

Character-based Leadership Approaches for Autistic Members of the Canadian Armed Forces

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Abstract – The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is heavily invested in becoming a more diverse and inclusive organization that mirrors the diversity of Canadian society. As new challenges arise in national defence, the unique cognitive abilities found in autistic individuals may become increasingly valuable for solving complex operational challenges. Despite an established presence of autistic leaders in the CAF, efforts to support and fully integrate these individuals are lacking, thus further study is necessary to determine the appropriate support and enabling conditions for success. Understanding leadership from autistic perspectives and experiences is crucial for developing inclusive leadership programs and policies within the CAF. This paper postulates that character-based leadership (CBL) could be a suitable leadership theory for CAF leadership development programs that incorporate autistic perspectives.

Keywords— Neurodiversity, Autism, Leadership, Character-Based Leadership, Canadian Armed Forces

Note on Language—The Autism Self-Advocacy Network promotes identity-first language to emphasize that autism is an inherent part of an individual and the condition cannot be separated from the person, thus, autistic individuals will be referred to as such

¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.

² Neurodiversity refers to the diverse way every individual brain functions. It includes the full spectrum of neurotypes from

throughout this paper and the term neurotypical will be used as the preferred language to describe non-autistic individuals.

I. Background and Motivation

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) outlines the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in terms of deficits. The core characteristics include persistent deficits in communication and social interaction across multiple contexts plus deficits in social-emotional reciprocity resulting in challenges in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. Restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities are manifested by stereotyped and repetitive motor movements and speech. There is often an insistence on sameness and an inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour. Highly restricted, fixated special interests may be abnormal in intensity or focus and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input is common.¹

As a form of neurodiversity,² autism is described as a set of heterogeneous neurodevelopmental conditions that result in atypical perception and information processing with impaired social cognition, social perception, and executive dysfunction. Comorbidity with other cognitive conditions is common with an estimate of greater than 70% of autistics having concurrent conditions of intellectual disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), tic disorders, motor abnormality, sleep disorders, substance use disorders, anxiety, or depression.³ Many autistic individuals experience sleep disturbances, food sensitivities and food aversions.

Autism also presents unique cognitive strengths and abilities including hyper-focus, hyper-memory,

neurotypical (i.e. brain functions align with societal norms) to neurodivergent, a subgroup characterized by atypical behavioral and cognitive function

³ Meng-Chuan Lai, Michael V. Lombardo, and Simon Baron-Cohen, "Autism," *The Lancet* 383, no. 9920 (March 8, 2014): 896–910, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)61539-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61539-1).

constellation thinking,⁴ pattern recognition, attention to detail, increased creativity, and personal qualities such as honesty, loyalty and the ability to offer unique autistic perspectives.⁵ Research has shown that within various United States national security organizations neurodivergent individuals outperform neurotypical individuals at recognizing patterns in a distracted environment, on intelligence tests using nonverbal testing, and at achieving states of hyperfocus.⁶ With proper support and enabling conditions the systematizing and synthesizing attributes of autism can be leveraged to great effect.⁷

Character-based leadership is an approach that emphasizes the importance of positive character traits in leadership roles. It is a type of leadership that prioritizes ethical values, empathy, and integrity. It encompasses involving others in decision-making and enhancing the growth of employees. Character is foundational for effective decision-making and influences how leaders consider and evaluate information and then convey it to their team. Complementarily research has shown that on average Autistic employees have increased authenticity, loyalty, consistency, and empathy compared to their neurotypical cohort.⁸ The association between autistic characteristics and desirable leadership traits will be further explored in this paper.

By questioning leadership definitions and traits rooted in ableist perspectives and shifting the focus towards the behaviours and attributes of leaders rather than transactional leadership paradigms, fresh insights can be gained regarding the potential for autistic individuals to excel in leadership positions. Autistic individuals possess distinctive strengths that defy

conventional notions of essential leadership traits, thus challenging existing theories and assumptions. Misconceptions and erroneous beliefs must be confronted when reassessing competencies to foster a more inclusive and accurate understanding of leadership capabilities among autistic individuals.

Given the notable prevalence of autism in the general population⁹ and across many leadership domains, it is postulated that there is a similar distribution of autistic individuals CAF-wide. A study of autism within the CAF will inform the development of leadership programs that align with CAF objectives of establishing workplace culture as a focus area. As stated in the Canadian Armed Forces Ethos, *Trusted to Serve*, “Canada as a country is made stronger because of its diversity and commitment to equity and inclusion, and so is the CAF. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are so critical to CAF effectiveness that they are set as professional virtues and a key part of our military ethos.”¹⁰

Autism is widely considered to be an invisible disability, which limits understanding, acceptance and support.¹¹ Thus, this paper will first explore autism generally to build a knowledge base before investigating its intersection with leadership. Character-based leadership will be presented as a leadership theory that complements autistic behaviours.

II. Autism

During the brain development of an autistic individual, both in utero and throughout early childhood, various brain regions develop an

⁴ Constellation thinking refers to a non-linear thinking pattern that makes novel connections across disparate domains to spark creative insights and new modes of understanding. It embraces multiplicity over singularity of meaning.

⁵ Rosie Cope and Anna Remington, “The Strengths and Abilities of Autistic People in the Workplace,” *Autism in Adulthood: Challenges and Management* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 22–31, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0037>.

⁶ Cortney Weinbaum et al., “Neurodiversity and National Security: How to Tackle National Security Challenges with a Wider Range of Cognitive Talents” (RAND Corp, March 27, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1875-1.html.

⁷ Quinetta Roberson et al., “Reconceptualizing Leadership from a Neurodiverse Perspective,” *Group & Organization Management* 46, no. 2 (2021): 399–423, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601120987293>.

⁸ Cope and Remington, “The Strengths and Abilities of Autistic People in the Workplace.”

⁹ The prevalence of autism is unknown but estimates in the general population of 1% - 2.8% have been reported which would represent 80-225 million individuals worldwide.

¹⁰ Department of National Defence, “Canadian Armed Forces Ethos : Trusted to Serve,” 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canadian-armed-forces-ethos-trusted-to-serve.html>.

¹¹ Karin E. van den Bosch et al., “Nothing about Us, without Us: A Case Study of a Consumer-Run Organization by and for People on the Autism Spectrum in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Management and Organization* 25, no. 4 (July 1, 2019): 464–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2018.54>.

overabundance of neurons and communication pathways becoming highly capable and specialized with heightened sensitivities. This phenomenon can lead to exceptional abilities but can also cause significant challenges for individuals when certain brain regions become hyperactive in unwanted and uncontrolled ways. In contrast, other brain regions and pathways of an autistic individual will have a deficient number of neurons that are unable to communicate effectively with other areas of the brain. Autism is characterized more by atypical inter-neural network connectivity rather than which discrete brain regions are affected.¹²

Due to this divergence in brain development and its excesses and deficits, autistic individuals have spiky skills profiles indicated by advanced abilities in some very focused areas and generally weaker abilities in other areas.¹³ Every autistic profile is unique; thus, the term spectrum appropriately describes this condition. A visual representation of the autism spectrum can be likened to a heat map, with various attributes of the condition depicted by different shades to indicate the level of prevalence, intensity, or severity for that particular attribute for an individual. An example graphical depiction is shown in Figure 1.

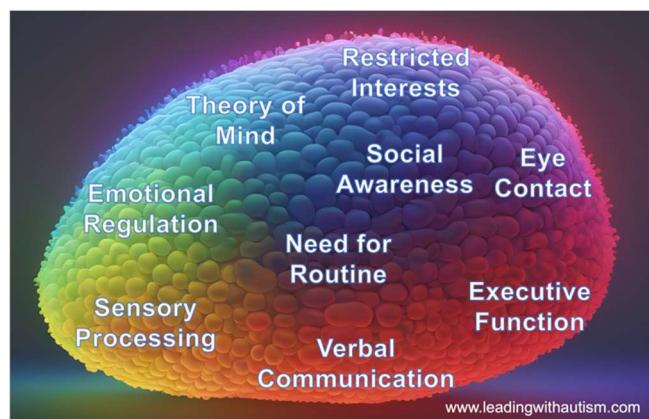


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the Autistic Brain

This visual analogy shows various attributes of the autism condition at varying levels of impact or proficiency as represented by gradients on the heatmap.

¹² Kyle Jasmin, Alex Martin, and Stephen J. Gotts, "Atypical Connectivity Aids Conversation in Autism," *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (March 31, 2023): 5303, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-32249-5>.

¹³ Simon Baron-Cohen et al., "Talent in Autism: Hyper-Systemizing, Hyper-Attention to Detail and Sensory Hypersensitivity," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1522 (May 27, 2009):

This image helps to convey the diverse and unique nature of autism. The distinct positioning of each individual on the spectrum is based on their unique brain structure with its focused strengths and distinctive gaps.

The atypical behaviours and communication patterns of the autistic condition could pose challenges within military leadership environments and a better understanding is necessary. Perspectives which limit leadership opportunities to only those who are effective communicators by neurotypical standards are grounded in relationship-based approaches to leadership; however, if the critical disability theory¹⁴ is leveraged an alternative and more balanced perspective is possible allowing a shift in focus from the challenges to the unique cognitive strengths of autistic individuals and how they support effective leadership. By recognizing and valuing these attributes we can reimagine and develop innovative models of leadership that are more inclusive and representative of autism. This enables us to look at autistic communication patterns or non-communication patterns from a new viewpoint rather than relying on a restrictive medical model which assumes autistic behaviours are medical symptoms to be diagnosed and treated.

Social challenges faced by autistic individuals in the workplace are notable and include social anxiety and social avoidance, often from repeated rejection and correction in childhood. Several other factors may contribute to social anxiety in an autistic individual, including sensory hypersensitivity, difficulty and discomfort with socializing, and deficits in theory of mind (ToM).¹⁵ Research suggests that autistic individuals may have acute deficits with instantaneous processing of ToM information from facial expressions, vocal tone, or hand gestures. Autistic individuals display particularly acute communication deficits, especially in nonverbal communication which is a significant aspect of workplace culture that supports the establishment of social hierarchy, fosters co-worker

1377–83, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0337>.

¹⁴ The Critical Disability Theory presents disabilities as a social construct that emerges from the sociocultural environment in which they are situated, including the normative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of that environment.

¹⁵ Theory of mind, or mentalizing skills, reinforce the comprehension of the mental states of oneself and others, representing the capacity for perspective-taking.

relationships, and expresses personal attributes and emotions. Difficulties in understanding others' mental states could contribute to high social anxiety and restricted behaviour among autistic individuals.¹⁶ Autistic role models and mentors at all ranks of the CAF could alleviate many of the social interaction challenges faced by autistic members.

While autistic individuals struggle to understand neurotypical perceptions and culture it is equally true that neurotypical individuals struggle to understand the perceptions and culture of autistic individuals which is known as the double empathy problem of communication style differences between autistic and non-autistic groups.¹⁷ Shannon's communication model consists of an information source, a transmitter, a channel, and a receiver.¹⁸ If any of those elements are on a different frequency or if there is noise in the channel then communication is impacted, requiring either or both parties to modify their delivery and behaviours to enable effective communication.

For autistic individuals serving in the CAF who aspire to take on leadership roles, it is crucial to examine and address the potential difficulties they may face related to communication and social interactions. Developing strategies and support systems to overcome these challenges is essential to creating an environment conducive to their success as effective leaders within the defence force.

III. Character Based Leadership

Crossan et al. developed the character-based leadership model as a leadership theory that emphasizes the importance of personal behaviours, attributes, and character in leadership roles.¹⁹ Character can be further extrapolated from leadership positions to the general populace of an organization or community. By focusing on the disposition to lead rather than the position to lead,

character can be applied to all individuals in organizations, which broadens its reach beyond the purely positional leadership domain to leadership theory in general.

The character-based leadership model encompasses eleven character dimensions: Integrity; Humility; Courage; Humanity; Drive; Accountability; Temperance; Justice; Collaboration; Transcendence; and Judgment.²⁰ Exhibiting and cultivating positive character attributes is the path to realizing impactful leadership.

Character is defined as deep structures of personality that are particularly resistant to change; however, they can be changed. As the neuroscience and neuroengineering communities learn more about the human brain and its capacity to change through neuroplasticity it is being realized that leadership character is not hardwired as once believed, rather it can be evolved through training, mentorship, and self-reflection.²¹

Within the CBL model, an effective leader acts with integrity and exhibits ethical decision-making. These values are demonstrated to and observed by employees, providing a foundation for the behaviours that are expected within the organization. Leaders who espouse CBL philosophies prioritize the value of character over profit or personal gain and refuse to compromise their intrinsic values. CBL focuses on the positive character traits of leaders by highlighting their ability to assess and understand their surroundings. Expertise, skills, emotional intelligence and other innate and developed personal qualities facilitate effective leadership.

By placing equal emphasis on cultivating virtuous character traits alongside developing meta-competencies and technical competencies, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) could unlock extraordinary leadership potential within its ranks.

¹⁶ Nikita Elizabeth Williams, "Servant Leadership Oriented Leadership Development for Leaders on the Autism Spectrum: An Exploratory Study" (MA Thesis, Montclair, Montclair State University, 2022).

¹⁷ Peter Mitchell, Elizabeth Sheppard, and Sarah Cassidy, "Autism and the Double Empathy Problem: Implications for Development and Mental Health," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 39, no. 1 (2021): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12350>.

¹⁸ C. E. Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal* 27, no. 3 (1948):

379–423, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-7305.1948.tb01338.x>.

¹⁹ Mary Crossan, Gerard Seijts, and Jeffrey Gandz, *Developing Leadership Character* (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739809>.

²⁰ Crossan, Seijts, and Gandz.

²¹ Faith Gilbert, "Exploring the Intersection of Servant-Leadership and Neurobiology: Hope for Deep-Rooted Mental and Behavioral Transformation," *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership* 10, no. 1 (2014): 119–41.

There are already compelling reasons to advocate for the integration of character-based leadership principles into the CAF's capstone leadership doctrine, reinforced by command-driven initiatives, in order to foster a culture of leaders commensurate with the profession of arms in Canada.²²

CBL focuses on the ethical dimensions of leadership, emphasizing the importance of one's character and value system in guiding leader behaviours and decision-making; thus, a study comparing character dimensions and inherent autistic characteristics should inform leadership programs for autistic individuals. Nurturing leadership character dimensions that intersect with autistic behaviours would foster an environment where autistic individuals are considered effective leaders despite having acute deficits in social, communication, or environmental domains.

IV. The Intersection of Autism and Leader Character

Character-based leadership underscores the importance of positive attributes such as integrity and accountability, which are recognized traits of autism.²³ Autistic individuals show particular strengths and virtues in honesty, fairness, kindness, and creativity which align with the character values of integrity, humanity, accountability, justice and judgment. High levels of accountability demonstrated by autistic leaders are supported by elevated honesty, integrity, and loyalty within the autistic cohort. Courage may manifest in autistic leaders' willingness to think differently and challenge conventional wisdom, driven by their unique perspectives and problem-solving approaches. Autistic individuals' ability to become subject matter experts through their focused interests and pursuit of knowledge aligns with the character dimensions of drive and transcendence. Heightened attention to detail and adherence to rules and procedures deriving from an internal need for a structured routine could contribute to superior judgment and a heightened perception of justice.

By broadening our current conceptualizations of leadership to encompass and embrace autistic characteristics and behaviours, we can challenge long-

held assumptions and address existing research gaps regarding autistic individuals in leadership roles. This paradigm shift opens up new avenues for exploring and nurturing the leadership capabilities of autistic and other neurodivergent individuals, promoting a more equitable and diverse view of leadership.

Matching autistic attributes and leadership behaviours within a supportive environment has the potential to generate positive outcomes for both leaders and their teams. With the proper enabling conditions, many autistic characteristics could amplify and enrich leadership effectiveness. For example, the sensory hypersensitivities and hyper-visual acuity of autism are often associated negatively with a tendency for fixation and in-flexibility, however, with the right enabling conditions these hypersensitivities may be invaluable in systematizing or recognizing repeating patterns in stimuli. This ability permits an autistic leader to analyze complex data, recognize connections, and make well-informed decisions based on detailed information. In the context of character-based leadership, these attributes would contribute to ethical and principled decision-making.

While restrictive special interests are identified as deficits of autism within the medical model a potential advantage is that special interests allow autistic individuals to become subject matter experts in core areas. The pursuit of core interests is intrinsically motivating and outcomes include increased task engagement and performance. This could be valuable in decision-making and problem-solving within leadership roles or could be leveraged to provide unique insights and innovative solutions, particularly within technical leadership domains or specialized fields.

Problem-solving and decision-making are foundational to leadership and are highly influenced by the creative process when generating novel ideas and unique solutions. The atypical lens through which autistic and other neurodiverse individuals view problems is associated with leader behaviours that are indicative of innovative thought processes. The term neurodiversity itself implies a divergence in cognitive processes in both idea generation and evaluation. Thus, given the cognitive influence of creativity on leader performance, further study of the creativity and

²² Major Jeffrey Manley, "Character Based Leadership for the Canadian Armed Forces: A Concept Whose Time Has Come"

(Canadian Forces College, 2019).

²³ Weinbaum et al., "Neurodiversity and National Security."

synthesizing attributes of autism would inform how these skills can support effective leadership. For these advantages to be fully realized though, enabling conditions for success must be established.

Research is generally lacking on how organizations should adapt, accommodate and develop autistic leaders to gain a competitive advantage in the leadership domain. Autistic individuals often struggle in the leadership process due to social deficits; thus, a better understanding of the relationship between autism and leadership could help organizations better support their autistic members in achieving their potential. Real-world examples and anecdotal evidence of autistic leaders within corporate, military, judicial, academic, public administration and many other leadership domains indicate a research gap and a need to investigate how these leaders could be better supported and developed.

Promoting equitable hiring of autistic leaders who demonstrate positive character attributes is facilitated by the creation of job descriptions that incorporate competency and desirable character strengths in an effort to attract candidates who align with the organization's values and culture. Follow-up character interviews can aid in further assessing a candidate's character attributes as to how they could support the organization's efforts. This interview approach involves posing questions that uncover instances where the candidate has exhibited specific character strengths in the past and how they intend to apply them in the future.

Designing an Employee Value Proposition (EVP) is another method to attract, retain and support autistic leaders. An EVP is composed of four interrelated factors that can help attract and retain talent based on compensation, benefits, career development, and work environment. By designing an EVP that accounts for the needs and desires of the individual balanced against the desirable values and culture of the organization, the CAF could attract and retain leaders who share those same values, creating a mutually beneficial employer-employee relationship and a strong talent brand.

As more autistic individuals enter leadership positions, a case is made for building peer support

networks of autistic individuals who will serve as role models, mentors and positive ambassadors for the autistic community. It is beneficial for autistic employees to have open discussions about various aspects of their autistic experience and to serve as role models for other employees who might be inclined to mask their autism and consequently be excluded from gaining appropriate support.²⁴ Leadership positions held by autistic individuals are important for self-advocacy in how autism is explained and represented to the public. Observing successful autistic leaders and role models will counterbalance the dominant narrative within the medical model that autism is a disability described by deficits and will instead build an alternative view of autism through the lens of human diversity. This viewpoint is supported by research that indicates that hiring and recruiting neurodivergent individuals is a competitive advantage for organizations.²⁵

The existence of autism within workplaces fosters more diverse workforces with differing viewpoints and perspectives, driving innovation and creative decision-making. In addition to the unique perspectives and analytical abilities, hiring candidates from the autistic community has been shown to lead to increased employee and brand loyalty. Another by-product observed is an overall increase in communication effectiveness with organizations that hire and support autistic employees. This is theorized to be due to the requirement that all employees in the organization must employ a more direct, concise and less ambiguous dialogue style to accommodate those with communication challenges, thereby increasing overall communication effectiveness in the workplace.²⁶ Concise, clear, effective communication is not only inherent but essential to CAF missions and the maintenance of operational effectiveness, thus, further study into how this phenomenon relates to and can be leveraged by the CAF would be of value.

Neurodivergent employees will often face challenges navigating a workplace that was not designed with them in mind. These challenges include sensory overload, rigid and tightly packed schedules, unspoken social norms, and lack of clarity in

²⁴ van den Bosch et al., "Nothing about Us, without Us."

²⁵ Williams, "Servant Leadership Oriented Leadership Development for Leaders on the Autism Spectrum: An

Exploratory Study."

²⁶ Williams.

instruction. Several aspects of the recruitment and hiring process can pose barriers to neurodiverse candidates. Such barriers include unclear or confusing job descriptions, complex application processes, challenges with job interviews, and the security clearance process.

In response to these challenges, Weinbaum and colleagues at RAND Corp. formulated a set of suggestions for integrating neurodiversity into military organizations, drawing from a US Military perspective. Recommendations include ensuring equitable access to reasonable accommodations to address sensory sensitivities, such as the option to choose desk locations, use noise-cancelling headphones, or establish quiet periods. Recruitment strategies should be revised to attract neurodivergent candidates by using clear and direct language in job postings and by updating interview processes to align with industry best practices for engaging neurodivergent individuals. Enhancing awareness and understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace includes engaging experts to address the subject, offering empathy and psychological safety training for managers, and cultivating support groups centred around neurodiversity as a strength rather than a disability. To drive positive organizational change, it is essential to incorporate the perspectives of neurodivergent employees throughout the organization in policy decisions.²⁷

It must be noted that many of the recommendations for accommodations within the context of a military environment may only pertain to static garrison environments, thus, further exploration is needed into how these accommodations could be applied to a field or deployed environment, if even possible. Due to the diverse range of trades within any military, a homogeneous approach is not possible, and an accommodation that is appropriate for a cyber operator in an office cubicle may not apply to an infantry soldier who works in a very dynamic environment or a pilot who works in a very controlled environment. Thus, before the CAF can draft a comprehensive policy that includes general support for autistic leaders, in-depth studies are necessary to ensure overall operational

effectiveness will be maintained and the CAF's mandate of protecting Canada and its citizens is not jeopardized.

To this effect, all CAF members are under a universality of service agreement which requires us to be willing and able to perform tasks in a variety of geographical locations and climatic conditions or physical environments. This includes deploying far from home on short notice; sustained irregular or prolonged working hours; sustained irregular, limited or missed meals, traveling in any mode of transportation; and performing duties under physical or mental stress with no access to medication or medical support.²⁸

The stringent requirements of the universality of service policy are deemed necessary for the CAF to execute its mission of defending Canada and its citizens at home and abroad, however, this could be problematic for an autistic individual who experiences sensory and environmental sensitivities or comorbid anxiety, depression, Tourette's, ADHD, or other conditions that require daily medication for management of the symptoms. This policy may restrict autistic individuals to certain environments or trades, or may even preclude military service; hence, before leveraging the unique attributes of autism the challenges posed by the universality of service policy must be studied, understood, and addressed.

In general, the requirements dictated by the universality of service policy are necessary due to the nature of military operations, however, aspects of the policy that are inherently limiting to the leadership potential of serving autistic members and barriers to entry for potential autistic members must be reviewed and updated based on research-informed data.

V. Summary And Conclusion

Autism can result in challenges and deficits but also great strengths. From an evolutionary viewpoint, it postulated that autistic traits are subject to positive selection pressure due to the potential societal benefits from individuals who possess a solitary single-minded

²⁷ Weinbaum et al.

²⁸ Department of National Defence, "DAOD 5023-1, Minimum Operational Standards Related to Universality of Service," policies, 2013, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department->

[national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/5000-series/5023/5023-1-minimum-operational-standards-related-to-universality-of-service.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/5000-series/5023/5023-1-minimum-operational-standards-related-to-universality-of-service.html).

obsessive focus on a unique understanding of a system. As noted by Lai et al, “such individuals might have successfully traded products or their building and fixing skills, thus acquiring resources, and increasing their reproductive fitness, which could have contributed to the maintenance of autism alleles in the gene pool,”²⁹

Understanding autism more broadly will support the CAF cultural evolution aims of recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce with a strong talent brand of inclusion and diversity while enabling better support for autistic leaders. The CAF is focused on becoming a culturally respectful and relevant organization and it would be remiss to exclude innovative thinkers and honest leaders who align with the eleven character-based leadership dimensions. Autistic individuals have been found to espouse these positive character attributes at a statistically higher rate than neurotypical individuals which could represent a competitive advantage for the CAF. A case can be made that neurodivergent and autistic individuals are necessary to the CAF’s future and the value of their inclusion will be worth the accommodations that must be made.

A comprehensive examination of the moral, legal, and operational aspects of recruiting neurodivergent individuals into the CAF was conducted, framing the discussion within the broader context of diversity and inclusion.³⁰ The CAF is currently experiencing a phase of growth amidst a fiercely competitive recruiting landscape, thereby necessitating the exploration of novel talent pools. There is a moral imperative and operational need for diversity within the CAF and the recognition of the potential benefits of recruiting autistic individuals.

The CAF has a duty to accommodate the needs of individuals with learning disabilities, contained within Defence Administrative Orders and Directive 5516-5. The duty to accommodate is a legal obligation under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the Employment Equity Act, requiring the CAF to accommodate the needs of individuals with learning disabilities unless doing so would impose undue hardship with consideration of

health, safety, or cost.³¹ This policy does not extend to autism which is not considered a learning disability, however, parallels can be drawn between the needs of those with learning disabilities and autistics.

In the current constrained job market, the CAF must embrace the potential of the under-employed and under-represented autistic talent pool. Given the talent shortages the CAF is facing, there is a pressing need to welcome neurodivergence into all ranks. To achieve the cultural and systematic changes necessary to create a workforce that is fully inclusive of neurodivergence and in particular autism more research is required into how best to attract, recruit, and retain this talent pool based on the shared, lived experiences of this community. The CAF needs ethical, innovative, technically proficient leaders; thus, competent, qualified individuals or entire demographics must not be excluded from the leadership process.

While this study investigated autistic individuals who can excel in leadership roles, it must be emphasized that the autistic spectrum is vast, ranging from profoundly disabled individuals who have extremely high care needs and cannot live independently in our neurotypical world, to individuals who use their autistic intelligence to accomplish phenomenal feats. In general, autistics may not be well suited to all professions either in the civilian or military sectors due to the characteristics of autism precluding the ability to cope in certain jobs, such as those requiring immediate and rapid processing of demands or those that occur in busy and noisy environments. It is not only important for autistics who can excel in leadership roles to be mentors and role models for the autistic community but to also use their strengths and talents to better the lives and experiences of the entire demographic of autistics who continue to suffer barriers and challenges within our workplaces and communities.

The CAF must understand, accept, and embrace autism with a realization that there already exists a statistically significant number of autistic members and leaders whose great potential is being systematically

²⁹ Lai, Lombardo, and Baron-Cohen, “Autism.”

³⁰ Brenda Tinsley, “A Case for the Recruitment of the Neurodivergent” (Toronto, Canadian Forces College, 2020).

³¹ National Defence, “DAOD 5516-5, Learning Disability Accommodation during Recruiting, Training and Education,”

policies, February 22, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/5000-series/5516/5516-5-learning-disability-accommodation-during-recruiting-training-and-education.html>.

limited by outdated, misinformed attitudes and policies. It can be presumed that most autistic members and leaders of the CAF mask their symptoms daily, or quietly find their own reasonable adjustments, thus, awareness, understanding and acceptance are crucial to truly improve the working lives of autistic employees and leaders and create a workplace culture that is inclusive of all neurotypes. For the CAF to be more welcoming and supportive of autistic members, additional research is needed into what reasonable accommodations would allow this community to feel accepted and able to work and lead at their full potential.

This paper surveyed the research landscape of autistic leadership, based on the specific aim of studying the potential and challenges of autistic leaders within the Canadian Armed Forces. By synthesizing various insights and identifying research gaps this research aimed to advance the understanding of autism within military leadership, including avenues for promoting and enhancing inclusive leadership behaviours within the Canadian Armed Forces.

Author Biography

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