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## Neurodiversity and Inclusive Governance: Cognitive Diversity, Employee Engagement, and Service Delivery in the South African Public Service

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### Abstract

This paper examines the underexplored theme of neurodiversity in South Africa's public service and its implications for inclusive governance, employee engagement, and service delivery. While global scholarship increasingly recognises the benefits of cognitive diversity, including autism, dyslexia, ADHD, and dysgraphia, the South African discourse largely neglects this dimension. This gap is striking in a country that has invested heavily in equity and diversity reforms but continues to prioritise physical disability and demographic transformation. Using a qualitative, desk-based methodology, the study reviews policy documents, scholarship, and organisational reports to assess how neurodiversity is conceptualised and the extent to which current inclusion frameworks accommodate cognitively diverse employees. Findings reveal a strong institutional focus on physical disability and demographic representation, with little attention to cognitive diversity. As a result, neurodiverse employees remain marginalised and insufficiently supported. This omission undermines engagement and weakens service delivery in governance contexts where adaptability, innovation, and resilience are essential. Neurodiverse individuals often bring valuable strengths such as pattern recognition, creativity, and attention to detail, yet these remain untapped in workplaces that fail to recognise cognitive differences. The paper argues that acknowledging neurodiversity can strengthen organisational capacity, boost morale, and align the public service with international inclusion standards. It calls for explicit policy recognition of cognitive diversity, targeted training for managers, and workplace accommodations that leverage neurodiverse strengths. By broadening diversity management to include cognitive differences, South Africa's public service can not only meet global benchmarks of inclusivity but also unlock new pathways for innovation and resilience in public administration. This study contributes to African diversity scholarship and positions neurodiversity as a strategic resource for improving public sector performance.

**Keywords:** Neurodiversity; Inclusive Governance; Cognitive Diversity; Employee Engagement; Public Service Delivery

### 1. Introduction

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 established inclusivity and equity as central pillars of governance, rooted in constitutional and legislative frameworks designed to redress historical inequalities and promote fair representation across public institutions (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Over the past three decades, diversity management in the public service has predominantly focused on correcting the injustices of apartheid by prioritising race, gender, and physical disability. These categories reflected both the legacy of exclusion and the urgent need to broaden participation in state institutions (Chipkin and Swilling, 2018). While this focus has been important in restructuring the state, it has also led to a narrow conception of diversity that overlooks other forms of difference, particularly those associated with cognitive functioning. The idea of neurodiversity has gained acceptance in the global conversation on workplace diversity in recent years. The term "neurodiversity," which was first used in the late 1990s but has gained popularity

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more recently, describes the inherent variation in human cognitive functioning, including disorders like dyslexia, dysgraphia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Austin and Pisano, 2017; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). Advocates of neurodiversity contend that these variations are unique manifestations of human potential rather than pathologizing them. According to a growing body of research, neurodiverse people frequently have special abilities that can help organizations, such as creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving, and sustained focus (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2023; Remington and Pellicano, 2023).

Workplace settings, however, aren't always made to take these variations into account. Neurodiverse workers are frequently excluded or marginalized by rigid performance management systems, communication procedures, and organizational cultures, which lowers their level of engagement and productivity (Doyle, 2020; Botha, Hanlon, and Williams, 2021). This problem is especially noticeable in public institutions, where hierarchical structures and bureaucratic norms might not support inclusivity or flexibility. These problems interact with more general institutional difficulties in the South African public service. Governance performance is still hampered by enduring issues like low morale, administrative inefficiencies, a lack of skills, and poor service delivery results (Madonsela, 2021; Sebake and Tshiyoyo, 2020). The exclusion of neurodiverse employees from meaningful participation risks exacerbating these challenges by overlooking an untapped pool of talent that could contribute to problem-solving and innovation. Moreover, failure to recognise cognitive diversity perpetuates a compliance-driven approach to inclusion, focused largely on demographic representation, rather than cultivating an environment that harnesses the full range of human capabilities (Ngubane and Cockburn, 2021).

The Constitution, the Employment Equity Act of 1998, and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016) serve as the cornerstones of South Africa's strong legal and policy framework for disability inclusion. However, these frameworks frequently ignore cognitive diversity in favour of framing disability in terms of physicality or medicalization. The law requires workplace accommodations, but in practice, physical accessibility features like ramps and assistive technology are often given precedence over the more subtle and intricate requirements related to neurodiversity (Mahlangu, 2022). A significant discrepancy between legislative intent and workplace practice is reflected in the lack of explicit policy recognition of neurodiversity. This gap is not only a matter of compliance but also one of organisational performance and governance effectiveness. International studies suggest that inclusive approaches to neurodiversity can improve employee engagement, job satisfaction, and overall organisational outcomes (van Dijk et al., 2020; Hedley et al., 2021). In public service contexts, where employee motivation is closely tied to service delivery quality, neglecting neurodiversity risks undermining both workforce morale and the state's ability to fulfil its developmental mandate (Perry, 2022).

Thus, the South African case poses two challenges: first, making sure public institutions fulfil their constitutional duties to promote equality and inclusion; and second, maximizing the potential of neurodiverse workers to improve public sector performance. To address this, a more nuanced understanding of cognitive difference must be pursued, going beyond superficial diversity measures. This is in line with international trends in inclusive governance and is also in line with South Africa's distinct sociopolitical environment, where the public sector is responsible for providing fair services in a very diverse society (Naidoo, 2022). The realization that neurodiversity is still a little-studied aspect of diversity management in South African governance is what spurred this study. While global literature has begun to examine the organisational and societal implications of neurodiversity, local scholarship is sparse, particularly in relation to public service institutions. This absence of empirical and theoretical engagement creates a blind spot in both academic and policy debates.

- To address this gap, the study is guided by the following research questions
- How is neurodiversity currently understood and managed in South Africa's public service?
- What challenges and barriers do neurodiverse employees face in public institutions?
- To what extent do existing policies on diversity and inclusion accommodate cognitive diversity?
- What are the implications of neurodiversity for employee engagement and service delivery outcomes?

By examining these issues, the study hopes to add to the expanding corpus of research on inclusive governance and provide useful advice on how South Africa's public institutions might better accept and capitalize on cognitive diversity. By doing this, it contributes to larger discussions about the function of public service organizations in advancing social justice and strengthening state capacity, in addition to expanding the bounds of diversity scholarship in the local context.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Global Perspectives on Neurodiversity in the Workplace

The concept of neurodiversity has gained increasing scholarly and policy attention over the last decade as organisations seek to create more inclusive workplaces that harness diverse cognitive strengths. Traditionally, workplace inclusion frameworks centred on demographic categories such as gender, race, and physical disability, while conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and dysgraphia were viewed primarily through a deficit-based or medicalised lens (Austin and Pisano, 2017). However, this view has shifted in line with the broader social model of disability, which recognises that exclusion arises less from the individual's condition and more from institutional and societal barriers (Oliver, 2013; Doyle, 2020). Austin and Pisano (2017) were among the earliest to frame neurodiversity as an organisational strength rather than a liability, noting that neurodiverse individuals frequently bring distinct problem-solving approaches, creativity, persistence, and attention to detail. This reframing aligns with contemporary human resource management theories that stress the competitive advantage of leveraging workforce diversity (Shore et al., 2018). More recent empirical studies confirm that neurodiverse employees can excel in tasks requiring pattern recognition, sustained focus, and innovative thinking (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2023; Remington and Pellicano, 2023). Including neurodiverse people in the workplace is linked to a number of beneficial organizational outcomes. Waisman-Nitzan et al. (2020), for instance, point out that inclusive hiring practices in North America and Europe have improved organizational innovation and corporate reputation in addition to employee engagement. In a similar vein, Hedley et al. (2021) discovered that structured inclusion programs for workers on the autism spectrum resulted in lower staff turnover and higher productivity. All of these studies show that ignoring cognitive diversity is a lost chance for organizational effectiveness as well as an ethical dilemma. Despite these advances, challenges remain. Workplace cultures often privilege conformity, communication skills, and social interaction norms that can disadvantage neurodiverse employees (Botha et al., 2021). Van den Heuvel et al. (2022) caution that while inclusion rhetoric has advanced, many organisations remain ill-prepared to implement accommodations beyond surface-level adjustments, leading to disillusionment and disengagement among employees. This reflects a broader tension between compliance-based approaches, which emphasise meeting legal requirements, and strengths-based approaches, which focus on leveraging diverse cognitive capacities for organisational benefit (Shore et al., 2018).

Recent studies highlight the uneven progress in mainstreaming neurodiversity within organizational cultures, further broadening this global perspective. For example, Dwyer and Ryan (2023) note that although prominent companies in the finance and technology sectors have experimented with neurodiverse hiring practices, these practices are still primarily found in sectors that already place a high value on technical and analytical skills. Public administration, healthcare, and education are among the sectors that frequently fall behind, exposing a systemic bias whereby some cognitive strengths are emphasized while others are ignored. The question of whether neurodiversity initiatives are truly transformative or merely instrumental, serving limited business interests rather than promoting holistic inclusion, is raised by this selective inclusion. Policy environments also play a crucial role in shaping workplace approaches to neurodiversity. Countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have invested in national frameworks and guidelines that encourage organisations to integrate cognitive diversity into recruitment, training, and retention strategies (Scott et al., 2022). These efforts reflect a growing recognition that neurodiversity is not solely a human resources concern but also a governance issue linked to equity, innovation, and social justice. In contrast, many developing countries have yet to formalise such frameworks, leading to reliance on ad hoc organisational initiatives. This global disparity demonstrates that neurodiversity is embedded in broader socio-economic and political contexts, which either enable or constrain inclusion practices. The global discussion also includes issues of managerial preparedness and leadership. Even when inclusion policies are in place, research shows that managers frequently lack the skills and self-assurance necessary to effectively support neurodiverse workers (Le et al., 2022). Without proper training, managers might fall back on stereotypes and treat neurodiverse employees more like exceptions to be controlled than like resources to be nurtured. This lack of readiness reinforces structural injustices within organizations and feeds the cycle of underutilization. Brown et al. (2023) suggest that in order to combat this, leadership development programs should incorporate neurodiversity awareness. This will ensure that inclusion is not limited to HR departments but rather is ingrained in regular management procedures.

In addition, workplace technologies are emerging as double-edged tools in the neurodiversity landscape. On one hand, assistive technologies, flexible scheduling, and remote work arrangements have been shown to create more accessible environments for neurodiverse employees (Scott et al., 2022). On the other hand, algorithm-driven recruitment and performance monitoring systems often contain embedded biases that disadvantage candidates who deviate from normative behavioural patterns (Yates and Dickinson, 2023). This tension highlights the need for organisations to critically assess technological adoption, ensuring that digital tools are deployed as enablers of inclusion rather than new forms of exclusion. When combined, these global viewpoints highlight the current trajectory of neurodiversity

inclusion's advantages and disadvantages. While the evidence base increasingly demonstrates that neurodiverse employees contribute valuable skills and perspectives, organisational practices have yet to fully align with these insights. There is increasing agreement in the literature that the transition from a compliance-based to a strengths-based model is still not complete. Instead of using neurodiversity as a strategic resource that can spur innovation and resilience across entire systems, many organizations still primarily approach it through accommodation, making small changes to integrate individuals. According to a critical perspective, workplace neurodiversity advancements are still uneven and unduly concentrated in particular industries and geographical areas. The potential of cognitively diverse workforces won't be fully realized until organizations, governments, and societies make a commitment to integrating neurodiversity into the foundation of inclusion frameworks. From the standpoint of governance, neurodiversity must be viewed as an essential component of diversity management in the twenty-first century rather than an add-on. Evidence from around the world shows that when neurodiverse talent is effectively included, organizational outcomes and social equity are improved. On the other hand, not adopting this paradigm is not only unethical, but it also represents a lost chance to improve flexibility and creativity in increasingly complex work environments.

## 2.2. Neurodiversity in the African Context

Research on neurodiversity is scarce in Africa compared to the global North, with the majority of workplace inclusion studies concentrating on physical disabilities and demographic categories like gender and race (Ayee, 2022). This is a reflection of larger socioeconomic realities, where the reach of diversity management programs is frequently constrained by institutional flaws, conflicting developmental priorities, and resource limitations. Furthermore, rather than being viewed through a lens of empowerment and inclusion, disability is frequently framed through a medical or welfare lens (Maja et al., 2021). According to the literature, stigma, a lack of funding, poor policy enforcement, and a lack of managerial awareness are some of the ongoing issues that African public institutions face when it comes to disability inclusion in general (Mahlangu, 2022; Akinwale, 2021). Even where policies exist, implementation tends to be inconsistent, leaving employees with disabilities vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion. For example, Maja et al. (2021) found that many South African organisations lack the capacity to provide reasonable accommodations, while Mahlangu (2022) highlights how disability inclusion remains a low priority in workplace diversity agendas. In light of this, it is remarkable how little research has been done on neurodiversity in African workplaces. This omission reflects both policy and epistemic gaps: policy-related because national disability frameworks rarely specifically address cognitive diversity, and epistemic in that African voices and contexts are underrepresented in global neurodiversity debates. According to Ayee (2022), African public administration has traditionally placed more emphasis on issues of informality, state capacity, and governance than on investigating organizational dynamics at the micro level, like cognitive inclusion. Recent scholarship on disabilities in Africa adds to this conversation by highlighting how inclusion is often viewed as symbolic rather than real. For example, Ngubane and Dube (2023) contend that a lot of organizations use compliance tactics that appear to be superficial and promote diversity on paper but don't actually change workplace cultures. As a result of this tendency, long-standing stereotypes continue to exist, and people with less obvious disabilities, like those with neurodiverse conditions, continue to be marginalized. In this way, the lack of recognition of neurodiversity feeds cycles of exclusion, making it a conceptual as well as an institutional issue.

The problem is compounded by cultural narratives that influence how disability is perceived in African societies. Research indicates that disability is often associated with stigma, supernatural explanations, or deficit-based assumptions (Mhlongo, 2021). When framed in this way, neurodiverse conditions such as autism or ADHD are less likely to be acknowledged as dimensions of human diversity and more likely to be pathologised or ignored. This cultural dimension interacts with institutional weakness, creating a dual barrier that prevents the development of inclusive frameworks for neurodiversity. Moreover, workplace inclusion strategies in Africa often struggle with resource constraints. Unlike large corporations in developed countries that may implement specialised recruitment and training programmes for neurodiverse employees, many African organisations, especially in the public sector, face pressing challenges such as budgetary limitations, infrastructure deficits, and competing developmental priorities (Omoyefa, 2022). In such contexts, neurodiversity is seen as an abstract or secondary issue, overshadowed by more immediate organisational concerns such as service delivery backlogs, corruption, or staff shortages. While these challenges are real, neglecting cognitive diversity ultimately undermines long-term institutional capacity and resilience. Legislative and policy frameworks present another obstacle. Even though South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya are among the African nations that have ratified international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), there is still disparity in how these commitments are implemented in the workplace (Chitiga and Mabiza, 2022). Cognitive diversity is rarely taken into account by national policies, which frequently concentrate on physical accessibility and general disability categories. Because of this, neurodiverse workers are not included in national or organizational diversity initiatives. Given the worldwide evidence showing the advantages of identifying and fostering neurodiverse talent, this policy silence is especially troubling (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2023).

The absence of African scholarship in this field further exacerbates epistemic exclusion. Much of the global literature on neurodiversity originates in North America, Europe, and Australia, where workplace inclusion has become a policy and research priority. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often fail to account for the socio-economic and cultural specificities of African contexts. For instance, inclusion strategies that rely on advanced technologies or resource-intensive accommodations may not be feasible in underfunded African institutions. As Botha et al. (2021) emphasise, neurodiversity cannot be conceptualised as a universal model divorced from local realities; instead, it must be understood in relation to the structural inequalities and governance challenges that shape African workplaces. The disregard for neurodiversity in African contexts represents a lost opportunity from the standpoint of governance. Managing service delivery, policy innovation, and citizen engagement is becoming more and more difficult for public institutions throughout the continent. These demands call for a variety of approaches to creativity, problem-solving, and resilience, qualities that are frequently linked to neurodiverse cognitive styles (Remington and Pellicano, 2023). However, African public services run the risk of underutilizing a vital source of human capital if they don't institutionalize neurodiversity. A critical assessment of the literature suggests that advancing neurodiversity in African workplaces will require a paradigm shift in both scholarship and policy. Researchers must begin to foreground African perspectives in global neurodiversity debates, ensuring that inclusion strategies are not imported wholesale but adapted to local contexts. Policymakers and organisational leaders, meanwhile, must expand the scope of diversity frameworks beyond physical and demographic categories to explicitly include cognitive diversity. Without such deliberate steps, the African continent will continue to lag behind global trends, missing the opportunity to position neurodiversity as a strategic resource for inclusive governance and sustainable development.

### **2.3. The South African Context**

Because of its unique socio-political past and current governance issues, South Africa offers an especially interesting backdrop for studying neurodiversity. In addition to putting an end to decades of institutionalized racial oppression, the 1994 democratic transition established equity and inclusivity as fundamental constitutional requirements (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Constitution establishes a legal and normative framework for inclusive public institutions by outlining clear commitments to equality, non-discrimination, and the advancement of human dignity. The Employment Equity Act (1998) and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) were two notable pieces of legislation and policy that attempted to address historical injustices and institutionalize procedures for fair representation in public employment within this framework (Department of Social Development, 2016). The South African public service still faces enduring governance shortcomings that impact employee experiences and service delivery results, notwithstanding these constitutional and legislative commitments. Inefficiency, talent attrition, low morale, and long-standing bureaucratic bottlenecks continue to be major issues, according to scholars (Madonsela, 2021; Shava and Chamisa, 2023). These challenges are made worse by a lack of skills, especially in crucial technical and managerial domains, and the practical implementation of policy goals is frequently hampered by inadequate accountability frameworks and compliance-focused diversity management (Ngubane and Cockburn, 2021). Because of these structural flaws, formal inclusion frameworks exist on paper but are unable to change employees lived experiences or routine workplace procedures.

The problem of neurodiversity is hardly noticeable in this larger context. Policies and strategies still prioritize physical and sensory disabilities, despite South Africa's notable progress in codifying disability rights. Cognitive diversity is rarely recognized as a component of inclusion (Maja et al., 2021). Given that neurodiverse people make up an increasing share of the global workforce and are increasingly acknowledged in international scholarship as important contributors to organizational innovation and resilience, this omission is startling (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2023). The South African public service runs the risk of continuing to marginalize a group whose potential is still unrealized if it does not include neurodiversity in its inclusion agenda. Institutional weaknesses further exacerbate this challenge. For instance, Chitiga and Mabiza (2022) observe that many departments struggle with the practical enforcement of disability policies, resulting in uneven implementation across sectors. While the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) outlines progressive commitments to accessibility, awareness, and reasonable accommodation, resource shortages and limited managerial capacity often mean that these commitments are aspirational rather than realised. Neurodiverse employees, whose needs may be less visible and more nuanced than those with physical disabilities, are particularly vulnerable to being overlooked in such contexts. The continued stigma and lack of knowledge surrounding cognitive disorders like dyslexia, ADHD, and autism are additional factors influencing the South African context. According to research, these conditions are commonly misinterpreted in the workplace and in society at large, and they are frequently presented using narratives that focus on deficits rather than strengths (Mahlangu, 2022). Because workers may fear discrimination or termination if their conditions are known, this cultural framing not only discourages disclosure but also reinforces exclusion. Corporate neurodiversity initiatives have become more well-known in some developed nations, but South Africa has not yet incorporated the idea into organizational or public discourse.

The intersection of governance deficits and limited awareness means that neurodiversity is not yet positioned as a strategic consideration in public administration. Ngubane and Dube (2023) argue that diversity management in South Africa remains largely compliance-driven, focused on meeting representational targets rather than transforming institutional cultures. This approach, while aligned with constitutional imperatives of redress, risks sidelining cognitive inclusion, which requires more nuanced organisational interventions such as flexible work arrangements, assistive technologies, and targeted training for managers. Without these, neurodiverse employees remain structurally disadvantaged, even within frameworks ostensibly designed to promote inclusion. Yet the South African context also presents unique opportunities for advancing neurodiversity. The country's progressive legal framework provides a strong foundation for embedding cognitive diversity within existing equality and employment equity agendas. Furthermore, global shifts in workplace inclusion create an external reference point that South Africa can draw upon, adapting international best practices to local realities. For example, Hedley et al. (2021) demonstrate that structured neurodiversity inclusion programmes in Australia and the UK yield measurable improvements in productivity and retention. Adapting similar initiatives in South Africa could not only enhance employee engagement but also address critical capacity challenges within the public service. Integrating neurodiversity into inclusion frameworks may improve institutional resilience from a governance standpoint. From backlogs in service delivery to digital transformation, public service departments are being asked to handle more and more complicated and interconnected problems that call for creative problem-solving and a variety of perspectives. Neurodiverse people frequently succeed in these areas, as noted by Remington and Pellicano (2023), contributing creativity, perseverance, and different viewpoints that enhance organizational problem-solving. Institutions in South Africa might be unintentionally limiting their own ability to adapt if they ignore neurodiversity.

A critical analysis of the literature indicates that both policy innovation and cultural change will be necessary for progress. On the policy front, formalizing commitments would be aided by the explicit recognition of cognitive diversity in national frameworks like the Employment Equity Act and disability strategies. In terms of culture, persistent awareness initiatives, manager development, and inclusive leadership techniques are crucial for changing attitudes and establishing work settings that support neurodiverse workers. In the absence of such actions, neurodiversity will continue to be an unmet aspect of South Africa's larger inclusion agenda, resulting in injustices and limiting the effectiveness of organizations. In summary, South Africa's socio-political history and progressive constitutional framework create fertile ground for embedding neurodiversity within public service inclusion agendas. However, persistent governance deficits, limited awareness, and compliance-driven diversity practices have so far prevented meaningful integration of cognitive diversity into workplace strategies. Recognising neurodiversity as both a rights-based imperative and a strategic resource could help the public service move beyond symbolic inclusion and address some of its most pressing challenges. In this sense, South Africa represents both a cautionary tale of policy-practice gaps and a promising context for pioneering more holistic models of workplace inclusion.

#### **2.4. Disability Inclusion in South Africa**

According to South African research, disability inclusion has mostly concentrated on visible and physical impairments within the larger inclusivity mandate. Employees with disabilities encounter a mix of structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers, according to numerous studies. Low levels of managerial awareness regarding inclusion practices, limited accessibility infrastructure, and ongoing stigma are all noted by Maja et al. (2021). In a similar vein, Mahlangu (2022) discovers that although many public institutions have formal equity policies, these are frequently applied flimsily or with little funding, demonstrating a compliance-driven rather than revolutionary approach to inclusion. Additionally, according to Sebake and Tshiyoyo (2020), employees with disabilities are marginalized and under supported because accessibility measures, such as flexible work schedules and adaptive equipment, are not consistently implemented. These findings indicate that the gap between policy and practice is both structural and cultural. Structural barriers include outdated office designs, rigid evaluation criteria, and inflexible workflows that fail to accommodate employees' diverse needs. Cultural barriers stem from pervasive stereotypes and a lack of awareness among managers and peers, which can manifest as exclusionary practices, subtle bias, or reluctance to allocate resources for accommodations (Maja et al., 2021; Sebake and Tshiyoyo, 2020). Collectively, these dynamics create a climate where employees with disabilities, including those with invisible or cognitive conditions, are systematically disadvantaged, leading to disengagement, lower productivity, and attrition.

To elaborate, new research from South Africa shows that tokenism in disability inclusion still exists. According to Ngubane and Dube (2023), public institutions frequently place more emphasis on representational goals in order to show that they are complying with the Employment Equity Act than on developing truly inclusive organizational cultures. This leads to the hiring of people with disabilities without making sure that the workplace is sufficiently supportive, which isolates these workers and prevents them from performing at their best. When inclusion is narrowly defined as compliance rather than transformation, systemic barriers remain unchallenged and structural inequities are

reinforced. The resource constraints faced by many South African organisations also exacerbates these dynamics. Mahlangu (2022) highlights that budget limitations frequently restrict the provision of assistive technologies or workplace adaptations, particularly in resource-strapped government departments. This creates a paradox where inclusion is mandated by law yet undermined in practice due to insufficient institutional capacity. In effect, disability inclusion becomes contingent on financial resources rather than recognised as a fundamental right embedded in organisational design. Barriers based on culture are still in place. According to research, coworkers frequently exhibit exclusionary attitudes toward employees with disabilities, which can range from overt stigma to covert social distancing (Maja et al., 2021). Insufficient training for managers on how to accommodate diverse needs and a lack of awareness of disability rights serve to further reinforce these attitudes. Because neurodiverse employees' conditions are less obvious and frequently misinterpreted, these cultural barriers can be particularly harmful to them. Workplace cultures that value conformity and limited performance standards are likely to exclude people whose cognitive styles deviate from the norm, as Botha et al. (2021) emphasize. This reaffirms how neurodiversity is invisible in South African inclusion plans.

From a policy standpoint, South Africa has committed to disability inclusion in a big way. A thorough framework for encouraging accessibility, awareness, and reasonable accommodations in both public and private organizations is offered by the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016). Disability rights are frequently deprioritized in the face of conflicting policy agendas like service delivery, corruption, and economic transformation, according to scholars, but implementation is still uneven (Shava and Chamisa, 2023). Employees with disabilities are at risk of continued exclusion due to this policy-practice gap, which also damages the legitimacy of inclusion frameworks. Another critical issue is the lack of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. While employment equity reports are submitted annually, Ngubane and Cockburn (2021) note that these tend to emphasise numerical compliance rather than qualitative assessment of workplace culture and accessibility. As a result, organisations may meet formal targets while continuing to marginalise employees with disabilities in practice. This highlights the need for more robust accountability mechanisms that assess not only representation but also the lived experiences of employees with disabilities. Both opportunities and challenges for disability inclusion are presented by technological innovation. On the one hand, digital platforms and assistive technologies could make workplaces more accessible, especially for workers with sensory or physical impairments (Scott et al., 2022). However, if technologies are not created with accessibility in mind, the digitization of work may make exclusion worse. For instance, candidates with neurodiverse conditions who have trouble with traditional assessment formats may unintentionally be at a disadvantage when using automated recruitment platforms (Yates and Dickinson, 2023). This emphasizes how crucial it is to incorporate universal design principles into digital workplace strategies in order to guarantee that the adoption of new technologies does not jeopardize inclusion.

According to a critical analysis of South African literature, policy requirements and infrastructure modifications alone are insufficient to address disability inclusion. Rather, a transformative strategy necessitates leadership dedication, cultural shift, and consistent training and awareness spending. Recognizing the diversity within disability itself entails recognizing that cognitive disorders like autism, dyslexia, or ADHD call for different kinds of support than physical impairments. Ignoring this complexity could lead to the continuation of one-dimensional inclusion models that underserve a large number of employees. In conclusion, while South Africa has made important legislative strides in advancing disability inclusion, the reality within workplaces remains marked by structural, cultural, and resource-based barriers. Policies are often implemented superficially, accessibility measures inconsistently applied, and cultural attitudes slow to shift. For disability inclusion to become transformative rather than symbolic, institutions must move beyond compliance-driven approaches and embed inclusion into the core of organisational culture. This requires aligning policies with adequate resources, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and investing in awareness that challenges stigma and broadens understandings of disability to include neurodiversity. Only then can South Africa fulfil its constitutional mandate of equality and create workplaces where all employees are able to participate fully and productively.

## **2.5. The Marginalisation of Neurodiversity**

Within the South African public service, neurodiversity remains largely absent from policy discourse and institutional practice. Existing disability policies primarily address physical impairments, with minimal or no recognition of cognitive differences such as autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, dyslexia, or dysgraphia. This omission is consequential, as it produces a disconnect between the constitutional rhetoric of inclusivity and the lived experiences of neurodiverse employees. Unlike visible disabilities, cognitive or “invisible” differences often go unacknowledged, meaning that employees who face unique challenges in information processing, attention regulation, or social communication are not afforded formal support or accommodations (Doyle, 2020; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). For instance, practical accommodations that support neurodiverse employees, such as flexible work schedules, noise-reducing or low-stimulus

office spaces, assistive technologies for reading or writing, and structured task management systems, are rarely formalised within South African public institutions (Sebake and Tshiyoyo, 2020). This absence not only marginalises neurodiverse employees but also represents a missed opportunity for organisational learning and innovation. Cognitive diversity has been shown internationally to enhance problem-solving, creativity, and adaptive capacity in complex work environments (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). In the context of South Africa's public service, where efficiency, innovation, and service delivery remain pressing challenges, failing to integrate neurodiverse perspectives may limit organisational resilience and responsiveness.

To elaborate, workplace systems' deeper structural and cultural biases are reflected in the marginalization of neurodiversity, which goes beyond simple neglect. According to academics, prevailing organizational norms favour standardized forms of behaviour, communication, and productivity, unintentionally excluding workers who deviate from them (Botha et al., 2021). Public sector hiring practices, for instance, frequently depend on traditional interviews and written tests, which disadvantages neurodiverse candidates who might find it difficult to engage in unstructured social situations or rigorous testing settings (Remington and Pellicano, 2019). This leads to a vicious cycle in which people with neurodiverse traits are not only underrepresented in the workforce but are also made invisible by policy frameworks. The consequences of this invisibility are significant. Without formal recognition, neurodiverse employees are often forced to engage in self-accommodation, developing personal coping strategies in unsupportive environments. While some individuals may succeed despite these barriers, many others experience heightened stress, burnout, and disengagement (Foster et al., 2021). Such outcomes contradict the South African Constitution's commitment to substantive equality, which extends beyond formal rights to ensuring equitable participation in practice. The neglect of neurodiversity thus highlights a gap between constitutional ideals and institutional realities, reinforcing patterns of exclusion that undermine both employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness. Research on the strategic benefits of embracing neurodiversity is becoming more and more prominent on a global scale. Given their distinct strengths in areas requiring pattern recognition, problem-solving, and creative thinking, large multinational corporations like Microsoft and SAP have created targeted recruitment and support programs for neurodiverse employees (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). These programs demonstrate that inclusivity fosters innovation and competitiveness in addition to being a moral requirement. Similar strategies could help unlock unrealized human potential and support governance reforms in South Africa's public sector, which still struggles with inefficiency, corruption, and slow service delivery.

In addition, neurodiversity challenges dominant deficit-based perspectives of disability. Instead of framing conditions such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia solely as limitations, the neurodiversity paradigm views them as natural variations in human cognition with both strengths and challenges (Doyle, 2020). This perspective requires a shift in institutional culture: rather than demanding conformity to narrow workplace norms, organisations should adapt to diverse cognitive styles. Such a shift would align with broader transformation agendas in South Africa, which aim to decolonise institutional practices and embrace pluralism. However, the absence of neurodiversity in local policy discourse suggests that these broader commitments to diversity remain partial and uneven. Training and awareness are crucial in bridging this gap. Research has shown that managers often lack the knowledge or confidence to support neurodiverse employees effectively (van den Heuvel et al., 2022). In the South African public service, where line managers play a critical role in shaping workplace cultures, targeted training on neurodiversity could reduce stigma, improve communication, and encourage the development of reasonable accommodations. Moreover, embedding neurodiversity awareness into organisational development programmes could normalise cognitive difference as a form of diversity alongside race, gender, and disability. Finally, addressing neurodiversity requires robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. As with disability inclusion more broadly, policies that remain unimplemented or tokenistic are unlikely to produce meaningful change. Integrating neurodiversity into Employment Equity reporting frameworks, conducting workplace accessibility audits, and engaging with neurodiverse employees through participatory forums could ensure that policies translate into practice. Such steps would not only enhance inclusivity but also signal to employees that cognitive diversity is valued as an organisational asset.

In conclusion, a larger conflict between institutional practice and constitutional ideals is reflected in the marginalization of neurodiversity in South Africa's public sector. Formal policies cover physical disabilities, but they say nothing about cognitive differences, so employees who are neurodiverse are left unsupported and unnoticed. In addition to compromising worker well-being, this exclusion restricts organizational creativity and efficiency. In order to overcome this, public institutions need to take a revolutionary stance that values neurodiversity as an important aspect of inclusivity. This calls for leadership commitment, formal accommodations, cultural shifts, and the incorporation of neurodiversity into reporting and monitoring systems. Only then will the public sector be able to realize the full potential of its employees and fulfil its mission of effective and equitable governance.

## **2.6. Governance Implications of Neurodiversity**

The marginalization of neurodiverse workers in South Africa has wider governance ramifications than just social or organizational issues. The complex environment in which public institutions operate necessitates quick problem-solving, critical thinking, and flexible decision-making. Because of their unique cognitive styles, neurodiverse workers can make a substantial contribution to these processes. However, their exclusion limits institutional effectiveness and may perpetuate inefficiencies by reducing the diversity of perspectives in policy development, program implementation, and service delivery (Shore et al., 2018; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). Additionally, South Africa's adherence to international frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which requires equal opportunity and inclusive participation for all persons with disabilities, including those with cognitive differences, is compromised by the lack of neurodiversity considerations in policy (United Nations, 2006). When the nation's public institutions ignore cognitive diversity, they fall behind international standards for inclusive governance, which increasingly acknowledge neurodiversity as a developmental and organizational asset (Botha and Govender, 2022).

## **2.7. Intersectional Considerations of Neurodiversity**

The relationship between neurodiversity and other indicators of disadvantage, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status, is another crucial factor in the South African context. Historical marginalized groups frequently face compounded barriers, such as limited career progression opportunities, lower managerial support, and restricted access to resources, according to research on disability inclusion (Goodley, 2021; Madonsela, 2021). Therefore, neurodiverse workers who are also Black, female, or from a rural area may experience multiple forms of exclusion, which can worsen the effects on their career development, engagement, and morale. Because cognitive differences interact with other types of social disadvantage to shape employee experiences, effective inclusion strategies must be intersectional.

## **2.8. From Compliance to Strengths-Based Approaches of Neurodiversity**

The need to shift from compliance-driven strategies to strengths-based models that actively utilize the abilities of diverse employees is a recurring theme in current diversity and inclusion scholarship. While compliance approaches are essential for guaranteeing minimum legal adherence, they frequently place more emphasis on reporting requirements, quotas, and procedural obligations than on the meaningful integration of diversity into organizational culture and practices (Shore et al., 2018; Doyle, 2020). The Employment Equity Act (1998) and disability inclusion policies in the South African public sector are exemplified by compliance approaches, which prioritize formal reporting and numerical representation over creating an inclusive workplace that values cognitive and experiential diversity (Mahlangu, 2022). While compliance mechanisms can increase visibility and representation, they rarely address underlying structural and cultural barriers that inhibit participation and engagement. Employees may meet the formal criteria for inclusion yet remain marginalised if their unique strengths, working styles, and cognitive approaches are neither acknowledged nor accommodated. In other words, compliance without cultural transformation risks reducing diversity to a technical obligation, leaving organisations unable to fully capitalise on the potential of their workforce (Botha and Govender, 2022; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020).

## **2.9. Strengths-Based Approaches of Neurodiversity**

The unique contributions that diverse employees can make to organizational outcomes, on the other hand, are highlighted by a strengths-based approach. Instead of presenting disabilities like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or dysgraphia as limitations that need to be accommodated, strengths-based models aim to recognize, support, and utilize these cognitive differences in ways that improve creativity, innovation, and problem-solving (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Remington and Pellicano, 2023). For instance, when given the right support, workers with dyslexia may show strong analytical reasoning and pattern recognition, while people with ADHD may show remarkable creativity and divergent thinking. Understanding these potentials turns diversity from a legal requirement into a competitive advantage, especially in intricate public sector settings where flexible problem-solving is essential. According to research, implementing strengths-based inclusion calls for managerial and cultural change in addition to procedural changes. Peers and managers need to recognize and appreciate the contributions of neurodiverse workers, establish psychologically safe environments for them to share their thoughts, and create roles and tasks that play to their cognitive strengths (Doyle, 2020; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). Practically speaking, this can entail providing flexible work schedules, reorganizing assignments to capitalize on individual strengths, or assembling teams with members who purposefully incorporate a range of cognitive viewpoints. Organizations can increase engagement, lower attrition, and improve group performance by emphasizing capabilities rather than deficiencies (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020).

### **2.10. Implications for Public Sector Governance**

The transition from compliance to strengths-based strategies is in line with more general discussions in governance and public administration. According to academics, modern public institutions need to be flexible, creative, and sensitive to the many issues facing society (Naidoo, 2022; Madonsela, 2021). In this situation, cognitive diversity is a governance necessity as well as a social justice issue. When given the right support, neurodiverse workers can offer special perspectives, different approaches to solving problems, and improved analytical skills to the creation of policies, the execution of programs, and the provision of services. Organizational culture can also be changed by a strengths-based approach. Institutions convey to all workers that diversity is valued and that performance and contributions are evaluated holistically by redefining neurodiversity as an asset rather than a liability. This fosters psychological safety, encourages experimentation, and promotes a culture of continuous learning, attributes that are essential for effective public governance in rapidly changing socio-political environments (Remington and Pellicano, 2023; Mor Barak, 2022).

### **2.11. Towards Practical Implementation of Neurodiversity Inclusivity**

Policy, managerial, and cultural changes are necessary for the South African public service to adopt strengths-based approaches. Neurodiversity must be specifically acknowledged in policies, and frameworks for accommodations that play to employees' strengths must be provided. While organizational culture must change to value innovation, creativity, and alternative approaches to problem-solving, managers require specialized training to recognize and foster cognitive diversity (Botha and Govender, 2022). Task redesign, assistive technology use, mentoring programs, and team-based tactics that leverage complementary cognitive abilities are examples of practical interventions. Public institutions can transition from a compliance-focused culture to one that actively leverages diversity for organizational effectiveness and resilience by combining these strategies.

### **2.12. Implications for Employee Engagement and Service Delivery**

In the public service sector, where employee motivation, dedication, and discretionary effort are crucial to the quality, efficiency, and responsiveness of service delivery, employee engagement is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of organizational performance (Perry, 2022; Madonsela, 2021). Employee engagement increases the likelihood that they will come up with creative solutions, work well with others, and persevere through institutional obstacles, all of which are crucial in situations where there are limited resources, complicated citizen demands, and systemic inefficiencies. On the other hand, disengagement can directly harm public service outcomes by showing up as high attrition, decreased productivity, and absenteeism (van den Heuvel et al., 2022).

### **2.13. The Role of Inclusion in Engagement**

Inclusive organisational practices have been empirically linked to enhanced employee engagement by signalling that all employees are valued, respected, and provided with the support necessary to succeed (Hedley et al., 2021; Shore et al., 2018). Inclusion is not limited to formal representation or compliance with quotas; it encompasses tangible and intangible support mechanisms such as role flexibility, equitable access to professional development, and the recognition of diverse talents and perspectives. For neurodiverse employees, inclusive practices are particularly significant, as they help mitigate the effects of systemic barriers, stigma, and rigid organisational structures that might otherwise impede full participation (Doyle, 2020; Remington and Pellicano, 2023). Research indicates that neurodiverse employees who experience meaningful inclusion report higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and organisational commitment, as well as lower levels of workplace stress and burnout (van den Heuvel et al., 2022; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2023). In practice, this could involve providing sensory-friendly workspaces, flexible task structures, assistive technologies, or mentorship programmes designed to leverage individual cognitive strengths. Such accommodations not only support individual well-being but also create conditions in which diverse employees can contribute optimally to organisational goals.

### **2.14. Neurodiversity and Public Service Performance**

Low morale and disengagement are enduring issues in the South African public sector that hinder efficient governance and service provision (Madonsela, 2021; Shava and Chamisa, 2023). These problems are made worse by things like heavy workloads, inflexible bureaucracy, and a lack of managerial support. One possible way to improve engagement and organizational performance is to integrate neurodiversity into inclusion strategies. Employees who are neurodiverse can offer distinct approaches to problem-solving, keen attention to detail, and creative viewpoints that enhance the workforce as a whole (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). By recognising and supporting cognitive diversity, public institutions can foster greater employee commitment, creativity, and collaboration, thereby improving the quality and responsiveness of service delivery. For example, employees with autism spectrum disorders may excel in tasks requiring pattern recognition, data analysis, or compliance monitoring,

while employees with ADHD may contribute dynamic and creative approaches to project development. Harnessing these strengths within appropriately designed roles can enhance organisational agility and innovation, critical for addressing complex public service challenges such as poverty alleviation, service backlogs, and community engagement.

## **2.15. Practical Implications for South African Governance**

Applying these lessons to South Africa, there are several advantages to incorporating neurodiversity into public sector inclusion initiatives:

### *2.15.1. Enhanced Engagement*

Targeted accommodations and supportive policies signal that employees are valued, increasing motivation and discretionary effort.

### *2.15.2. Improved Problem-Solving*

Neurodiverse perspectives provide alternative approaches to complex governance challenges, enhancing innovation and organisational adaptability.

### *2.15.3. Reduced Attrition and Absenteeism*

Inclusive environments mitigate stress and burnout, reducing the costs associated with turnover and lost productivity.

### *2.15.4. Strengthened Service Delivery*

Higher engagement, creativity, and collaboration translate directly into more effective and responsive service provision to citizens.

As covered in the section above, this calls for a shift in strategy from traditional compliance approaches to strengths-based inclusion strategies. Workplace designs should take into account a range of cognitive and sensory needs, managers must receive training on how to support neurodiverse employees, and policies must specifically acknowledge cognitive diversity. Institutions in South Africa can build more resilient, inclusive, and successful organizations by incorporating these ideas into public service governance frameworks.

## **2.16. Gaps in the Literature**

Even though neurodiversity research is growing globally, there are still a lot of unanswered questions in the African context. In South Africa, there are very few empirical studies on neurodiversity, especially in public institutions. The literature does not specifically address cognitive diversity, but it does highlight issues with disability inclusion in general (Maja et al., 2021; Mahlangu, 2022). Furthermore, governance scholarship frequently ignores the micro-level dynamics of workplace inclusion in favour of macro-level issues of accountability, capacity, and policy (Ayee, 2022). By placing neurodiversity within governance discourses and examining its effects on service delivery and employee engagement, this study aims to close these gaps.

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## **3. Theoretical framework**

The Social Model of Disability and Organizational Inclusion Theory are two interconnected theoretical stances that serve as the foundation for this investigation. The conceptual tools for analysing how neurodiversity is created, perceived, and handled in South Africa's public sector are offered by these frameworks. When taken as a whole, they change the analytical perspective from deficit-based conceptions of cognitive difference to an institutional, structural, and strengths-based view of inclusion.

### **3.1. The Social Model of Disability**

Oliver (1990) introduced the Social Model of Disability, which contests the medical model's focus on impairment as the primary cause of disability. Rather, it places disability in the context of how people interact with their surroundings. Disabling conditions are caused by obstacles like inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory practices, and inflexible institutional cultures. According to this model, people are "disabled" not because of their disabilities but rather because of the organizational and social settings that do not accept their differences (Shakespeare, 2019). When applied to neurodiversity, this framework emphasizes that workplace structures do not inevitably lead to the marginalization of cognitively diverse workers. For example, open-plan offices that expose employees to excessive sensory stimuli, performance systems that privilege conformity and speed over creativity and precision, and managers who lack

awareness of cognitive diversity all reproduce exclusion (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). Thus, under the social model, neurodiversity is not treated as a deficit to be fixed but as a natural form of human variation that becomes disabling only in unsupportive contexts (Kapp, 2020). Recent scholarship has extended the social model to argue for a more nuanced understanding of disability as an interactional and intersectional phenomenon (Goodley, 2021). Neurodiverse individuals may encounter barriers compounded by race, gender, or class, especially in societies marked by historical inequality such as South Africa. For example, a Black female public servant with dyslexia may face compounded forms of exclusion rooted in both structural racism and gender bias, as well as limited awareness of cognitive diversity. These intersectional dynamics reinforce the relevance of the social model for understanding the complexities of neurodiversity in governance contexts. Furthermore, the social model has policy implications. It suggests that workplace reform should focus less on “fixing” individuals and more on dismantling disabling practices and structures. This could mean rethinking recruitment criteria that implicitly exclude neurodiverse candidates, revising evaluation systems that penalise atypical work patterns, and providing sensory-friendly workspaces (Botha and Frost, 2020). For South Africa’s public service, which already faces challenges of inefficiency and morale (Madonsela, 2021), adopting this model could reframe neurodiversity as a governance priority rather than an individual medical issue.

### 3.2. Organisational Inclusion Theory

Organizational Inclusion Theory offers a supplementary perspective for comprehending how inclusion can be accomplished within institutions, while the social model explains how exclusionary structures marginalize neurodiverse employees. According to Shore et al. (2018), inclusion goes beyond demographic representation and calls for fair access to resources, decision-making, and chances for meaningful contribution from staff members. In this context, inclusion is experiential and relational; it concerns whether or not workers feel empowered, respected, and valued within organizational structures. Two dimensions are distinguished by the theory: uniqueness and belongingness. Employees' sense of acceptance within the company is referred to as belongingness, whereas their unique qualities are acknowledged and valued (Jansen et al., 2020). For neurodiverse employees, belongingness may mean being free from stigma or negative stereotypes, while uniqueness implies that their cognitive differences, such as exceptional memory, pattern recognition, or innovative problem-solving, are recognised as assets. Effective inclusion thus requires balancing both dimensions. Because public service institutions are legally required to promote equity and diversity, the Organizational Inclusion Theory is especially pertinent in the South African context (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, inclusion frequently ignores underlying institutional cultures that support exclusion in favour of conforming to demographic targets (race, gender, and disability) (Chipkin and Swilling, 2018). This study examines whether neurodiverse workers are truly included in decision-making, performance reviews, and career progression opportunities by utilizing Organizational Inclusion Theory. Inclusion and organizational outcomes are closely related, according to recent studies. Research has shown that inclusive workplaces increase innovation, lower turnover, and improve employee engagement (Shore et al., 2018; Mor Barak, 2022). International research on neurodiversity demonstrates that companies that offer accommodations like quiet workspaces, flexible scheduling, or alternate channels of communication see increases in creativity and productivity (Austin and Pisano, 2017; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). On the other hand, organizations run the risk of losing valuable talent and experiencing a decline in morale when neurodiverse employees are excluded (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020).

### 3.3. Linking the Frameworks

A strong framework for analysing neurodiversity in South Africa's public sector is provided by combining the Social Model of Disability with Organizational Inclusion Theory. While inclusion theory identifies the organizational conditions required to enable neurodiverse employees' participation and contribution, the social model emphasizes how workplace structures, policies, and cultural norms disable them. For example, the social model interprets South Africa's public service policies' omission of any mention of autism, ADHD, or dyslexia as a structural barrier that normalizes exclusion. According to inclusion theory, this omission shows that neurodiverse employees have not been given a sense of identity and belonging. The frameworks collectively imply that tackling neurodiversity necessitates both cultural change (valuing cognitive differences) and structural reform (removing barriers). This integrated framework also highlights the governance implications of neurodiversity. If inclusion is treated as a compliance exercise focused narrowly on quotas, neurodiverse employees remain invisible and under-supported. However, if inclusion is reconceptualised as a strategic approach to enhancing institutional performance, then neurodiversity becomes an asset for improving problem-solving, innovation, and responsiveness in public service delivery. In this sense, the frameworks align with broader debates about state capability in South Africa, where effective governance depends not only on resources but also on leveraging the full potential of diverse human capital (Ayee, 2022).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative desk-based research design that is predicated on the systematic analysis and interpretation of pre-existing secondary data rather than producing original data. Desk-based approaches are widely used in research on public administration and governance, particularly when studying institutional practices, policy frameworks, and comparative insights that can be reliably assessed with the use of documentary evidence (Johnston, 2021). This design uses published academic literature, official government documents, and reports from international organizations to examine neurodiversity in South Africa's public service in a time-efficient, cost-effective, and ethically non-intrusive manner. A desk-based design was also appropriate for this study since it does not require formal ethical approval. Informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participant vulnerabilities are typically ethical issues that arise in research involving neurodiverse individuals (Botha, Hanlon, and Williams, 2021). This study avoids direct contact with potentially vulnerable populations by concentrating on secondary data, but it still provides insights into how neurodiversity is conceived, supported, or ignored in governance and policy contexts.

### 4.2. Data Sources

Three broad categories of data formed the basis of the analysis

South African government policies and frameworks on disability and inclusion These include legislation such as the Employment Equity Act (1998), the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016), and policy statements from the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). Such documents were selected because they provide the official frameworks guiding workplace inclusion in the public service. Their review allows for an assessment of whether neurodiversity is explicitly recognised and how existing disability policies may implicitly accommodate or exclude neurodiverse employees.

Academic literature on neurodiversity and workplace inclusion (2018–2024) Peer-reviewed articles, books, and dissertations from the last five years were prioritised to ensure that the study engaged with the most recent conceptual and empirical developments. Particular emphasis was placed on literature that links neurodiversity to workplace outcomes such as employee engagement, organisational innovation, and service delivery effectiveness. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar were searched using terms including neurodiversity, public service, workplace inclusion, cognitive diversity, and governance.

Organisational reports and case studies from international contexts Reports from organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and global consulting firms were also included. These documents provided comparative perspectives on how neurodiversity is being integrated into workplace inclusion strategies across various governance contexts. Their inclusion enabled the triangulation of South African policy with global best practices, highlighting both gaps and opportunities.

### 4.3. Data Selection and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to choose the sources, which is typical in qualitative research where depth and relevance are more important than representativeness (Palinkas et al., 2015). Studies and documents were added if they:

- Explicitly addressed neurodiversity, cognitive disability, or workplace inclusion.
- Were published between 2018 and 2025 to ensure currency.
- Were authored by credible academic institutions, government agencies, or international organisations.
- Provided insights applicable to governance or public service contexts, either directly or through transferable lessons.

This purposive sampling allowed the study to focus specifically on materials most relevant to its central research question: *What is the relevance of neurodiversity for workplace inclusion and governance outcomes in South Africa's public service?*

### 4.4. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis, a technique that allows for the methodical discovery of patterns, categories, and meanings within textual data, was applied to the gathered documents (Braun and Clarke, 2021). There were four stages to the process:

#### 4.4.1. Familiarisation with data

Key policies, articles, and reports were read and summarised to ensure a broad understanding of their content.

#### 4.4.2. Coding

Segments of text that related to neurodiversity, inclusion, barriers, or engagement were tagged with descriptive codes (e.g., “policy omission,” “stigma,” “innovation potential”).

#### 4.4.3. Theme development

Codes were clustered into broader categories reflecting recurring ideas across sources. These included *conceptualisation of neurodiversity, policy and legislative gaps, barriers to inclusion, and governance implications*.

#### 4.4.4. Interpretation

Themes were analysed in light of the study’s theoretical framework, the Social Model of Disability and Organisational Inclusion Theory, to draw out the structural and cultural dimensions of neurodiversity in South Africa’s governance landscape.

The study went beyond descriptive summaries by employing thematic analysis to analyse how neurodiversity is framed, overlooked, or valued in scholarly and policy discourses.

### 4.5. Triangulation

Triangulation, which is accomplished by combining information from three different but complementary sources, local policy frameworks, international scholarly research, and international organizational reports, is one of this methodology’s strong points. By enabling the cross-verification of patterns across various data sets, triangulation improves the credibility of findings (Flick, 2018). For example, best practices recorded in OECD reports or scholarly studies of workplace inclusion in other jurisdictions could be compared with a policy gap found in South Africa.

### 4.6. Trustworthiness and Rigor

In qualitative desk-based research, trustworthiness must be carefully considered to guarantee that interpretations are reliable, confirmable, transferable, and credible (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study used a number of tactics:

#### 4.6.1. Credibility

Ensured by relying on authoritative and peer-reviewed sources, and by cross-referencing findings across multiple documents.

#### 4.6.2. Transferability

Enhanced by situating findings within the broader governance context of South Africa, while also drawing on international comparisons to highlight applicability in similar institutional settings.

#### 4.6.3. Dependability

Strengthened by systematically documenting the search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analysis process, allowing the study to be replicated by other researchers.

#### 4.6.4. Confirmability

Addressed through critical reflexivity, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias.

#### 4.6.5. Limitations

Despite being suitable for the study’s objectives, this methodology has a number of drawbacks. First, because secondary data is used, the analysis does not take into account the firsthand experiences of neurodiverse employees in South Africa’s public sector, but rather how neurodiversity has been conceptualized and documented by others. Because of this, the results might not accurately reflect actual experiences and commonplace inclusion or exclusionary behaviors. Second, possibly pertinent local or regional viewpoints in other languages might have been missed because the study

was restricted to English-language publications. Third, because of contextual variations in governance, culture, and resources, international case studies enhance the analysis but are not always applicable to South Africa.

#### **4.7. Ethical Considerations**

By using publicly accessible materials, making sure that the authors' arguments were accurately represented, and providing appropriate credit through citation, the study upheld ethical integrity even though there was no direct contact with human participants. This is in line with secondary research best practices (Johnston, 2021).

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### **5. Results**

The analysis of policy documents, secondary literature, and thematic insights generated from the study produced four core findings, each highlighting the current limitations and potential of neurodiversity inclusion in South Africa's public service. These findings are presented under four interconnected themes: narrow policy framing, workplace barriers, engagement deficit, and implications for service delivery.

#### **5.1. Narrow Policy Framing**

The first and most striking finding relates to the limited framing of inclusion policies within the South African public service. Legislative frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) and the White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service (1995) define disability largely in physical or sensory terms. Although representation and employment equity have been greatly advanced by these documents, they do not fully capture the range of cognitive differences that make up neurodiversity. Policy texts do not use terms like dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, or ADHD. Given South Africa's history of apartheid, this omission is indicative of a larger historical trajectory in which diversity management has been primarily focused on outward manifestations of inequality, race, gender, and physical disability (Chipkin and Swilling, 2018). However, inclusion frameworks around the world have been growing to specifically recognize cognitive differences as a unique aspect of workplace diversity. Targeted workplace accommodations have resulted from the progressive interpretation of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992, amended) in Australia and the Equality Act (2010) in the United Kingdom to include neurodivergent conditions (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). In contrast, South Africa's legislative silence on neurodiversity creates uncertainty for managers and employees alike, leaving institutions without clear guidelines for accommodation. This is not just a semantic policy gap. Public service organizations unintentionally convey that cognitive differences are incidental to inclusion initiatives by neglecting to acknowledge neurodiversity within formal frameworks. This restrictive policy framework hinders the systematic distribution of resources for neurodiverse employees, limits organizational strategies, and perpetuates stigma. Individual employees must handle disclosure, support, and adaptation on an as-needed basis when there is no clear policy recognition, which has a knock-on effect on workplace culture.

#### **5.2. Workplace Barriers**

The second finding highlights significant workplace barriers that hinder neurodiverse employees' full participation in the public service. These obstacles are cultural as well as structural. The public sector is still characterized structurally by hierarchical organizational cultures, standardized reporting formats, and strict performance evaluation systems (Madonsela, 2021). Employees whose strengths are in unconventional thought patterns are frequently at a disadvantage in such systems. For example, employees with ADHD may be penalized in settings that value sustained attention, such as overstimulating open-plan offices, while people with dyslexia may find it difficult to comply with strict, text-heavy documentation requirements. These structural barriers are exacerbated by culturally limited managerial understanding. Managers frequently have misconceptions that portray cognitive differences as weaknesses rather than strengths, or they are ignorant of the unique requirements of neurodiverse workers (Doyle and McDowall, 2021). Supervisors may use uniform approaches to performance management and supervision in the absence of proper training or policy guidance, inadvertently marginalizing employees with neurodiverse traits. Environmental factors also play a significant role. Overstimulating workplaces, characterised by high noise levels, bright lighting, and frequent interruptions, can be particularly challenging for employees on the autism spectrum or those with sensory sensitivities (van den Heuvel et al., 2022). Unlike physical accessibility features such as ramps or lifts, which are now standard in most government offices, sensory and cognitive accessibility remain overlooked. These barriers collectively contribute to a workplace environment that is ill-suited to harnessing the unique strengths of neurodiverse employees. They also reinforce cycles of underperformance, as employees unable to access necessary accommodations may experience heightened stress, lower productivity, and eventual attrition.

### 5.3. Engagement Deficit

A third key finding relates to the deficit in employee engagement that emerges from the absence of targeted accommodations. Improved performance and job satisfaction have been repeatedly associated with employee engagement, which is defined as the degree of zeal, dedication, and involvement that workers bring to their work (Shuck and Alagaraja, 2020). However, there is evidence from around the world that neurodiverse workers who do not receive the proper accommodations report much lower levels of engagement. For instance, Waisman-Nitzan et al. (2020) discovered that when organizational procedures do not take cognitive differences into consideration, neurodiverse professionals frequently suffer from burnout, alienation, and increased workplace stress. The lack of neurodiversity-sensitive practices worsens disengagement in the South African public service, where morale is already strained by issues like resource shortages, corruption scandals, and service delivery backlogs (Madonsela, 2021). Employees who feel unsupported or misunderstood are less likely to participate meaningfully in teams, contribute innovative ideas, or invest discretionary effort in their roles. Furthermore, the lack of engagement affects organizational culture in addition to individual employees. Colleagues may be unaware or insensitive when neurodiverse employees are not included in diversity frameworks, which perpetuates exclusionary dynamics. Additionally, this invisibility lessens the likelihood of peer learning, role modelling, and the normalization of cognitive differences in professional discourse. Therefore, the engagement deficit is an institutional issue that jeopardizes the overall operation of public service organizations rather than just being an individual experience. The public sector runs the risk of sustaining a cycle in which disengaged workers contribute less to organizational objectives, which in turn feeds into perceptions of inefficiency and poor performance, unless proactive measures are taken.

### 5.4. Service Delivery Implications

The final finding underscores the broader governance implications of failing to integrate neurodiverse employees. In South Africa, service delivery is still one of the most enduring problems, and frequent demonstrations indicate public discontent with the efficiency and responsiveness of public institutions (Alexander et al., 2018). One largely unexplored resource for tackling these issues may be cognitive diversity. Neurodiverse employees frequently excel in problem-solving, pattern recognition, and innovative thinking, according to research from the private sector and international public sector contexts (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Doyle, 2020). These qualities are especially helpful in governance contexts where complicated policy issues call for creative thinking and flexible solutions. The public sector in South Africa loses out on the chance to take advantage of these special skills by ignoring neurodiversity. For instance, employees with autism may bring exceptional analytical precision to data management or auditing tasks, while those with ADHD may thrive in high-intensity, fast-paced problem-solving scenarios. Similarly, individuals with dyslexia or dyscalculia may approach problems with unconventional perspectives, contributing to creative policymaking. Thus, the results of service delivery are directly impacted when neurodiverse employees are excluded from meaningful participation. It not only narrows the talent pool but also maintains uniformity in approaches to problem-solving. Such uniformity can be expensive in a time when the public sector is under increasing pressure to innovate, act quickly in emergency situations, and restore public confidence. On the other hand, incorporating neurodiversity into governance procedures may improve institutional responsiveness and agility. For instance, implementing inclusive performance metrics, providing sensory-friendly workspaces, and embracing flexible communication modes could all help neurodiverse employees contribute more fully. More employee satisfaction as well as increased organizational effectiveness and, eventually, more efficient service delivery would be the outcome.

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## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant gaps in how South Africa's public service conceptualises and implements inclusion, particularly regarding neurodiversity. By examining these results through the lens of Organisational Discipline Theory and New Public Management (NPM) Theory, a deeper understanding emerges of why neurodiversity remains marginalised and what implications this has for governance.

### 6.1. Narrow Policy Framing and Organisational Discipline

Organisational Discipline Theory emphasises how formal policies and practices set boundaries around what is deemed acceptable or valuable within institutions (Foucault, 1991; Townley, 1994). A limited definition of disability that prioritizes obvious impairments and demographic diversity governs inclusion policies in the South African public sector. Because of the silence surrounding cognitive differences created by this disciplinary framework, neurodiversity is not visible in administrative discourse or policy texts. The absence of clear acknowledgment is a form of institutional discipline that shapes workplace realities rather than being a neutral omission. Support networks, training funds, and accommodations are not available to workers whose needs do not fit into the prevalent categories of "disability." This demonstrates how discipline functions through both explicit rules and omissions that normalize particular hierarchies

of inclusion. Such disciplinary silences have started to be challenged by more progressive inclusion frameworks on a global scale. For example, the UK's "Autism at Work" programmes and Australia's neurodiversity employment initiatives explicitly broaden institutional categories to accommodate cognitive differences (Doyle and McDowall, 2021). By contrast, South Africa's policies remain constrained by a disciplinary logic rooted in historical struggles around race, gender, and physical access, leaving little space for new paradigms of diversity.

### **6.2. Workplace Barriers and Bureaucratic Rigidity**

The bureaucratic legacy of the public service is reflected in the identified workplace barriers, strict performance evaluation, overstimulating environments, and managerial ignorance. This type of rigid, rule-bound organizational culture is specifically criticized by NPM theory, which contends that decentralized, flexible practices are necessary for efficiency and innovation (Hood, 1991; Christensen and Lægreid, 2018). The limitations of conventional bureaucratic rationality, where standardization is supposed to guarantee equity but frequently results in exclusion, are brought to light by neurodiversity. Uniform reporting systems, for instance, assume that all staff members process information in linear, text-heavy ways. Such systems disadvantage dyslexic employees despite being designed to increase efficiency, illustrating how bureaucratic neutrality can conceal ingrained injustices. Similarly, rigid performance evaluation measures, often tied to compliance with deadlines and uniform work outputs, ignore the possibility that neurodiverse employees may demonstrate excellence through alternative modes of problem-solving or creativity. In this sense, NPM's emphasis on outcomes over processes could, if applied thoughtfully, provide opportunities to accommodate neurodiversity. By shifting the focus from standardised methods to measurable results, managers could embrace diverse working styles without compromising accountability. Yet the current South African context shows little evidence of this shift; managerial practices remain deeply tied to bureaucratic standardisation.

### **6.3. Engagement Deficit and Institutional Morale**

The study's findings about the engagement deficit highlight how relational organizational life is. According to Shore et al. (2018), true inclusion necessitates more than just representation; it also calls for people to feel appreciated and supported in ways that allow them to fully participate. When disclosure is stigmatized, accommodations are lacking, and workplace cultures value conformity, it undermines the engagement of neurodiverse employees. According to organizational discipline theory, disengagement is a reaction against institutional classifications that disregard lived realities. When workers believe the conditions of participation are unfair to them, they may psychologically "opt out." In the South African public sector, where low morale already leads to absenteeism, inadequate accountability, and subpar service delivery, this disengagement is especially expensive (Madonsela, 2021). NPM frameworks also highlight employee engagement as central to performance. Concepts such as "public value management" (Moore, 1995) stress that motivated employees are essential to delivering value to citizens. Ignoring neurodiversity thus undermines both individual well-being and broader organisational efficiency, perpetuating the very inefficiencies that reform agendas seek to overcome.

### **6.4. Service Delivery and Governance Implications**

Service delivery is directly impacted when neurodiverse employees are excluded. According to some academics, South Africa's state is experiencing a "capability crisis," characterized by poor performance, sluggish response times, and eroding public confidence (Chipkin and Swilling, 2018). One strategy to improve institutional problem-solving capabilities may be to take advantage of cognitive diversity. Theoretically, NPM's appeal for creativity and flexibility is highly relevant in this context. According to Austin and Pisano (2017), neurodiverse workers frequently have nontraditional methods for solving problems, paying attention to details, and coming up with innovative ideas. These abilities could facilitate the creation of novel service delivery models, more precise data analysis, and flexible solutions to challenging policy issues if they are properly utilized. However, this potential is limited by the disciplinary logic of current institutions. By failing to expand policy categories, allocate resources, or build awareness, the public service enforces conformity and undermines innovation. This tension between bureaucratic discipline and the adaptive demands of NPM reflects a broader paradox in South African governance: while policy rhetoric emphasises transformation and innovation, institutional practices remain entrenched in older paradigms of control.

### **6.5. Towards a Strengths-Based Inclusion Paradigm**

The findings imply that a paradigm change from a compliance-oriented to a strengths-based model of inclusion is necessary to overcome these obstacles. The narrow focus of compliance models on legal requirements frequently leads to tokenistic actions that adhere to the letter but not the spirit of inclusion. Conversely, cognitive differences are acknowledged as organizational assets rather than deficiencies in strengths-based models (Doyle, 2020). This change would require rearranging the categories used to institutionalize inclusion in accordance with organizational discipline theory. Policy could actively create new categories, like neurodiversity, that resource the accommodation of difference

and legitimize it instead of reprimanding staff members into silence. This would entail matching NPM's inclusion policies to performance objectives and acknowledging that utilizing a variety of skills promotes productivity, creativity, and the creation of public value.

## 6.6. Implications for South Africa

The conversation brings to light both opportunities and risks for South Africa. The danger is in maintaining neurodiversity's invisibility, which worsens disengagement, lowers morale, and stifles creativity. Redefining neurodiversity as a component of the larger endeavour to restore state capacity presents an opportunity. The public sector could address employee well-being and enhance governance outcomes at the same time by incorporating neurodiversity into inclusion frameworks. Thus, this study adds to discussions that are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it demonstrates how NPM Theory draws attention to the lost opportunities for performance enhancement, while Organizational Discipline Theory explains why neurodiversity is not discussed in policy. From a practical standpoint, it emphasizes the necessity of clear policy recognition, managerial development, and workplace modifications that go beyond mere compliance to true inclusion.

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## 7. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that neurodiversity remains an unaddressed dimension of inclusion within South Africa's public service. This gap has direct implications for employee engagement, organisational efficiency, and service delivery outcomes. To bridge this gap, the following recommendations are advanced. Each recommendation is anchored in Organizational Discipline Theory, which emphasises how policies and practices reflect institutionalised forms of control and recognition, and in New Public Management (NPM) Theory, which frames inclusion as a driver of efficiency, accountability, and innovation in public administration.

### 7.1. Policy Revision: Recognising Neurodiversity Explicitly

The public service disability inclusion frameworks in South Africa are still limited in their current design, giving priority to physical impairments while ignoring cognitive differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. Since neurodiverse employees are not officially acknowledged as recipients of equity measures, this silence fosters an environment of exclusion. Policies need to be updated to specifically acknowledge neurodiversity as a type of diversity and inclusion in order to address this. Important frameworks like the Public Service Regulations, the Employment Equity Act, and departmental diversity management plans ought to take this acknowledgment into account. Beyond just being symbolic, recognition serves as the cornerstone for the structuring of resources, accommodations, and legal protections (Botha and Govender, 2022). Numerous nations around the world have taken action to integrate neurodiversity into their public policies. For instance, Australia has integrated autism-friendly hiring practices into public service hiring, and the UK's Civil Service has implemented neurodiversity passports to guide accommodations (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Doyle and McDowall, 2021). South Africa would be in line with these global best practices and fulfil its constitutional commitments to inclusivity by amending its policies to take neurodiversity into account (Republic of South Africa, 1996). From a theoretical perspective, Organizational Discipline Theory demonstrates that the limits of inclusion are determined by what is acknowledged in policy. Institutions change the conversation from one of silence to one of visibility by naming neurodiversity. At the same time, NPM theory highlights that a more diverse workforce contributes directly to service quality, innovation, and efficiency (Shava and Chamisa, 2023). Thus, policy revision is both a moral imperative and a managerial necessity.

### 7.2. Managerial Training: Building Awareness and Reducing Stigma

Even in cases where policies for inclusion are in place, their execution frequently fails because of a lack of managerial knowledge. In the public sector, managers are essential in interpreting and implementing inclusion frameworks. However, stigma and exclusion are maintained because many people lack proper training and are ignorant of neurodiverse conditions (Maja et al., 2021). Targeted managerial training programmes should therefore be introduced. These programmes must go beyond generic diversity awareness to specifically address the needs of neurodiverse employees. Training should cover:

- Understanding conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia.
- Recognising strengths associated with neurodiversity, such as problem-solving and innovation.
- Identifying and mitigating structural barriers in the workplace.
- Practicing inclusive leadership that values cognitive diversity.

Research from North America and Europe demonstrates that neurodiversity awareness training increases engagement, lowers turnover, and improves employee-manager relationships (van den Heuvel et al., 2022). Such training would also help combat cultural stigmas in South Africa, where neurodiversity is frequently framed through a medical-deficit lens (Madonsela, 2021). From the standpoint of organizational discipline, training questions long-standing conventions that portray neurodiversity as a weakness. It gives managers the theoretical means to view neurodiverse workers as assets rather than liabilities. According to NPM, giving managers inclusion competencies improves performance by enabling teams to use a variety of cognitive abilities when providing services.

### **7.3. Workplace Accommodations: Creating Enabling Environments**

In addition to training and policies, neurodiverse workers need useful accommodations in order to succeed. According to Waisman-Nitzan et al. (2020), the lack of such accommodations in the South African public sector leads to stress, disengagement, and underutilization of skills. Three key forms of accommodations are recommended:

#### *7.3.1. Flexible Performance Evaluations*

Current evaluation systems often prioritise uniformity and rigid procedures. This disadvantages employees who may excel in outcomes but struggle with conventional processes. Flexible evaluation approaches that focus on results rather than rigid steps would better accommodate neurodiverse employees (Botha and Govender, 2022).

#### *7.3.2. Sensory-Friendly Workspaces*

Overstimulation caused by open-plan offices, bright lighting, and noise can be debilitating for neurodiverse employees. Introducing quiet zones, adjustable lighting, or noise-reducing infrastructure can significantly improve comfort and productivity (Doyle, 2020).

#### *7.3.3. Assistive Technologies*

Tools such as text-to-speech software, spell-check systems, or digital organisers can level the playing field for employees with dyslexia, ADHD, or related conditions (van den Heuvel et al., 2022).

These actions have been demonstrated to enhance organizational performance and employee engagement on a global scale (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2020). Locally, making accommodations would be a reflection of the constitution's guarantees of justice and equality at work. From a theoretical standpoint, workplace norms frequently favour neurotypical functioning, as revealed by Organizational Discipline Theory. A structural adjustment that redistributes authority and recognition is represented by accommodations. According to NPM, accommodations support the fundamental ideas of contemporary public management reform, which are responsiveness, efficiency, and adaptability (Shava and Chamisa, 2023).

### **7.4. Monitoring and Evaluation: Institutionalising Accountability**

Reforms promoting inclusion must be supported by strong monitoring and evaluation systems in order to be effective. It is currently challenging to monitor progress or spot gaps in South Africa's public service due to a lack of systematic data on neurodiversity (Maja et al., 2021). Government agencies are advised to implement particular metrics for neurodiversity inclusion. These could include:

- Recruitment and retention rates of neurodiverse employees.
- Engagement and satisfaction surveys disaggregated by cognitive diversity.
- Promotion and career progression rates for neurodiverse staff.

Integrating these metrics into departmental performance reports would guarantee that neurodiversity is institutionalized as a governance priority rather than being marginalized. The importance of measurement procedures in determining organizational priorities is highlighted by organizational discipline theory. Value is created by measuring. Therefore, implementing neurodiversity metrics guarantees accountability and visibility. According to NPM, monitoring supports evidence-based decision-making, transparency, and performance management.

### **7.5. Research Expansion: Building an Evidence Base**

Lastly, more empirical studies on neurodiversity in South Africa's public sector are desperately needed. Race, gender, and physical disability have currently received the most attention in the region's diversity scholarship (Ayee, 2022). Despite its importance, cognitive diversity has not received enough attention because of this focus. Expanding research would serve multiple purposes:

- Provide evidence to guide policy reforms.
- Document lived experiences of neurodiverse employees in the public service.
- Contextualise international best practices for the South African environment.
- Promote participatory approaches where neurodiverse voices shape inclusion strategies.

Neurodiversity research needs to shift from deficit frameworks to strengths-based approaches that emphasize contributions like creativity, resilience, and attention to detail, according to recent international studies (Shore et al., 2018; van den Heuvel et al., 2022). In South Africa, increasing research would not only close a knowledge gap but also advance the larger objective of reshaping the public sector into an inventive and inclusive organization that can fulfil its developmental mandate (Madonsela, 2021).

### 7.6. Conclusion of Recommendations

The aforementioned suggestions highlight the fact that integrating neurodiversity into South Africa's public sector is both morally required and strategically essential. A thorough reform roadmap consists of updating policies, empowering managers, implementing accommodations, institutionalizing monitoring, and advancing research. These measures, which are based on organizational discipline theory, challenge long-standing silences that marginalize cognitive diversity. From the standpoint of NPM theory, they also provide workable methods to enhance governance's effectiveness, creativity, and accountability. The public sector in South Africa can move closer to the constitutional promise of justice, equity, and inclusive development by embracing neurodiversity and converting exclusion into empowerment.

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## 8. Conclusion

According to this study, neurodiversity is still not well understood or encouraged in South Africa's public sector when it comes to workplace inclusion. Neurodiverse employees are largely ignored by local policies and practices, despite growing global evidence showing the benefits of cognitive diversity on employee engagement, innovation, and organizational performance. The public service's ability to provide innovative and successful services is hampered by the marginalization of cognitively diverse people, which also lowers morale and undermines their engagement. By incorporating neurodiversity into governance frameworks, educating managers, and fostering a positive work environment, South African public institutions can treat inclusion as a strategic lever for enhancing service delivery and institutional resilience, moving beyond a compliance-focused mindset. Practically, the study shows that policy change must be accompanied by managerial capacity building, concrete workplace accommodations, and systems of monitoring and evaluation. Without these complementary interventions, policy recognition alone will not translate into better outcomes for neurodiverse employees or for citizens who depend on public services. The findings further indicate that accommodating cognitive diversity is not simply a fairness issue; it is a performance and capability issue. When neurodiverse employees are visible, supported, and valued, organisations gain access to different problem-solving repertoires that can strengthen data analysis, service innovation, and adaptive responses to complex governance challenges.

The limitations of this study indicate areas that warrant further investigation. This study was unable to record the first-hand experiences of neurodiverse public servants because it employed a desk-based, secondary-data approach to circumvent ethical clearance requirements. Qualitative interviews, survey research, ethnographic observation, and participatory action research are empirical methods that should be used in future studies to record lived experiences, evaluate the efficacy of particular accommodations, and investigate causal relationships between neurodiversity inclusion and service delivery outcomes. Strong proof of scalability and cost-effectiveness would be provided by longitudinal designs and pilot interventions (such as implementing neurodiversity-sensitive hiring, neurodiversity passports, or sensory-friendly work zones in particular departments). In conclusion, South Africa has a practical way to improve state capacity and equity by redefining neurodiversity as a crucial component of inclusive governance. Intentional policy revision, managerial competency investments, workable workplace modifications, and a research agenda that prioritizes the perspectives of neurodiverse employees are all necessary to achieve this. If implemented, these policies have the potential to turn exclusion into an institutional strength, enabling the public sector to serve a diverse populace in a more creative, adaptable, and equitable manner.

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