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# The Allure of Neurodiversity



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## Abstract

“Neurodiversity” is a term now frequently used to indicate the idea that disabilities, including a range of intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder or ASD), are neurological variations among individuals that should be celebrated, not changed. Although it is true that diversity is within the natural continuum of human existence, neurodiversity, a biological reductionist term, has been used to imply a strategy and policy for education and social services for people with disabilities. In the political sense, neurodiversity can represent a rationale for not teaching students with various disabilities alternative behaviors so that they can maximize their human functioning, including social acceptance and opportunities. We discuss the educational and political consequences of this specific notion of neurodiversity.

**Keywords:** Neurodiversity; Developmental disabilities; ASD

## The Allure of Neurodiversity

We understand well that when the neurodiversity idea comes from people with disabilities, we should hear their experiences and stories [1]. Empathy and sympathy are among the noblest characteristics of human beings and prerequisites for human collaboration and solidarity. However, words that sound melodious in personal spaces cannot avoid systematic scrutiny and critical thinking in the public space, let alone in the realm of inquiry and science [2].

Differences and disabilities need to be viewed in the context of human commonalities and diversity [2,3]. In a sense, we are all the same, yet we are all different-unique. Cultural diversity (e.g., gender, “race,” ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) is to be expected, valued, honored, and included in the wonderful, colorful tapestry of human existence. Although disability is part of human diversity, it is not just another cultural difference to which we are indifferent in terms of teaching and social welfare policies. In theory, if it were, then one could assume there is nothing wrong with treating children in such a manner that they could no longer think, speak, and communicate [4].

Instead, the neurodiversity perspective posits that we are neurologically different, and this neurological diversity is, like

cultural diversity of all kinds, to be accepted and celebrated, not considered something to be prevented, altered, or “cured” as if it were a disease. The idea of “neurodiversity” is credited to Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist with ASD. She used the term in her sociology thesis, formally presented in 1998 ([1]; see also <http://www.myspectrumsuite.com/meet-judy-singer/>). Others have picked up the idea and written such things as “each person has a unique brain and a unique combination of traits and abilities and asserts that many challenges faced by autistic individuals stem from a lack of fit between the characteristics of autistic people and society’s expectations and biases” [5].

Although neurodiversity was initially embraced by “high-functioning” persons with ASD [1], the notion has expanded to encompass the whole autism spectrum (each and every person with autism, including those with low-functioning autism), in addition to other disabilities, including schizophrenia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia [6,7].

Neurodiversity proponents use an attractive way of avoiding the distinction between people with and without disabilities. That is, they promote the idea that diversity can be found in all human characteristics, and what we call disabilities are simply

natural variations. We do not deny that natural variation is part of human evolution. This, however, is also true for every aspect of the human body (anatomical or physiological), including the brain and neurological system. In addition, most human characteristics fall into a continuum or continuous distribution. Is the fact of the continuum enough to reject the idea of disability and replace it with neurodiversity? As is true of all physical conditions, variations in mental conditions (e.g., stress, fears, obsessions, intellectual limitations, learning difficulties, and communication difficulties) have turning points, and extreme or scarce quantities can be considered new qualities. This occurs with both predicaments (e.g., disabilities) and typically desirable characteristics or situations (e.g., gifts, talents) [2,3]. The distinction between a statistically typical predicament and a non-typical predicament (e.g., a disability) can be a matter of social and scientific convention (i.e., classification systems of mental health); it can also change over time across cultures and can be dependent on technology. However, the arbitrariness or blurriness of cut-offs and borders does not eliminate this distinction, even though it can mask it [2,3,8].

### Educational and Political Implications

The neurodiversity idea has brought a call for removing societal and environmental barriers for people with developmental disabilities, particularly ASD [9]. However, there are also problems with using this term to replace the diagnosis of ASD, for example, and what it represents. The diversity of people's characteristics is very great, and this applies to differences between people with and without ASD as well as to those within the ASD category.

To some, it [ASD] conjures an image of the socially awkward eccentric who, besotted by a narrow set of interests, eschews small-talk and large gatherings in favor of solitude. To others, it's a profoundly life-limiting disorder that consumes every waking hour of a family's life, a medical disability that entails unpredictable bouts of aggression resulting in torn upholstery, cracked skulls and savage bites [10].

Criticisms of the neurodiversity movement have come from people with ASD, stating that the movement has gone too far [9,10]. It seems that so many people are now said to have ASD under the neurodiversity umbrella that the meaning of this (ASD) diagnosis is quickly eroding, leaving the most vulnerable people with ASD without effective advocacy [10]. As Clements [10] noted there are people who even "self-identify as autistic as though it were a fashion label rather than a debilitating disorder" [11].

The neurodiversity perspective aims at promoting the important recognition of the rights of people with disabilities by trivializing the disordered part and predicaments that many persons with ASD face in real life, especially those who are low functioning. In some cases, neurodiversity proponents [6] emphasize the gifts of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc. However, denying the existence of a disability, and considering it always as an advantage, means perpetuating and aggravating it.

The progress of the last century regarding schooling, social integration, and employment of people with disabilities was based on the recognition of problems, not on their denial. This recognition gave a considerable boost to research on the genetic, behavioral, and educational characteristics and needs of those with disabilities and the development of effective and humane interventions [12]. Unfortunately, it also gave birth to many fads and controversial therapies [13]. We believe neurodiversity is one of those controversial, faddish, misleading, and misunderstood notions.

Leadbitter et al. [14] argue that "Objections to neurodiversity are often based on an erroneous conception of the tenets of the movement" (p. 2). Some recognize neurodiversity can be used to reject any form of early intervention [15] and that parents of those with ASD sometimes protest the idea of neurodiversity because it "presents a sanitized view of autism, excludes those with significant language or intellectual disability, and deflects resources from those most in need of support" (p. 2).

Perhaps the most contentious issues involving neurodiversity involve treatment of non-injurious self-stimulation, such as hand-flapping, body-rocking, screeching or other unusual vocalizations, or other non-injuring behaviors that prevent a person from "passing" as ordinary or "normal." What some defenders of the neurodiversity idea seem not to understand is that "passing" has enormous social benefits and that reducing or eliminating non-injurious self-stimulation that is blatantly atypical allows a person with ASD to have more typical social interactions. Thus, neurodiversity can become the cruel denial of opportunities for people with ASD and related developmental disabilities.

An important point, from our perspective, is that neglect of learning needs is a form of diversity. Diversity of many kinds is good, and desirable, to be made a valuable part of living. Nevertheless, an important caveat is that some biology-related diversity is not good. A favored comeback to the assertion that some diversity is not good, but the opposite is "Well, that's not diversity!" Then the issue becomes what the word "diversity" means.

The allure of the term neurodiversity is the recognition that we are all different, and this difference goes down to the level of neurons and the neural system. However, diversity in human beings includes more than neurons; it incorporates development and culture too. A disability manifestation is neither the sole product of biological nor societal conditions [3]. The term neurodiversity seems to reflect a radical biological reductionism with a new cultural lens. Nevertheless, this extreme biological reductionism is an inappropriate rationale for understanding, effectively teaching, and planning social policies for people with ASD because it fails to integrate biological with psychological and social factors [3,16].

We understand the psychological pain of that realization—that some human, biology-related, diversity is not good—is

part of our humanity, and the denial of that reality is neglect that can lead to cruelty, especially for low-functioning persons with ASD, which adds to the pain. However, from a historical and political perspective, we can see that cultures and societies vary enormously in the degree to which they allow neglect and cruelty to the most vulnerable members of society. Thus, we are afraid that the libertarian rationale incorporated into neurodiversity perspectives, even for a good cause (recognition and non-discrimination) can be turned against persons with low-functioning conditions under cruel authoritarian and/or market-fundamentalist regimes. We cannot fight for good causes in the long run if we do not rely on science and the search for truth [17].

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