018; Pisano & Austin, 2016; Remington & Pellicano, 2019).[6] For instance, Remington and Pellicano (2019) show that interns with autism hired via a dedicated program found that the information and support they received helped with the application process, an area of particular concern for candidates with autism (e.g., Lorenz et al., 2016). Access to hard-to-get information about what the job entails and how best to prepare their application are well-known benefits of employee referral (Breaugh, 2008; Fernandez & Weinberg, 1997). Similarly, Pisano and Austin (2016) describe the efforts that SAP made to identify talented AS candidates by working with referring organizations that would know the applicants and their strengths and could encourage them to apply. Although rarely considered as a serious barrier to employment for neurotypical candidates, candidates with AS often lack a realistic awareness of their strengths and therefore do not apply to jobs commensurate to their skills, a situation that leads to both unemployment and underemployment. Finally, EY's initiative to hire AS candidates, which has used not only specialized referring organizations but also existing employees, has shown that neurodivergent employees integrated well and brought tangible benefits such as early problem identification and problem-solving, innovation, and cost reduction on complex projects (Ernst & Young, 2018). While the initiatives mentioned above have also included additional onboarding and learning activities, the role played by referrers in matching neurodiverse talent with organizational demands for such talent is notable. On the part of those recruited, many have joined and remained with their organizations for the long term. As one candidate in Remington and Pellicano's study concluded, "sometimes you just need someone to take a chance on you."

Although a focused endeavor to understand how likely employees are to "take a chance" on a qualified candidate on the AS has not yet been undertaken, research on disability in organizations has advanced an analytical framework useful for exploring the treatment of individuals with disabilities (Beatty et al., 2019; Stone & Colella, 1996). Stone and Colella draw from categorization theories to propose that, once an individual is categorized as having a disability, biased beliefs affect how others interact with the individual and the expectations that they have about that individual's capacity to perform a given job. In the context of recruiting, biased beliefs lead to negative evaluations of people with disabilities in general, as well as of those on the AS (Ameri et al., 2018; Johnson & Joshi, 2016).

While Stone and Colella's framework that links disability status with recruiting outcomes is useful for understanding formal recruiting, its application is less straightforward to referral recruiting, especially for individuals with hidden conditions. More specifically, Stone and Colella's framework and the related empirical studies rest on the assumption that the disability status is known to the decision-makers, disclosed as part of the application process. However, with referrers, this assumption only holds for cases in which a candidate discloses their condition to a potential referrer, but not for cases in which they do not disclose it. Reluctance to disclose is a well-known phenomenon, but its multiple implications for the relationship between people with disabilities and other individuals, especially in the context of recruiting, are under-researched. Furthermore, nondisclosure is a

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realistic option when a disability is not immediately visible, which is the case for several mental and neurodevelopmental conditions, including high functional autism (Elraz, 2018; Johnson & Joshi, 2014). Finally, although not immediately visible as a condition, behavioral characteristics associated with autism, even high functional autism, are not always fully concealable in repeated interactions. In fact, most individuals' search for a diagnostic is often triggered by long-standing difficulties related to social interactions and the presentation of self during such interactions (e.g., Johnson & Joshi, 2016).

The hidden nature of a condition has implications for referral hiring because referrers' decisions can be shaped by the mere observation of behaviors associated with a condition, even in the absence of awareness regarding a formal diagnosis. Alternatively, referrers may possess full knowledge that their contact has a specific condition. While both situations might result in hesitation to refer a candidate on the AS, the question remains whether and how disclosure influences the decision considerations of referrers, and in doing so affects their willingness to refer. The answer to this question is relevant to both people on the AS who struggle to decide whether to disclose their condition to others, as well as to organizations that can benefit from hiring neurodiverse talent. Furthermore, unanswered questions remain concerning the extent to which disclosure effects vary with a person's characteristics such as gender, or are affected by organizational practices. Below we leverage role congruity theory (RCT) and research on the "ideal worker" (Acker, 2006) to advance specific hypotheses about how disclosure, gender, and organizational recruiting practices affect employees' willingness to refer highly qualified candidates on the AS.

2.3 | Role congruity theory and the ideal worker

The concept of social role refers to the set of shared beliefs and expectations that people have about individuals who belong to a particular social group or occupy a certain social position (Biddle, 1986; Eagly & Karau, 2002). One way in which social role has been used in research has focused on explaining the consequences of misalignment between individuals' perceived characteristics and the expectations associated with the roles that the individuals occupy. In particular, role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) proposes that when individuals are perceived as possessing characteristics not congruent with the expectations of a role that they occupy or aspire to occupy observers evaluate them negatively or deny them access to that role.

Although initially developed from a gender perspective, to show how, because of the perceived incongruity between expectations about leadership roles and stereotypical characteristics associated with one's gender, females are less likely to be considered for leadership roles and evaluated more negatively when in that role, RCT has proven useful in explaining other biases in individual evaluation (del Carmen Triana et al., 2024 for a recent review of RCT). For instance, more recent research has shown that, because people have stereotypical expectations about the characteristics of a typical worker in various occupations, representatives of certain groups (e.g., white vs. racial minorities, able vs. people with mental illness, old vs. young) are more or less likely to be considered congruent with those occupations (e.g., Hancock et al., 2020; Koenig & Eagly, 2014a; Rule et al., 2016). Similarly, research on "ideal worker" (Acker, 2006) proposes that people have shared expectations about successful occupants of the employee role and that these expectations include both a productivity and a social dimension. Productivity expectations relate to the ability to be fully dedicated to productive endeavors while at work, no competing responsibilities, total attention to work, and longer hours whenever needed (Acker, 2006). In turn, the social dimension captures expectations regarding how the ideal worker fits the social norms of working in organizations (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998) as well as the sociocultural expectations related to work interactions (Rivera, 2012). Both standards are important and when candidates to the employee roles are perceived as incongruent with these expectations, they are evaluated negatively. Overall, research on role congruity and "ideal worker" complement each other and, in the context of recruitment, can help explain why certain job holders or job applicants are evaluated more or less positively, depending on their perceived congruity with the expectations of the employee role.

Role congruity theory also proposes that the perceived incongruity between a person and a role varies across contexts and that one of the factors that affect the degree of incongruity relates to how roles are defined. Specifically, roles that are more explicitly defined in terms that are not perceived as characteristics of the person will elicit a higher sense of incongruity and will attract more negative evaluations. For instance, Eagly and Karau (2002) propose that the more agentic the description of a leadership role is, the less likely it is for a woman to be cast in that leadership role or to be positively evaluated once she occupies it. This aspect is relevant for studies of recruitment because it suggests that organizational recruiting practices such as job descriptions could, with or without intent, affect the perceived incongruence between job candidates and the employee role by emphasizing characteristics that specific categories of job candidates are perceived as lacking. Furthermore, newer research aiming at expanding role congruity theory suggests that perceptions of incongruity can be heightened or mitigated depending on whether an individual is associated with multiple social categories (e.g., gender and person of color: Hoyt & Simon, 2016; Koenig & Eagly, 2014a). Although still limited, this emerging line of research is relevant for our study in that it offers grounding for exploring whether and how the gender of qualified candidates on the AS might affect employees' willingness to refer them. Overall, role congruity theory and "ideal worker" allow us to theorize about how expectations that observers might have about job candidates who aspire to occupy the employee role in an organization could affect how they evaluate individuals on the AS.

2.4 | How do nondisclosure and disclosure of AS affect referrers?

Hidden disabilities are not immediately detectable and therefore observers are likely to view people with such disabilities as able

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bodies. Individuals who are categorized as able are expected to be in employment and viewed as congruent with the expectations of the ideal worker (Acker, 2006; Foster & Wass, 2013; Koenig & Eagly, 2014a). When able individuals display behaviors incongruent with these expectations, observers are likely to evaluate them negatively, as they attribute the atypical behaviors to that person's inner character. Thus, in the case of a hidden condition such as AS, potential referrers who witness behaviors associated with the condition but are not aware that the person with whom they interact has such a diagnosis are likely to consider the person as neurotypical but with flaws of character such as rude, cold, self-centered, distracted, and so forth, all viewed as antithetical to the ideal worker. These misattributions and some others are a common reality for many neurodivergent individuals, including those on the AS (e.g., Botha et al., 2022). Because these misattributions are viewed as incongruent with the expectations of the employee role, potential referrers would be less likely to recommend such candidates for employment in their organization.

What about having the disability disclosed to one's potential referrer—a dilemma with which individuals on the AS often struggle? Once a disability is disclosed, observers shift toward a new category, i.e., from able person to person with specific disability, and their congruency evaluation changes accordingly. We propose that disclosure of the condition by a qualified job candidate should moderate referrers' initial incongruency evaluation regarding the employee role. This follows from attribution theory, specifically Kelley's discounting principle, which predicts that there will be less attribution of an undesirable behavior to personal characteristics when observers learn about external constraints that caused that behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). We therefore can expect that when the AS is disclosed referrers are likely to discount some of their initial negative attitudes and evaluations that stem from perceived incongruity with the employee role. Research evidence also shows that such discounting is even more pronounced when the cause of a condition is perceived as beyond an individual's control, as it is the case of AS, than when the cause can be attributable, at least in part, to an individual's previous choices (e.g., addiction, lifestyle, preventable accidents: Jones et al., 1984; Reilly et al., 2006; Stone & Colella, 1996). Furthermore, an understanding that some atypical behaviors are the result of a condition and not due to innate undesirable characteristics should alleviate, to some extent, the reputational concern of being seen as associated with someone with a flawed character. Overall, more positive attitudes toward a person tend to be associated with more helping behavior and therefore we expect that referrers will be more likely to want to help the candidate with disclosed AS and to be more willing to refer. Helping behavior is also consistent with evidence from the literature on referral hiring for ethnic and racial minorities (also social categories seen as less congruent with the employee role) which shows that referrers are willing to help these candidates. However, help is only extended to social contacts who are highly qualified and have a good job record (Smith, 2005). Overall, we expect that:

Hypothesis H1. (Nondisclosure penalty): Compared to the situation in which the referrer is aware of the presence of behaviors associated with AS but not aware of a diagnosed disability (nondisclosure), the willingness to refer a qualified candidate is higher when the disability is disclosed.

2.5 | How does the description of the job affect referrers?

Researchers and practitioners interested in organizational inclusion have lately started to call out job analysis and advertising design as areas in need of particular attention, because many standard job descriptions include non-essential criteria and wording that, inadvertently, allude to the "ideal worker" (Acker, 2006; Foster & Wass, 2013). We focus here especially on the social dimension of the "ideal worker," as we expect that this dimension is likely to be particularly important when organizational members evaluate people on the AS against the standards of an ideal organizational employee.

One way in which organizations might, often inadvertently, draw more attention to the social dimension of the ideal worker is by including in their job ads terms that hint at this dimension. In practice, such terms do not appear only in isolated instances. On the contrary, the inclusion of requirements such as communication, teamwork/team player, passion, leadership, ability to influence in most job ads, is a well-known trend, identified in both generic and relatively specialized positions such as computer programmer (Gardiner et al., 2018; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Newton et al., 2005). The wording of job ads can be even more problematic for candidates on the AS who take words more literally and whose reading of the terms used in job ads could differ from the reading of neurotypical organizational members. For instance, while a job ad that describes the work environment as "work hard and have fun" (ad excerpt for a financial accounting position in a large company) might be attractive for a qualified person on the AS, an employee who considers recommending someone for a job in the environment so described might not see the candidate as a good fit and thus discourage them from applying.[7]

Role congruity theory predicts that perceptions of greater incongruity between a person and a role are more likely when the role is defined in terms not typically seen as characteristics of the social category to which the person belongs (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, when job ads include words hinting at the social dimension of the ideal worker, they are likely to create the image of an individual who possesses skills required to observe the social interaction standards and, therefore, to prime potential referrers toward social contacts who are viewed as congruent with this image and away from those who are not. To the extent that these skills are incongruent with observers' stereotypical beliefs about individuals on the AS, their inclusion in job ads is likely to dissuade potential referrers from recommending a qualified candidate on the autistic spectrum to apply for a job in their organization. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis H2. (Ad cue penalty): The willingness to refer a qualified candidate on the AS is lower when job

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ads include cues that hint at the social dimension of the ideal worker than when such cues are not included in the ad.

2.6 | How does the gender of the AS job candidate affect referrers?

Research on disability has increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding disability at its intersection with other characteristics, such as gender. In their analysis of potential effects at the intersection of gender and disability, Stone and Colella (1996) advanced the prediction that men with a disability would be evaluated as less suitable employees, a prediction that builds directly on role congruity theory. Specifically, because the social category of people with disability raises stereotypical associations with weakness and lower competence (Cuddy et al., 2008), and because these attributes are not stereotypically associated with male employees (men are strong, agentic: Eagly & Karau, 2002), the proposition is that men with a disability are likely to be evaluated less favorably in organizations. Although some qualitative evidence has supported this proposition (e.g., Mik-Meyer, 2015), research on the intersection of gender and disability is still scarce and results are inconclusive. Indeed, both Stone and Colella (1996) and the updated review of evidence by Beatty et al. (2019) show that the effect of gender as an attribute of a person with a disability is not well understood and call for more research to assess the extent to which the attitudes toward individuals with disabilities are influenced by their gender.

We suggest that inconclusive empirical evidence is likely due to studies typically including disability as a generic condition and not focusing on how gender moderates attitudes toward individuals with *specific* conditions. We use autism and gender as an example and propose that the role congruency model needs to be applied considering specific expectations related to specific conditions. Although still limited, research has shown how some mental conditions are gender-typed. For instance, laypeople viewed mental disabilities with symptoms such as aggressiveness or antisocial behaviors as more related to men than to women (Howell & Watson, 2002). Furthermore, individuals associated with male or female-typed mental illnesses were more likely to be thought of as fit for male or female-dominated occupations, respectively (Koenig & Eagly, 2014b). To some extent, such views could be generalized to ASD, because the rates of diagnosis in men far exceed the rates for women (Loomes et al., 2017). Thus, to the extent that substantially more males than females receive an ASD diagnosis, autism is more likely to be stereotyped as a more masculine condition. Drawing on insight from this research and applying role congruity theory, we expect that the association with autism, a condition characterized by some difficulties in navigating social relations could hurt women more, as the cultural expectation is that women are more sociable, caring, and considerate of others' needs (Eagly, 2013). In turn, the stereotypical description of men as less emotional and more analytical could dampen the possible negative effect of an AS condition. Moreover, to the extent that both media and business examples of AS hiring (e.g., Ernst & Young, 2018; Volpone et al., 2022) have also tended to emphasize specific attributes of AS employees, such as analytical skills and innovative thinking, and given that stereotypically such attributes are associated with men, we suggest that exposure to this kind of discourse might amplify the gender penalty in the evaluations of women on the autism. Regarding referral behavior, we expect that:

> **Hypothesis H3.** (Gender penalty): The willingness to refer a qualified candidate diagnosed as being on the AS is lower when the candidate is a woman than when the candidate is a man.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Sample, design, procedure

We recruited working individuals for "a study on recruiting" (no mention of AS or other details in the call for participants) from a panel available at the behavioral laboratory affiliated with a UK university. The study was completed on the laboratory computers and participation was compensated. Responses from 268 (out of a total of 284 participants) were included in the quantitative analyses. Those excluded either did not answer the main questions or failed attention check questions. Participants with valid responses are between 18 and 61 years old (mean 27.6, SD 8.6), with an average work experience of 5.44 years (SD 2.72). Then, 58.8% are female, and 68% have either experienced being referred or referring or both, a figure that confirms that referral recruiting is widely used. To assess their familiarity with the AS condition, at the end of the survey, we asked respondents about both their general knowledge of AS (if heard about AS before this study) and their direct experience with individuals with AS. Of all the respondents who provided valid answers, 93% mentioned that they heard about it, while 58% responded that they had some experience with individuals with AS. Due to ethical considerations, we could not probe further whether this experience was in the work or social sphere, or even personal diagnosis of AS.

Participants read pre-tested vignettes that described the profile of a highly qualified accountant, within 3 years of finishing their undergraduate studies, who is searching for a job that offers better career opportunities. We used the accounting profession based on previous research on formal recruitment of candidates with AS (Ameri et al., 2018) because this is a profession in which job candidates with AS are less likely to have objective disadvantages compared to non-AS candidates. Accounting is also an occupation familiar to anyone who works in an organization. For a more conservative test, we use a junior profile, as the relative importance of technical versus soft skills is higher for junior candidates (Ameri et al., 2018). Finally, the candidate is highly qualified (reputable education credentials and CPA professional qualification), a requirement in line with the model advanced by Stone and Colella (1996). Aside from information about the candidate's qualifications (Vignette 1—baseline), additional vignettes

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include behavioral characteristics consistent with the AS condition (Vignette 2—nondisclosure) drawn from extant literature (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Butler & Gillis, 2011; Hendrickx, 2008; The National Autistic Society, 2016) and discussions with both individuals diagnosed with AS and professionals with experience in the diagnostic of AS. A last vignette (Vignette 3—disclosure) discloses that the candidate was diagnosed with AS condition. The full text of the vignettes is available in Appendix 1, along with more detailed information about ethical considerations, the implementation of the overall study, and descriptive statistics (Table A1).

To test the moderating effect of gender, we randomly vary the contact's name to be either male (David) or female (Emily). Furthermore, to test the impact of the job ad wording, a random selection of half of the participants saw the following brief information about what the organization is looking for: "a self-starter, passionate about the opportunity to work for a large business, adaptable and able to interact effectively with diverse internal and external stakeholders." We opted to include effective interaction as opposed to other more suggestive terms such as good communication, team player, leadership (although they are far more prevalent in job ads) for a more conservative test of the possible impact of ad wording on the willingness to refer. After reading the vignettes, participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to offer to internally refer the candidate, using a worded scale from 1 to 6: definitely no, very likely no, rather no, rather yes, very likely yes, definitely yes. Once they answered this question, they were asked about their decision considerations using the question: "Write down what went through your mind as you were thinking about whether to refer David/Emily for the job." We use the answer to the first question for our quantitative analysis and the text from the second question for the qualitative analysis.

3.2 | Quantitative analysis

Table 1 presents findings about the willingness to refer candidates with AS (not disclosed and disclosed) compared to candidates without AS. In addition to the factors of interest for testing our hypotheses, we include *Experience with AS*, a dummy variable that captures whether respondents had experience interacting with individuals with AS. We also include the variable *Same gender* that captures whether the respondent and the candidate have the same gender, to control for potential gender homophily effects.

Table 1 model 1 shows that, compared to the baseline condition in which only the qualifications of the social candidate are known, the willingness to refer a social contact when they display some AS characteristics decreases almost one point on the scale (no disclosure condition, coefficient −0.946, $p < 0.000$) and remains low even when the respondent becomes aware that the social contact has a diagnosed condition (disclosure condition, coefficient 0.807, $p < 0.000$). Neither previous experience with AS, nor gender similarity appear to further moderate these effects.

To test the no-disclosure penalty hypothesis, we performed an analysis of contrasts between the condition with behavioral characteristics and no disclosure and the condition with disclosure. Table 2 shows all the contrast effects. The analysis shows a statistically significant positive effect in the magnitude of the willingness to refer when AS is disclosed (coefficient 0.161, $p < 0.05$), suggesting a higher willingness to refer when one knows that the candidate has an AS diagnosis, thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

Table 1 model 2 includes the gender of the job candidate. Introducing gender does not affect the previous results, with the willingness to refer decreasing once some AS characteristics are presented and remaining low even when the disability is disclosed. The drop in

TABLE 1 Impact of disclosure, gender and soft skill cues on the willingness to refer.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	Std.Err	Coef.	Std.Err	Coef.	Std.Err
No disclosure	−0.946***	0.136	−0.886***	0.163	−0.518***	0.185
Disclosure	−0.807***	0.148	−0.780***	0.179	−0.450**	0.202
Male name (*David*)						
Male name × No disclosure			−0.097	0.148	−0.095	0.198
Male name × Disclosure			−0.044	0.162	0.103	0.217
Skill cues						
Skill cues × No disclosure					−0.691***	0.198
Skill cues × Disclosure					−0.604***	0.216
Experience with AS						
Experience × No disclosure	−0.025	0.148	−0.027	0.148	−0.047	0.141
Experience × Disclosure	0.168	0.161	0.167	0.161	0.140	0.155
Same gender						
Same gender × No disclosure	−0.019	0.146	−0.036	0.148	−0.066	0.142
Same gender × Disclosure	−0.165	0.160	−0.173	0.162	−0.204	0.155
Constant	4.461***	0.134	4.565***	0.162	4.536***	0.191

**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.001$.

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TABLE 2 Contrast analyses: Impact of disclosure by gender and soft skill cues.

	All names	Male name only	Female name only
Disclosure vs. no disclosure	0.161 (0.067)**	0.187 (0.093)**	0.134 (0.097)
Disclosure vs. no disclosure without skill cues	0.191 (0.094)**	0.290 (0.133)**	0.092 (0.134)
Disclosure vs. no disclosure with skill cues	0.133 (0.096)	0.087 (0.132)	0.179 (0.137)

**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.001$.

the willingness to refer a candidate on the AS does not appear to be influenced by the gender of the candidate. To test the hypothesis of a gender penalty in disclosure we conduct an analysis of contrasts to check whether candidates' gender affects the increase in willingness to refer when the disability is disclosed. The contrast analysis in Table 2 shows that the increase is not statistically significant for the female name, but statistically significant for the male name (coefficient 0.187, *p*-level <0.05) thus suggesting that, for male candidates, an AS diagnosis is received more favorably by a potential referrer than for a female candidate.

Does the inclusion of terms hinting at the social dimension of the ideal worker affect referrers' decisions? The results in Table 1 model 3 show that the inclusion of such terms causes a significant drop in the willingness to refer, both when the AS condition is not disclosed (coefficient −0.691, $p < 0.001$) and when it is disclosed (coefficient 0.604, $p < 0.001$). As before, we conduct an analysis of contrasts to check the impact of disclosure when such cues are included, as well as gender effects. Table 2 shows that when no cues were present, disability disclosure resulted in a more favorable treatment (coefficient 0.191, $p < 0.05$). However, this more favorable treatment was only present for the male candidate (coefficient 0.290, $p < 0.05$). Instead, when social skills cues were present, disclosure did not change referrers' treatment of candidates, neither for the male nor for the female name. This suggests that terms related to the social dimension of the ideal worker have the most consistent negative effect on willingness to refer qualified candidates on the AS, and they negatively affect both men and women.

3.3 | Qualitative analysis: Decision considerations

We complement the quantitative analysis with a qualitative inquiry into referrers' considerations informing their decision to refer or not a qualified social contact on the AS. In doing so, we aim to bring a new lens that can deepen and broaden our understanding of the quantitative findings. While existing qualitative research has explored employers' decisions regarding hiring employees with disabilities (e.g., Lengnick-Hall et al., 2008), one could not expect the same considerations to apply to the informal referral recruiting channel. Given the limited knowledge of the topic, we took an inductive approach. To the extent that we were interested in shedding light on how respondents make sense of a situation that requires a decision, an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2007) was the closest to our purpose. We analyzed decision considerations from 260 respondents (out of the 268 who were analyzed quantitatively). We could not use eight responses because they were ambiguous, and we could not distinguish a clear meaning. Overall, this is a relatively low attrition rate, which means that the requirement of our multimethod design that the quantitative and the qualitative components draw from the same sample is met.

We proceeded by first reading multiple times through all the qualitative responses, noting down potential codes, and discussing them among the two authors and a research assistant. The process was iterative, involving reading and rereading the material, as well as further engagement with the extant literature for cases in which codes resembled insights from previous research. Once we identified a comprehensive list of codes that reflected reasons for decisions, we proceeded by coding the entire data. Each of the two researchers coded independently, using the list of codes, but also allowing for an "other" category to emerge. Based on the nature of the decision consideration, we identified several themes, some including multiple codes, and some representing a unique code. Tables A2 and A3 (in the Appendix due to space considerations) show themes that emerged from the data, including the codes subsumed to a theme, a definition of the codes, and multiple illustrative quotations. Given the aim of the qualitative analysis to increase the depth and scope of the quantitative analysis, below we present the themes to mirror the quantitative reporting. Specifically, we report and compare the themes by the disclosure condition, while also indicating notable variations by gender and by social cues.

3.3.1 | Decision considerations for referring a candidate without disclosure of AS

Table A2 presents the themes and codes for the situation in which the AS condition is not disclosed. **Job performance fit** emerges as an important theme, with respondents evaluating whether the candidate has the credentials for being a good performer in the job. As such, the focus of their answers is on education, previous work experience, and professional qualifications and, in this respect, the candidate is judged as having performance potential for the job. Many respondents also explicitly mention that other considerations are irrelevant or minor for the performance of an accountant role. We code all these responses together as "*condition irrelevance* to reflect that respondents do not see behaviors consistent with the AS as a serious hindrance to work performance. While considerations related to a candidate's past credentials as signals of future performance are expected, less expected

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are respondents" attempts to create positive links between AS behavioral characteristics and job requirements. Specifically, some respondents appear to carefully weigh behavioral characteristics against job fit considerations and find that some of these characteristics could be beneficial for the accounting job, a code that we call "*positive stereotyping*"[8] to reflect this attempt: "plays crossword—so he is analytical"; "has some habits that one might associate with being an accountant so that is good, particularly being on time, and completing a crossword every day, these are positive things."

Social fit theme focuses on considerations related to ways in which the candidate departs from the social dimension of the ideal worker. These answers show that respondents see a strong need for anyone to fit socially in the organization, in teams, be a good communicator, enjoy social interactions, and so forth. Although one would be hard-pressed to think about most organizational members possessing such skills to a high degree, the social dimension of the ideal worker appears to have a strong influence on respondents' referring decisions: "David may not be comfortable in social situations, which is an important consideration in whether a person fits into an organization"; "she seems to lack empathy which is a skill important to have to be able to work for a company and in teams." Overall, when evaluated through the social fit lens, the candidate is stereotypically found unable to work with others and, by extension, unable to hold the accountant job regardless of high job fit. Respondents are much more likely to invoke considerations of social fit when the job ad includes references to social skills (63% of those who saw the ad compared to 37% of those who did not see it), but no gender difference is apparent.

Personal reputation as a theme reflects respondents' concern that being associated with the candidate could harm their reputation. Respondents who invoke reputational considerations are not claiming that the candidate is not qualified, rather they are concerned that others can see them as similar to the candidate or tolerating the candidate's atypical behaviors. "So I didn't want to seem like I have a close connection with her as that could portray me like her" writes one respondent, while another respondent who is unwilling to refer the candidate notes that "while David has the necessary credentials to excel in this role… I am not keen on David writing my name on the application, as I would not want to be held accountable for his shortcomings." These comments are consistent with concerns that spring from the fear of stigma by affiliation (e.g., Jones et al., 1984). Reputational concerns are not related to the presence of terms related to social skills or the candidates' gender.

Regarding the final theme, **helping**, our analysis unveils two situations. The first code, *helping as social norm*, relates to the desire to help people in one's social network and is consistent with evidence from the literature on social exchange and social networks. The second, which we code "*the extra mile*" includes more substantive helping actions. Specifically, these respondents appear willing to do whatever it takes to get a qualified candidate whom they know in a good position, including coaching and interview tips and talking to the hiring team to emphasize how qualified the candidate is. However, those who are willing to help more are more likely to do so when no social skill cues are present (90% vs. 10% when social cues are present). No gender variation is apparent within this theme.

3.3.2 | Decision considerations for referring a candidate with disclosure of AS

Table A3 shows the key themes, codes, and illustrative quotations for the disclosure condition. As before, we present the themes, also noting changes compared to the nondisclosure condition as well as variations with gender and the inclusion of soft skills cues in the job ad. We found that considerations regarding **job performance fit** for accounting remain as important as they were in the nondisclosure scenario, and that respondents continue to evaluate the candidates positively, with some mentioning that being on the AS is irrelevant for this job. Like before, some respondents double down on the fit aspect, by using "*positive stereotyping*" about autism such as "autistic people are usually great with numbers … so (this job) it's a good fit." However, compared to the nondisclosure condition, the number of respondents invoking positive stereotypes is lower, and more positive stereotypes about autism accrue to the candidate David than to Emily (64% vs. 36%).

Social fit remains a common theme, showing the importance of the social dimension of the ideal worker, albeit with a relatively lower number of respondents (a reduction by about a third compared to the nondisclosure condition). This is consistent with the results from the quantitative analysis, which show an increase in the willingness to refer when the autism condition is disclosed, suggesting that one potential mechanism that contributes to this effect is a decrease in negative stereotyping of AS behaviors when they can be attributed to a cause (diagnosis). However, when the social concern was mentioned, it was expressed in a more trenchant manner, with phrases like "creating problems", "being a burden," or "creating tensions" very often expressed by respondents. "Autism might cause real problems" notes a respondent, who reinforces the message by adding that "autism could be obstacle for smoothing communication, let alone working together," while others suggest that such candidates be placed "in a position in which she works with numbers and spreadsheets and not with people." Like in the nondisclosure scenario, the social fit concern is much more frequent when the respondents see the job ad that includes social skills cues (72% vs. 28%).

Compared to the nondisclosure condition, **helping** as a theme doubled in frequency, primarily because a larger number of respondents were prepared to go *the extra mile*, mostly when they did not see the job ad. The additional help comes however in a surprising way, with a significant number of respondents suggesting that they are willing to openly discuss the autism condition with the hiring team and the HR department: "I would likely inform the hiring managers about David's Asperger's (either before or after interview) so that it does not negatively impact his application"; "will aim to inform the HR team of my firm to be sensitive to her condition and focus on hiring a competent resource." Although meant as helpful in intent, such suggestions indicate disregard for the appropriate behavior when

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dealing with someone with a hidden disability and the requirement to respect confidentiality. It also shows a relatively poor understanding of recruiting practices related to disability disclosures. A third helping reasoning which emerges when respondents know the candidate's diagnosis is triggered by what we identify as "*moral duty*." This new code includes fairness concerns about how people with disabilities are treated in society and in organizations and captures respondents' willingness to help such candidates have a fair assessment of their qualifications: "many people with autism find it hard to get a job… so I think it would be good for him to list me as an internal referral." Overall, the increase in responses that include helping considerations is consistent with findings from the quantitative analysis, which shows an increase in the likelihood to refer under disclosure and suggests that another potential mechanism that contributes to this effect is an increase in helping considerations, mostly triggered by the moral duty to help qualified candidates whose high qualification would not be otherwise recognized. It is also relevant to mention that responses in the "moral duty" category do not vary with the presence of soft skills cues in the job ad, suggesting that respondents with a stronger sense of fairness are less likely to be influenced by job ads with less inclusive cues. They also do not vary with the candidate's gender.

A theme that is diminishing to about half of its initial frequency, and thus consistent with the quantitative finding that disclosure increases the likelihood to refer, is fear of damage to **personal reputation.** Nonetheless, this theme remains relevant and those who mention reputational concerns are averse to referring the candidate regardless of cues related to social skill being present or absent from the job ad. "If I am written as his referral, the company would blame me for referring someone who does not suit," reasons one respondent, while another respondent who recognizes that the candidate is strong concludes, however, that "I would probably not like to declare being socially linked to a person like that (as sad as it sounds)."

A new theme that emerges only when the autism condition is disclosed includes considerations regarding **employers' readiness for disability inclusion**. Unlike the previous themes, which capture job-related considerations (job fit, social fit) or referrer-candidate relations (help, reputation), this theme captures respondents' assumptions about organizational readiness to welcome employees with disabilities. We distinguish two stances, coded *doubt* and *hope*, respectively. Remarks in the first category include doubts and sometimes outright skepticism about employers' willingness and ability to hire and to run appropriate accommodations for candidates on the AS: "I am somewhat unsure if employers will really accept his limitations and view him as still a good fit for the job." Skepticism about employers' inclusiveness leaves one respondent with no choice but to reconsider their desire to help: "By doing this [i.e., not being inclusive] firms lose excellent people. Part of me wants to recommend now David and prove that he is good, but if he ends up hired and unhappy, I will be unhappy." In contrast, the hopeful stance, more prevalent when the job ad is not seen (64% vs. 36%), appears to reflect respondents' confidence that, if they were to refer the candidate, their employers would have measures in place to ensure fair treatment during the recruitment and further. "Businesses should make adjustments for disabilities such as autism, so there is no reason, with these adjustments, that David would not be a good fit for the job" notes a respondent who is prepared to refer, while several others are confident that any good employer will be "able to make adjustments where necessary." Overall, this new theme shows the key role that employers play in influencing decision-making regarding referring qualified candidates on the AS.

4 | DISCUSSION

Recruitment experiences of neurodivergent individuals, including individuals on the AS, are an understudied aspect in the HRM research, with referral recruiting representing an area that is currently missing (e.g., Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2022). While illuminating the complexity of referral recruiting for candidates on the AS is beyond the reach of a single article, our aim here was to start addressing some of the outstanding gaps and, in doing so, to advance our theoretical and practical understanding of referral hiring for neurodivergent job seekers. Furthermore, the integration of the deductive testing of hypotheses related to the likelihood of referring candidates with AS, and the inductive explorations of the variety of decision considerations offers insights into the mechanisms behind employees' willingness to refer (or not) qualified candidates on the AS. To support the discussion section, we present an integrative overview of the multimethod findings in Figure 1.

4.1 | Theoretical implications and further research

The theoretical contribution of our study unfolds in several directions. First, we bring together role congruency and disclosure to engage with a key tension in the disclosure literature related to whether disclosure of stigmatized identities can generate more positive evaluations. Existing theorizing and research on disclosure have primarily focused on external observers' negative reactions (Beatty et al., 2019; Stone & Colella, 1996). In contrast, our study shows that a more positive reaction is possible when the disclosure reduces the perceived incongruency between individuals' behaviors and the role that they occupy or aim to occupy. Consistent with existing empirical evidence which shows that employers are more likely to reject applicants who disclose their autism condition (e.g., Ameri et al., 2018), we found that disclosure to social contacts who can be referrers is also problematic. However, compared to the nondisclosure situation and in the presence of some AS-related behavioral characteristics, we found that disclosure raised the likelihood of being referred. Drawing from RCT, we suggest that this more positive reaction is due to disclosure reducing the perceived incongruity between an applicant with some AS behaviors and the employee role. Indeed, consistent with this line of reasoning, our qualitative analysis showed that, when AS was disclosed, there was a notable reduction in the incidence of negative stereotypes related to social fit with the role.

Furthermore, the qualitative analysis reveals two other mechanisms that appear to contribute to an increase in the willingness to refer when the AS condition is disclosed: a reduction in reputational

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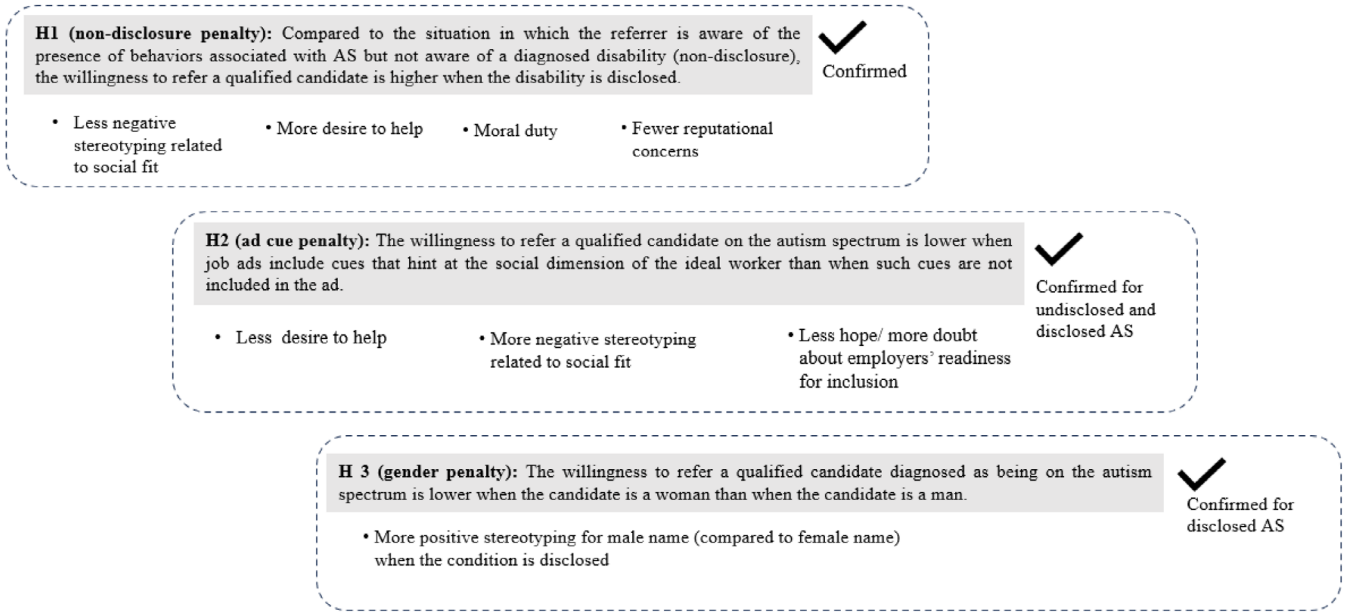


FIGURE 1 Integrative summary: Hypotheses, quantitative, and qualitative findings.

concerns regarding affiliation with an AS candidate and an increase in the desire to help. Helping behavior toward candidates that a referrer recognizes as disadvantaged due to their minority categorization has also been found by Smith (2005), in relation to racial minority candidates. However, we do not know of any study that finds an increase in the willingness to help as a result of disclosure, nor are we aware of studies showing that disclosure of a hidden condition could also reduce the sense of stigma by affiliation. Taken together, these three mechanisms suggest ways in which disclosure could bring about more positive attitudes and evaluations following disclosure. Further studies can be conducted to verify the relative importance of each of these mechanisms for external evaluators.

More generally, we believe that bringing together role congruency and the literature on disclosure is beneficial for future research aiming at understanding attitudes toward and evaluations of individuals with other hidden conditions. If certain disclosures create a discounting effect, as was the case in our study, it is also possible that other disclosures could trigger or amplify perceived incongruency. Further research is needed to determine when disclosure of a hidden condition could amplify perceived incongruency, as well as to reveal the potential mechanisms through which more negative evaluations might accrue after disclosure. Regarding the three mechanisms that we uncovered as resulting in more willingness to refer, further studies could also investigate the extent to which these mechanisms, and potentially others, can be leveraged to alleviate unfavorable treatment for neurodivergent individuals, not only during recruitment but also throughout their employment experience.

Second, by integrating role congruency theory and the "ideal worker" concept, this study expands our understanding of evaluation penalties in the workplace for neurodivergent individuals. Specifically, our study shows the importance of considering not only the productivity dimension but also the social dimension of the "ideal worker," especially when investigating potential evaluation penalties for individuals who belong to social categories perceived as less congruent with the social dimension of the employee role. Understanding the relevance of the social dimension of the ideal employee is even more important in the context of current recruitment practices, which tend to include terms related to this dimension in most job ads. In line with RCT, which proposes that making a potential dimension of incongruency more salient triggers more negative evaluations of the individual who occupies the role or aspires to occupy it, our study shows that the inclusion of a job ad with terms related to social skills significantly reduces the willingness to refer a qualified candidate on the AS. The qualitative analysis confirms that role incongruency is indeed elevated by the inclusion of such cues, with evaluators expressing more concerns about a candidate's fit and less likely to consider helping the candidate navigate the recruitment process when the job ad with social cues was present. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis also shows that, in the presence of social skill cues in a job ad, referrers are more likely to question whether their employers are open to and have conditions in place to include a neurodiverse workforce. Thus, our study also adds to the literature on organizational discrimination by evidencing how job ads that create or exacerbate role incongruency for certain categories of candidates not only reduce the willingness of current employees to refer candidates from that category but also create negative perceptions about the organization among employees.

Third, our study answers growing calls for more intersectional research (e.g., Beatty et al., 2019) to shed light on the distinct attitudes and evaluations toward individuals who belong to multiple social categories, such as being a person with autism and of a certain gender. Drawing on RCT and evidence suggesting that autism might

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be typecasted as a more masculine condition, we hypothesized that the candidate's gender was likely to moderate the observers' perceived incongruity between a candidate with AS and the employee role. Although no gender effect is observed when the condition is not disclosed, once the condition is known, the respondents are less favorable to the candidate with a female name. This result, somehow different from the prevalent predictions that observers would evaluate men with a disability more negatively, shows the need to more carefully theorize how distinct beliefs and expectations can appear at the intersection of multiple social categories. In addition to the quantitative effect, our study is also novel in that it surfaces a mechanism through which such an effect appears, namely more "positive stereotyping" of the candidate with a male name. An alternative mechanism could have been more negative stereotyping for the candidate with the female name, but we did not observe this in our study. This raises the question of whether "positive stereotyping" is the stronger mechanism through which different evaluations accrue to men and women with specific conditions, or whether there are boundary conditions that make one or another mechanism stronger. Further studies are absolutely needed to shed light on whether and how the gender of neurodivergent individuals affects how others evaluate and treat them.

4.2 | Practical implications

Our study offers several practical insights to organizations interested in designing interventions suitable for the referral recruitment of qualified candidates on the AS. The first insight relates to the need for organizations to audit their referral recruiting channel to better understand whether it works for or against qualified neurodivergent candidates, and to design suitable educational interventions. Our study offers some areas on which organizations can focus. For instance, the qualitative analysis suggests that employees' perception of their employers' positions on disability inclusion has a significant weight in employees' referral decisions. In our study, participants expect that their employers would be open to neurodiverse talent, but they also doubt that inclusive policies and practices are in place, and therefore are hesitant to refer candidates on the AS, even when the candidate is highly qualified. Insufficient knowledge about employers' positions on acceptance and inclusion of diverse talent also creates fears of stigma by association, which further reduces employees' willingness to refer. Thus, to facilitate the referral of employees on the AS companies should not only have inclusive policies and practices but also ensure that their employees know about them and are explicitly encouraged to refer qualified neurodivergent candidates.

Second, we propose that organizations should use purposeful training to educate employees and hiring managers about referral recruitment for individuals with invisible and therefore potentially undisclosed conditions. In our study, we found evidence that some employees consider having side conversations with the hiring managers to give them a heads-up that their referee is very talented but has a disability, which shows a relatively poor understanding of the ethics and confidentiality concerns around HR recruiting practices. If organizations want their referral recruiting to function ethically and legally, they should consider addressing such issues which, according to our findings, are likely to appear.

Finally, organizations should pay attention to their discourse on the social dimension of the ideal worker, both in everyday interactions and in job descriptions. As it stands now, the emphasis that organizations put on "people skills" appears to suggest to employees that candidates on the AS cannot work with others and therefore should not be hired, even when highly qualified. While acknowledging that people with autism may have some challenges with social interactions, this does not mean that they cannot effectively interact with people and play important roles in teams, as suggested by numerous respondents. Organizations should conduct training to educate employees and hiring managers about these aspects. Furthermore, organizations should be wary of inadvertently amplifying these stereotypes in their job ads, by using too much wording related to the social dimension of the ideal worker. Our study shows that even a slight suggestion regarding the type of person an organization prefers could strongly affect employees' willingness to refer a neurodivergent candidate and that negative stereotyping is more prevalent when such suggestions are included. Overall, our study suggests that organizations genuinely interested in access to neurodiverse talent should pay attention to how their job ads speak to these individuals but, equally important, to how the cues in the job ads affect the current employees' perception about the ideal candidate for the job. Unless organizations pay attention to these aspects, their broad claims that they are welcoming and encouraging the recruitment of neurodiverse talent could be challenged.

4.3 | Limitations

Our study has limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the above findings. First, as this study uses vignettes to elicit respondents' preferences toward a social contact, its external validity might be affected in a variety of ways. To alleviate such concerns, we designed and implemented our study considering Aguinis and Bradley's (2014) recommendations. Yet, we acknowledge that studies like ours are likely to see social desirability bias, as respondents might feel inclined to show a variety of "qualities," such as good judgments in choosing a good employee, kindness, or lack of prejudice. We aimed to counteract this bias both implicitly, by emphasizing the anonymous nature of our study and explicitly, by asking participants to provide their "honest thoughts." Moreover, by collecting both a quantitative choice (willingness to refer) as well as a qualitative account of their decision, we reduced the ability of a respondent to align all their responses along some desired identity. Overall, however, we acknowledge that due to the above limitations, this study's quantitative findings cannot establish how large is the negative impact of disability on the willingness to refer or quantify the proportion of various decision considerations. Rather, the study's findings show that a penalty in referring exists for individuals on the AS and that the penalty is

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amplified/dampened by the gender of the candidate and by organizational practices related to job advertising. Most importantly, the multimethod approach shows how various decision mechanisms are linked to the penalty.

A second aspect that might affect the generalizability of our findings relates to the fact that our data was collected in the United Kingdom and findings might vary by country, with potentially lower willingness to refer in countries in which the rates of diagnosis and general knowledge about autism are low. Moreover, the reasoning behind the willingness to refer might be different in these countries, and so further studies that aim to replicate our study in other countries could surface new decision considerations that can lead to unveiling new theoretical mechanisms. Furthermore, replications in other cultures could also tease out better the intersection of autism and gender which our study uncovered. For instance, we suggested that media and business examples of AS hiring could amplify the perception that autism is related to stereotypically male attributes (e.g., analytic, innovative) and therefore could affect how observers evaluate male and female candidates. However, this is just an insight based on observations from the United Kingdom and the United States and we did not test it in the current study. Further studies could evaluate whether and how attitudes to and evaluations of neurodivergent individuals are affected by the frequency and type of discourse in the media and business.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available upon request from the corresponding author, subject to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Example offered to one of the authors by a highly qualified person on the autism spectrum searching for a job in line with their qualifications.

[2] Throughout this study, we use the term person on the autism spectrum, to align with the terminology used in most current research, including research in this journal. We note, however, that some individuals on the autistic spectrum with whom we discussed our research prefer to call themselves autistic.

[3] Including part-time employment moves the overall employment to 32%, much lower than the employment rate for people without disabilities (about 80%) and that of people with other disabilities (about 47%).

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-review-to-boost-employment-prospects-of-autistic-people.

[5] Because there are no studies evidencing the impact of referrals on hiring managers when the candidate is qualified but on the autism spectrum, we conducted interviews with hiring managers. Our primary aim was to verify if applicants on the autism spectrum could expect benefits from the referral process similar to those observed in studies of neurotypical candidates. Respondents' answers revealed two such benefits. First, hiring managers indicated that they were more likely to call back qualified candidates on the autism spectrum when they were referred by an employee. Viewed through the lens of previous studies which show that candidates on the autism spectrum are less likely to be invited for interviews (e.g., Ameri et al., 2018), the responses we got suggest that, when referred, they might have callback rates closer or equal to neurotypical candidates. Second, hiring managers indicated that they were more likely to further search for job opportunities for unsuccessful candidates and to keep them on record for more suitable jobs when these candidates were referred regardless of their AS status. However, the managers appear willing to do this primarily when the candidate is referred by employees trusted by the hiring manager, employees with high reputation and long organizational tenure. This insight shows further positive implications of referring, by showing that even if not immediately hired, candidates on the autism spectrum referred by highly regarded employees are more likely to remain connected with the organization and potentially be considered for other positions. We thank one of the reviewers who prompted us to further investigate hiring managers' views regarding referred candidates on the autism spectrum. The insights gleaned from the hiring managers also suggest further research opportunities for a systematic investigation of the various benefits that might accrue at various stages of the referral recruiting process to qualified candidates on the autism spectrum, with some specific areas of investigation related to characteristics of the referral (e.g., reputation) as well as characteristic of the manager (e.g., previous experience managing employees with AS, personal experience).

[6] In reviewing existing evidence, we also noted the scarcity of studies focused on programs dedicated to hiring neurodivergent individuals, another area that could benefit from more systematic research efforts.

[7] Example provided by a candidate diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and who works in the finance accounting industry.

[8] In labeling the code "positive stereotype," we do not intend to suggest that such stereotypes are desirable, rather the work positive signals that the respondents viewed particular behaviors as a good fit for the accounting job.

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APPENDIX 1: EHICS, IMPLEMENTATION, VIGNETTES

ETHICS CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

The main empirical study reported in this paper was preceded by two small pilot studies, with smaller samples. These were samples of graduate students, with some students having work experience, internship experience, or no experience. Explicit consent that the authors can use the data for research purposes and publish findings based on the data was sought and obtained from participants in all samples. It is worth noting that, although the pilot studies were mainly used for calibrating the wording of the vignettes and manipulation checks for the job ad condition but did not include all the details and questions asked in the main study, partial analyses of the data from the pilot studies show results consistent with the main quantitative study. The academic institution to which the laboratory belongs also has specific ethical standards related to: the level of pay per study, depending on the level of difficulty and time required; not enforcing responses (e.g., if a respondent refuses to answer a question, even if that is a main question, they can continue the survey); a debrief note and, in case of studies like ours, adding links to national institutions that could offer more information and support on sensitive issues (in our case autism). For this study, in line with compensation rules, participants received £5 after completing the study.

Regarding the construction of the vignettes, we use behavioral characteristics consistent with the AS condition drawn from extant literature (American Psychiatric Association, 2012; Butler & Gillis, 2011; Hendrickx, 2008; The National Autistic Society, 2016), including behavioral descriptions related to verbal and nonverbal communication (eye contact), routine behaviors, and social reciprocity. In formulating the descriptions, we aimed to use purely descriptive language that tells how the social contact can be sometimes and to include behaviors that do not appear highly offending. To refine the vignettes, we had multiple iterative discussions with both individuals diagnosed with AS and professionals with experience of AS, and feedback from a small sample of graduate students and working individuals, none of the latter further involved in the main study. Post-study validation of the behavioral characteristics also came from participants in pilot studies and the main study who, when made remarks in the available comments section (at the end of the survey) or during the debrief, mentioned that when they read the description, they thought that the person seemed to be on the autistic spectrum. Several participants mentioned that the description in the vignette reminded them of a social contact who they knew was on the autism spectrum. Although these comments and those of other individuals who advised us appear to indicate that the chosen behaviors were consistent with the condition, we do not want to suggest that any person on the autism spectrum would display exactly these behaviors or all these behaviors. Furthermore, none of the characteristics were considered incompatible with an effective accountant.

VIGNETTES: FULL TEXT WITH THE GENDER OF THE CANDIDATE RANDOMLY ALLOCATED

Vignette 1: Competence condition

David/Emily is someone who you have known socially for a number of years. David/Emily earned an undergraduate degree in Accounting & Finance at a top university 3 years ago, and immediately started working as an accountant. S/he has recently earned his/her Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualification. David/Emily has once mentioned to you that s/he is interested in moving to a large firm like yours, as it would offer him/her more opportunities for career advancement. Your firm is currently advertising a position in Accounting & Finance, and you think that David/Emily's credentials and experience are a good fit for this job.

Vignette 2: Nondisclosure condition (competence + behavioral characteristics)

The above + As you think about your next steps, you picture David/Emily in front of your eyes. S/he is an avid crossword player who solves the crossword every morning before heading to work. David/Emily likes arriving at work very early, to avoid crowded trains. S/he feels anxious when the service on his/her train line is disrupted and s/he needs to take an alternative route. David/Emily is knowledgeable about a wide range of topics, but s/he can get fixated on a topic. When this happens, s/he keeps talking without noticing when the other person has lost interest. When talking to people, especially for a longer while, David/Emily tends to look down, sideways or to anchor his/her gaze on an object in the room. This is the way David/Emily is.

Vignette 3: Disclosure condition (competence + behavioral characteristics + diagnosis)

The above + You also know from David/Emily that s/he had been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism that is characterized by "impairments in social interactions and the presence of restricted interests and activities, with no clinically significant general delay in language, and testing in the range of average to above average intelligence" (from Autism Society of America).

Job ad randomly seen by half of the respondents

The firm is looking for someone who is a self-starter, passionate about the opportunity to work for a large business, adaptable, and able to interact effectively with diverse internal and external stakeholders.

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TABLE A1 Distribution of willingness to refer.

	No job ad			With job ad		
Candidate gender	Base Vignette 1	Nondisclosed Vignette 2	Disclosed Vignette 3	Base Vignette 1	Nondisclosed Vignette 2	Disclosed Vignette 3
Female (Emily)	4.78 (1.14)	4.03 (1.45)	4.09 (1.42)	4.80 (1.15)	3.35 (1.27)	3.51 (1.48)
Male (David)	4.72 (1.24)	3.96 (1.46)	4.31 (1.31)	4.78 (1.12)	3.41 (1.37)	3.56 (1.55)

Note: Means and standard deviations in parentheses.

TABLE A2 Summary of themes for the nondisclosure condition.

Theme	Codes	Code description	Examples
Job performance fit	Condition irrelevance (to job performance)	Respondents note performance potential due to education, experience and qualifications only. Mention AS behavioral characteristics but conclude that they are irrelevant or minor issues for performance in an accounting job.	"David is good at his job … difficulties with social situations don't seem to be especially relevant to this role. Indeed I can imagine that other accountants might have the same tendencies"; "Obviously qualified. The fact that he is prone to getting fixated and can keep talking is minor in my opinion when compared to his qualifications. His intelligence and knowledge outweigh any social issues."
	Positive stereotyping (related to job performance)	Respondents find AS characteristics present some advantages for the job; they explicitly name characteristics and link them positively to job performance in accounting	"has some habits that one might associate with being an accountant so that is good, particularly being on time, and completing a crossword everyday, these are positive things"; "she is a very reliable and organized person leaving time for train delays, etc., this will be good [for job]"; "Plays crossword—so he is analytical, which is advantage for the job."
Social fit	Negative stereotyping (unfit to work in teams and organizations)	Respondents invoke the social dimension of the ideal worker such as "fit to work in a team," "fit to work in an organization," "socially fit to work with others" to find the candidate socially unfit	"Sounds like David may not be comfortable in social situations, which is an important consideration in whether a person fits into an organization"; "She seems to lack empathy which is a skill quite important to have to be able to work for a company and in teams"; "Good communication skills is an important skill to have especially in a large organization"; "David might not be a good social fit in terms of collaborating well with others."
Personal reputation	(Fear of) negative reputation	Respondents fear that association with the candidate would reflect negatively on them	"While David has the necessary credentials to excel in this role… I am not keen on David writing my name on the application, as I would not want to be held accountable for his shortcomings"; "So I didn't want to seem like I have a close connection with her as that could portray me like her"; "might subsequently lead to the HR team having an altered impression of me—perhaps at my inability to identify "fit" of individuals with the organization, or my discernment of others."
Helping	Helping as social norm	Respondents feel that one must support qualified individuals from their social network by referring them	"I've known David for years"; "being a friend it would be good to recommend him"; "that's what friends are for"; "[others] helped me get to where I am today and I would like to do the same for Emily."
	The "extra mile"	Respondents are willing to speak directly with hiring managers and other decision-makers	"I will meet the HR in person and say some good comments about David"; "I would then write an email to the HR team to suggest that I have a friend who seems to be a good fit for the role advertised."

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APPENDIX 2

TABLE A3 Summary of themes for the disclosure condition.

Theme	Code	Description	Examples
Job performance fit	Condition irrelevance (to job performance)	Respondents note performance potential due to education, experience, and qualifications only. Mention AS behavioral characteristics but conclude that they are irrelevant or minor issues for performance in an accounting job.	"this [diagnostic] doesn't affect my decision because it doesn't stop David from competently doing his job"; "she has a legitimate reason for being anxious around interaction with others [because of AS] but can still deliver on her work as an accountant"; "Emily having Asperger's Syndrome should have no impact on her application, or ability to carry out her role to a high standard as she has proven through her knowledge, credentials, and experience that she is a strong candidate"
	Positive stereotyping (related to job performance)	Respondents find AS characteristics present some advantages for the job; they explicitly name characteristics and link them positively to job performance in accounting	"Autistic people are usually great with numbers and it's evident in his education and experience, so (this job) it's a good fit for him" "people on the Autism spectrum usually get the work done quicker and efficiently"
Social fit	Negative stereotyping (unfit to work in teams and organizations)	Respondents invoke the social dimension of the ideal worker such as "fit to work in a team," "fit to work in an organization," "socially fit to work with others" to find the candidate socially unfit	"[this condition] may be a problem for the firm and the workmates"; "I think working in a company entails the interaction with other colleagues. Taking into consideration the syndrome David has, he may not be considered an extraordinary applicant"; "her [AS] might cause the real problem. Because large firm should be operated in many different types of teamwork and the smooth communication skill should be at the heart. Her autism could be an obstacle for smoothing communication, let alone working together"; "autistic people are known to have bad social skills… maybe the company can put her in a position in which she works with numbers and spreadsheets and not with people"
Personal reputation	(Fear of) negative reputation	Respondents fear that association with the candidate would reflect negatively on them	"I would probably not like to declare being socially linked to a person like that (as sad as it sounds) "; "I would not want to be linked to his hiring should his hiring result in unwanted situations"; "I would not want to be associated with her"; "I would not want my name tarnished"
Helping	Helping as social norm	Respondents feel that one must support qualified individuals from their social network by referring them	"she has the qualifications needed for the position; as a friend of mine, I am willing to recommend the position to her"
	The "extra mile"	Respondents are willing to speak directly with hiring managers and other decision-makers	"I could also talk to the hiring manager personally"; "If she puts my name on her application, I can explain her condition to the firm; inform the HR team of my firm to be sensitive to her condition and focus on hiring a competent resource like Emily"
	Moral duty	Helping someone with a disability is perceived as a moral duty, respondents express a desire to act to restore equity	"I think it's important to push people who have disabilities… it's a positive step"; "David is skilled for the job and could benefit a life improvement"; "many people with autism find it hard to get a job… so I think it would be good for him to list me as an internal referral. I want to help him as much as I can"; "I think that conditions such as Asperger's will affect her chances of getting the job, etc. in a negative way. This is unfair. I would want to help her get the job"; "I immediately felt that I wanted to help her because she may struggle to find positions due to her diagnostic"

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TABLE A3 (Continued)

Theme	Code	Description	Examples
Employers' readiness for inclusion	Doubt	Respondents express doubts and skepticism that employers are willing and able to hire and accommodate employees on the autism spectrum	"I am somewhat unsure if employers will really accept his limitations and view him as still a good fit for the job"; "By doing this [i.e., not being inclusive] firms lose excellent people. Part of me wants to recommend now David and prove that he is good, but if he ends up hired and unhappy, I will be unhappy"; "some people are prejudiced against the disabled, especially people with mental problems that are diagnosed and have no cure. My bosses could be the same so I cannot be sure how they would react if they knew that I recommended"; "… thinking whether the people in my firm can treat Emily fairly and equally"
	Hope	Respondents express hope and trust that employers are willing and able to hire and accommodate employees on the autism spectrum	"The company should be an inclusive employer so I will act as a referral"; "Businesses should make adjustments for disabilities such as autism, so there is no reason, with these adjustments, that David would not be a good fit for the job"; "A big firm like mine should provide equal opportunities for people with special needs to thrive."

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