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The Absurd Workplace

How Absurdity is
Normalized in
Contemporary Society
and the Workplace

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Chapter 4: From Hypernormalization of Workplace Inequality to Dehumanization: A way out for Human Resource Management

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Abstract

Workplace inequality is an ongoing employment and social problem. Attempts in HRM-related fields to explain the contributory factors to inequality have stabilized, legitimized and perpetuated the unquestioning adoption of equality, diversity and inclusion practices in staff hiring, training and development, pay and reward. This has led to the absurdity highlighted in legislators and employers' attempts to address the perpetuation of inequality. However, the emerging normalization of inequality in workplaces and society has marginalized autistic employees and jobseekers thereby creating a hypernormalization of the absurd. Yurchak's notion of the 'hypernormalization' of absurdity is recreated in this chapter's examination of autistic employees, who, despite their philosophical aspirations and practical attempts to contribute towards greater workplace equality have been dehumanized as a result of the adoption of HRM practices pointing to the normalization of inequality. This chapter critiques the dichotomization of workplace inequality into challenge/risk recognition and mitigation, highlights how such an approach has paradoxically led to the normalization of inequality and the dehumanization of autistic employees at work and in society. The survey responses of 24 highly functioning and work-ready autistic jobseekers are captured to present 4 thematic categories and by using Alvesson and Skoldberg's narrative inquiry and analytical approach I have extended Yurchak's 'hypernormalization of the absurd' to include 4 proposals as an alternative framework to help address the absurd normalization of inequality at work, the dehumanization of marginalized groups like autistic staff and therefore provide a way out for HRM. These 4 propositions are embedded in a new 4-stage resilience intervention model which radicalizes how HR scholars and practitioners address the perpetuation of the absurdity in workplace inequality by going beyond the conceptualization and categorization of inequality in terms of challenge/risk and mitigation to include 1) a recalibration of what inequality means; 2) a reconceptualization of the hypernormalization of the absurd application of employment practices; 3) a deeper understanding of how support and advice for marginalized jobseekers should include a community-focused approach and 4) a resilience perspective on how workplace inequality can be resolved by HR professionals. The implications for practice, methodology, theory and future research directions for societal, organizational and individual humanization are considered.

Keywords: hypernormalization/absurdity, workplace inequality, HRM, dehumanization, resilience model

Introduction

Why does Human Resource Management keep reproducing scholarly debates and discussions that perhaps (un)intentionally recreate and perpetuate workplace inequality, including income and gender, race and societal inequality (Bratton & Gold, 2017; Guerci et al., 2019)? What such reproduction of various forms/facets of workplace inequality through the adoption of multiple HRM practices such as training and development, hiring, reward and performance management has done over the decades is stabilized the discourse on the types of inequalities we have had in workplaces and society. However, what such growing research have missed is the lack of acknowledgement of the fundamental principles underpinning the normalization of such inequality and whether there may even be a way out for the central discipline tasked with addressing such gender, race, ethnicity, religious and other types of inequalities at work: HRM. Part of the underpinning fundamental that has not been addressed previously is a critical appraisal of the inequality discourses and how they have been applied through standardised HRM procedures in the hiring, training, development and performance appraisal of staff to ascertain the extent to which people who experience such practices are treated. It is even acknowledged fleetingly in previous scholarship that an examination of hiring processes is the start of unearthing whether people are treated as if they were objects and therein dehumanized within a process that is paradoxically supposed to embed equality within it (Bernard et al., 2018; Vaes et al., 2012). The focus of this chapter is to examine the theoretical and practical instances where workplace hiring practices have been applied unquestioningly on already marginalized communities such as autistic jobseekers to the extent that their treatment by HR Managers can be labelled as dehumanizing (or less human). To achieve this focus, I use Tilly's (1998) seminal scholarship on inequality to initially pose and then examine (through additional debates) the central question which is 'why has the unquestioned reproduction of the normalization of workplace inequality continued in contemporary research and Human Resource Management practice to the extent that it has created marginalised communities within the workplace and society?' I present the traditional approaches to workplace inequality, whose main anchor on Tilly's (1998) work on 'Durable Inequality' to critique the stabilization of HRM's hiring, performance management and training practices to paired, yet unequal, autistic and non-autistic staff. Although Tilly highlights the social mechanisms I do so to reflect on how earlier and subsequent approaches have inadvertently maintained an institutional culture (or a hypernormalization) of workplace inequality. This apparently unintended normalization of workplace inequality is antithetical to the dominant HRM discourse promoting equality, diversity and inclusion and creates a void between what is espoused in the inequality theorization of Tilly and his advocates and the normalization of inequality that is experienced by marginalized communities such as highly capable autistic people. Such a theory – practice/experience gap has led to the (perhaps unintended) dehumanization of autistic staff which highlights the normalization of the absurd in workplace and society. This normalization serves as both a scholarship and practice void, which is addressed in this chapter's theoretical framework, the findings and discussions and the proposition of 4 interventions and a resilience model to fill such a neglect. The interventions and model are expected to firstly, extend Tilly's work on the causes of long-lasting social inequalities but also the categorical differences he has used to account for unequal pairings (e.g. black/white, male/female) in society. Secondly, by critiquing Tilly and his followers' critique of the social stratification method used to categorise societal inequalities and differences, I reintroduce on the very personal preferences and group attributes, which Tilly and his followers had discredited in their meta-analysis to provide both an alternative set of interventions as potential solutions and a reconceptualization of workplace inequality. Thirdly, I highlight how Yurchak's (2013, see 2003 for earlier version) 'hypernormalization of the absurd' has, over time, led to the identification of more specific forms of the normalization of workplace inequality and societal disparity by focusing on both

the categorical distinctions/differences between autistic and non-autistic staff but also the individual and group distinctions to highlight the specificity of such inequality normalization. However, there is an even bigger void/gap in the debates and discussions on inequality, which is that organisational efforts to address the problem through traditional HRM procedures of recruitment, selection and performance management measures has only succeeded in surfacing the wider societal marginalisation felt by some communities (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 2009). To find out more on how these debates have reproduced/normalized inequality, I examine other nuanced aspects in the scholarly debates, which emphasize the primacy of legislation to address hidden workplace inequality whilst, at the same time, neglecting how those HRM practices included in hiring, performance appraisals and inductions have enhanced the normalization of inequality between unequal categorical pairings (Nachmias & Caven, 2018).

Although he is accredited with the notion of ‘hypernormalization’, Yurchak did not capture how the normalization of workplace inequality could evolve as part of a process of the normalization of HRM practices, whose adoption over time, helps in perpetuating absurdity. As such, the normalization of inequality at work can be captured and presented at the organizational level, where HRM practices are designed, implemented and experienced by various categorical employment distinctions. Such a remiss, has therefore, presented a false sense of legitimacy for the normalization of inequality and the dehumanization of specific sectors of the workplace and society. Such replication/reproduction has also tended to simplify how other complex socio-economic, legal and humanitarian aspects were involved in the unexpected yet sudden crumbling of the very bureaucratic and autocratic forms that maintained such imposition of a state of normalcy. Despite the shortcoming and the disappointment that the ‘until it was no more’ (crumbling of the reproduction of oppressive bureaucratic form) brought to its Soviet autocrats, the antithetical presentation of the Soviet Union in the 1980s as an emblem of paradise brought with it a conceptual lens of how not to manage or govern people at a national level but also what happens when a way of life (a culture of governance and behaving) has become so endemic that it is unquestioningly accepted as a ‘hypernormalized’ status quo. This status quo has sadly become accepted and even practised by researchers and HRM professionals in a fundamental aspect of Management, namely hiring. It is the unwitting application of standardisation of hiring practices in the workplace that I critique to see what could be contributed to Yurchak’s hypernormalization and thereby open the gates to future research.

Structurally, I draw on various scholarly perspectives (both traditional as well as contemporary) to critique the hypernormalization of workplace inequality in a range of contextual settings to show how such a scholarly practice has led to a dead end for HRM scholarship. By drawing on varied contextualised research in autism scholarship I try to show how studies on autism in different countries have propagated instances of inequality in the workplace, thereby stabilising an unquestioning acceptance of systemic and widespread inequality at work and in society. Finally, I use the survey materials of a research project with 24 autistic jobseekers to highlight their contextualised challenges in the UK and to narrate what was practically done to address workplace inequality. Four proposals (interventions) are advanced, based on the examined literature and the research project to show how HRM, as the Social Science discipline that is expected to intervene in this area, can provide a way out of the normalization of workplace inequality whose naïve adoption in the expectation that they would create equality, diversity and inclusion through hiring, reward, training and performance management has led to the dehumanization/objectification of autistic jobseekers. Such absurdity examination has not been attempted in previous HRM scholarship, literature and debates. The conclusion provides some recommendations for theory and professional practice on how HRM can step up to address workplace and wider social inequality issues.

Inequality Theory

Inequality as a hypernormalized process

This chapter examines the extent to which aspects of Yurchak's hypernormalization has permeated Human Resource Management and contributed to the stabilization of the marginalization and inequality discourse by focusing on Tilly's (1998) seminal scholarship called *Durable Inequality*. Although previous scholars such as Glenn (2002) included various categorisation of inequality namely race, class, income and gender disparities in their expositions of the topic (also see Acker, 2006; Marsh, 2011), Tilly was the first to highlight how inequality ought to be understood from the interpersonal relationships between individuals in society by adopting a relational lens to inequality (Tomasovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Such a relational approach is important as it depicts the dynamics and potential changes in the relationality, the contexts within which the relationships are transacted and therefore, the nature of the inequality problem. By adopting such an approach, Tilly highlighted how inequality has become systemic and last for an organization's or society's lifetime by investigating the causes of the inequality within paired representations in society using race (black and white), gender (female and male) or nationality (citizen and non-citizen). Through such categorical, paired distinctions, Tilly showed how they become institutionalized (part of a culture) and sedimented (ossified in organizational architectures) over time thereby creating 'durable inequality'. He attributed the long-lasting nature of such inequality of the pairings to how each of the parties depends on the solutions to the inequality problem rather than an examination of the underlying processes and the trends that may have reproduced the inequality in the first place. Tilly used the examples of apartheid South Africa and a racially divided US of the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties and sixties to demonstrate how the resolution of black and white segregation could not be resolved simply by examining the structures that produced the inequality rather than the processes via which the relations to such inequality ought to be examined. However, the relationality between pairings robs us of the possibilities of examining relationality between multiple pairings. These relational pairing-aspects are again echoed in Yurchak's depiction of the Soviet Union in the 1980s although Yurchak was preoccupied with the state bureaucratic forms that are responsible for stabilizing an acceptance of societal inequality. As a way of highlighting the underpinnings behind these societal challenges, Yurchak bi-polarised (in order to show the relational pairings between) an examination of the late Soviet Union into a socio-political reality and philosophical nexus to show how everything, including inequality, has been hypernormalized to a state of unquestioning acquiescence. Interestingly, Tilly's relational pairings approach was more interested in how inequality should be regarded as part of a process within which people have agency vying to show how valuable their contributions ought to count and by so doing discount or marginalise the contributions of others. Although this was not the case in Yurchak's work, the implicit discounting of other contributions in the inequality debates has narrowed other possibilities and standardized or even hypernormalized workplace inequality into challenge identification vs mitigation strategies. For example, Kaplan and Mikes (2012) identified three major types of challenges/risks to an organization, including political and natural disasters and macroeconomic paradigm shift. They argued that the inability of firms to prevent these from happening, the focus of managers should be on identification and mitigation measures. They identified the compliance approach as suitable for the management of preventable (mainly internal) challenges/risks such as health and safety whereas other fundamental shifts to decision making may be needed in addressing externally triggered challenges ranging from climate change to the fluctuating demands and pressures from marginalized communities. However, Foster and Kaplan (2001) also note how the notion of 'cultural lock-in' (i.e. senior management's stiffening of a firm's invisible decision-making framework could hamper or ossify the very control systems, decision-making processes and mental capabilities that are expected to provide the necessary and appropriate mitigation

interventions to the challenges posed. On the other hand, Tilly's argument focuses on how a phenomenon such as workplace inequality undergoes a generative process, be it at an organizational (national or even international) level, whereby agents do ascribe value to their mitigation actions. Tilly highlights how an exploitative class may choose to control a country's/firm's resources and thereby extract maximum benefit from the utilization of others' inputs whilst ostracizing them from enjoying the fullest value of their contributions (e.g. apartheid South Africa). However, he fails to explore how multiple agencies ascribing value propositions to how they intend to address the challenges they face could lead to something more dynamic within the traditional challenge – mitigation approach.

Inequality as a marginalization process

Although this explication has helped in spotlighting how two of the underpinning drivers help in the appreciation of the genesis of workplace inequality, namely the control and exploitation of organisational resources by a selected few (those managers who have been challenged), it is through their agency (their ability to mitigate/resolve the challenge/risk) that they produce not only the structures for such inequality but also the relations driving the inequality. Debates on inequality have even extended to how slavery and immigration discrimination practices have been normalized in the past and in current times and used by some scholars such as Munoz (2008) to denote principal aspects/drivers of inequality. In resource exploitation, Tilly surfaces a process via which individuals with power and authority control and utilize vast amounts of resources to utilize the efforts of others in producing and adding value to the original resources without enjoying the outcomes of their labour. They do so coercively through organizational procedures and policies on performance, reward, remuneration and training, legislative or even repressive force. However, Mann (1999) and Wright (2000) have also clarified that Tilly's arguments were originally borrowed from Marx's theorization on labor value. The opportunity hoarding type of inequality highlights how members of specific group limit value-enhancing resources for the specific use of their group at the detriment of others outside. Although Tilly's focus was on how the elite group do engage in opportunity hoarding, he also highlighted how non-elites may choose to engage with those who control such resources in peace-building exercises so as to try and progress within such structures rather than find ways of dismantling it. Such a process has led to the organisational and social exclusion of wider networks that may choose not to engage or associate and such lack of engagement and commitment could be considered a fundamental HRM problem. This echoes Weber's (1996) and Parkin's (1979) notion of social closure.

Inequality as a Sociological process

The literature on inequality has also received additional attention from a socio-structural lens. Jin and Lee (2017) explained how workplace inequality may have been legitimised by adopting a functionalist sociological approach in which social class differences have led to inequality being perceived as a challenge. They also note how this is largely contingent upon factors outside of the individuals' influence. However, the extent to which social classification may or may not be viewed as part of inequality was coined in Zhao and Wry's (2016) famous adage that 'not all inequality is equal'. The functionalist and rather contentious approach to workplace or societal inequality has been predominantly observed in the standardized application of HRM practices such as recruitment and selection and performance and the wider inequality tendencies that their mismanagement could have on individuals and communities. Jin and Lee believe that social structures and the systems therein determine individuals' living conditions (such as their wealth accumulation propensity, their gender and ethnicity associations). Despite these structural determinants, they also claimed that an individual's efforts in acquiring the necessary professional, practical and academic qualifications and skills could help (but not

guarantee to) improve their level of inequality. However, Li et al., (2018) and Witt (2016) believe that state-controlled mechanisms/institutions ranging from the economic, to the educational to the security set-ups have maintained and systematically institutionalized, or in Yurchak's words, 'hypernormalized' inequality as a fundamental challenge faced by society, contemporary workplaces and HR professionals. Tilly highlights how state institutions and organizational procedures can be utilized as forms and vehicles of *emulation* (i.e. copying and implementing so-called 'best practice' HRM models in totally new business environments). When this fails to maintain the status quo, Tilly highlights how the *adaptation* process, which enhances the reproduction of an organization's or country's rules-based procedures, policies and practices to enable people to cope in new environments, whilst, simultaneously, reproducing the expected (unequal) categorical pairings distinctions in relationships. Here, of course, are echoes of the new institutionalism.

Inequality as an organizing process

Other possible explications and debates on inequality include Munoz's (2008) racial inequality. However, discussions on race have since been superseded by Le Grand and Tahlin (2013), who claim that it is much more beneficial to understand the way work is organized into different categories if we are to deepen our knowledge on how inequality practices are actually produced and stabilised as a key challenge in contemporary society. Although Tilly (1998), Munoz (2008) and Tomascovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019), among others, have adopted the relational and processual view to how workplace inequality may be generated, there have been growing concerns that adopting the organizational lens to inequality may not be sufficient if we are to firstly understand the more individualistic experiences of inequality (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2000) and secondly to appreciate the wider societal-level challenges. These scholars claim that patriarchy has contributed to influencing, maintaining and stabilising institutional logics, beliefs and practices leading to the hypernormalization of workplace inequality procedures. Furthermore, Grimshaw et al. (2017) believe that it is the way the labour market has been segmented which has brought about organisational level, workplace inequality. Although Le Grand and Tahlin's (2013) and Kalleberg's (2011; 2003) 'good and bad jobs' has partly stabilized this type of inequality categorization and polarization, Vallas (2012) believes that workplace inequality should be attributed not only to labour market segmentation, similar to the way the Soviet Union of the 1980s was ethnically stratified, but also to how production processes have tended to value and consequently reward a selected few in workplaces and society. The same arguments and claims have been proffered by segmented labour market theorists such as Srivastava (2017) and Lopez-Roldan and Fachelli (2021) to argue how even though the structures that influence job categorisation may largely be driven by external labour market conditions, the internal organisational procedures used have also, in parts, exacerbated employers' understandings of which jobs should be performed by which genders, races and classes in society and how unequally they should be treated. The latter aspect is similar to the bureaucratic tendencies in the Soviet Union of keeping large swathes of people subjugated under the delusional logic of stability. Interestingly, these debates have only highlighted a trend of hyper-categorised sets of challenges in terms of inequality but stopped short of signalling how HR can contribute in addressing this hypernormalisation and hyper-categorisation.

Contextualizing inequality within autism and employment research

Having observed the bi-polarisation of inequality, which has led to a hyper-categorised challenge vs mitigation camp in the debates, this section contextualises workplace inequality by situating it within autism and HRM/Employment related studies, something that has not been previously attempted. I draw from various scholarships around the world to show what is still lagging. For example, in the UK, research shows that although only 32% of adults with

autism conditions are employed, only 16% of these are in full-time work (Howlin, Alcock & Burkin, 2005). In the United States, Australia and Canada, the unemployment figures of autistic adults pointing to workplace and societal inequality are more alarming (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava & Anderson, 2015; Baldwin, Costley & Warren, 2014; Eaves & Ho, 2008) in comparison to those with other types of disabilities seeking employment (Hedley et al., 2017a). Such difficulty in obtaining and retaining work opportunities (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2014) has also been amplified by the fact that people with autism find it hard to make the necessary workplace adaptations and thereby end up leaving jobs more frequently than other colleagues without such a condition (Hurlbutt & Chalmers, 2004). Research has also found that autistic employees are still beset with having to navigate challenges at the recruitment and selection stages as most companies use traditional person specifications and job descriptions which do not align with the needs of autistic people thereby revealing a state of neglect (Burgess & Cimera, 2014; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). Again, these point to the adoption of the traditional challenge identification approach in inequality studies. Sheridan (2018) found that the gender pay-gap/inequality in Australia since the 1980s has grown to 15.3% in spite of the fact that 46% of the country's workforce are women compared to the UK's 72.2%, which also registered a workforce decline of 0.5% (ONS, 2020), it is interesting to note from such studies that women who were found in low paid and low skilled jobs were predominantly those with some mental or disability condition. The Australia study also highlighted how socio-economic inequality was exacerbated by workplace practices that tended to promote discrimination against an already marginalised group of workers (the double challenge whammy). The tendency therefore for women to reach higher levels of management were quite minimalistic (Dalingwater, 2018). Part of the explanation for such endemic gender-based inequality has been ascribed to the adoption by most organisations of neoliberal tendencies, whereby firms organise how work is delivered on the basis of a competitive and free market ideology and policy implementation in the Western world. Such neoliberal tendencies were more pronouncedly felt in workplaces in the UK. The current state of autism research therefore shows an unfolding high level of inequality not only within organisational but also national/societal contexts.

The pervasiveness of inequality practices that have hypernormalized the marginalization of certain groups in the workplace, especially those with autism conditions, could be further understood if we turn our attention to the role that HRM has had (or is expected) to play in this. Cooper and Kennady (2021) found that 95 autistic participants from a 600 neurodiverse group of employees experienced recruitment and selection procedures and practices that reflected no appreciation of their existing conditions and challenges. They also found a generally negative work experience for such a group in all aspects of the recruitment, selection, performance management processes. The experiences even worsened the more neurodiverse and minority ethnically orientated the employee was. However, managers' good understanding of neurodiversity helped to alleviate the negative experiences felt by the autistic group. Similarly, Gal, Landes and Katz (2015) articulated some of the negative communication experiences that autistic employees faced when they were being interviewed as the procedure did not account for their individual needs (Barnham & Martin, 2017). Such negativity could be explicable in the sense that the necessary legal reasonable adjustments for their social, sensory and communication requirements were not met (López & Keenan, 2014). Again, such a group is perceived as a challenge to be dealt with. Likewise, the psychometric tests that were conducted on them were far from suitable for people living with such conditions. Out of the 24 (12 males and 12 females) clinically diagnosed people ranging between 26 and 66 years either in or out of employment in the UK, Romualdez, Walker and Remington (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews and found a mixed set of results. Whilst some autistic employees chose not to disclose for fear of reprisals and further negativity others preferred to disclose

their neuro-diverse conditions in hopeful attempts to be included in their organisations' activities (also see the work of Wood & Happe, 2020, on autistic teachers in the UK). Vincent (2020) also interviewed a snowballed sampled population of 21 UK autistic graduates (6 females and 15 males). There was also an additional 58 people who comprised part of support networks (such as support workers, advisors and parents) and they registered negative experiences ranging from not understanding the recruitment practices to lack of workplace adaptations to fit their conditions to feeling overwhelmed. Similar discomfort triggered by workplace mal-adaptations (such as communication and physical sensory distractions) was raised in Waisman-Nitzan, Gal and Shreuer's (2021) study of 19 autistic employees in the US, aged between 22 to 29 to see the extent to which the personal, environmental and job characteristics impeded or enhanced their job performance. Even the theoretical review of over 800 articles between 1987 and 2018 conducted by Khalifa et al. (2019) highlighted the extent of the relational and environmental support that was needed in autistic employees were to feel less workplace unequal than their peers. The research on autism therefore seems to be suggesting that workplaces need to do more if autistic staff are to feel equally and adequately supported to develop, to acquire and retain jobs (Harmuth et al., 2018).

As part of a recent wave of scholarship suggesting a way out, calls for employment support for marginalized staff groups are emerging (Hedley et al., 2017a; Buescher, et al., 2014; Hendricks, 2010). Recently Spoor, Hedley and Bartram (2020) acknowledged that organizations need to do more to support autistic employees (also see Bury et al., 2021). Recently, calls for such types of support have even been extended to families of autistic people (Rose et al., 2020). Despite these calls for more positive actions such as boosting the psychosocial competencies of autistic people in order to deal with their sensory and social challenges, the extent to which their resilience is developed at the organisational level remain sparingly investigated (Luthar et al., 2006). There has been negligent attention and practical focus on how to address the inequality experienced by autistic people from an individual emotional and personal behavioural stance (Wright et al. 2013; Kaboski, McDonnell & Valentino, 2017).

Despite some of the proffered solutions, autistic people continue to experience workplace inequality to the extent that its intensified scale highlights a certain acceptance of treating some marginalised groups more dis-favourably than their most able-bodied colleagues, thereby leading to some researchers the pervasiveness of un-well-being triggered by a hypernormalized inequality (Szatmari, 2018). Such a toxic workplace context has therefore overshadowed previous calls for personal psychosocial, cognitive and organizational-environmental support for autistic employees (Kaboski et al., 2017). To complement the call to practically address the shortcomings raised by pervasive inequality for autistic people, some scholars are now suggesting that the potential way out may be resilience capability (Shochet et al., 2016) but we do not know how doing so could address the deeper systemic workplace inequality and the traditional approaches used in doing so. To find out how this can be achieved and thereby obtain the chapter's focus, I continue this section by examining more recent studies into the pervasiveness of workplace inequality through the adoption of specific employment practices followed up with an analysis of a recent UK based project on autism in the next.

Methodology: An Autistic Jobseekers' Peer-Support Case in the UK

Having examined the pervasiveness of inequality in a range of autism and inequality research contexts, the challenge vs mitigation approach used and HRM's role in different countries, I now turn attention to investigate the extent to which Yurchak's notional aspects of 'hypernormalization' (the use of everyday practices to normalise abnormal phenomenon like workplace inequality as if they will last forever) – could be observed in a case involving autistic jobseekers in the UK. The sample involved here was about individuals diagnosed with autism,

but who were able to work and participate in the support group. However, not all individuals with autism are able to do so. The case was chosen because it highlights and fits the key aspects of inequality that have been depicted in the literature examined earlier (including structural, processes-based, procedural, systemic and even relation aspects used at organisational and national level to propagate and maintain a state of inequality and marginalisation).

Based on emerging research and the call to support the neuro-diverse needs of autistic people, an Autism Work Peer Support Group (AWPSG) was set up with the UK Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Jobcentre in a UK county. The group comprises of 24 people who were clinically diagnosed with a range of autistic conditions and who had registered with the Jobcentre in a UK county comprised the support group. They also had, between them, a range of employment histories in different jobs whilst others were actively looking for but were not fortunate at the time to find employment. 90% of the group had already achieved some educational qualification from secondary to A-levels whilst 10% had Higher National Diplomas (or HNDs) in the UK. The group was also being supported in their job searches by 2 Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs), who have had a good working relationship with the group and were therefore understanding of their specialized employment, personal, behavioural and health needs. These Advisors also acted as facilitators at the group's sessions so as to provide vital form, structure and continuity and familiarity (important aspects needed in any autism support context as found from different autism studies). For example, it was the facilitators' role and responsibility to ensure members had access to session venues and therefore could participate and contribute to a range of activities and discussions at appropriate times and places. The meetings were held at the Department for Work and Pensions premises, which were accessible and safe for all group members who lived in the locality. For details of what was agreed with and provided for group members (see Table 4.1) below.

Table 4.1: Support areas and agreements for the autism group

Support areas	Agreements with participants
Peer-to-peer support	Person-to-person assistance within group
Additional support	Bespoke online sessions to boost technological skills
Place	Local Jobcentre
Membership	Autistic jobseekers and mentors
How often	Twice monthly
Session length	Between 1 – 1.5 hours
Focus	Job searches and wellbeing issues
Facilitation and coordination	Facilitators who had experience at supporting autistic people

The main aim of setting up such a group was to share ideas, frustrations, missed opportunities as well as foreseeable job outlets to see the extent to which hypernormalization was internalized by group members. The group was also given the platform to strategize on a range of intervention mechanisms that were designed to address the absurdity of hypernormalized practices, opinions and viewpoints. A set of questionnaire areas was proposed to the autistic jobseekers to see how they reacted to each item. The questionnaire that was designed focused on aspects such as how well autistic jobseekers were able to communicate their viewpoints, their reactions to facilitators, how they related with other group members and their use of technology to find work. These questions were meant to foster discussions at such a forum and serve not only as an outlet where communication could be enhanced through the voicing out of each member's opinions on a range of autism and employment related issues but also for members to examine the extent to which they internalized and were prepared to challenge the

literature and research's 'hypernormalization' of autistic people as a subdued, marginalized and subjugated group. An additional set of questionnaire items focused on the extent to which the autistic jobseekers' participation at the focus group meetings facilitated their socialization, confidence building, attitudinal change and capability of retaining jobs when they have succeeded in getting one. These questions were asked to find out the individuals' and group's ability to develop resilience over time. Additionally, the discussions were expected to serve as a peer motivation platform given the range of negativities that have been highlighted in previous and current research on autism, employment seeking and inequality (see Table 4.2 for the specific methodological issues).

Table 4.2. Methodological issues

DWP case issues	Inequality issues in case	Autism issues raised by group facilitators	Focus group guidelines
Issue 1	Adapting to standardized recruitment and selection processes	Have you experienced any difficulties in relation to finding a job?	Jobseekers' internalization of hypernormalized employment practices
Issue 2	Adapting to workplace environments that are not sensitive to autistic people's sensory, emotional and behavioural needs	How do you view other autistic jobseekers in the support group?	Jobseekers' reactions to the challenges
Issue 3	Not having access to adequate resources	How do you think other jobseekers in the support group see you?	Jobseekers' attitudes to finding work
Issue 4	Not being able to develop and progress as other colleagues without a disability	What is your perception of the online job-search platform?	Jobseekers' approach to job retention

Thematic findings

Four themes have been found from the two sets of questionnaires – firstly, to the autistic jobseekers' responses to the generic questionnaire, whose aspects have been highlighted in the preceding section and to a second set of questions which sought to ascertain whether resilience building could help alleviate their inequality and marginalisation. The resilience questions focused on aspects such as their ability to socialise with friends, their confidence building capability leading to potential job opportunities and the added benefit of being part of the employment focus group. The themes are presented as follows.

Theme 1: Access to employment framework

The first finding highlights the way the group has been put together and implemented. Members spoke about not only how formatted and structured the group's meetings were but also its benefits such as influencing and being influenced by each other's opinions and viewpoints on attempts to find work. They talked about the way they were keen to take part reassured about their safety, sensory and behavioural requirements been safeguarded within an environment they felt comfortable in. Whilst more than half of the members talked about how their confidence levels were boosted by such meetings, others highlighted that they had begun to observe improvements in the way they interacted with other group members, whom they did not know prior to the meetings and discussions, others spoke about how their increased awareness of who they are and their limits made them question why they had previously had self-doubts and were low on personal esteem. The latter aspects dented their abilities to interact with people previously and directly or indirectly affected their chances of getting or even

keeping a job. Although it is easy for over half of the members to say how wonderful their experience of the group has been in terms of offering them a framework, which they can use to access employment support, there was a deeper underlying issue of trying to develop the socio-cultural and educational prerequisites of the group so as to resist against the stereotypical negativities that they had previously experienced when applying for jobs.

Theme 2: From economic exclusion to social inclusion

Members also talked openly about how they had begun to develop greater self-appreciation which had increased their desire to make new friends in an expanded social network. Such an ability to increase their social acumen was reflected in continuing their discussions outside of the DWP. In fact, 65% of members agreed that they were able to discuss difficult unemployment and exclusion issues at meetings whereas 35% strongly agreed to such as possibility. They talked about how they stayed in touch with other group members outside of the formal structure of the group meetings within an informal atmosphere outside the DWP. Such renewed social interactions increased their confidence in applying for more jobs. The members were clearly expanding their personal spaces in which they felt supported and valued and, in return, they were beginning to appreciate the benefits of feeling included within various groups both inside and outside of DWP. This sense of inclusion was used as their tool to fight against a previous sentiment of being left out/excluded from participating in the economic world of work/employment and skills development.

Theme 3: Overcoming unemployment barriers through community belonging

In the third theme, members reflected on how they were constantly faced with barriers to employment and how these were created from a variety of sources, namely organizations, society, other social networks and the standardized recruitment and selection procedures which did not cater to their clinically diagnosed requirements. In contrast, 70% of members strongly agreed with being able to talk freely in the focus group meetings whereas 50% were pleased to participate in the online employment jobs' searches. They began to individually interpret and make greater sense and meaning out of their meetings. A sense of community started to develop in the group. This was highlighted in how group members started to be more open with one another by even sharing their personal secrets that they were previously nervous of exposing to others outside of their immediate families. They showed a community spirit which they had not had previously and which they said was lacking from their previous attempts at finding work. They now felt human and had a sense of belonging somewhere where their efforts at improving their lives were appreciated. In essence, they were developing a new set of support networks within the initially established focus group. They were now in control of their journey towards employability and could begin to feel less stressed and anxious about its outcomes. The procedural challenges that they had to encounter had started to disappear as their attitudes and perspectives started to become more positive and empowering.

Theme 4: Developing dynamic resilience capability

Developing resilience is the fourth theme. It showed a couple of interesting findings as follows. Firstly, the autistic jobseekers were able to highlight how their challenges to finding work were created mainly by external parties (such as organizations, procedures, people's perceptions or misgivings about autistic employees...) and that these constraints were not insurmountable. The members also saw the benefits of group discussions and the social connectedness both within and outside of the DWP and the online employment discussions and searches that were enhanced through these networks. They said these measures enhanced their resilience building (including having the capability to 'bounce back' from adversities) and challenge resolution capacity. They started to adopt new and more effective strategies to get out of unemployment

and gain wider social acceptance and belonging. In so doing, they realized how unhelpful the HRM policies and procedures they were subjected to when attempting to find work and how resilience capability offered them a new lease of life beyond that of exclusion, marginalization and even dehumanization. The members began to develop their confidence and ‘can-do’ spirit through social participation, developing self-esteem and having a positive outlook.

Four Proposals: Way out for HRM and Employment Studies

Based on the literature and the thematic findings, I propose four areas for HRM to help address the marginalization and dehumanization that has been created as a result of the application of hypernormalized employment practices onto marginalized communities such as those of autistic jobseekers. These are namely 1) a framework shifting from workplace inequality to workplace inclusivity in autism research and for autistic employees; 2) a reconceptualization and rethinking of what the hypernormalization of the absurd application of employment practices means for marginalized communities; 3) a shift from a superordinate organizational and national culture and structure that hypernormalizes absurd practices that dehumanize people to a deeper understanding of the types and levels of support and advice needed by marginalized communities (e.g. jobseekers) and 4) a conscientious development of resilience capability to address workplace inequality, marginalization and dehumanization.

Proposal 1 identifies an HRM framework shifting from workplace inequality to workplace inclusivity in autism research and for autistic employees. This framework highlights the negativities of applying standardized employment practices such as recruitment and selection’s use of prototype job descriptions and person specifications onto *all* categories of potential employees irrespective of age, race, ability/disability etc... The frame also surfaces the workplace inequality that such an application could lead to and calls for a more common-sensical approach to practice application and contextual sensitivity. The framework is therefore aimed at greater workplace inclusion for marginalized staff. In order to put this proposal into practice, it is necessary for organizations to encourage members to voice out their socio-cultural preferences of what types of employment practices may potentially discriminate or alienate, what types of HRM processes could count as stressors and therefore should be dealt with earlier in the recruitment and selection processes (including before the damage and losses to productivity creep in). Although the examples from the literature highlighted organizations’ and HR professionals’ expectations *on* incoming employees (albeit with limited interventionist success) hardly were we enlightened about what effects these perpetuated practices could have on the resilience building potential of employees. The current thinking behind HRM scholarship and practice is that the onus to be productivity-driven, to have a sense of belonging, to fit within organizational operations and so on is *on* the individual employee. Likewise, the predominant thinking is the challenge – mitigation perspective, which views marginalized employees as a problem rather than a potential part of the solution. Proposal 1 is stating that HRM should work *with* existing and incoming staff to ensure that adhering to organizational structures and procedures are inclusive and non-discriminatory.

Proposal 2 highlights how HRM scholarship and research could benefit from a reconceptualization and rethinking of what the hypernormalization of the absurd application of employment practices means for marginalized communities. The scholarship on autism and inequality highlights the negative impact of employment practices that have adopted a challenge – mitigation approach in their application. It also shows what happens when people who need support (including autistic jobseekers) in activities such as one-to-one guidance and coaching are treated as a challenging, homogenous group with the potential to cause trouble. This signals the need to rethink the challenge – mitigation approach in terms of what type of support is provided *for* such a group and, in so doing, reconceptualise challenge – mitigation to include supporting individuals and groups out of the perpetuation of absurdity via the

challenge – mitigation framework. The new proposal includes a tripartite challenge – support – mitigation framework as part of the new reconceptualization of workplace inequality and how it could be addressed. Such a new direction provides a radical rethink of who has the authority to design, implement and evaluate the effects of HRM practices on staff, who needs to be included in this redesign process and how Personal Human Development (or PHD) takes centre stage rather than the priority accorded to the notion of ‘challenge’ in previous scholarship. My proposal echoes Kuchinke’s (2010) notion of the centrality of Human Development that would supersede managerial and business leaders’ preponderance to abuse their power in the challenge – mitigation approach. This new Personal Human Development notion highlights, among other things, the centrality of the individual personal and their development and how these should be guided by a more ethical, moral commitment and values-driven management style that does not always fall back on the more imposition-driven challenge – mitigation approach. The new PHD focuses more on both employees and employers adopting a reciprocal approach to each other’s developmental needs. For example, management would need to be supported by autistic staff to understand their neurodiverse workplace needs whereas autistic staff would management’s support to thrive within increasingly standardized workplace settings. Such a new perspective is better tailored at resolving performance, reward, recruitment and selection practices which have caused the marginalization-related challenges. Such an environment enhances business firms and people to thrive. Continuing to use hypernormalized practices that only measure traditional constructs of job, organisational and personal attributes and characteristics in order to be performing employees as recommended by Cooper et al. (2013) will only serve to deal with the challenge posed by autistic staff whilst discriminating, alienating and further marginalizing them in wider society (including autistic jobseekers). This thereby severely undermine their career and personal development and attainment and the support and reciprocity of obligations that should be encouraged in my new reconceptualization.

Proposal 3 draws our attention to yet another important shift from a superordinate organizational, national, societal culture and structure that hypernormalizes absurd practices (such as normalizing a neoliberal approach to workplace practices whereby all people have to compete for employment, for rewards and promotion, for recognition and so on despite their capability or health conditions) to one that treats disabled people with respect and as humans (not objects for organizational use). Similarly, this proposal calls for an HRM-centric approach that uses structural, process-based and emotive discourses to help deepen understanding of the types and levels of support and advice needed by marginalized communities (including jobseekers). This proposal involves managers undertaking a more critically evaluative approach of the workplace structures involving how they recruit, select, performance and reward manage staff, especially those considered as marginalized. The new proposal also highlights the need for managers and staff to work together in identifying internal and external processes related to resource utilisation, resource hoarding, exploitation and adaptation practices that may have been inadvertently used by management thereby leading to the perpetuation of workplace inequality and its resultant absurdity. Such an examination calls for a deeper understanding of what workplace inequality actually means to those on the receiving end as it takes into account the context and the jobseekers’ experiences of the phenomenon. The earlier challenge – mitigation approach does not allow for such a critical examination and therefore negates the experiences of those adversely impacted by its consequences: marginalized communities like autistic staff. Such an experience transcends the structural mechanisms and the HRM procedures that initially helped to reproduce inequality and, focusing on the processes that increase people’s abilities to function optimally. Although previous research has identified the negative effects that improper use of an organization’s resources could have on organizations and their ability to be sustainable, the widespread

neoliberal application of rewarding, compensating, promoting and recognising staff ability and performance have failed to alleviate the marginalization and dehumanizing nature of HRM's resource use or hoarding and its adaptation to suit less potentially non-marginalized staff communities in reward and performance management processes. Therefore, the instrumentalization of the challenge – mitigation approach only perpetuates autistic employee – employer inequality as it surfaces greater competition between autistic and non-autistic staff. Such dichotomization is especially harmful for marginalized groups. My new proposal/alternative therefore normalizes understanding and collaboration between autistic, non-autistic and management staff. It also enhances the judicious and transparent identification and distribution of organizational resources to normalize the humanization of individual and collective contributions.

Proposal 4 underscores how important it is for HRM scholars and practitioners to conscientiously develop resilience capability in their research and professional practice to address workplace inequality, marginalization and dehumanization more than ever before. This fourth proposal is calling for resilience as an alternative to the challenge – mitigation approach that HRM professionals could embed in their corporate and HRM practices when employing people from different backgrounds and experiences. The resilience aspects include identifying and communicating with all potential employees all characteristics of the job that could be perceived and experienced negatively by incoming staff (especially those with some disability), putting into place performance enhancing and stress coping mechanisms into all the HRM procedures, policies and practices for each individual and over time, helping to create resilience-building communities of practice in the workplace. Whilst previous research has emphasised the importance of workplace performativity through a range of performance and reward mechanisms (e.g. appraisals, performance indicators, reward and remuneration packages), past studies have missed how placing numeric values on what people contribute within the workplace has individually increased stress, demotivation and anxiety levels as it also dampened the ability of the entire organisational collective to become more resilient, less marginalized and better performing over a longer period of time. Therefore, this type of intervention (proposal) is new since it has identified both individual *and* organisational characteristics for everyone's development. Contrary to the challenge – mitigation approach which identifies autistic staff as posing a challenge/risk to organizational development, the resilience approach recognizes human potential as the starting point for organizational success. Whilst Roelvink and Zolkos (2015) highlighted how the embodied forms of emotions can help organisations develop knowledge of which practices can foster their sustainable development, 'affective ontologies' that continue to discriminate, to marginalize and dehumanize by treating staff's outputs as objects fails to enhance collective resilience building capability. Such failure has been perpetuated by the challenge – mitigation approach and exacerbates workplace inequality. Furthermore, its adoption has dampened HRM's capability to resolve inequality and marginalization in workplaces. Proposal 4 now calls for the identification of these negativities as part of a resilience building process in HRM (see Table 4.3 for a comparative analysis of theories examined, this chapter's 4 proposals and how hypernormalization has been extended).

Table 4.3: Comparative Analysis between Theorization and 4 Proposals

Inequality Theory Perspectives	Hypernormalization Perspective	Autism research perspectives	Chapter's 4 Proposals	Extension of Hypernormalization & future research
Tilly's (1998) relational perspective	Yurchak's (2003; 2005/2013) paradoxical depiction of an unreal eternity	Baldwin et al.'s (2015) autistic over-representation	Designing and implementing tailored recruitment & selection, job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A focus on people's perceptions of what counts as workplace inequality

		in unemployment	descriptions & person specifications should include all staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlighting practical resolutions to inequality & marginalisation • Future research should examine how employees' perceptions of inequality have been hypernormalized in informal, non-workplace settings
Glenn's (2002) race, class, gender & income disparity perspective	Difference between ideological pronouncements & practice/reality	Burgess & Cimera (2014) unfriendly recruitment & selection practices		
		Cooper & Kennady (2021) recruitment & selection challenges for autistic applicants		
Munoz's (2008) resource control & exploitation perspective	Façade of stability, predictability, replicability & security for all	Kaboski et al. (2017) emotional, personal & behavioural challenges for autistic people		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A recognition of the power of resource allocation and its impacts in shaping human behaviour • Dealing with environmental stressors that trigger staff's & jobseekers' 'ontological insecurities' & societal marginalization • Future studies should examine how 'ontological insecurities' can be investigated within autism, inequality and employment studies
Le Grand & Talin's (2013) organization & categorization of work perspective	Normalization of absurd practices in workplaces & society in general	Sheridan's (2018) gender pay gap challenges for disabled staff		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing work and workplace environments through common-sensical & non-binary/polarisation approach • Staff's requirements and needs should be central in workplace inequality studies • Future studies should look into the combination of much wider societal, organisational and employees' qualitative

				responses to inequality and marginalisation
Vallas' (2012) labour market segmentation and attribution of specific value and rewards perspective	Rational practices are replaced with and normalized by irrational/absurd practices	Gal et al.'s (2015) communication barriers for autistic staff		
Srivastava (2017) & Lopez-Roldan & Fachelli's (2021) external influences on organizational structures & jobs' categorization perspective	Replication & maintenance of societal 'truths', rituals, organizing structures & modes of expression	Lopez & Keenan (2014) sensory and social challenges for autistic staff		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging organizational rituals, customs and cultures leading to inequality and marginalisation of autistic people • Highlighting the role of hierarchical forms in the reproduction of exclusion • Highlighting how the adoption of standardised HR practices have led to inequality and marginalisation reproduction • Future studies should examine how staff members' beliefs, customs and preferences may have also reproduced workplace inequality
Jin's (2017) social class structural differences perspective	Polarization between meaningful & meaningless	Waisman-Nitzan et al.'s (2021) workplace mal-adaptations for autistic staff	Reconceptualizing & rethinking the meaningfulness of employment practices and workplace environment for autistic staff and the marginalized in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the meaninglessness of standardized recruitment, selection, pay & reward and performance appraisals • Future studies to focus more on a shift towards HR practices <i>with</i> meaning
Li et al. (2018) & Witt (2016) state institutionalization of workplace & societal inequality perspective	Polarization between illusion and reality	Wood & Happe's (2020) overall unfriendly work environment	Challenging neoliberal application of reward, compensation, promoting and staff recognition and performance through equitable resource identification, allocation, distribution and usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalizing a workplace norm based on people's internalization of what it means to feel valued, respected, treated equally • Future studies should examine a comparative analysis of value and meaning creation as mitigators against unequal and marginalised treatment in workplaces and society

	Polarization between official & unofficial rule & language	Szatmari's (2018) pervasive autistic lack of wellbeing in workplaces	HR to identifying appropriate wellbeing measures that are realistically communicated to enhance employees' performance and longer-term resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building resilience into organizational entities through employee learning & development • Enhancing workplace adaptation through a language of tolerance, dignity for all and inclusivity • Future studies should ask fundamental questions on processes of relationality, dignity enhancement and strategic resilience
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Conclusion and Recommendations

Autism research has not previously been investigated and presented in terms of how the use of employment practices such as recruitment, selection, reward and performance management have led to a perpetuation of inequality within the workplace and wider society. The absurdity that this normalization has created has led to a fundamental void, which is how to address workplace inequality through a reconceptualization of the inequality and the dehumanization felt by marginalized communities such as autistic jobseekers. After a critical examination of autism research and anchoring this chapter on the theoretical framework of inequality theory, a deeper understanding of the extent to which inequality and marginalization may have been perpetuated in different organizational contexts and national/societal environments has been achieved. An examination of inequality research and literature within various organizational and societal contexts has revealed that HRM has been, for far too long, preoccupied itself with developing procedures and mechanisms that have successfully served a range of organizations' performance and financial objectives, whilst, simultaneously, robbing individual employees, collectives and marginalized communities of their individuality, their respect, dignity and humane employment conditions. Over time, such research has become mainstream and has led to what Yurchak called the hypernormalization of absurdity (including the unquestioning adoption of standardized recruitment, selection and performance practices) to the extent that the unquestioning development and adoption of such practices have maintained, stabilized and perpetuated an organizational and even national culture of inequality and marginalization of vulnerable communities (including autistic jobseekers). This has therefore led to this chapter's recognition of a rethinking of the blanket application of the challenge – mitigation approach that has, over the decades, been used to address challenges posed to organizational development by marginalized groups such as autistic employees.

As part of a new way out, I have proposed four areas in which HRM should step up its' responsibility to help address the inequality and marginalization experienced by the autistic community of jobseekers in my focus group. Doing so will help to resolve the application of standardized workplace processes and procedures, including the hiring processes, that have been hypernormalized in workplaces. By using the experiences of a focus group of autistic jobseekers to study a marginalized community, the novel set of four proposals include an HRM framework that identifies the negative issues felt by autistic people when an organization's resources are applied in ways that were anticipated to satisfy the traditional challenge – mitigation approach in HRM scholarship. The new 4-pronged framework also highlights the need to shift the discourse from national (macro-level), organizational and cultural systems that treated marginalized groups disrespectfully and inhumanely to one that focuses on improving their personal and professional wellbeing and personal human development and finally

developing resilience capability for individuals and communities at the micro level. These proposals serve as a practical way forward to help HRM to address the structural inadequacies and the normalization of personal and organisational under-development that Bechter et al. (2017) and Heyes et al. (2018) and the challenge – mitigation processes (see Tilly, 1998) that have perpetuated workplace inequality in Human Resource Management scholarship. Future studies should examine and critique frameworks that develop sustainable resilience building in a wider range of marginalized and vulnerable communities and groups.

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