Organizational Autism Metaphorization

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of explicating and conceptualizing "organizational autism" as a diagnostic–explanatory metaphor for understanding organizational dysfunctions. The research design of this applied qualitative study draws on a conceptual metaphor approach based on mapping a source domain (autism) onto a target domain (the organization). Data were collected through metaphor-elicitation sessions and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 experts, using snowball sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data analysis was performed using the mapping analysis method. The validity of the metaphor was confirmed based on Cornelissen's eight principles for evaluating metaphors (Cornelissen, 2006), and reliability was established through an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 0.74 and a test–retest procedure. The findings indicate that the metaphor of "organizational autism" can conceptualize an interconnected set of organizational dysfunctions through seven key mappings: (1) deficits in social communication are mapped onto one-way communication, feedback discontinuity, and internal and external isolation; (2) repetitive behaviors are mapped onto rigid repetitive routines and the recurrence of inefficient processes; (3) resistance to change is mapped onto a culture of fear, excessive conservatism, and risk aversion; (4) social isolation is mapped onto the severance of ties with society, markets, and civil institutions; (5) intense focus on details is mapped onto prioritizing rules and procedures over outcomes and overarching goals; (6) sensitivity to new stimuli is mapped onto extreme reactions to minor changes and paralysis in the face of transformation; and (7) difficulty in processing complex information is mapped onto slow decision-making, inability to analyze the environment, and cognitive inadequacy. The combination of these manifestations portrays an isolated, change-averse, and inefficient organization trapped in a vicious cycle. As a result, it can be argued that "organizational autism" emerges when an organization experiences persistent dysfunction in communication, the consolidation of inflexible structures, deficiencies in information processing, and the dominance of a static culture. This condition leads to organizational isolation, reduced agility, diminished innovation, and weakened strategic decision-making. The proposed metaphor can function as a diagnostic roadmap, guiding transformational interventions away from treating surface-level symptoms toward addressing underlying systemic roots.

Keywords: Organizational autism; conceptual metaphor; conceptual mapping; organizational pathology; resistance to change; communication deficits.

Introduction

Organizational dysfunction has long been a central concern in management and organizational studies, particularly in contexts characterized by increasing environmental complexity, rapid technological change, and heightened stakeholder expectations. Contemporary organizations are expected to be adaptive, communicative,

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learning-oriented, and capable of processing complex information streams in real time. Nevertheless, empirical evidence and practical observations consistently demonstrate that many organizations fail to meet these expectations and instead exhibit persistent patterns of rigidity, isolation, ineffective communication, and resistance to change (1, 2). These dysfunctional patterns are not merely episodic or situational but often become embedded in organizational routines, cultures, and structures, resulting in chronic inefficiencies and declining performance (3, 4). As a result, scholars have increasingly emphasized the need for diagnostic frameworks that move beyond surface-level symptoms and offer deeper explanatory insights into the underlying logic of organizational pathologies (5, 6).

One influential stream of research conceptualizes organizations as social and cognitive systems whose behaviors can be analyzed analogously to individual psychological processes (7, 8). From this perspective, organizational dysfunction is not simply the outcome of poor structures or inadequate resources but reflects deeper failures in collective sensemaking, communication, emotional regulation, and adaptive learning (9, 10). Such failures often manifest as one-way communication, fragmented decision-making, ritualistic adherence to outdated procedures, and an excessive focus on internal rules at the expense of environmental responsiveness (11, 12). These characteristics suggest the presence of systemic disorders that require interpretive and integrative analytical tools rather than purely technical solutions.

In response to this challenge, metaphor-based analysis has gained prominence as a powerful methodological and theoretical approach in organizational research. Metaphors enable scholars and practitioners to translate complex, abstract organizational phenomena into more tangible and interpretable conceptual forms by mapping familiar source domains onto less accessible target domains (8, 13). Unlike purely descriptive models, metaphors do not merely label phenomena but actively shape how problems are perceived, explained, and addressed within organizations (7, 14). Consequently, metaphorical frameworks play a critical role in organizational diagnosis, strategic sensemaking, and change interventions (15, 16).

Among the various metaphorical traditions in organizational studies, pathological metaphors have been particularly influential. Drawing on concepts from psychology, psychiatry, and medicine, these metaphors frame organizations as entities capable of exhibiting disorders, dysfunctions, or maladaptive behavioral patterns (5, 17). Such metaphors allow scholars to explore how organizations may suffer from chronic anxiety, depression, obsession, or narcissism, thereby offering novel insights into leadership failures, cultural rigidity, and systemic breakdowns (11, 18). Importantly, pathological metaphors are not intended to stigmatize organizations but to provide diagnostic clarity and guide transformational interventions toward root causes rather than superficial symptoms (2, 19).

Within this intellectual tradition, the metaphor of autism has recently attracted scholarly attention as a potential explanatory lens for understanding certain organizational dysfunctions. Autism, as a neurodevelopmental condition, is characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication, restricted and repetitive behaviors, resistance to change, heightened sensitivity to stimuli, and challenges in processing complex information (20, 21). While autism research has primarily focused on individual cognition and behavior, several scholars have suggested that its core features may offer valuable analogies for understanding collective and systemic patterns in organizations (22, 23). In this sense, the metaphor of "organizational autism" does not equate organizations with individuals but uses the structural logic of autism as a source domain for interpreting persistent organizational pathologies.

The relevance of this metaphor becomes particularly evident in organizations that exhibit chronic communication breakdowns, internal isolation, and rigid adherence to routines despite clear environmental signals demanding change (24, 25). Such organizations often operate as closed systems, prioritizing internal coherence over external engagement and displaying disproportionate reactions to minor disturbances while remaining insensitive to major strategic threats (26, 27). These patterns closely resemble the defining characteristics of autism at the individual level, thereby providing a compelling basis for metaphorical mapping (20, 21).

Moreover, contemporary organizational environments increasingly demand cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, and complex information processing capabilities. Digital transformation, stakeholder pluralism, and volatile markets require organizations to integrate diverse data sources, engage in continuous dialogue with multiple actors, and adapt their strategies dynamically (4, 10). When organizations fail to develop these capabilities, they may become trapped in bureaucratic inertia, procedural formalism, and decision paralysis (11, 12). The metaphor of organizational autism provides a conceptual framework for understanding how such failures emerge not as isolated deficiencies but as interconnected systemic disorders (2, 22).

Despite its potential explanatory power, the metaphor of organizational autism requires careful theoretical grounding and methodological rigor. Metaphors, if used uncritically, can oversimplify complex realities, obscure alternative explanations, or reinforce biased interpretations (8, 16). Therefore, rigorous conceptual mapping, explicit articulation of highlighted and hidden aspects, and systematic validation are essential to ensure that the metaphor contributes to analytical clarity rather than conceptual distortion (7, 14). Recent studies have emphasized the importance of evaluating metaphors against criteria such as coherence, interpretability, contextual placement, and explanatory depth (8, 9).

In the Iranian and broader developing-country context, the need for such diagnostic frameworks is particularly acute. Many organizations operate within highly centralized, risk-averse institutional environments characterized by rigid regulations, hierarchical decision-making, and limited stakeholder engagement (1, 28). Empirical studies have documented widespread challenges related to organizational learning, innovation resistance, and ineffective communication across public and private sectors (29, 30). These conditions create fertile ground for the emergence of autism-like organizational patterns, including internal isolation, excessive proceduralism, and hypersensitivity to change (4, 19).

At the same time, cultural and institutional factors shape how organizational metaphors are interpreted and applied. In collectivist and high-context cultures, communication failures and emotional disengagement may have particularly profound consequences for trust, legitimacy, and social capital (31, 32). Consequently, metaphorical diagnoses that foreground relational and communicative dimensions can offer valuable insights for organizational development and reform (6, 17). The organizational autism metaphor, by emphasizing deficits in interaction, feedback, and environmental engagement, aligns closely with these contextual concerns (22, 28).

Another important dimension of the organizational autism metaphor relates to leadership and governance. Leadership research has consistently shown that leaders play a critical role in shaping organizational communication patterns, emotional climates, and adaptive capacities (5, 31). Authoritarian or risk-averse leadership styles can exacerbate autism-like organizational traits by suppressing feedback, penalizing innovation, and reinforcing rigid routines (11, 12). Conversely, reflective and participatory leadership may mitigate such tendencies by fostering openness, dialogue, and learning (9, 10). Understanding organizational autism thus has direct implications for leadership development and governance reform (2, 19).

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From a methodological standpoint, qualitative and interpretive approaches are particularly well suited for exploring metaphor-based constructs. Such approaches allow researchers to capture the lived experiences, narratives, and symbolic representations through which organizational members make sense of dysfunction (7, 8). Prior studies employing metaphor analysis have demonstrated its effectiveness in uncovering hidden assumptions, power dynamics, and emotional undercurrents within organizations (13, 16). By systematically eliciting and analyzing metaphors from experts and practitioners, researchers can construct robust conceptual models that bridge theory and practice (2, 22).

Despite growing interest in metaphorical analysis, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the systematic conceptualization and validation of organizational autism as a diagnostic framework. Existing studies often reference autism metaphorically without clearly articulating the mapping logic, evaluative criteria, or practical implications (23, 33). Moreover, few studies integrate insights from psychology, organizational theory, and systems thinking to develop a coherent and empirically grounded model (20, 21). Addressing this gap requires a comprehensive and methodologically rigorous investigation that situates organizational autism within the broader tradition of organizational pathology while respecting the complexity of both domains (5, 8).

In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to advance organizational theory and practice by offering a systematic metaphorical conceptualization of organizational autism grounded in qualitative analysis and validated through established metaphor evaluation criteria. By mapping core characteristics of autism onto organizational manifestations, the study aims to illuminate the interconnected nature of communication failures, rigidity, isolation, and decision-making weakness within organizations (2, 22, 28). Ultimately, such a framework has the potential to serve as a diagnostic roadmap that guides organizational interventions away from superficial fixes toward deeper systemic transformation (4, 19).

The aim of this study is to conceptualize and validate the metaphor of organizational autism as a diagnostic–explanatory framework for understanding and analyzing persistent organizational dysfunctions through systematic metaphorical mapping.

Methods and Materials

In terms of purpose, this study is applied, and in terms of implementation, it is a qualitative study employing a conceptual metaphorization approach. This method, by using conceptual mapping between a source domain (autism, as a psychological condition with salient characteristics such as deficits in social communication, repetitive behaviors, and resistance to change) and a target domain (the organization, as a complex social system), seeks to reveal the hidden dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

The expert community involved in the metaphorization process consisted of 13 specialists who possessed the capacity to conceptualize and articulate metaphors related to the phenomenon under study. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, snowball sampling was employed, whereby each participant introduced other relevant and knowledgeable individuals for interview, thereby forming a rich network of experts. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, that is, until new data no longer added novel concepts or themes to the findings. These individuals, holding doctoral degrees in fields such as Public Administration (Organizational Behavior), Organizational Psychology, Organizational Sociology, Strategic Management, and Organizational Sciences, played key roles in universities, consulting institutions, and organizational development projects.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Interview Respondents

No.	Academic Degree	Field of Specialization	Professional Role	Key Contributions
1	PhD in Public Administration (Organizational Behavior)	Organizational Behavior	Associate Professor, Consultant	Multiple publications in organizational behavior; research on organizational behavioral disorders
2	PhD in Organizational Psychology	Organizational Psychology	Full Professor, Human Resources Consultant	Books and articles on psychological dynamics; focus on organizational mental health
3	PhD in Sociology	Organizational Sociology	University Professor, Social Development Consultant	Articles on organizational cohesion; consulting in public and private projects
4	PhD in Strategic Management	Strategic Management	Associate Professor, Strategy Consultant	Reference books in organizational strategy; competitive analysis in multinational organizations
5	PhD in Systems Theory	Organizational Systems	University Professor, Systems Analysis Consultant	Articles on systems dynamics; modeling for complex organizations
6	PhD in Human Resource Management	Human Resource Management	Associate Professor, Organizational Consultant	Research on organizational culture; employee development programs
7	PhD in Organizational Behavior	Organizational Behavior	University Professor, Change Consultant	Articles on employee motivation; change projects in industrial organizations
8	PhD in Industrial Sociology	Industrial Sociology	Senior Researcher, University Professor	Research on organizational social interactions; consulting in manufacturing industries
9	PhD in Management	Management	Associate Professor	Articles on systemic efficiency; process optimization projects
10	PhD in Industrial Psychology	Industrial Psychology	University Professor, Mental Health Consultant	Research on organizational stress; workplace mental health programs
11	PhD in Innovation Management	Innovation Management	University Researcher, Technology Consultant	Articles on organizational innovation; consulting in technology firms
12	PhD in Organizational Sciences	Organizational Sciences	University Professor, Organizational Development Consultant	Book on organizational dynamics; development projects in the public sector
13	PhD in Organizational Sociology	Organizational Sociology	Associate Professor, Policy Consultant	Research on organizational legitimacy; consulting in social policymaking

The analytical process in this study is organized around seven key stages/dimensions, based on metaphorical mapping analysis and the assessment of its validity and reliability.

Stages of Mapping Analysis

a) **Mapping Analysis:** A process in which the relationships between the source and target domains in metaphorization were identified and examined.

Source Domain: Autism, as a psychological condition, is characterized by tangible and well-recognized features such as deficits in social communication, repetitive and restricted behaviors, and sensitivity to environmental changes. Due to the concreteness, observability, and experiential nature of these concepts, this domain provides an appropriate basis for metaphorical analysis, as its behavioral characteristics can be clearly understood and examined.

Target Domain: The organization, as a complex, dynamic, and abstract system, consists of interactions among internal units, employees, managers, as well as external stakeholders. The multidimensional and dynamic nature of this structure makes direct understanding difficult; therefore, metaphorical analysis can serve as an effective tool for better understanding behaviors, misalignments, and challenges within it.

b) **Defining the Features and Characteristics of Each Domain**

• Features of the source domain (autism)

• Features of the target domain (organization)

• Conceptual mapping between the domains

c) **Analysis of Highlighted and Hidden Aspects**

1. **Highlighting:** In the metaphor of "organizational autism," certain aspects of the target domain are particularly highlighted and gain greater clarity through analogy.

The Need for Coordination and Effective Communication: The autism metaphor portrays the organization as a system that requires coherent and effective interactions among its components and departments for optimal functioning. Just as individuals with autism face challenges in social communication, organizations afflicted with organizational autism experience disruptions in inter-organizational communication and interactions with external stakeholders.

Emphasis on Flexibility: This metaphor clearly underscores the importance of adaptability to environmental changes. In the same way that individuals with autism tend to resist change, organizations with organizational autism are unable to respond effectively to technological, market, or environmental transformations due to excessive reliance on established processes.

Systems Coordination: By drawing on the metaphor of the human body, the organization is conceptualized as a complex system whose components (such as management, human resources, finance, and communications) must function cohesively and in coordination—similar to vital bodily systems (e.g., the nervous or circulatory systems)—to achieve healthy and effective performance.

Intra-System Synergy: This aspect refers to interaction and alignment among different organizational components. Just as the nervous system transmits signals to coordinate bodily organs, interactions among employees, managers, and units are considered prerequisites for achieving shared objectives within the organization.

2. **Hiding:** In using the metaphor of "organizational autism," certain dimensions of the target domain are overlooked or implicitly downplayed.

Complexity of Human Factors: The autism metaphor does not fully capture the complexity of behavioral patterns, human decision-making, and the diversity of individual motivations within organizations. Unlike autism, which is defined by relatively predictable psychological patterns, organizational behavior may be influenced by nonlinear variables such as organizational culture, leadership style, and interpersonal conflicts.

The Role of Active Management: In individuals with autism, characteristics such as communication deficits are inherent; however, in organizations, the quality of interaction and coordination among units is heavily dependent on policies, organizational mechanisms, and the active role of management. The metaphor relatively weakens the strategic role of leadership and the design of managerial structures.

d) **Examining the Depth of Conceptual Mapping and Evaluating Its Effectiveness**

The effectiveness of the "organizational autism" metaphor in transferring concepts from the source domain to the target domain was examined along three dimensions.

Accurate Transfer of Key Characteristics: Comparative analysis showed that the salient features of autism (such as impaired social interaction, repetitive behaviors, and resistance to change) were transferred to the organizational domain with acceptable accuracy. For example, repetitive behaviors in autism corresponded to excessive focus on internal processes and resistance to innovation in organizations. However, the analyses also

indicated that positive characteristics associated with autism—such as high precision, cognitive order, and deep focus on details—were neglected.

Interpretive Limitations and Risk of Misunderstanding: Interpretive analysis indicated that focusing the metaphor on the negative aspects of autism may lead to overlooking positive organizational capacities, including creativity or innovation in certain units. This issue can produce a one-sided and negative image of the organization, attributing all inefficiencies to disconnection or isolation, while other factors such as weak leadership or flawed structures may also play a role.

Effectiveness in Simplifying Complex Concepts: Final analysis showed that the organizational autism metaphor successfully simplified abstract and complex concepts such as intra-organizational misalignment, resistance to change, and communication dysfunctions into a comprehensible language and a clear image for non-specialist audiences (such as executive managers). The application of this metaphor facilitated a more precise understanding of structural and functional inefficiencies and strengthened the basis for designing targeted managerial interventions.

Reliability and Validity of the Metaphorization

Following the development of the metaphor, the validation stage was conducted. The stages of validity assessment and correct interpretation of data can be considered synonymous with a trial-and-error reasoning process. In this process, the researcher, while considering the eight principles of metaphorization, must examine, refine, and ultimately rank and eliminate some of the identified metaphors. Since this study examined only one metaphor, Cornelissen's eight-step framework was used for evaluation. Cornelissen refers to these eight principles as the principles of optimal metaphorization. The results of the analyses indicated that the proposed metaphor demonstrates high conceptual coherence, analytical applicability, and interpretive capacity. Each of these principles and their realization in the present study are explained below.

The Principle of Integration: The study demonstrated a high level of semantic alignment between the source domain (autism as a psychological disorder) and the target domain (the organization as a social system). Core characteristics of autism, such as deficits in social communication, repetitive behaviors, and resistance to change, were effectively aligned with organizational practices and challenges such as lack of interdepartmental collaboration, repetition of inefficient processes, and structural inflexibility.

The Principle of Placement: The organizational autism metaphor cannot be interpreted outside the organizational context. Even in technology-driven or complex organizations—where departmental segmentation, siloed operations, and weak horizontal communication are prevalent—the metaphor proved meaningful and applicable. This indicates that the metaphor is situated within an appropriate and valid context.

The Principle of Tension: The source domain (autism) is supported by an extensive theoretical and empirical foundation in psychological sciences. The well-established structure and stable concepts within this domain enabled accurate transfer of meanings to the organizational context, providing the metaphor with sufficient analytical and argumentative depth.

The Principle of Unpacking: Analyses showed that the metaphor possesses high conceptual clarity and interpretability for audiences, particularly managers, organizational consultants, and researchers. Due to general familiarity with the indicators of autism, audiences can readily understand and analyze similar behaviors within organizations. In everyday language, the term "autism" is often used to denote isolation and communication

difficulties; therefore, the management community can quickly grasp the core implication of the metaphor, namely the isolated organization.

The Principle of Good Reason: The "organizational autism" metaphor exhibits clear conceptual alignment with real organizational phenomena such as communication confusion, interdepartmental conflicts, and resistance to environmental changes. As an analytical tool, the metaphor avoids imposing incorrect or unrealistic meanings and accurately reflects organizational realities.

The Principle of Dense Metonymy: In the conceptual mapping conducted, source concepts were creatively and meaningfully substituted for target concepts. For instance, "organizational isolation" replaced "social isolation in autism," and "ritualistic and repetitive behaviors in organizations" replaced "individual repetitive behaviors," resulting in a coherent and meaningful metaphorical transfer.

The Principle of Distance: The conceptual distance between the individual (in autism) and the organization (as a collective social entity) endowed the metaphor with creativity and novelty. This distance did not hinder meaning transfer; rather, it opened new horizons for analyzing and understanding dysfunctional organizational structures.

The Principle of Concreteness: Prominent features of autism, such as difficulties in social interaction and weaknesses in communication, are widely recognized by the public, enabling audiences to easily identify analogous behaviors in organizational contexts. This clarity rendered the metaphor easier to comprehend and more effective.

Reliability of the "Organizational Autism" Metaphor

The reliability of the organizational autism metaphor was assessed using two primary criteria.

• **Inter-rater Agreement Coefficient:** This index reflects the level of agreement among different analysts regarding the meaning of the metaphor. In this study, the inter-rater agreement coefficient was 0.74, indicating a high level of analytical alignment and, consequently, satisfactory reliability of the metaphor.

• **Test–Retest Analysis:** To assess stability in the interpretation of the metaphor over time, a subset of the data was reanalyzed and recoded by the same analysts after a two-week interval. The results of the reanalysis showed acceptable consistency between the codes extracted in the second stage and the initial analysis, indicating the stability and conceptual robustness of the metaphor.

Findings and Results

1. Source Domain (Autism Characteristics)

The key characteristics of autism, as defined by the American Psychological Association in 2022 and used as the basis for the metaphor, include the following:

• Deficits in social communication (limited communication and difficulty establishing meaningful interactions)

• Repetitive and restricted behaviors (insistence on fixed behavioral patterns)

• Resistance to change (preference for an unchanging environment)

• Social isolation (disconnection from external social networks)

• Intense focus on details (excessive attention to specific matters, sometimes without regard to the overall picture)

• Sensitivity to novel stimuli (strong reactions to minor environmental changes)

• Difficulty processing complex information (inability to integrate data and construct a comprehensive representation)

2. Target Domain (Organizational Manifestations)

Each of the above characteristics has organizational equivalents. For example:

Deficits in social communication → one-way communication, feedback discontinuity, internal/external isolation

Repetitive behaviors → rigid repetitive routines; repetition of inefficient processes

Resistance to change → a culture of fear, excessive conservatism, risk aversion

Social isolation → severing ties with society, markets, and civil institutions

Intense focus on details → prioritizing rules and procedures over outcomes and overarching goals

Sensitivity to novel stimuli → extreme reactions to minor changes; paralysis in the face of transformation

Difficulty processing complex information → slow decision-making, inability to analyze the environment, cognitive insufficiency

Table 2. Findings From Interviews on Organizational Autism

Expert ID	Source-Domain Characteristic	Corresponding Organizational Manifestations (Target Domain)	Key Interview Quote / Metaphor
X01	Deficits in social communication	One-way communication; feedback discontinuity; internal and external isolation	"isolation bubble," "a ship in a dry dock"; "Employees feel their voice is not heard"; "Managers see feedback as a threat."
X01	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Rigid routines; nonproductive repetition; inefficient bureaucracy	"rigid repetitive routines," "a broken clock," "old paper forms," "repetitive meetings with no decisions."
X01	Resistance to change	Culture of fear; conservatism; innovation punishment	"a culture of preserving the status quo," "innovation is risky," "managers who fear change."
X01	Difficulty processing complex information	Slow decision-making; excessive focus on details; inability to analyze the environment	"a broken compass," "a brain in a coma"; "In crises, they repeat the same old methods."
X02	Deficits in social communication	Internal and external isolation; lack of psychological safety for critique	"an impenetrable capsule," "one-way communication"; "Employees feel their voice is not heard."
X02	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Repetition of inefficient processes; dependence on old routines	"Repeating inefficient processes without review," "dependent on repetitive routines."
X02	Resistance to change	Risk-averse culture; unaccountable leadership	"A culture that penalizes risk-taking is institutionalized," "centralized and unaccountable leadership."
X03	Social isolation	Institutional isolation; severing ties with society	"a fortress with closed gates," "a remote island," "organizational isolationism."
X03	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Overemphasis on internal processes; fixed routines	"Excessive focus on internal processes," "restricted and repetitive patterns."
X03	Resistance to change	Closed culture; fear of social changes	"a closed culture," "fear of social changes."
X04	Deficits in social communication	Reduced collaboration; disregard for market trends	"a broken compass," "reduced collaboration with partners."
X04	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Reliance on old plans	"clinging to old plans," "preserving the status quo."
X04	Difficulty processing complex information	Lack of environmental analysis	"lack of environmental analysis," "not using analytical tools."
X05	Social isolation	Detachment from the environment; closed system	"an information black hole," "detachment from the environment."
X05	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Reduced output variety; uniform services	"reduced diversity in outputs," "identical services without attention to changes."
X05	Difficulty processing complex information	Deficits in feedback loops; reduced internal complexity	"deficits in feedback loops," "reduced internal complexity."
X06	Deficits in social communication	Disregard for feedback; lack of interaction	"a heart without emotional blood supply," "disregard for feedback."
X06	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Clinging to internal routines	"They only cling to repetitive internal routines."
X06	Resistance to change	Closed culture; negative culture	"The culture is closed and negative."
X07	Deficits in social communication	Absence of genuine interaction; suppression of feedback	"a museum of living people," "absence of genuine interaction."
X07	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Repetitive, lifeless patterns	"falling into the trap of repetitive, lifeless patterns."
X07	Resistance to change	Culture that punishes innovation	"a repetitive organizational culture that punishes innovation."
X08	Social isolation	Separation from the social fabric	"a dam blocking the flow," "detached from the larger social fabric."

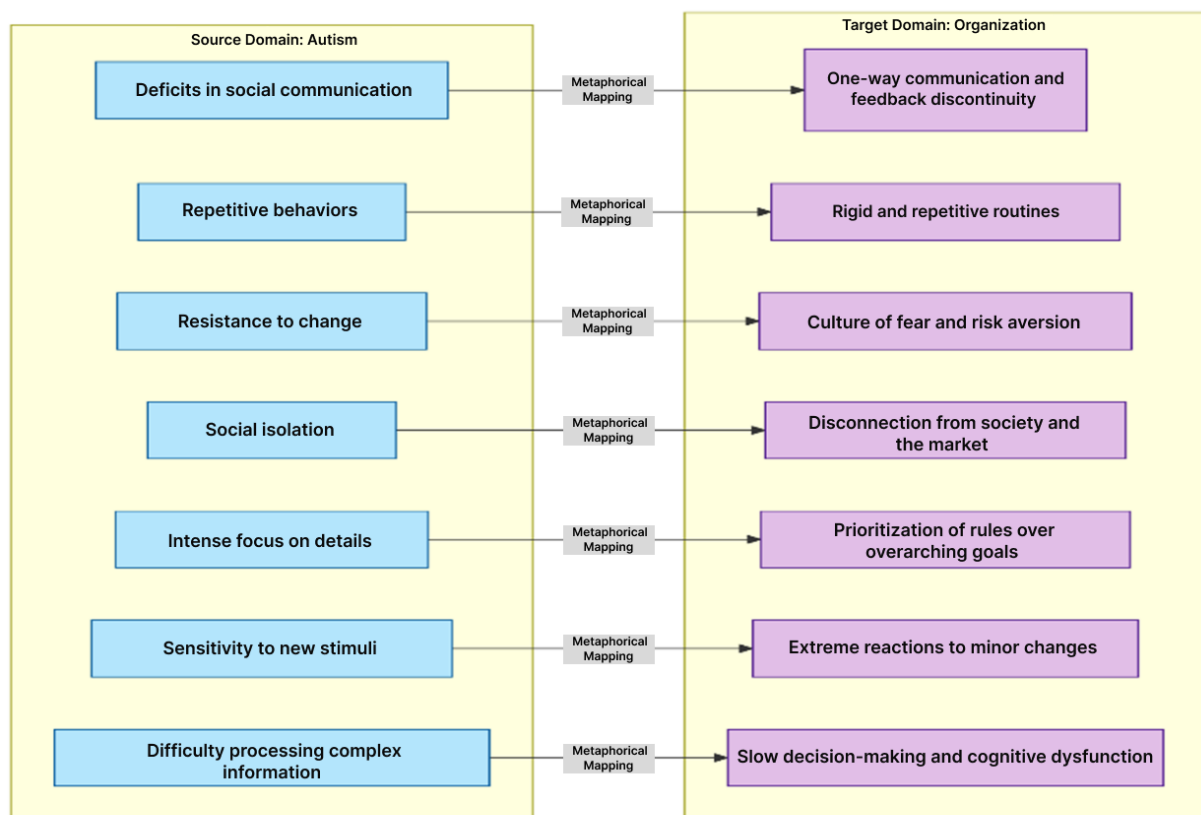| X08 | Repetitive and restricted behaviors | Repetitive routines; dependence on old patterns | "repetitive routines," "dependent on old patterns." |
X08	Resistance to change	Negative culture; punishing innovation	"a negative culture that punishes innovation."
X09	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Nonproductive repetition; futile cycles	"an old computer from the 1990s," "expecting different results from repetitive work."
X09	Resistance to change	Managerial culture suppressing change	"Every change hits a management wall," "change equals trouble."
X10	Sensitivity to novel stimuli	Overreaction to minor changes; decision turbulence	"With every small change, the system falls apart," "an overstimulated organization."
X10	Intense focus on details	Losing the big picture; dysfunctional perfectionism	"They see the trees but not the forest," "Decisions get buried under details."
X10	Deficits in social communication	Lack of empathy; lack of emotional support	"a mechanical heart without feeling," "Relationships have become completely mechanical."
X10	Resistance to change	Suppression of emotions; unsupported leadership	"Emotions have no place here," "emotional support is not part of the KPI."
X11	Social isolation	Falling behind the technology world	"a library with hundred-year-old books," "falling behind the world of technology."
X11	Resistance to change	Risk-averse culture; traditional leadership	"risk-averse culture," "changes are perceived as dangerous."
X12	Deficits in social communication	Severed ties with stakeholders	"an old fortress atop a hill," "connection with stakeholders is severed."
X12	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Clinging to internal rules	"They only cling to internal rules."
X12	Difficulty processing complex information	Blocked information flow; slow decision-making	"information flow is blocked," "slow decision-making."
X13	Social isolation	Detachment from social and cultural networks	"an unlit lighthouse," "detached from social networks."
X13	Repetitive and restricted behaviors	Insistence on rules regardless of effectiveness	"The rule matters more than the outcome," "regulations have become the goal."
X13	Resistance to change	Conservative culture; authoritarian leadership	"a conservative culture," "an authoritarian leadership style."

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Organizational Autism

The combination of these organizational manifestations results in an organization that appears to exhibit a form of autism-like dysfunction. In practice, the model of "autistic organizations" can be described across three layers:

• Input layer (source domain): the set of autism characteristics as the origin of the metaphor.

• Intermediate layer (metaphorical transformation): mapping relationships that translate the characteristics into organizational equivalents.

• Output layer (model outcome): the final image of an organization affected by organizational autism—isolated, change-averse, trapped in bureaucracy, hypersensitive to stimuli, and weak in decision-making.
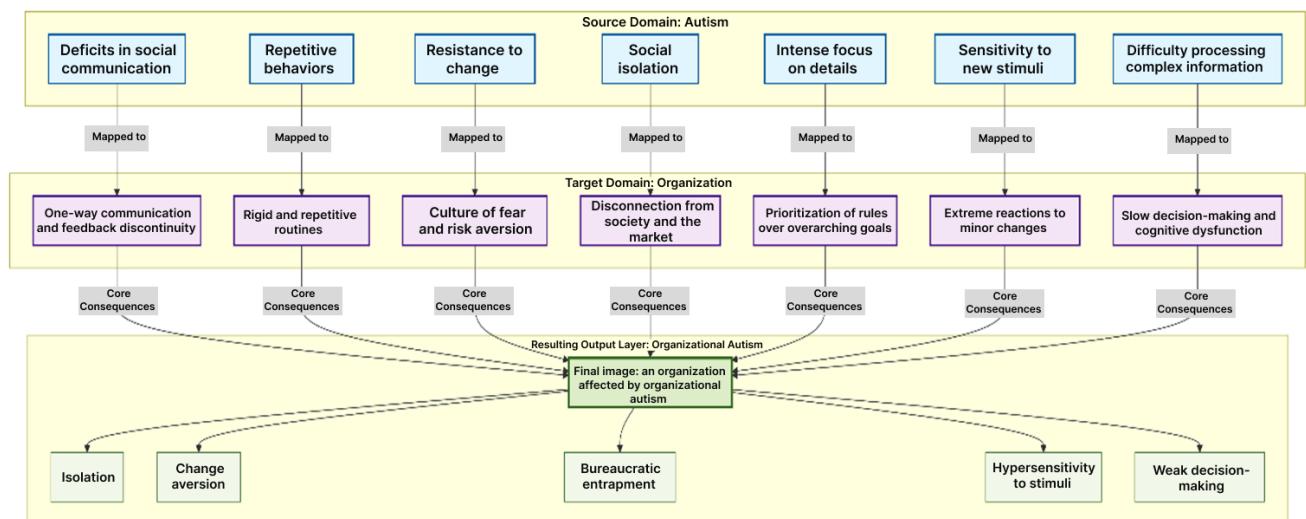

Figure 2. Organizational Autism Metaphorization

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide robust support for the conceptual validity and analytical usefulness of the metaphor of organizational autism as a diagnostic–explanatory framework for understanding persistent organizational dysfunctions. The results demonstrate that the core characteristics of autism at the individual level—namely deficits in social communication, repetitive and restricted behaviors, resistance to change, social isolation, hypersensitivity to stimuli, excessive focus on details, and difficulties in processing complex information—can be coherently and systematically mapped onto corresponding organizational manifestations. This mapping revealed that organizational dysfunctions rarely occur in isolation; rather, they emerge as interconnected and mutually reinforcing patterns that shape organizational behavior over time. This systemic perspective aligns closely with the foundational assumptions of organizational pathology, which emphasize that chronic organizational problems are embedded in structures, cultures, and collective cognitive processes rather than arising from isolated managerial errors (5, 9).

One of the most salient findings concerns deficits in organizational communication, which were consistently identified by experts as a central manifestation of organizational autism. One-way communication, suppression of feedback, and the absence of psychologically safe spaces for dialogue were repeatedly emphasized as core dysfunctions. These findings are consistent with prior studies on organizational silence and indifference, which show that restricted communication channels lead to reduced learning capacity, weakened trust, and organizational inertia (6, 12). From a metaphorical standpoint, the parallel with social communication deficits in autism provides a

powerful explanatory lens, highlighting how organizations may become internally fragmented and externally disengaged when meaningful interaction breaks down (20, 22). The results further corroborate research suggesting that communication failures are not merely technical problems but reflect deeper cultural and emotional dynamics within organizations (2, 11).

Another significant finding relates to the prevalence of repetitive and rigid organizational routines. The data revealed that many organizations persist in executing inefficient processes, holding repetitive meetings without outcomes, and adhering rigidly to outdated procedures. This mirrors the restricted and repetitive behaviors observed in autism and resonates strongly with prior research on bureaucratic inertia and organizational rigidity (1, 27). The metaphorical mapping clarifies how such routines become self-reinforcing, gradually transforming from functional mechanisms into ritualistic practices detached from organizational goals. This interpretation is supported by studies on organizational dysfunctions, which emphasize that excessive proceduralism often undermines adaptability and innovation (13, 16). By framing these patterns through the autism metaphor, the study extends existing theoretical insights by integrating behavioral, cognitive, and systemic dimensions into a unified explanatory model (8, 22).

Resistance to change emerged as another core dimension of organizational autism in the findings. Experts described organizational cultures characterized by fear, risk aversion, and the punishment of innovation, leading to chronic reluctance to engage with environmental changes. These results align with extensive literature on change resistance, which identifies fear-based cultures and conservative leadership as major barriers to organizational transformation (21, 28). The metaphor of autism adds explanatory depth by conceptualizing resistance to change not merely as a rational response to uncertainty but as a systemic condition rooted in collective cognitive and emotional patterns. This perspective complements earlier studies on organizational trauma and neurosis, which highlight how unresolved past experiences and institutionalized anxieties can immobilize organizations (25, 26).

Social isolation at the organizational level was another prominent theme identified in the results. Many organizations were described as disconnected from society, markets, technological ecosystems, and civil institutions. This finding echoes prior research on closed systems and organizational insularity, which demonstrates that external disengagement significantly undermines legitimacy, innovation, and long-term sustainability (19, 29). The autism metaphor effectively captures this phenomenon by emphasizing parallels with social withdrawal and isolation at the individual level. Importantly, the results suggest that organizational isolation is not simply a strategic choice but often the unintended outcome of cumulative communication failures, rigid routines, and fear-driven cultures (24, 33). This systemic interpretation strengthens the diagnostic value of the metaphor by linking external disengagement to internal dysfunctions.

The findings also highlight difficulties in organizational information processing and decision-making, manifested as slow responses, inability to integrate diverse data sources, and paralysis in the face of complexity. These manifestations closely correspond to challenges in processing complex information observed in autism and align with studies on miscommunication and cognitive overload in complex organizations (10, 27). The metaphorical framing underscores how excessive focus on details, combined with weak integrative mechanisms, prevents organizations from forming coherent strategic pictures of their environments. This insight reinforces earlier research on organizational cognition, which emphasizes the importance of sensemaking and integrative thinking for effective decision-making (7, 31).

From a methodological perspective, the results confirm the analytical rigor and explanatory power of metaphor-based analysis when applied systematically. The study's findings demonstrate that, when evaluated using

established criteria such as conceptual coherence, interpretability, contextual placement, and explanatory depth, the organizational autism metaphor provides meaningful insights without reducing organizational complexity to simplistic analogies (2, 8). This supports prior methodological contributions that advocate for disciplined metaphor analysis as a legitimate and valuable approach in organization and management studies (7, 14).

The findings further contribute to the literature on organizational pathology by extending the repertoire of diagnostic metaphors. While previous studies have examined organizational phenomena such as stroke, schizophrenia, neurosis, and trauma, the metaphor of organizational autism offers a distinct focus on communication breakdowns, rigidity, and isolation as interdependent systemic conditions (3, 12). This conceptual contribution is particularly relevant in contemporary organizational contexts characterized by digital transformation and stakeholder pluralism, where relational and communicative capacities are critical for success (4, 21). By integrating insights from psychology, systems theory, and organizational studies, the present research advances a more holistic understanding of organizational dysfunctions (22, 32).

Moreover, the findings are especially salient in public and semi-public sector contexts, where centralized structures, rigid regulations, and risk-averse cultures are prevalent. Prior studies conducted in similar contexts have documented patterns of organizational silence, inertia, and resistance to innovation that closely resemble the manifestations identified in this study (1, 28). The organizational autism metaphor thus provides a context-sensitive diagnostic framework that resonates with empirical realities and offers actionable insights for organizational reform (2, 19).

In sum, the discussion of results demonstrates that organizational autism is not a superficial or rhetorical label but a theoretically grounded and empirically supported metaphor that captures the systemic nature of chronic organizational dysfunctions. By revealing how communication deficits, rigidity, isolation, hypersensitivity, and cognitive impairment interact to form self-reinforcing cycles, the metaphor contributes to both theory and practice in organizational diagnosis and change management (9, 22). The alignment of the findings with prior research across multiple domains further strengthens the validity and relevance of the proposed framework.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative and metaphor-based nature of the research, while providing depth and interpretive richness, limits the generalizability of the findings across all organizational contexts. Second, the study relies heavily on expert perspectives, which may reflect professional biases or sector-specific experiences. Third, the metaphor of organizational autism, although analytically useful, may not capture all dimensions of organizational dysfunction and should therefore be viewed as one diagnostic lens among others rather than a comprehensive explanatory model.

Future studies could build on the present findings by empirically testing the organizational autism model using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to examine its predictive validity and boundary conditions. Comparative studies across sectors, cultures, and organizational life-cycle stages would further enhance understanding of when and how autism-like organizational patterns emerge. Additionally, future research could explore the interaction between organizational autism and leadership styles, digital transformation processes, and governance mechanisms to develop more nuanced and integrative theoretical models.

From a practical standpoint, the organizational autism framework can be used by managers and consultants as a diagnostic tool to identify deep-rooted dysfunctions beyond surface-level symptoms. Interventions should prioritize restoring multidirectional communication, strengthening feedback mechanisms, and fostering psychological safety.

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Efforts to reduce rigid routines, encourage adaptive learning, and reconnect organizations with their external environments are essential. Finally, leadership development initiatives should focus on enhancing emotional awareness, participatory decision-making, and systemic thinking to prevent the emergence or persistence of autism-like organizational patterns.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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