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From Deficit to Strength: Autistic Adults' Lived Experiences and the Case for Strength-Based Education and Employment Practices

Dal deficit alla forza: Esperienze vissute dagli adulti autistici e la necessità di Strength-Based Education e pratiche occupazionali

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is often framed within deficit-based paradigms, overshadowing the inherent strengths of autistic individuals. This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the unique strengths of autistic individuals as perceived by five high-functioning autistic adults in Malta. Semi-structured interviews examined participants' reflections on their childhoods, educational environments, and professional lives. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes: (1) hidden gifts and strengths of autistic individuals, (2) perceptions of autism and self-awareness, (3) living with misunderstandings in adulthood, (4) navigating childhood and school, and (5) the influence of family and professional environments. Findings highlight strengths such as exceptional memory, analytical thinking, creativity, and empathy, alongside challenges arising from societal misconceptions and a lack of strength-based educational practices. This research advocates for the adoption of neurodiversity-affirming frameworks and strength-based approaches across education, family support, and workplace environments to foster inclusion and well-being. Uniquely situated within the underexplored Maltese context, this study contributes novel insights into how cultural and educational systems influence the recognition of autistic strengths.

Il Disturbo dello Spettro Autistico (ASD) è spesso inquadrato entro paradigmi basati sul deficit, che finiscono per oscurare i punti di forza intrinseci delle persone autistiche. Questo studio adotta un approccio fenomenologico per esplorare le specifiche risorse delle persone autistiche così come percepite da cinque adulti autistici ad alto funzionamento a Malta. Attraverso interviste semi-strutturate, la ricerca ha indagato le riflessioni dei partecipanti sulla propria infanzia, sui contesti educativi e sui percorsi professionali. L'analisi tematica ha individuato cinque temi interrelati: (1) talenti e punti di forza nascosti delle persone autistiche; (2) percezioni dell'autismo e consapevolezza di sé; (3) il vivere con fraintendimenti nell'età adulta; (4) l'attraversamento dell'infanzia e della scuola; (5) l'influenza dei contesti familiari e professionali. I risultati mettono in luce risorse quali memoria eccezionale, pensiero analitico, creatività ed empatia, accanto a criticità derivanti da rappresentazioni sociali distorte e dalla carenza di pratiche educative orientate ai punti di forza. La ricerca sostiene l'adozione di cornici

affermative della neurodiversità e di approcci Strength-Based nei contesti educativi, familiari e lavorativi, al fine di promuovere inclusione e benessere. Inserito nel poco esplorato contesto maltese, lo studio offre contributi originali su come i sistemi culturali ed educativi influenzino il riconoscimento delle risorse delle persone autistiche.

KEYWORDS

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Neurodiversity Paradigm, Strength-Based Education, Lived Experience, Inclusive Education, Employment

Disturbo dello Spettro Autistico, Paradigma della neurodiversità, Educazione orientata ai punti di forza, Esperienza vissuta, Educazione inclusiva, Occupazione

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1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is most commonly characterised through diagnostic frameworks such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR), which describes autism in terms of impairments in social communication and restricted, repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). This deficit-based framing has played an important role in establishing diagnostic criteria and access to services. However, a substantial body of contemporary scholarship has critiqued this approach for reinforcing individualised and pathologizing understandings of autism that marginalise autistic identities,

lived experiences, and strengths (Botha & Cage, 2022; Devenish et al., 2022). Such critiques argue that deficit-oriented models risk obscuring the cognitive, emotional, and creative capacities that many autistic individuals report as central to their sense of self and competence.

Over the past two decades, autism research has increasingly engaged with alternative theoretical frameworks that conceptualise autism as a form of human neurocognitive diversity rather than solely a disorder requiring remediation. Foundational contributions to this shift include Singer's (1998) articulation of the neurodiversity concept, later developed through empirical and theoretical work by autistic scholars and allies (Kapp, 2020; Botha & Cage, 2022). More recent empirical studies have explicitly examined autistic strengths, skills, and interests, providing systematic evidence that traits such as deep focus, analytical reasoning, creativity, and heightened perceptual awareness can function as assets when appropriately recognised and supported (Devenish et al., 2022; Woods & Estes, 2023).

While diagnostic models centre autistic challenges, the deficit model conceptualises autism primarily as a set of impairments that must be reduced or normalised, emphasising remediation of social, communicative, and behavioural differences (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Botha & Cage, 2022). In contrast, strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming models conceptualise autistic cognition as comprising distinctive and potentially advantageous modes of thinking, learning, and relating. These models argue that autistic strengths emerge relationally, shaped by the degree to which educational, familial, and workplace environments accommodate neurodivergent ways of processing information and engaging with the world (Devenish et al., 2022; Woods & Estes, 2023).

This reframing has particular relevance for educational and employment contexts, where autistic strengths such as creativity, pattern recognition, sustained attention, and memory have been shown to support wellbeing, motivation, and achievement when environments move beyond conformity to neurotypical norms (Raymaker et al., 2020; Woods & Estes, 2023). Nevertheless, research consistently demonstrates a persistent gap between strength-based theory and practice, with many systems continuing to prioritise behavioural compliance and normative social performance over cognitive diversity and person–environment fit (Botha & Cage, 2022).

Responding to calls for autism research that foregrounds lived experience rather than solely neurotypical interpretation (Botha & Cage, 2022; Van Den Plas et al., 2024) this study explores how autistic adults make meaning of their strengths across the trajectory of childhood schooling, family relationships, and adult work life. Situated within the underexplored Maltese context, the study contributes contextually grounded insights into how cultural, educational, and institutional environments shape the recognition, suppression, or flourishing of autistic strengths across the life course. By foregrounding participants' voices, the study contributes to the evidence base supporting strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming approaches in education and the workplace, approaches that remain limited in implementation despite growing scholarly consensus.

2. Literature Review

This literature review is organised around a coherent theoretical progression that moves from deficit-oriented models of autism toward integrative, neurodiversity-affirming and strength-based frameworks. Rather than treating the medical model, neurodiversity paradigm, double empathy theory, Monotropism, and strength-based approaches as discrete perspectives, the review

conceptualises them as interconnected lenses that collectively inform the study's theoretical framework. Together, these perspectives support an understanding of autistic strengths as relational, context-dependent, and shaped by educational, social, and institutional environments.

2.1. From the medical model to Neurodiversity

The predominant medical-diagnostic model conceptualises autism as a set of deficits that deviate from neurotypical norms. Rooted in behavioural psychology and clinical diagnostic traditions, this perspective focuses on identifying and mitigating traits such as social communication challenges, rigid behaviour, and sensory reactivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). While this model facilitates access to services and structured support, it has been critiqued for inadvertently reinforcing stigma and framing autistic traits as problems to be corrected rather than differences to be understood (Botha & Cage, 2022). In educational contexts, deficit-based assumptions may lead to narrow interpretations of behaviour and to interventions aimed primarily at compliance rather than learning, engagement, or wellbeing (Sanz-Cervera et al., 2017).

The neurodiversity paradigm emerges in direct response to these limitations, reframing autism not as pathological deviation but as a natural variation in human neurocognitive functioning. First articulated by Singer (1998) and later expanded by autistic scholars and allies, this paradigm challenges the normative assumptions underpinning the medical model and foregrounds autistic identity, agency, and lived experience (Kapp, 2020). Rather than rejecting diagnosis outright, neurodiversity-informed scholarship critically interrogates how diagnostic frameworks are interpreted and enacted, particularly in education and employment systems where deficit logics often persist (Botha & Cage, 2022).

2.2. Relational accounts of autistic difference: Double Empathy Problem

Building on the neurodiversity paradigm's rejection of individualised deficit explanations, the Double Empathy Problem offers a relational account of autistic–non-autistic interaction (Milton, 2012). This theory argues that communicative breakdowns arise from reciprocal differences in social meaning-making rather than from deficits located solely within autistic individuals. Importantly, the double empathy framework shifts analytical attention from individual impairment to the interactional and contextual conditions that shape understanding, misinterpretation, and social exclusion.

Within the study's theoretical framework, the Double Empathy Problem provides a crucial bridge between neurodiversity as an identity-based paradigm and strength-based interpretations of autistic experience. It explains how autistic strengths may remain unrecognised or be misread in environments governed by neurotypical norms, particularly in classrooms and workplaces that privilege specific communication styles.

2.3. Cognitive Style and Attention: Monotropism

Complementing relational accounts of social interaction, the theory of Monotropism offers a cognitive explanation for distinctive autistic learning and engagement patterns. Monotropism conceptualises autistic attention as deeply focused on a limited number of interests at any given time, enabling exceptional depth, persistence, and expertise (Murray et al., 2005). While such

attentional styles are frequently interpreted as rigidity or resistance to change within deficit-based frameworks, Monotropism reframes them as potential cognitive strengths whose value depends on environmental alignment.

Within an integrative framework, Monotropism helps explain why autistic strengths often emerge in interest-driven, autonomous contexts and diminish in environments that demand rapid task-switching or divided attention. This perspective aligns closely with both neurodiversity and strength-based approaches by highlighting the role of educational and institutional design in either enabling or constraining autistic capability.

2.4. Strength-based approaches and contextual fit

Strength-based perspectives explicitly challenge deficit-dominant narratives by focusing on autistic abilities, interests, and adaptive strategies. Empirical research has identified strengths such as attention to detail, strong memory, analytical and systems thinking, creativity, sensory attunement, and authenticity (Devenish et al., 2022; Woods & Estes, 2023). However, strength-based scholars emphasise that these qualities are not inherently beneficial in all contexts; rather, their expression and value are mediated by environmental expectations, supports, and power relations (Raymaker et al., 2020).

Integrating strength-based approaches with neurodiversity, double empathy, and Monotropism enables a holistic understanding of autistic experience. Strengths are conceptualised not as fixed individual traits but as relational phenomena that emerge when cognitive styles, communication practices, and institutional norms are in alignment. Conversely, when environments prioritise conformity to neurotypical standards, the same traits may lead to misunderstanding, masking, stress, or burnout.

2.5. Educational systems and the misrecognition of autistic strengths

Educational systems play a critical role in shaping whether autistic strengths are recognised or suppressed. Research consistently indicates that educators often lack adequate training and confidence in supporting autistic learners, resulting in reliance on deficit-oriented interpretations of behaviour (Sanz-Cervera et al., 2017; Al-Sharbati et al., 2015; Clark & Adams, 2020). When autistic interests are dismissed as “obsessions” rather than leveraged as learning resources, opportunities for engagement, motivation, and identity development are curtailed.

By contrast, strength-based pedagogies, including interest-driven learning, flexible pacing, predictable environments, and autonomy-supportive teaching, have been associated with improved engagement and self-efficacy among autistic learners (Jordan et al., 2019). From an integrative theoretical standpoint, these pedagogies operationalise neurodiversity, Monotropism, and a relational understanding of autistic experience by redesigning learning environments to accommodate diverse cognitive and communicative profiles.

2.5. Autistic lived experience and knowledge production

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises the importance of centring autistic voices in research, both as participants and as knowledge producers. Botha and Cage (2022) argue that autism research has historically marginalised autistic perspectives, reinforcing epistemic

injustice. Similarly, Van Den Plas et al. (2024) advocate for neurodiversity-affirmative frameworks that foreground lived experience rather than deficit-based psycho-educational models.

Within the present study's framework, autistic lived experience functions as the unifying thread that connects the reviewed theoretical perspectives. The neurodiversity paradigm provides the ethical and conceptual foundation; double empathy and Monotropism offer explanatory mechanisms; and strength-based approaches translate theory into educational and workplace practice. Together, these perspectives justify a phenomenological focus on how autistic adults themselves understand and narrate their strengths across life contexts.

2.6. Synthesis and theoretical positioning of the study

In summary, this study adopts an integrative theoretical framework that moves beyond deficit-based explanations to understand autistic strengths as relational, contextual, and environmentally mediated. By synthesising the neurodiversity paradigm, the Double Empathy Problem, Monotropism, and strength-based approaches, the framework positions autistic experience not as individual pathology but as an interaction between cognitive style, social norms, and institutional design. This integrated perspective directly informs the study's focus on lived experience and provides a coherent lens for analysing how autistic strengths are recognised, misinterpreted, or enabled across education, family, and employment settings.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design aligned with neurodiversity-informed research to explore how autistic adults understand and describe their strengths across key life contexts, including childhood, schooling, family relationships, and employment. Phenomenology privileges first-person meaning-making and resists deficit-based interpretations by enabling participants to articulate how they experience and interpret their own strengths, rather than having these inferred by external observers (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016). This approach responds to contemporary calls in autism research to centre lived experience as a primary site of knowledge construction (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016).

3.1. Participants and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit five autistic adults, each formally diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at DSM-5-TR Level 1 or Level 2. All participants were aged 23–40 years, verbally fluent, and able to engage in reflective dialogue about their life experiences. Recruitment occurred through autism advocacy groups and social media in Malta. Participants identified across the gender spectrum (with an equal mix of male and female identities) and a mix of Maltese and non-Maltese backgrounds.

Although a sample of five is consistent with phenomenological research, it limits transferability and reflects a demographically specific group, primarily late-diagnosed autistic adults who were cognitively and communicatively independent. Broader heterogeneity, including non-speaking autistic individuals or those with earlier diagnoses, falls outside the scope of the present study.

3.1. Ethical considerations

The Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta granted ethical approval. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and were reminded of their right to withdraw without consequence. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

3.2. Data collection

The semi-structured interview guide was informed by existing literature on autistic strengths, neurodiversity, and educational experience, and was designed to balance consistency across interviews with flexibility to follow participants' priorities. Questions were open-ended and prompts were adapted responsively to participants' communication styles and comfort. The interview guide was reviewed for clarity and sensitivity prior to data collection.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting 30–55 minutes, conducted either in person or online. The interview guide prompted reflection in four broad areas: (a) self-perception of autism, (b) identification of strengths, (c) retrospective experiences of school and family influence, and (d) adult experiences of recognition or misunderstanding of autistic traits in social and employment contexts. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Theme development was iterative rather than linear, involving movement between data, codes, and emerging interpretations. Themes were retained when they demonstrated internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and relevance to the research aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All transcripts were read multiple times for immersion before generating initial line-by-line codes. Codes capturing similar ideas were grouped into higher-order categories, which were iteratively refined into final themes through repeated comparison across transcripts. To enhance dependability, a second researcher reviewed a subset of transcripts and associated code allocations; discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus.

3.4. Trustworthiness and rigour

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and the use of verbatim quotations to ground interpretations in participants' accounts. Dependability was enhanced through collaborative coding discussions between researchers, while reflexivity was maintained through ongoing critical reflection on the researchers' positionality in relation to autism, education, and power. Transferability is supported through thick description of context and participants, enabling readers to assess relevance to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 1 presents the progression from initial codes to categories and, finally, to themes. Table 2's frequencies are not interpreted as measurements of importance but are reported to enhance the transparency and credibility of the analysis.

Initial codes	Higher-order categories	Final themes
memory for detail; visual thinking; pattern detection; intense interests; creativity; intuition; empathy;	personal cognitive and emotional strengths	Theme 1: Hidden gifts and strengths

problem-solving		
self-acceptance; meaning of diagnosis; autism as identity; rejection of stereotypes; sensitivity to stigma	self-knowledge and identity processes	Theme 2: Perceptions of autism and self-awareness
misinterpretation by peers; misunderstanding at work; masking; frustration with communication demands; burnout	social misunderstanding and relational strain in adulthood	Theme 3: Living with misunderstandings in adulthood
rigid expectations at school; inconsistent support; special interests dismissed; alternative approaches enabling success	schooling as barrier or channel for strength expression	Theme 4: Navigating childhood and school
parental encouragement; parental pressure to conform; workplace accommodations; workplace rigidity; autonomy	relational and institutional conditions shaping self-expression	Theme 5: Influence of family and professional environments

Table 1. Coding Matrix: initial codes, higher-order categories, final themes.

Theme	Number of coded excerpts
Theme 1: Hidden gifts and strengths	41
Theme 2: Perceptions of autism and self-awareness	33
Theme 3: Living with misunderstandings in adulthood	38
Theme 4: Navigating childhood and school	35
Theme 5: Influence of family and professional environments	36

Table 2. Frequency of coded instances per theme.

4. Findings

Analysis of participant accounts yielded five interrelated themes reflecting how autistic adults recognised and described their strengths and how these strengths were shaped across different environments.

4.1. Theme 1: Hidden Gifts and Strengths

All five participants (5/5) identified specific strengths they associated with being autistic, including exceptional memory, pattern recognition, sustained focus on areas of interest, creativity, and heightened sensory or emotional attunement. Four participants (4/5) described these strengths as internally recognised long before they were acknowledged or valued by others, while *one participant (1/5) reported early external recognition of their abilities within a supportive educational context.*

Several participants articulated a clear sense of competence that had developed in contrast to external perceptions of inadequacy. For example, Maria reflected on her remarkable memory for detail, noting, "I can still remember the smallest details from school... even the colour of my teacher's clothes during an exam." Eli highlighted his capacity for systems thinking and analytical focus, explaining, "I understand systems. I can spot when something doesn't work, and I get obsessed with fixing it." Creative and visual modes of thinking were reported by three participants (3/5) as central to their learning and self-expression.

While four participants (4/5) described these strengths as largely beneficial, one participant (1/5) expressed ambivalence, noting that intense focus could at times become isolating or socially limiting. This divergent account underscores the context-dependent nature of strengths rather than presenting them as uniformly advantageous.

4.2. Theme 2: Perceptions of Autism and Self-Awareness

Four participants (4/5) described receiving a formal autism diagnosis in adulthood, while one participant (1/5) had been diagnosed during adolescence. All five participants (5/5) reported that diagnosis provided a framework for reinterpreting earlier educational and social experiences, particularly in relation to both strengths and challenges. Adrian, for example, reflected on diagnosis as a clarifying rather than transformative moment, stating, "Getting diagnosed didn't change who I am, but it explained why I struggled in some places and excelled in others."

Three participants (3/5) explicitly rejected dominant stereotypes portraying autistic individuals as lacking empathy or emotional awareness. Lara challenged this assumption directly, stating, "People say autistic people have no empathy. But I feel everything. Sometimes too much." Two participants (2/5) expressed mixed feelings about the diagnostic label, indicating concern that disclosure could activate stigma or externally imposed expectations.

4.3. Theme 3: Living with Misunderstandings in Adulthood

All five participants (5/5) described recurring experiences of being misunderstood in adulthood, particularly within professional and social contexts. These misunderstandings most commonly related to communication style, intensity of focus, or the need for processing time, and were frequently interpreted by others through deficit-oriented assumptions.

Four participants (4/5) reported that their behaviour was routinely misread as disinterest, inflexibility, or excessive intensity. Adrian, for example, reflected on workplace interactions in which his detailed explanations were negatively framed, stating, "I'm often told I'm too intense, or that I over-explain. But I'm just trying to be thorough." Similarly, Eli described how his quietness during meetings was misinterpreted as disengagement rather than reflection, explaining, "They thought I didn't care. But I was processing. No one asked me what I needed." These accounts illustrate how communicative differences were interpreted according to neurotypical norms, rather than being recognised as alternative modes of engagement.

Three participants (3/5) reported adapting or masking aspects of their autistic presentation in order to avoid negative judgement in adulthood. While masking was described as a strategy for social survival, it was also experienced as emotionally costly. Participants linked sustained masking to fatigue, frustration, and in some cases burnout. In contrast, two participants (2/5) described at least one workplace in which their communication style was accepted without the need for explanation. These participants emphasised that misunderstandings were not inevitable but were contingent on organisational culture and leadership attitudes.

Overall, this theme highlights how autistic strengths and working styles were frequently obscured by misinterpretation in adulthood, reinforcing the relational nature of misunderstanding rather than locating difficulty within the individual alone.

4.4. Theme 4: Navigating Childhood and School

Participants' recollections of childhood schooling revealed a pattern of unrecognised potential alongside sporadic moments of support. Four participants (4/5) reported that their strengths were largely overlooked during compulsory schooling, particularly in classrooms governed by rigid expectations around behaviour, pace, and participation. These participants recalled being labelled as lazy, disruptive, or socially awkward, despite demonstrating strong cognitive abilities.

Lara described how her learning strengths were dismissed when they did not align with prescribed methods, noting, "I was labelled lazy because I couldn't follow the method they used. But when I was allowed to write in my way, I produced beautiful essays." Adrian similarly recalled being positioned as "the weird kid," a label that overshadowed recognition of his academic competence and reinforced a sense of exclusion. These narratives illustrate how deficit-based interpretations of difference shaped participants' school identities and constrained opportunities for strength development.

At the same time, three participants (3/5) described isolated yet highly significant moments in which teachers adapted expectations or learning conditions in ways that enabled their strengths to emerge. Maria recounted a particularly transformative experience in mathematics, explaining, "My maths teacher let me work alone at the back of the class. It changed everything. I felt capable." Such moments were described as exceptions rather than the norm, but they had a lasting impact on participants' self-concept and motivation.

Only one participant (1/5) described a consistently supportive schooling experience across multiple years, underscoring the variability of educational responses to autistic learners. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate how schooling functioned either as a barrier to or a channel for strength expression, depending on the degree of flexibility and recognition afforded by educators.

4.5. Theme 5: Influence of Family and Professional Environments

Family and professional environments played a pivotal role in shaping how participants understood and expressed their strengths. Three participants (3/5) described family contexts in which at least one caregiver actively affirmed difference and encouraged self-acceptance. Lara reflected on this affirming support, stating, "My mum always told me my difference was my superpower." Participants who experienced such validation reported greater confidence in their abilities and a stronger sense of legitimacy in pursuing their interests.

In contrast, two participants (2/5) recalled family environments characterised by misunderstanding or pressure to conform. One participant summarised this experience succinctly, noting, “They tried to fix me. They thought I was just being difficult.” These accounts suggest that even within families, deficit-based interpretations of autism could undermine the recognition of strengths and contribute to self-doubt.

Workplace experiences mirrored this variability. Two participants (2/5) described thriving in professional contexts that offered flexibility, autonomy, and explicit communication norms aligned with their working styles. Eli, for instance, described flourishing in a technology-focused environment where his analytical strengths were recognised and valued. In contrast, three participants (3/5) reported experiencing stress or burnout in workplaces characterised by rigid social expectations and unaccommodated sensory demands. One participant described feeling constantly monitored for social performance rather than evaluated on competence.

Across both family and professional contexts, participants consistently emphasised that external recognition and environmental flexibility were critical for enabling their strengths to be expressed. Where such conditions were absent, strengths were suppressed or reframed as problems, reinforcing the centrality of context in shaping autistic experience.

4.6. Disclosure of autism across life contexts

Patterns of diagnostic disclosure varied across participants and contexts. All five participants (5/5) reported disclosing their diagnosis to at least one trusted individual in adulthood. However, only two participants (2/5) disclosed their diagnosis consistently across educational, social, and professional contexts.

Three participants (3/5) reported selective disclosure, most commonly withholding diagnostic information in workplace settings due to fear of stigma, reduced expectations, or altered professional relationships. One participant explained, “Once people hear ‘autism,’ they stop seeing what I can do.”

Disclosure was reported to influence perception in mixed ways. Two participants (2/5) described disclosure as enabling understanding and reasonable adjustment, while three participants (3/5) reported that disclosure led to subtle forms of infantilisation or lowered expectations. These accounts suggest that disclosure alone does not guarantee inclusion and may, in some contexts, exacerbate misrecognition of strengths.

4.7. Perceived Conditions Needed to Enhance Strengths

All five participants (5/5) articulated specific conditions they believed would have enabled better recognition and development of their strengths. These included predictable routines, autonomy in task completion, reduced sensory overload, explicit communication, and validation of interests as legitimate learning or work pathways.

Four participants (4/5) emphasised the importance of interest-driven learning or work, indicating that their strongest performances occurred when they were permitted to engage deeply with personally meaningful topics. Three participants (3/5) highlighted the need for reduced social performance demands, particularly in group-based or evaluative settings.

Beyond these five themes, participants' accounts also revealed important cross-cutting issues related to diagnostic disclosure and the conditions perceived as necessary for the development of autistic strengths.

5. Discussion

Beyond the five core themes identified above, participants' accounts also revealed two cross-cutting issues that shaped the recognition and development of autistic strengths across life contexts: patterns of diagnostic disclosure and the conditions participants identified as necessary for their strengths to flourish. These findings are presented below.

The findings of this study reinforce and extend strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming scholarship by demonstrating that autistic strengths are not solely a function of individual capability, but are profoundly shaped by contextual and relational factors. In particular, participants' accounts foreground diagnostic disclosure and environmental responsiveness as critical mechanisms influencing whether autistic strengths are recognised, misinterpreted, or constrained across educational, familial, and professional settings.

By highlighting disclosure as a mediating process, the findings complicate assumptions that increased diagnostic visibility automatically leads to inclusion. Instead, disclosure emerged as a double-edged phenomenon: while it occasionally facilitated understanding and accommodation, it more frequently activated deficit-based assumptions that constrained recognition of competence and capability.

These patterns resonate strongly with the Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012), illustrating how institutional and cultural norms shape the interpretation of autistic behaviour even when diagnostic information is available. Disclosure did not consistently resolve misunderstanding; rather, it shifted the interpretive frame through which participants' actions were evaluated, often reinforcing deficit-oriented expectations rooted in neurotypical standards of communication and interaction.

Participants' articulation of the supports and conditions they perceived as necessary for their strengths to flourish further reinforces a relational and contextual understanding of autistic capability. Conditions such as autonomy, interest-driven engagement, predictable environments, and reduced sensory and social overload align closely with Monotropism and neurodiversity-informed pedagogy. Importantly, these supports were not described as specialised or exceptional accommodations, but as enabling conditions that facilitated authentic engagement, sustained well-being, and meaningful participation.

Across accounts, participants described strengths such as memory, creativity, pattern recognition, empathy, and deep focus as central to their identities and life trajectories. These capacities were experienced as advantageous when recognised and supported, echoing strength-based research, demonstrating that traits traditionally pathologized within diagnostic frameworks may constitute valued forms of competence when environments respond flexibly to autistic cognition and communication (Devenish et al., 2022; Woods & Estes, 2023). Rather than emerging in isolation, strengths were shaped relationally: they flourished in contexts characterised by autonomy, interest-driven tasks, and predictability, and diminished in environments prioritising behavioural compliance and conformity to neurotypical norms.

The findings also align with theoretical frameworks that reconceptualise autism not as a lack of social competence but as a difference in social meaning-making. Participants' accounts of workplace and social misunderstandings closely reflect Milton's (2012) Double Empathy Problem, where detailed explanations were misinterpreted as excessive, silence was read as disinterest, and sustained focus was framed as inflexibility. These examples demonstrate how communication breakdowns frequently arise from mismatched social expectations rather than inherent autistic shortcomings.

Similarly, experiences described across Themes 1 and 4 resonate with the theory of Monotropism, which conceptualises autistic attention as deeply focused on a restricted number of interests (Murray et al., 2005). Participants reported thriving when learning or working environments enabled sustained engagement with personally meaningful interests, and experiencing distress when required to multitask or rapidly shift attention. These findings reinforce theoretical claims that deep interest and focus may be misunderstood or discouraged in traditional educational and workplace settings, despite being powerful drivers of creativity, expertise, and motivation under supportive conditions.

A recurring pattern across themes was that autistic strengths were not always visible to others, even when they were strongly experienced by participants themselves. Schools, in particular, were described as environments where strengths were overshadowed by expectations for normative behaviour and performance. This echoes previous research demonstrating that educators may lack the training and confidence to differentiate instruction according to autistic learning profiles, despite inclusive intentions (Sanz-Cervera et al., 2017; Jordan et al., 2019). Where teachers recognised and adapted to students' strengths, participants reported increased confidence and motivation; where they did not, participants described disengagement, frustration, and negative labelling.

Beyond schooling, the findings underscore the profound influence of relational environments across the lifespan. Families, peers, and workplaces functioned either as amplifiers or suppressors of autistic strengths. Supportive parents and flexible employers played a pivotal role in enabling self-expression and sustained engagement, while environments that prioritised conformity—such as pressure to appear “normal” at home or rigid workplace cultures—were associated with masking, exhaustion, and burnout. These patterns reinforce the argument that strengths are not intrinsic qualities that automatically enhance well-being or performance; rather, they become meaningful through interaction with enabling conditions, aligning with the neurodiversity literature's emphasis on person–environment fit (Kapp, 2020).

Collectively, these findings contribute to the growing evidence base advocating for systemic change in how educational and employment systems conceptualise autistic development. They demonstrate that the persistence of deficit-based assumptions risks not only overlooking autistic potential but actively undermining wellbeing. Conversely, strength-based environments that honour autistic identity, autonomy, and sensory and communicative needs offer a viable pathway toward sustained participation, equity, and fulfilment across the lifespan.

5.1. Implications for Practice

In educational settings, the findings point to the importance of learning environments that are predictable, structured, and sensitive to sensory demands, while also allowing opportunities for independent, interest-driven engagement. Teachers should be supported in developing and using learner profiles in collaboration with autistic students, enabling the identification of individual

strengths, stressors, and optimal learning conditions. Such profiles can inform more responsive planning and foster greater learner autonomy. In addition, initial teacher education programmes should incorporate compulsory modules on autism that are grounded in lived experience and neurodiversity perspectives, rather than relying solely on behavioural or deficit-oriented frameworks. Assessment practices also require reconsideration, with greater emphasis on offering multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, such as written, oral, visual, or project-based formats, so that diverse strengths can be recognised and valued.

In employment contexts, the findings suggest a need to move beyond compliance-based models of accommodation toward more comprehensive neuro-inclusive design. This includes transparent, explicit communication, attention to sensory conditions in the workplace, and, where possible, flexibility and autonomy in task pacing. Recruitment processes should be adapted to include alternatives to traditional interviews, such as task-based assessments or written responses, allowing candidates to demonstrate their strengths more effectively. Ongoing support for autistic employees should not depend on masking or conformity to neurotypical norms; instead, workplaces should aim to enable authentic participation by aligning roles, expectations, and environments with individual strengths.

5.2. Limitations

This study is exploratory in nature and is shaped by several limitations. The sample comprised five verbally fluent autistic adults, most diagnosed in adulthood and all able to articulate their reflections retrospectively. The findings, therefore, do not represent the full heterogeneity of autistic experience, particularly among non-speaking individuals, those diagnosed in early childhood, or those with higher support needs. Additionally, the study did not employ a participatory research design. Autistic individuals were not involved in shaping the research design or data analysis; however, all participants were autistic adults reflecting on their own experiences growing up, meaning that lived experience remained central to the data. The study's context, Malta, also has cultural and educational specificities that influence how autism is perceived and supported; further research is needed to explore strength-based experiences in diverse cultural settings.

6. Conclusions

The autistic adults in this study described strengths that were deeply significant to their identities and capabilities, yet frequently unrecognised or unsupported within formal environments. Their accounts provide compelling evidence that deficit-based framings of autism can obscure the very traits that contribute most to flourishing when appropriately nurtured. As reflected in the neurodiversity paradigm, the expression of autistic strengths is contingent on the responsiveness of surrounding environments rather than on individual traits alone. Schools and workplaces that shift from remediation to recognition, from managing autistic traits to enabling them, hold the potential not only to improve wellbeing for autistic individuals but also to benefit society by valuing diverse forms of thinking, creating, and relating. Strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming approaches, therefore, represent not merely an ethical position but a practical pathway for equitable participation across education, employment, and community life.

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