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## Article

# Neurodivergence and Boundary Spanning as Predictors of Social Skills and Diversity Climate

Jan van Rijswijk <sup>1</sup>, Petru L. Curşeu <sup>1,2,\*</sup> and Lise A. van Oortmerssen <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Organisation, Open Universiteit, 6419 AT Heerlen, The Netherlands; jan.vanrijswijk@ou.nl (J.v.R.); lise.vanoortmerssen@ou.nl (L.A.v.O.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Babeş—Bolyai University, 400347 Cluj-Napoca, Romania

\* Correspondence: petrucurseu@psychology.ro

**Abstract:** We report a multilevel investigation of the interplay between neurodivergence and boundary-spanning activities in groups as predictors of social skills and diversity climate. In a sample of 357 group members nested in 70 organizational groups, we show that neurodivergence negatively affects conversational and work-related social skills. We also show that boundary spanning attenuates the association between neurodivergence and social skills. We discuss differences observed for within- as well as between-group effects and discuss the indirect association between neurodivergence and diversity climate as significantly mediated by conversational skills. Our study makes important contributions to the literature on neurodivergence in the workplace, showing the beneficial role of engaging in boundary-spanning activities.

**Keywords:** neurodivergence; boundary spanning; social skills; communication; neurodiversity; diversity climate

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, diversity has emerged as a prominent societal issue, with many organizations developing and implementing diversity management and inclusion programs (Austin and Pisano 2017). In this context, neurodiversity and fostering inclusivity among neurodivergent individuals have become key elements of diversity management in modern organizations (LeFevre-Levy et al. 2023; Rao and Polepeddi 2019). Research on neurodiversity in work environments underscores the need to address both the relational as well as task-related consequences related to neurodivergent employee characteristics (Szulc 2022; van Rijswijk et al. 2024). The distinctive thinking styles of neurodivergent employees, particularly when complemented in collaboration with neurotypical peers, can result in significant organizational benefits, including enhanced innovation, elevated entrepreneurial mindset, and lead to an overall increase in output quality and quantity (Austin and Pisano 2017; Houdek 2022; Moore et al. 2021). However, despite the potential for unique skill sets that neurodivergent individuals bring to the table, employers often struggle to move beyond viewing neurodivergence solely through the lens of disability, which complicates the effective inclusion of these individuals into work processes (Krzeminska and Hawse 2020; Rogge and Janssen 2019). One of the essential factors that distinguish neurodiversity-friendly work environments from others is an inclusive diversity climate (Volpone et al. 2022).

While the importance of a positive diversity climate at the organizational level is well recognized (Holmes et al. 2021; Volpone et al. 2022), the specific contribution of neurodivergent individuals to a positive diversity climate is currently unclear. Research to date has not extensively explored the way in which neurodiversity is reflected in social interactions at work, as the scarce group-level quantitative studies have focused primarily on group outcomes rather than dissecting social dynamics (Dugan et al. 1995; Kamps et al. 1995; Zolyomi et al. 2018). Moreover, the reliance on student-based samples in nearly



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all studies raises questions about the generalizability of findings to actual work groups (van Rijswijk et al. 2024). In particular, understanding the role of neurodiverse work groups in fostering an inclusive group climate remains virtually unexplored. Although research has shown that neurodivergence also relates to individual social skills and the way in which individuals engage in and experience social interactions (Astle et al. 2022; Fletcher-Watson 2022; Shaw et al. 2014; Whittenburg et al. 2020), it is also unclear what impact neurodivergence and social skills have on the emergence of diversity climate in organizations. This lack of clarity challenges researchers seeking to relate neurodiversity with an inclusive and diversity-welcoming organizational climate, and it is one of the potentially contributing factors to the underrepresentation of neurodivergent employees in organizations.

We set out to study the association between neurodivergence and perceptions of diversity climate and the extent to which social skills explain this association. Moreover, we explore the moderating role of boundary spanning in the relationship between neurodivergence and social skills. For this purpose, we collected and analyzed research data from 70 working groups in 19 Dutch organizations across different industries. Our paper is among the first to explore neurodivergence within work groups, specifically delving into how neurodivergence influences social dynamics in workplace settings. Given the limited existing research on neurodiversity in work groups and the predominantly student-sample experimental nature of earlier studies on this topic (van Rijswijk et al. 2024), our research fills a gap by providing real-world data-driven insights into the relationship between neurodivergence and perceptions of diversity climate. In addition, because we aim to test the association between boundary spanning and social skills, our study responds to the call for multilevel research on boundary spanning by Marrone (2010) that also includes individual outcomes and looks beyond group performance consequences of engaging in boundary spanning.

## 2. Theory and Hypotheses

Neurodiversity is a particular form of group diversity with the potential to increase the pool of cognitive resources in groups, yet with clear relational challenges, particularly when the level of vertical differentiation is high, namely when group members have unequal access to socially valued resources in the group (van Rijswijk et al. 2024). Although the literature to date advocates the equal treatment of neurodivergent individuals regardless of their neurological diagnosis (Houdek 2022; Krzeminska et al. 2019), neurodivergent employees are often marginalized and navigate in sparse social networks (Chapman 2021; Dwyer 2022), with important consequences for their social skills development. We know relatively little about how differences in social skills unfold in terms of relational dynamics in groups and the perception of inclusiveness. While initially focused on supporting people with Autism, the scope of neurodiversity has expanded over time to encompass neurodivergent characteristics such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome, and intellectual giftedness (Astle et al. 2022). Although broadening the scope of neurodiversity to include different neurodivergent diagnoses makes comparison across studies difficult, recent trans-diagnostic approaches have emphasized various commonalities in cognition, behavior, social interactions, and lived experiences across different neurodiversity types (Astle et al. 2022; Fletcher-Watson 2022). A recent empirical study identified the so-called "N factor" as an underlying shared factor that includes social, cognitive, and emotional commonalities shared across various neurodivergent conditions (Apperly et al. 2024).

Studies of neurodivergence usually include at least Autism, ADHD, and ADD, all of which can have a significant impact on social skills. Social skills can be defined as one's capacity to actively and effectively participate in social interactions (In et al. 2019) and include conversational, emphatic, and work-related social skills. Conversational skills refer to the ability to engage in dialogues without experiencing excessive stress during verbal interactions (Olaz et al. 2009). Neurodivergent individuals may encounter challenges re-

garding the development of such social skills, depending on their form of neurodivergence, which may include delayed language development, difficulty initiating and sustaining conversations, and overlooking subtle communication signals (Antshel and Russo 2019; Ginapp et al. 2023; Milton 2012b). Empathic skills capture individuals' capacities to empathize with another's position, involving conveying appreciation and compliments and standing up for another person's position (Olaz et al. 2009). Empathy often comes under pressure when neurodivergent individuals participate in group processes, a phenomenon described by Milton (2012a) as the "double empathy problem": neurodivergent individuals have difficulty putting themselves in the position of neurotypicals and vice versa. Finally, work-related social skills, such as collaboration, public speaking, and expressing opinions, are often necessary for elevated job performance (Olaz et al. 2009). Due to the common challenges neurodivergent individuals face in relation to the development of social skills, seeking assistance from neurotypical colleagues can be desired but often proves challenging in practice (Van den Bosch et al. 2019). That brings us to the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *Neurodivergence has a negative association with social skills (conversational, empathic, and work-related).*

Broad engagement in social interactions in various social settings and contexts fosters the development of social skills (Beauchamp and Anderson 2010). In workgroup contexts, we can distinguish between interactions that unfold within groups and the boundary-spanning activities in which group members interact at work with other employees outside the group. Boundary-spanning activities are essential for enriching the information pool within groups (Curşeu and Pluut 2018), and in the context of inter-group collaborations, pressures for effective alignment require effective interpersonal communication. The individual tasked with managing these inter-group relations, also called the boundary spanner, is often required to reconcile different and sometimes divergent group interests, tasks, and objectives. Therefore, tasks substantially improving their social skills are essential to fulfill this role effectively. We expect that the frequency of engaging in boundary-spanning activities will have a positive association with the social skills reported by the group members. These social skills encompass not only personal competencies like reliability, commitment, and respect but also social competencies such as relationship development, leadership, effective communication, empathy, and diplomacy (Williams 2002, 2011). Biographical reports on influential neurodivergent individuals, such as Bill Gates and Richard Branson, show that through conscious and systematic engagement in social interactions across a variety of settings, their social skills developed to great lengths (Branson 2011; Lowe 2001). For example, Bill Gates practiced extensively on his public speaking and communication skills to improve his ability to communicate complex ideas clearly and effectively to a broad audience, which was crucial to both Microsoft and his philanthropic activities, and Richard Branson has practiced talks and interacting with unfamiliar people, and he is known for saying that communication is an art form, a skill that anyone can develop. We expect, therefore, that the limitations in social skills associated with neurodivergence are alleviated by systematic engagement in interpersonal interactions at work. We hypothesize that for neurodivergent group members who engage in such boundary-spanning activities, the relational challenges tied to such roles contribute to the development of their social skills. To summarize, we first hypothesize that the frequency of engaging in boundary-spanning activities fosters social skills, and while neurodivergence may often present challenges to social skills, boundary-spanning activities mitigate such limitations and enhance the social skills of neurodivergent employees. That leads us to the following hypotheses:

**H2:** *Engagement in boundary-spanning activities has a positive association with social skills (conversational, empathic, and work-related).*

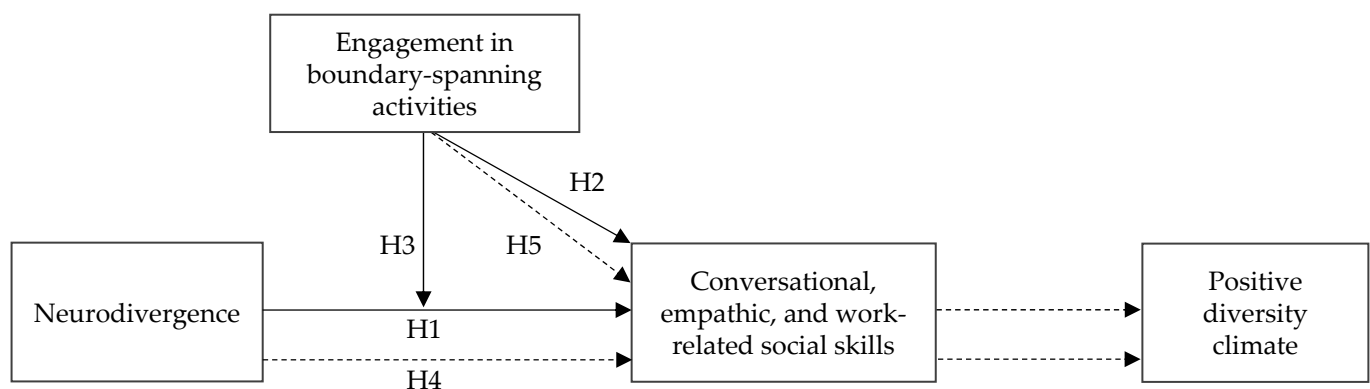
**H3:** *Engagement in boundary-spanning activities attenuates the negative association between neurodivergence and social skills (such that the association between neurodivergence and social skills is less negative if group members engage in boundary-spanning activities).*

To benefit as a group from the performance advantages that diversity can provide, a positive diversity climate plays an important stimulating role (Volpone et al. 2022). This role applies not only to demographic differentiation like gender, ethnicity, or age but also to cognitive diversity characteristics to which neurodivergence belongs. A diversity climate reflects group members' shared understanding of discrimination in the work environment (Chin 2009; Goyal and Shrivastava 2013). A positive diversity climate is focused on tolerance and inclusiveness for its group members, actively looking at treating colleagues equally and taking advantage of any benefits that may arise from group diversity. A diversity climate reflects the shared beliefs related to diversity within organizational groups, and it is shaped by formal interventions such as diversity management programs; yet, it is primarily reflected in the quality of social interactions among group members (Herdman and McMillan-Capehart 2010). Therein, the social skills of group members, including factors such as empathy, trust, good communication, and respect, contribute to the development of emotional intelligence at the group level by developing norms and skills that are inclusive and embrace diversity (Curşeu et al. 2015) and thereby shape the group's diversity climate (Gardenswartz et al. 2010). Therefore, we expect that social skills play a mediating role between neurodivergence and boundary-spanning activities, on the one hand, and diversity climate, on the other, which leads us to the following hypotheses:

**H4:** *Social skills mediate the association between neurodivergence and a positive diversity climate in groups.*

**H5:** *Social skills mediate the association between boundary-spanning activities and a positive diversity climate in groups.*

All hypothesized relations are visualized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** A conceptual model.

### 3. Materials and Methods

We collected data from employees working in groups in various Dutch organizations in the context of a broader study aimed at exploring cognitive and neurodiversity in groups. This study is the first to use this dataset, and we followed the recommendations for data slicing suggested by Kirkman and Chen (2011), with dependent, moderating, and mediating variables exclusively selected and used for this paper. We used a snowball technique to recruit groups to participate in the study, aiming to obtain as many individual responses as possible from the group members. The snowball technique began by contacting individuals within our networks and requesting referrals to teams potentially willing to participate. After establishing contact, we explained to a team member or manager the purpose of our



study and asked if they could also bring us in contact with other possible participating teams. The only requirement was that each group included at least three people working together on tasks. Our final sample included 357 group members (from which 43 reported being officially diagnosed with neurodivergence: 5 with Autism, 16 with ADHD, 8 with ADD, 14 with Dyslexia, 7 with High Giftedness, and none with Dyscalculia or Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)) nested in 70 organizational groups (ranging from 3 to 45 members) from 19 organizations in various branches: 5 in healthcare, 1 in banking, 1 in pensions and insurance, 7 in IT, 2 in construction industry, 1 in employee recruitment, and 2 in education. To preserve anonymity in accordance with the institution's IRB requirements, we did not collect demographic information on the participants except for their educational level. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Open Universiteit.

Social skills were assessed with sixteen items from the social skills scales presented by Olaz et al. (2009), slightly adapted to a work situation (e.g., changing the word friends to colleagues). Seven items assessed conversational social skills (item examples: "If someone at work or school praises me, I feel embarrassed and don't know what to do or say", "I have trouble interrupting a phone conversation even with people I know") rated from 1 = "never or rarely" to 5 = "always or almost always". Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.77, indicating acceptable reliability of the scale, while the omega score derived from factorial analysis (Hayes and Coutts 2020) was also 0.76, with all items loading positively into the main factor, with factor loadings ranging from 0.40 to 0.90. Five items assessed work-related social skills (item example: "At work, if I do not understand an explanation about an interesting topic, I ask all the questions I need to in order to clarify it"), and the responses were recorded from 1 = "never or rarely" to 5 = "always or almost always". Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.76, while the omega score was also 0.76, indicating acceptable reliability of the scale. Four items referred to empathic social skills (item example: "When one of my colleagues achieves something important that took a lot of effort, I praise them for their success"), and answers were recorded from 1 = "never or rarely" to 5 = "always or almost always". Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.59, and the omega score was 0.61, indicating problematic reliability of the scale. All items had a positive load in the main factor exceeding 0.44, with a single item with a 0.27 load. Given the previous empirical results supporting the validity of the scale in cross-cultural contexts (Olaz et al. 2009), we decided to use it further in the analyses.

Diversity supporting work climate was evaluated with fifteen items of the Diversity Climate Questionnaire (Larkey 1996), slightly adapted to work situations and neurodiversity where necessary, assessing four dimensions of a climate that welcomes differences, namely inclusion (item example: "It seems that the real reason employees are denied promotions or raises is that they are seen as not fitting in"), ideation and dissent (item example: "Employees with different neurological and/or ethnic backgrounds have a difficult time getting their ideas across"), understanding (item example: "When employees who are neurological diagnosed, culturally different, or of different genders work together in our group, there is always some amount of miscommunication"), and fair treatment (item example: "Some employees in our group are "talked down to" because they are different"); answers were recorded from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree", and answers were recoded so the final scores indicate a climate open to diversity. Based on the factor analysis, a single dominant factor emerged, accounting for 46.60% of the variance in scores. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.92, and the omega score was 0.92, with all items loading significantly and positively in the dominant factor, showing excellent reliability of this scale. Given the unitary factor structure of this scale, we decided to use Bartlett's dominant factor score for further analysis as an indicator of the underlying constructs assessed by the items (DiStefano et al. 2019).

Neurodivergence was evaluated by asking participants to report whether they were diagnosed with one of the following neurodivergent characteristics: Autism, ADHD, ADD, DCD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and High Giftedness. We combined these neurodivergent

characteristics into a single variable, an approach supported by a recent study of [Apperly et al. \(2024\)](#) that suggests that traits across these diagnoses can be explained by a general neurodiversity factor, with overlapping characteristics transcending traditional diagnostic categories.

Engagement in boundary-spanning activities was evaluated with a single item: “A boundary spanner is someone who (formally or informally) engages in boundary-crossing activities, processes, and practices, such as, for example, organizing alignment with other/different teams, projects, or departments. How often do you perform this role?” (1 = never, 2 = several times/year, 3 = several times/month, 4 = several times/week, 5 = daily). Given the clear description of the boundary-spanning behavior, we consider this an accurate indicator of the frequency of boundary-spanning activities.

Educational level was evaluated as a categorical variable by asking participants their highest completed education level: vocational education (1), secondary education (2), university of applied sciences bachelor’s degree (3), university of applied sciences master’s degree or research university bachelor’s degree (4), research university master’s degree (5), and PhD (6).

#### 4. Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Education	3.3557	1.51196	1					
2. Neurodivergence	0.1204	0.32594	0.055	1				
3. Boundary spanning	2.82	1.488	0.205 **	−0.037	1			
4. Conversation skills	3.6146	0.70967	−0.125 *	−0.206 **	0.208 **	1		
5. Emphatic skills	3.7513	0.65769	−0.024	−0.064	0.146 **	0.309 **	1	
6. Work-related skills	3.7976	0.67341	0.158 **	−0.103	0.310 **	0.433 **	0.289 **	1
7. Diversity climate	4.0220	0.67668	−0.055	−0.086	0.068	0.282 **	0.109 *	0.169 **

Note: Neurodivergence was coded as a dummy variable: 1 = group members with a neurodivergence diagnostic, 0 = neurotypical group member; education was coded as a categorical variable ranging from 1 = vocational education to 6 = PhD. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Because our participants were nested in organizational groups, we used multilevel analyses to test our hypotheses. In order to disentangle within- and between-group effects, we used the MLMed macro Beta 2 version for SPSS developed by [Rockwood and Hayes \(2017\)](#). MLMed is a multilevel mediation procedure that tests moderation and mediation effects. The results of the multilevel moderation analyses are presented in Table 2, and the additional results for the mediation hypotheses are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2.** Results of the within–between-group multilevel analyses predicting social skills.

Variable	Conversational Social Skills		Emphatic Social Skills		Work-Related Social Skills	
	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between
Constant		−0.09 (0.07)		0.04 (0.07)		−0.01 (0.07)
Education	−0.08 (0.05)	−0.15 ** (0.05)	−0.06 (0.05)	−0.001 (0.06)	0.05 (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)
Neurodivergence (ND)	−0.43 * (0.17)	−0.64 (0.39)	−0.08 (0.18)	−0.26 (0.42)	−0.35 * (0.17)	0.16 (0.40)
Boundary spanning (BS)	0.12 ** (0.04)	0.07 (0.07)	0.13 ** (0.04)	0.004 (0.08)	0.15 *** (0.04)	0.21 *** (0.07)
NDxBS	0.23 * (0.11)	0.64 * (0.27)	−0.04 (0.12)	0.62 * (0.29)	0.28 * (0.11)	0.31 (0.28)

Note: Unstandardized coefficients are presented in the table with SE in parentheses; ND = neurodivergence; BS = boundary spanning. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 3.** Results of the within–between-group multilevel analyses predicting diversity climate.

Variable	DC No Control Variables		DC No Interaction Effect		DC Full Model	
	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between
Constant		0.01 (0.18)		0.001(0.09)		0.01 (0.09)
Education			−0.07 (0.05)	−0.05 (0.07)	−0.06 (0.05)	−0.04 (0.08)
Neurodivergence (ND)	−0.14 (0.17)	−0.01 (0.44)	−0.16 (0.17)	0.03 (0.45)	−0.16 (0.17)	−0.05 (0.51)
Boundary spanning (BS)	−0.004 (0.04)	0.01 (0.09)	0.005 (0.04)	0.02 (0.10)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.09)
Conversational social skills	0.30 *** (0.06)	0.19 (0.16)	0.29 *** (0.07)	0.15 (0.17)	0.28 *** (0.06)	0.16 (0.17)
Empathic social skills	0.01 (0.06)	0.13 (0.15)	0.004 (0.06)	0.15 (0.16)	0.01 (0.06)	0.16 (0.16)
Work-related social skills	0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.15)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.16)	0.02 (0.07)	0.04 (0.16)
NDxBS					0.19 <sup>†</sup> (0.11)	−0.12 (0.37)

Note: Unstandardized coefficients are presented in the table with SE in parentheses; DC—diversity climate; ND—neurodivergence; BS—boundary spanning. <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

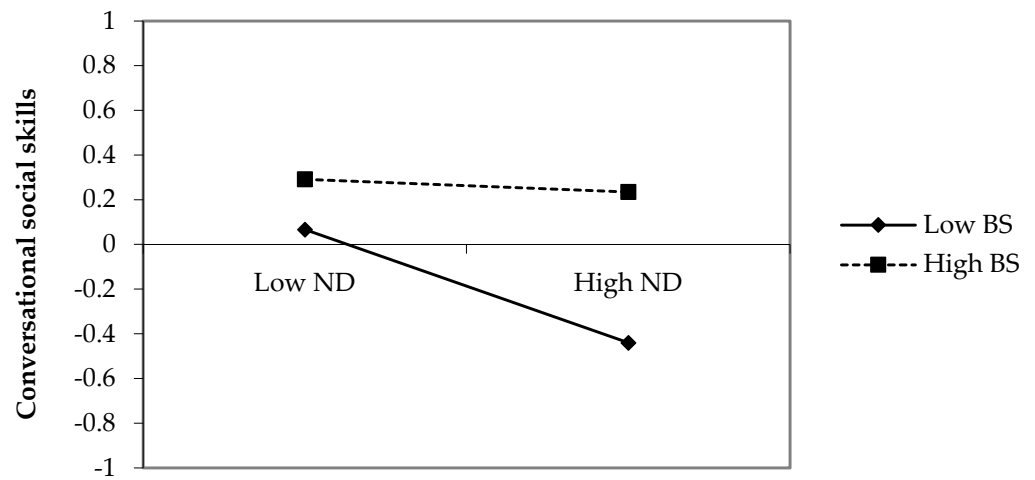
Education had a negative and significant association between groups with conversational social skills ( $B = -0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), showing that groups in which average education is high report lower conversational social skills than groups in which the average education of the members is low. Neurodivergence had a negative and significant within-group association with conversational social skills ( $B = -0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and with work-related social skills ( $B = -0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), while its association with empathic social skills was not significant. As illustrated in Table 2, none of the between-group associations between neurodivergence and the three social skills were significant. Therefore, we can conclude that Hypothesis 1 was supported within groups only for conversational and work-related social skills. Boundary spanning had positive and significant within-group associations with conversational social skills ( $B = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), empathic social skills ( $B = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), and work-related social skills ( $B = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.0006$ ). These results fully support Hypothesis 2 for the within-group effects. Moreover, Hypothesis 2 was partly supported for between groups since boundary spanning had a positive and significant between-group association with work-related social skills ( $B = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), showing that in groups in which members engage, on average, in more boundary spanning, the average work-related social skills reported by the members are also higher than in groups whose members engage less in boundary spanning.

The interaction between neurodivergence and boundary spanning was significant for conversational social skills (within groups:  $B = 0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ; between groups:  $B = 0.64$ ,  $SE = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). The significant interaction effects are presented in Figures 2 and 3, showing that boundary spanning attenuates the strength of the negative association between neurodivergence and conversational social skills, fully supporting what we specified in Hypothesis 3. Moreover, the interaction effect between neurodivergence and boundary spanning was significant between groups for empathic social skills ( $B = 0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.29$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). The interaction effect is presented in Figure 4, and it is aligned with the hypothesized attenuation effect of boundary spanning as specified in Hypothesis 3. Finally, the interaction effect was significant within groups for work-related social skills ( $B = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), and the interaction effect depicted in Figure 5 was also aligned with Hypothesis 3. We can, therefore, conclude that Hypothesis 3 received considerable support.

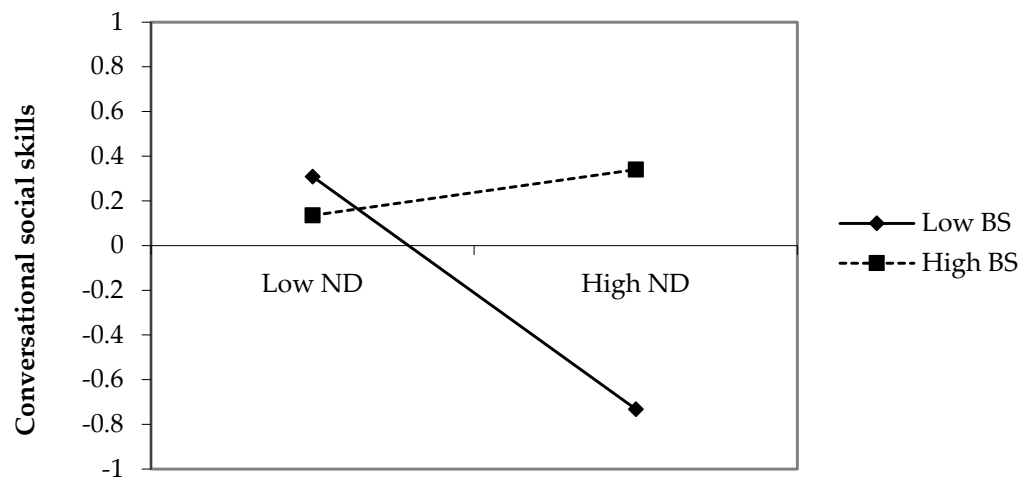
As indicated in Table 3, the only types of social skills with a direct and positive association within groups with diversity climate were conversational social skills ( $B = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). As empathic ( $B = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.85$ ) and work-related social skills ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ) did not have significant within-group associations with diversity climate, the only indirect within-group association between neurodivergence and diversity climate was observed through conversational social skills ( $B = -0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.03$ , 95%CI [ $-0.26$ ;  $-0.03$ ]), as the confidence interval did not include zero. The other indirect associations between neurodivergence and diversity climate were not significant, as the 95% confidence intervals included zero; thus, Hypothesis 4 was only supported for



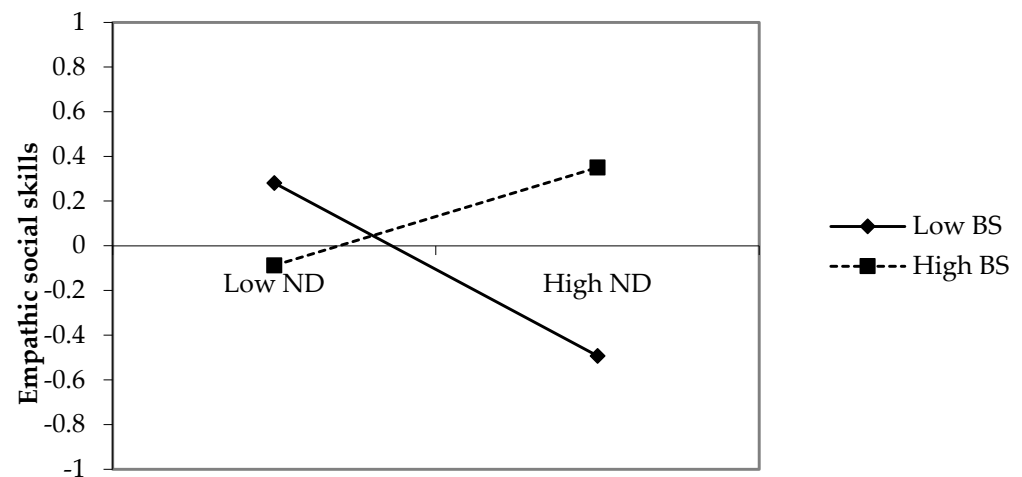
conversational social skills. Similarly, the indirect association between boundary spanning and diversity climate was supported only for conversational social skills ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.006$ , 95%CI [0.01; 0.08]), lending only weak support for Hypothesis 5.



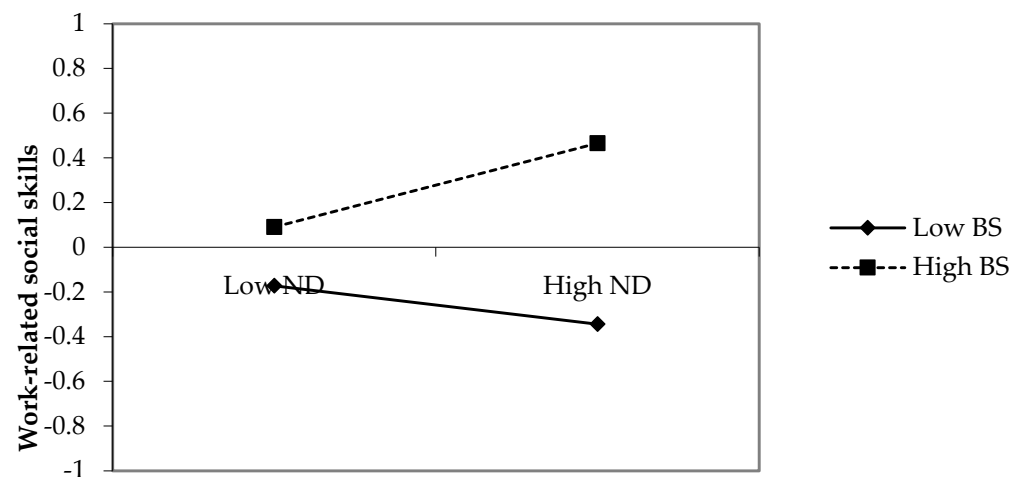
**Figure 2.** The interaction effect between neurodivergence and boundary spanning on conversational social skills (within-group effect). The graph represents a significant within-group interaction effect; ND—neurodivergence (Low ND—neurotypical group members; High ND—neurodivergent group members); BS—boundary spanning (Low BS—group members that do not engage in boundary spanning; High BS—group members that engage in boundary spanning).



**Figure 3.** The interaction effect between neurodivergence and boundary spanning on conversational social skills (between-group effect). The graph represents a significant between-group interaction effect; ND—neurodivergence (Low ND—neurotypical group members; High ND—neurodivergent group members); BS—boundary spanning (Low BS—group members that do not engage in boundary spanning; High BS—group members that engage in boundary spanning).



**Figure 4.** The interaction effect between neurodivergence and boundary spanning on empathic social skills (between-group effect). The graph represents a significant between-group interaction effect; ND—neurodivergence (Low ND—neurotypical group members; High ND—neurodivergent group members); BS—boundary spanning (Low BS—group members that do not engage in boundary spanning; High BS—group members that engage in boundary spanning).



**Figure 5.** The interaction effect between neurodivergence and boundary spanning on work-related social skills (within-group effect). The graph represents a significant within-group interaction effect; ND—neurodivergence (Low ND—neurotypical group members; High ND—neurodivergent group members); BS—boundary spanning (Low BS—group members that do not engage in boundary spanning; High BS—group members that engage in boundary spanning).

## 5. Discussion

Our study examined the effect of neurodivergence and boundary-spanning activities on diversity climate as mediated by conversational, empathic, and work-related social skills. Our results support the first hypothesis, showing that neurodivergence negatively impacts conversational and work-related social skills, which is in line with earlier studies on Autism and ADHD (Antshel and Russo 2019; Ginapp et al. 2023). The significant and positive impact of boundary-spanning activities on conversational, empathic, and work-related social skills also supports our second hypothesis, as these boundary-spanning activities are known to rely on and further develop social skills (Williams 2002, 2011). An important insight derived from our multilevel analyses is that group-level boundary-spanning activities impact collective work-related social skills, suggesting that these activities also foster social growth at the group level. Previous research shows that boundary spanning benefits collective information processing in groups (Curşeu and Pluut 2018); therefore, it becomes

important that future research explores the aggregated boundaryspanning effects at the group level. As social skills drive collective intelligence (Woolley et al. 2010), we believe an important avenue for future research could explore the aggregated effects of boundary spanning for collective intelligence in groups.

Remarkably, our results show that neurodivergence does not have a significant association with empathic social skills (although the reliability for the empathic social skills scale was low). This non-significant association could reflect differences between the degree to which empathy social skills vary across different neurodivergent conditions. For instance, neurodivergent characteristics like Dyslexia and Dyscalculia may be less taxing on empathy, a trait that captures compassion and understanding rather than verbal or written communication (Eklund and Meranius 2021). Moreover, Groen et al. (2018) found that individuals with self-reported ADHD symptoms scored lower on emotional empathy but still within the typical range reported for the general population. Therefore, an explanation for our findings is that empathy variance within neurodivergent individuals overlaps with empathy variance reported by neurotypical employees. Neurodivergent employees, however, report lower levels of work-related and conversational social skills as compared to neurotypical employees (an effect that is not observed at the group level of analysis), pointing out the relevance of a multidimensional and multilevel investigation of neurodiversity consequences for group dynamics and outcomes.

We believe the most important finding of our study is the interaction between neurodivergence and boundary-spanning activities, as boundary spanning attenuates the negative association between neurodivergence and social skills. Such results show that neurodivergent individuals can substantially develop their conversational and work-related social skills when facing their neurodivergence challenges in boundary-spanning activities. Particularly relevant are the significant group-level interaction effects reported for empathic and conversational skills, showing the synergetic effects of aggregated boundary-spanning activities. In other words, in groups in which several group members engage in boundary-spanning activities, neurodivergence is positively associated with empathic and conversational skills, while in groups in which, on average, members engage in less boundary-spanning activities, the association between neurodivergence and empathic and conversational skills is negative. Therefore, conversational and empathic social skills also develop through group-level influences, especially when group members engage in boundary-spanning activities; therefore, establishing a work environment conducive to the practice of social skills by neurodivergent individuals enhances personal growth and contributes to group interactions.

Since we found only weak support for an indirect effect of neurodivergence on diversity climate (including the ones moderated by boundary-spanning activities), we can conclude that these findings are rather marginal. Our results show that conversational social skills (as behavioral components of diversity climate, Cachat-Rosset et al. (2019)), are the most predictive type of social skills for the emergence of a diversity climate. This outcome is in line with scholarly findings that highly communicative and supportive social interactions are the cornerstone of a group's diversity climate (Herdman and McMillan-Capehart 2010). One potential explanation for the differences in the predictive role of social skills may be the way we assessed the empathic and work-related social skills, which may not align closely with other specific social skills significantly influencing the development of a diverse and inclusive organizational environment (e.g., skills to deal with risks or self-exposure). Another explanation is that social skills are not equally relevant for all dimensions of diversity climate. Recent conceptualizations of diversity climate (Cachat-Rosset et al. 2019) distinguished between intentionality (an explicit managerial commitment to inclusive practices), programming (the implementation of diversity management initiatives, policies, and processes), and praxis (shared organizational behaviors that are aligned with an inclusive ideology). Social skills, therefore, are less likely to be related to formal diversity management initiatives, corporate diversity policies, and are less reflective of explicit managerial commitment to inclusiveness. As illustrated by our

results, group members' social skills related to conversation are just one of the factors with a bottom-up impact on the emergence of a strong diversity climate within organizations. Other, more formal top-down managerial initiatives are equally (or potentially more) important in generating and maintaining a diversity-welcoming organizational climate focused on equity and growth opportunities for all employees regardless of group membership (Cachat-Rosset et al. 2019). Future studies could jointly explore the factors with a bottom-up (employee's attitudes, skills, values, behavioral intentions related to diversity) and top-down (managerial policies, practices, and frameworks for managing diversity) impact on the emergence of diversity climate in organizations.

A plausible explanation for the individual and group-level gain in social skills tied to engagement in boundary-spanning activities is a cyclical interaction pattern that may emerge within groups with neurodivergent group members assigned to boundary-spanning roles. Neurodivergent group members often face initial social challenges and might be reluctant to pursue boundary-spanning roles in which such social skills are important. Simultaneously, societal perceptions and negative stereotypes tend to further hinder neurodivergent individuals in such boundary-spanning roles, restricting them even more from diversifying their social interactions. While this arrangement may offer short-term comfort for neurodivergent individuals and prevent social mishaps in work settings, it ultimately hampers personal growth on two levels. Firstly, it places neurodivergent individuals at a disadvantage by limiting their access to roles where they can refine their social skills by interacting with diverse others. Secondly, it impedes social skills development at the group level, which is important for improving group collaboration and unleashing the creative potential of cognitive variety between group members. When groups delegate their neurodivergent members (along with their neurotypical members) to work in boundary-spanning positions, group-level social skills develop, as do groups' collective emotional intelligence, thus reducing relational dissolution processes and enhancing task synergetic processes (Curşeu et al. 2015; Gardenswartz et al. 2010; van Rijswijk et al. 2024).

## 6. Practical Implications

In today's dynamic organizational landscape, the interaction between management and groups is evolving rapidly. Previously, managers held the reins of decision-making and oversight on work organization and management, but nowadays, the focus is shifting toward fostering collaborative team environments capable of swift adaptation to market demands. As a result, team members more frequently take on boundary-spanning roles. As responsibilities previously centralized within management are decentralized to teams, the importance of social skills development at the group level increases. Managers may adapt by encouraging boundary-spanning activities and putting team members in positions where they are facilitated to develop their social skills by interacting with less familiar persons within and outside the organization. It is crucial to ensure that these activities involve the participation of all team members rather than assigning a dedicated role to one individual. Based on our findings, we recommend distributing boundary-spanning activities or rotating the boundary-spanning role among team members (including neurodivergent members) so that they develop their individual conversational and work-related social skills. Besides that, collective emotional intelligence will be further developed due to the elevation of social skills at the group level that facilitates the integration of diverse perspectives, including neurodivergent ones, and enhances overall team performance (Curşeu et al. 2015; van Rijswijk et al. 2024). So, consciously encouraging boundary-spanning activities among all group members is an important tool for both managers and team members to stimulate team performance over time.

## 7. Limitations

While our study has strengths, we also recognize limitations that could affect how we interpret and generalize our findings. Our dataset has some limitations, as the number of teams was sufficient for conducting a multilevel analysis; yet, larger samples, including

teams from various organizations and industries, could expand the scope of the findings. Also, the influence of demographic variables, such as age, ethnicity, and gender, on our conceptual model is not clear, as these data were not collected for privacy reasons. Besides that, the teams in our dataset were mainly from knowledge-intensive industries with an average high level of cognitive tasks that do not reflect broader organizational fields. The dataset also does not have global coverage; therefore, our results cannot be easily generalized to other cultures. Moreover, some of the scales had rather low reliability; therefore, our paper's results must be interpreted with caution. Our research design was cross-sectional, with data collected from a single source; therefore, the results are susceptible to the common method bias. Given that we have tested interaction effects, we believe these estimated interactions are not likely to be overestimated due to the common method bias (Siemsen et al. 2010). Moreover, although we cannot draw any causal claims based on the cross-sectional design, in the mediation model we have tested, it is unlikely that neurodivergence (as a set of formally diagnosed conditions) is impacted by social skills or the diversity climate.

## 8. Further Research Directions

We provide four recommendations for further research based on our findings. First, we recommend testing the generalization of our findings by replicating this study in other countries, industries and organizational teams with different tasks and work characteristics. We acknowledge the difficulty of collecting accurate data on neurodiversity, as many employees may decide not to seek a formal diagnosis for their neurodivergence (Pryke-Hobbes et al. 2023). As such, we join voices such as Fellowes (2024) in calling for more empirical research to document and explain differences between formal versus self-diagnosed neurodivergence in order to develop more parsimonious ways of assessing neurodiversity in organizations without necessarily relying on formal diagnoses that can be stigmatizing and ultimately misleading with respect to the true incidence of neurodivergence in organizations.

Second, we advocate for more research on the impact of neurodivergence in groups on various dimensions of diversity climate since our study found only weak support for their overall association. In particular, future research could use multilevel models to test individual and group-level differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees of relational dynamics at work, as illustrated by psychological safety, trust, cohesion, and social acceptance, all cornerstone dimensions of an inclusive and diversity-welcoming organizational climate.

Third, a more detailed analysis at the level of the various neurodivergent types could, in theory, provide a clearer view of how neurodivergence relates to social dynamics at work. However, in line with the transdiagnostic approach to neurodiversity (Apperly et al. 2024; Astle et al. 2022; Fletcher-Watson 2022), various types of neurodivergence share commonalities in how employees process information and experience emotions as well as social interactions. A generic clustering of various types of neurodivergence is therefore supported by the empirical results documenting such transdiagnostic commonalities across different types of neurodivergence (Apperly et al. 2024), and it also provides the parsimony necessary to compute group diversity indices that can be used to test reasonably complex models in samples of a modest size (as group-level data are tedious and difficult to collect). Future studies could, for example, estimate group neurodiversity by using dichotomous clustering of group members as neurotypical and neurodivergent in order to explore, for instance, the relationship between neurodiversity and various group outcomes. The narrative evidence reported so far points out that neurodiversity in software testing teams fosters team productivity (Austin and Pisano 2017); yet, the literature to date lacks systematic evidence concerning the relation between neurodiversity and team outcomes (van Rijswijk et al. 2024). We, therefore, call for more group-level studies that tap into the neurodiversity–team performance relationship and its plausible explanatory mechanisms.



Lastly, as we recommended the participation of neurodivergent individuals in boundary-spanning activities, recognizing that supporting them effectively can be challenging (Van den Bosch et al. 2019), further exploration may offer insights into strategies managers and other group members can employ to foster a safe learning environment. Such a diversity-welcoming organizational climate allows neurodivergent individuals to face their social challenges without unnecessarily compromising the organization's objectives. An important dimension of a diversity climate is related to formal programming or the explicit set of managerial practices and policies aimed at managing diversity (Cachat-Rosset et al. 2019); yet, it is still unclear to what extent modern organizations implement authentic diversity-supporting policies or engage in diversity washing in order to disseminate a deceptive positive image toward their stakeholders. Future research could document, more explicitly, such diversity-washing practices in relation to neurodiversity, as they can create a misleading view of the true nature of the diversity climate within organizations.

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