

## **WIP: Identifying the Teamwork Strengths and Challenges of Neurodivergent Undergraduate College Students**

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# **Identifying the Teamwork Challenges and Strengths of Neurodivergent Undergraduate College Students**

## **Abstract**

This study explores the teamwork experiences of neurodivergent students, aiming to identify their strengths and challenges while participating in teamwork, as well as what factors could help improve their teamwork experiences. Using a qualitative methodology, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve neurodivergent undergraduate students at the University of Michigan. Key themes emerged from inductive coding: the influence of identity on teamwork, factors influencing disclosure, and unique challenges and strengths associated with neurodivergence, such as hyperfocus and empathy. Experiences with institutional support services and the role of instructors in creating equitable team environments also emerged as critical factors impacting students' teamwork experiences. Preliminary results suggest the need for more inclusive, universally designed teamwork pedagogies and institutional policies that account for neurodiversity in the student population.

## **Background**

Over the past decade, an increasing number of studies have been added to the growing literature on neurodiversity, focusing on the unique experiences of neurodivergent students in educational settings compared to neurotypical students. The term 'neurodiversity' refers to the natural range of cognitive and behavioral patterns different people exhibit. Holistically, the 'framework' of neurodiversity argues that having a high level of diversity in how we process information is evolutionarily advantageous, and preferential in comparison to a population of people who process information in the exact same way. [1]

Previous research considering mental health and teamwork generally focuses on how teamwork can be used to improve mental health [2] and learning outcomes in classes. However, there is limited research on how mental health is impacted by team-based learning, nor is there much information on how neurodivergent students experience teamwork. Research also consistently shows that individuals with neurodivergent traits have a higher prevalence of mental health conditions [3], which suggests that this potential comorbidity should be considered to contextualize the unique experiences of neurodivergent students. Neurodivergent students often report feeling disproportionately overwhelmed and obligated to choose between meeting their academic demands and caring for their life, health, and well-being as opposed to finding a balance. [4]

Existing literature on neurodiversity in higher education emphasizes the importance of pedagogies grounded in "foundational principles of compassion-focused psychological theories" [5] focused on identifying triggers, maximizing individual strengths, and encouraging independence. [4] Since many of the conditions within the neurodivergent 'umbrella' share

certain strengths and challenges, many educators have begun advocating for curricula and interventions with a ‘Universal Design’, which caters to students of all neurotypes as opposed to one specific neuropsychological condition. [6] The ‘Universal Design’ curriculum model has also been shown as helpful for students’ self-acceptance by framing neurodivergence as strength and natural phenomenon as opposed to a weakness that inhibits the potential for academic success. [1] Moreover, research has noted that neurotypical students also benefit from teaching frameworks that presume neurodiversity [5], further suggesting the importance of using curricula that are non-presumptuous of students’ neurotype. [2]

One pedagogical strategy common in engineering curricula is teamwork. Some key skills required for teamwork, such as communication, organization, and conflict resolution, share some overlap with the challenges neurodivergent students often face, which highlights the importance of developing supports that promote representation and accountability, to prevent neurodivergent students from feeling isolated in team settings. [7] Neurodiversity-focused peer support groups have been linked to a higher sense of social belonging and improved academic outcomes, allowing students to form connections and normalize their experiences. [4]

More research considering the experiences of neurodivergent students in higher education is important in order to create an equitable classroom environment for all students. Educational research has slowly adopted an increasingly intersectional focus in its aims, looking at how race, gender, and socioeconomic status all impact experiences and diagnoses in different groups of people. Meta-analyses have shown that these demographic variables are closely linked with how parents and educators interpret a child’s behavior, which impacts their access to support. [8] The proposed research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge about student neurodivergence in higher education, as well as how the unique challenges and strengths of neurodivergent students affect their teamwork experience. While there is a wide array of literature on the psychosocial impacts of neurodivergence in school settings, there is a gap in research on the efficacy of different intervention strategies that aim to increase accessibility, especially regarding team-based learning. [8] The findings could impact curriculum development, teaching and team management strategies and institution-level policy decisions impacting students. Additionally, the research aims to investigate neurodiversity in higher education through an asset-framed approach.

### **Research Purpose and Research Questions**

This research investigates the experiences of neurodivergent undergraduates and identifies ways to strengthen teamwork and related factors. We aim to address the following research questions:

1. How does neurodivergence impact the individual’s experience of teamwork, positively and negatively? What factors influence the teamwork experiences of neurodivergent college students?

2. How do neurodivergent students perceive their strengths in teamwork and what challenges do they encounter? What are the strengths and challenges they face?
3. What kind of support, resources, or accommodations would neurodivergent students find beneficial in improving their teamwork experiences? This could be at the team level, the instructor level, or the University level.

## Methodology

This study qualitatively explored the teamwork experiences of undergraduate students who identified as neurodivergent or as having a mental illness. To gather data, we conducted 12 semi-structured individual interviews at the University of Michigan during the summer of 2024.

## Participants

We recruited neurodivergent college students via a mass email to undergraduate students across all departments and areas of study. We also sent out targeted emails to listservs with students that have used the Services for Students with Disabilities. To participate in the study, students had to meet the following criteria:

- 1) Be at least 18 years old
- 2) Be currently enrolled as an undergraduate student
- 3) Self-identify as neurodivergent or as a person with a mental illness
- 4) Have previous experience doing group work in at least one course at an accredited college or university

In total, 12 students participated in individual interviews. More information about the participants is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1: Participant Identity by Race and Gender (12 total participants)*

	Demographics	Participants
<b>Gender</b>	Man	1
	Woman	11
	Nonbinary	0
<b>Race</b>	White	9
	Asian	2
	Black/African-American	1

*Table 2: Summary of participant mental health conditions/challenges out of 12*

<b>Diagnosis</b>	<b>Participants with formal diagnosis</b>	<b>Participants who self-identified or suspected having diagnosis</b>
ADHD	11	1
Anxiety	7	4
Depression	5	0
<b>Other (fill in Dx)</b>	<b>Participants with a relationship to this Dx</b>	<b>What type of relationship did the participants who reported the Dx have with that Dx (formally diagnosed, self-identified, suspected)</b>
OCD	3	Formally diagnosed or self-identified
Bipolar disorder	2	Formally diagnosed
Auditory processing difficulties	1	Self-identified
PTSD	2	Formally diagnosed or self-identified
Autism	2	Suspected

### ***Data Collection***

Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. We developed an interview protocol that included questions about students' experiences with teamwork, perceptions of their role in the team, management of their challenges, perceptions of their strengths while working in the team, supports and/or accommodations that could enhance their experiences, and opportunities to improve team experiences for students like them. Five to ten minutes before each interview, participants were emailed the list of questions. This step allowed participants time to think about their responses and provided a visual aid for reference during the interview.

## ***Data Analysis***

We are applying an inductive approach to analyze the data using Dedoose (version 9.2.22). All individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized before analysis. The data analysis was an iterative process that included two coding phases: (1) creating an initial codebook grounded in the data and (2) coding all transcripts while refining the codebook. In the first coding phase, four researchers independently coded three transcripts using data-driven codes and then collaboratively discussed and refined these codes. After finalizing the initial codebook, the researchers updated the coding of the three transcripts and proceeded to the second phase. In this ongoing phase, five researchers divided and independently coded the remaining nine transcripts, and met for collaborative group discussions to review codes and ensure inter-coder reliability.

## **Preliminary Results**

We present each of the themes that make up our codebook, grouped according to which of the three original research questions they relate to.

### **RQ1: Factors impacting teamwork experiences**

The following themes emerged in relation to our first research question: language preference, identity importance, attitudes toward teamwork, teamwork composition and conditions, and the impact of previous teamwork experiences.

#### **Theme: Language preference**

Elements coded as *language preference* described how students prefer others to refer to their neurodivergence. Different students may use the term neurodivergent to describe both a physical or a mental illness depending on who they are interacting with. Other relevant topics might include: preferences for the use of person-first versus identity-first language (e.g., disabled student versus student with a disability), or the use of general terms such as ‘learning difference’ as opposed to ‘learning disability’. For example, subject #10 said:

*I identify myself as both of them. [‘neurodivergent’ and ‘mentally ill’] I usually use the term mentally ill, but neurodivergent if I feel like mentally ill could have a negative connotation. (Subject #10)*

#### **Theme: Identity importance**

*Identity importance* refers to how the student views their neurodivergence in relation to their self-concept and identity. This could include things such as how often they think about their neurodivergence, and how central they feel their neurodivergence is in how they describe themselves. Subject #1 noted that their identity was of high importance:

*So it's just it's always just kind of been a part of my life. It's in everything I do, you know? The way I behave, the way I interpret things sometimes, the way I respond to challenges. (Subject #1)*

In contrast, subject #6 discussed low identity importance in the context of teamwork:

*When I- when I'm working in a group I'm not like, oh, I'm facing a lot of challenges because of what I have. [referring to their neurodivergent identity] (Subject #6)*

### **Theme: Attitudes toward teamwork in general**

The code *attitudes toward teamwork in general*, covered any blanket statements, general attitudes, opinions, or sentiments students have about working in teams. Examples of this could include: if they enjoy group projects or prefer to work on their own; if they see teamwork as valuable to their learning. Subjects #3 and #12 discuss the different ways their neurodivergent identities impact how they feel about group work:

*I would characterize myself as a smart individual. Grade-wise, just focus-wise, multitasking-wise, but when I work in group assignments or group projects with other people that may not have ADHD, ADHD and a processing disorder. It makes me feel as though... "Why am I not fast enough? Or why am I not keeping up?" Even though I'm still getting the right answers and I'm doing it at a slower pace. It's just...I don't like teamwork. It depends on the teamwork, but overall, if I have the choice between doing something by myself or doing it with the group, I prefer to do it by myself because I know I will still end up at the right answer or with a good grade. It's just...by myself I can take my time. (Subject #3)*

*I, for sure avoid doing the editing at the end. I for sure- I don't want any responsibility if anything is wrong, cause I don't want anybody to get mad at me. I mean, when I was younger I used to let everybody, I used to be the boss. I used to be really bossy. I used to be the leader of every single group, and I used to have a lot of confidence. But then, when I got older I kind of just started getting too scared to mess up and let people down. So when we're in the big groups. I just get too nervous that I'm gonna mess up, or any of that. So I kind of just let somebody else- I let anybody else decide what I- my job and like the group. So if someone's like, "Okay, [name] you should be the transcriber. You should do this. You should do this." I'll just say "Yeah, for sure." And I don't really fight, I just let I just do what people tell me to do. (Subject #12)*

### **Theme: Teamwork composition and conditions**

Wording coded as *teamwork composition and conditions* included contextual and logistical aspects of working in teams, and how variability in the instructions, format, or structure of

different teamwork tasks can affect neurodivergent students' approach and performance. Applicable comments might include: whether the team meets synchronously or asynchronously, how much impact the assignment has on the student's final grade, and if students are graded individually or as a group. For example, as subject #9 said:

*But what makes it quote-unquote difficult is different depending on what it is. Sometimes it's more busy work type stuff. And it's just, yeah, just sit there and spend your time doing what needs to be done. And that's why it's difficult. Others, like I just took, [named a senior-level engineering lab course], which is like a lab portion of a circuits class and that was really difficult because no one in my group knew what they were doing. So we all had to just learn together. And so...it goes between those 2 things. Just having to trudge through it and then genuinely not knowing. (Subject #9)*

### **Theme: The impact of previous experiences**

*Impact of previous experiences* refers to any experiences, stories, or anecdotes (positive or negative) from past teamwork experiences that the student mentions. This category includes any stories students tell to give context for a general attitude or belief the student has about teamwork.

\*This code is closely related to the code 'feelings about/attitudes toward teamwork' code, but distinguishable in that this code is intended for any time where the student tells a specific story or anecdote to illustrate the reason why they have a current belief about teamwork. As subject #7 discussed:

*One recent experience I had was in a lab. And I didn't really know that much about this certain topic that we just learned. And so there was sort of...miscommunication from my group and they're going ahead and working on the problems, but I'm still on the first one. (Subject #7)*

### **RQ2: Student strengths and challenges**

The following themes emerged in relation to our second research question: factors affecting motivation, coping methods and strategies, factors influencing disclosure, and variation in the experience of being neurodivergent for different people. In response to these questions, we found that there is a large degree of variation in how different students experience their neurodivergence, even if students share the same diagnosis or self-identify as neurodivergent for the same reasons. We found that the unique set of strengths and challenges faced by neurodivergent students are highly individual, as what one student considers a motivating factor could also be considered a stressor for a different student.



**Theme: Factors affecting motivation**

*Factors affecting motivation* includes both motivating and demotivating factors. Responses could include a range of topics, such as the impact of: time pressure, assignment weighting for a final grade, and topic interest/disinterest. For example, subject #4 said:

*I usually just run my motivation by deadline. So I kind of use that adrenaline like 'oh it's due in 24 hours, I have to get this done', but I think that really gets me going because I get scared that I'm not gonna finish it. (Subject #4)*

**Theme: Coping methods and strategies**

*Coping methods and strategies* represented ways that students take care of their mental health or have adapted to overcome struggles related to their neurodivergence, including both health-focused strategies as well as academic strategies (such as always double-checking their work for any preventable mistakes), as discussed by subject #1:

*And as for the anxiety thing, whenever I do feel super anxious exercise is really good for me. So going on walks, or just working out to kind of release the endorphins better the stress. It's typically more active strategies that I use to cope with the anxiety and then making sure that I'm not bogged down by the amount of work that I have. (Subject #1)*

*I, you know, double triple check my work. I run it by people. I because another thing I do is I run through things really quickly and I miss little mistakes sometimes so I'll run it by people will be like hey does this make sense, does this look well? Is this in line with everything else that we're trying to achieve with this project? (Subject #1)*

**Theme: Factors influencing disclosure**

*Factors influencing disclosure* represents the things students think about when considering whether or not they want to disclose their neurodivergence to teammates. This category includes both things that make students *want* to disclose and things that make them *not want* to disclose. Relevant factors may relate to concern about: how well teammates understand neurodivergence, team dynamics changing after disclosure, or if their teammates will doubt their abilities/intelligence after disclosure. Many participants centered their answers about disclosure around their concerns about using “neurodivergent” or a diagnostic term when working in groups, which aligns with previous educational research on how many neurodivergent students actively choose not to identify as neurodivergent specifically due to concerns that it will ostracize them from other educational opportunities or cause others to look at them differently. [1] Subject #1 discussed why they avoid disclosure:

*And so I don't want to, I already, you know, may not feel as smart as some of the other people in there - like they're all getting the correct answer to things super easily. So I*

*don't want to impact that more by then saying that I have ADHD, and I don't want it to come across as an excuse or something. (Subject #1)*

Subject #10 talked about how disclosing depends on context:

*I think it kind of depends on what I'm disclosing. If I'm talking about anxiety, because it's so common and the stigma has been very rolled back a lot lately, I'm open about talking about that one, but I also do struggle with bipolar type II and that one has a lot of misconceptions and people have a lot of stereotypes in their mind, especially with like celebrity manic episodes like Kanye West. (Subject #10)*

Subject #8 discussed that they disclose selectively:

*I kind of lean towards the physical side of my situation, as in I talk specifically about my chronic illnesses instead of saying "I have severe anxiety" because like I said, the anxiety is probably the main culprit in terms of my difficulties with group work, but I find, unfortunately, because of the stigma of mental illness and the overall questioning of legitimacy, I think there's just, unfortunately, a little more understanding when you say you have a physical chronic illness. (Subject #8)*

### **Theme: Variation in the experience of being neurodivergent for different people**

Quotes coded as *variation in the experience of being neurodivergent for different people* represented the ways that students explain that they experience their neurodivergence uniquely from others, giving them a unique combination of strengths and challenges that influence their approach to teamwork. While this code overlaps with 'teamwork composition and conditions', any comments about how neurodivergence 'looks' for a participant were tagged with this code, to prevent assuming that one participant's neurodivergent experiences are universal for all neurodivergent students. Subjects #5 and #8 discussed the unique strengths they attribute to their neurodivergence:

*Yeah, I tend to be super detail-oriented, which comes from the hyperfixation aspect of ADHD. And so I tend to notice small mistakes and I tend to be good at making things look pretty. And also I feel like...it makes me more empathetic. And so anytime anybody else is struggling, I feel like I'm always the first person to offer to help. And like I said, with communication, I feel like I'm slightly better with communication just because I had to learn how to communicate sooner I think? But yeah, so detail oriented. Also sometimes- it just fully depends, but if I'm on top of it...sometimes my time management is almost better because I'm so focused on it. (Subject #5)*

*I do get really perfectionistic and hyper-focused and that really helps too. That's an incredible strength of being neurodivergent. (Subject #8)*

Subject #9 discussed the way their ADHD helped them with non-linear and big-picture thinking in group tasks:

*For team projects where we're not very comfortable with the information that we're working with, I feel like my ADHD does positively impact that because I have the ability to jump between topics really easily. And when trying to figure out how information fits together or [understand a topic] I think that helps me with piecing different pieces of information together. (Subject #9)*

### **RQ3: Support and accommodations**

The following themes emerged in relation to our third research question: accommodations and experiences with SSD, and suggestions for improvement at the institutional, faculty, and student levels.

#### **Theme: Accommodations, experiences with SSD (Services for Students with Disabilities)**

The code *accommodations, experiences with SSD (Services for Students with Disabilities)* covered anything related to the experiences of students and the process of acquiring learning accommodations or support from the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) Office. This category includes both positive and negative experiences, as well as any comments on barriers - such as lack of a formal diagnosis for cultural, regional, or financial reasons that prevented students from maximizing benefit from their services. Participants noted not having had an accommodation plan in high school and lack of knowledge about SSD's services as major causes of feeling unsupported. As subject #1 noted:

*The accommodations process for this school is nearly impossible. It is incredibly confusing, incredibly time consuming. It is a lot - it's a lot for anyone. And I think that just in the university as the whole and how it can get better is to make that process easier or make it so that students who don't have the time and the money to be able to go through this process to have alternate options and be able to find ways that work for them without having to have hundreds of dollars in doctors appointments and evaluations like I have right now. (Subject #1)*

#### **Theme: Suggestions for improvement at the institutional, faculty, and student levels**

Finally, items coded under *suggestions for improvement at the institutional, faculty, and student levels* discussed how the needs of neurodivergent students could be better met on a practical and theoretical level, and includes both positive and negative feedback. This includes casual exchanges, such as addressing misinformation or disrespectful comments from teammates, as well as more routine policies, such as opening the conversation to neurodivergence and different styles of thinking with a note in each course syllabus.

Subjects #10 and #7 talked about ways the institution could support neurodivergent students:

*There's a lot of miscommunications between the University, SSD, and then instructors. And there is not really a support system in place to support the instructors in supporting students. So, I think that the University should...have more transparency in between them and SSD and what is expected of the instructors, and how they can support us. (Subject #10)*

*I always think that there's something more that the University could be doing. I just don't really feel like it's even acknowledged at all at this point. If I'm being honest...they just throw you into groups and it's like, okay, well. You know, you get the same grade as everybody else. So it doesn't really matter. We don't care that you have these other things going on. Whether it's a mental illness you know, a disability, I don't really feel like they're that accommodating of that. Because it's just kind of a "sink or swim" thing. (Subject #7)*

Subjects #11, #5, and #1 discussed ways faculty could better support neurodivergent students:

*It would be beneficial for the instructor to be aware that there's a team that is comprised partially of individuals with ADHD, and maybe give a little extra structure and support to that. That would be helpful. (Subject #11)*

*I feel like if I was paired with somebody that was also neurodivergent it might have honestly been better. (Subject #5)*

*I think that instructors should know how to work with students like that and know how it transcribes not only to just an exam or somebody with ADHD can't focus but an essay or a team project or different parts of a really in-depth course, I think it would be beneficial to have some extra training that could just show them what these students run into and that we're not trying to get out of work or not do as much as our classmates. We're just trying to get some support. (Subject #1)*

Subject #1 also discussed ways peers could support neurodivergent teammates:

*If people could just be more understanding of what it's like and what it's like to grow up and how exhausting it is to be somebody with one of these conditions... You as a team member may be annoyed at me and frustrated with me for how I do things, but imagine how I feel like living with this every single day, you know? So I think that it's definitely just kind of a sensibility thing, you know. People just need to become more educated and more open to it because I bet a lot more people have it than they think, you know, and they are maybe in a position one day where they want some kind of support that falls in line with that and they would wish that maybe they treated somebody like that at some point too. (Subject #1)*

## **Limitations**

Though we advertised broadly, most of the students who self-identified for an interview were women (11 of 12); this gender breakdown may be unsurprising given the gendered response patterns that are often seen in survey research. Most participants (11 of 12) identified as having ADHD, and the majority of participants were white (9 of 12), limiting the diversity of our subject pool. While these patterns deviate from representative coverage of students in higher education with neurodivergence, we believe it is not particularly surprising given the study's ask. Disclosing personal details is more difficult with more stigmatized experiences (thus, our project oversampled participants with ADHD), and some students are more comfortable being vulnerable with strangers than others (which we suspect may be related to factors such as gender, race, and differing cultural views on mental health).

Moreover, to be as inclusive as possible, we did not require students to have a formal diagnosis, nor did we ask students to complete screening surveys for specific diagnoses. We made this decision because we recognize barriers to official diagnosis, demographic and cultural patterns in who does and doesn't have official diagnoses, and patterns in who is more likely to seek out a diagnosis. Gendered and race-based patterns in autism and ADHD diagnoses [9] show the lack of sensitivity most clinical measures of neurodiversity have to people from different cultural backgrounds and different lived experiences. [10] We did not want students to complete screenings in a way that would allow us to "categorize" them, and we were uncomfortable with the idea of having knowledge about participants' relationships to formal diagnoses that they themselves might not have. While this decision increased our study's vulnerability to bias, many participants did speak about the role that their cultural identities played in their ability to pursue a diagnosis, suggesting the importance of this consideration. An additional limitation to consider is how challenges in teamwork are also context-related (such as courses and disciplines) and related to other psychosocial influences such as motivation, personalities, study skills, and relationships with others). We acknowledge these influences, but we focus on common challenges related to teamwork faced by neurodivergent students at this stage.

The authors of this paper include both self-identifying neurotypical people, as well as self-identifying and formally diagnosed neurodivergent people. Of the authors identifying as neurodivergent, each had a different reason for doing so, which helped the team understand some of the nuanced perspectives students had.

## **Conclusion and next steps**

We look forward to completing analysis using the developed codebook and further refining our understanding of both the strengths and the challenges faced by students with neurodivergence and/or mental illness in team contexts. Future work includes considering our findings in broader and more diverse contexts, which will require the intentional recruitment of students with

different identities experiencing different types of collaboration. With regard to disseminating findings, we intend to summarize student insights regarding institutional and faculty support for student teamwork and to communicate this information to stakeholders at the University of Michigan, both through the Office of Support for Students with Disabilities and through our Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. Additionally, because the Center for Academic Innovation supports student teamwork with a web-based tool, Tandem, we will consider how our findings might be used in this tool to support students and their teammates with self-advocacy and mutual understanding.

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