

Cognitive Deviance: The Social Implications of Neurodivergence

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By Alysia Gentry

Introduction

What is neurodivergence?

Neurodivergence is precisely what it sounds like—a different manner of brain function (1). Though not an official medical term, the word “neurodivergent” has arisen as an alternative way to refer to individuals with any one of a wide range of conditions associated with cognitive behavior that is different from the norm, such as autism, ADHD, or intellectual disabilities (1).

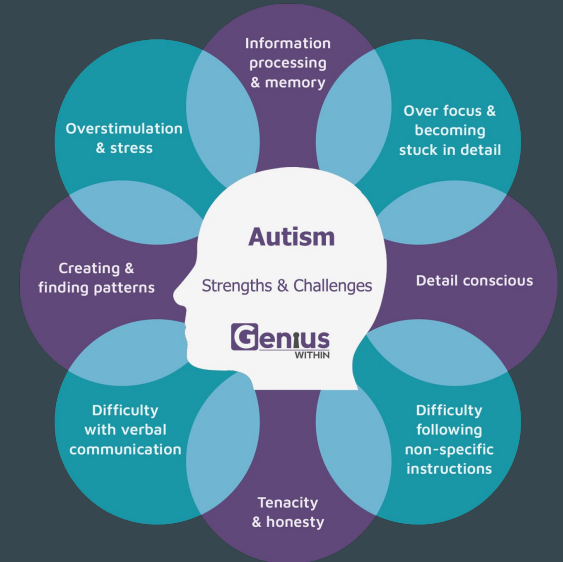


“Who figured out how to make the first stone spear? It wasn't the yakkity yaks, that's for sure. It was some Asperger sitting in the back of a cave figuring out how to chip rocks into spearheads. Without some autistic traits you wouldn't even have a recording device to record this conversation on” (2).

- Temple Grandin

Neurodiverse vs. disordered

These conditions are commonly considered dysfunctional and lumped in with mental illnesses like depression and schizophrenia. While mental illnesses also involve a difference in brain function, the idea of neurodivergence is that conditions such as autism are not simply harmful issues of cognitive health but simply alternate ways of thinking that present their own pros and cons (3). Depression, for instance, would not have such upsides. The idea is that neurodivergence is a natural and overall neutral way of being, not a reflection of an unhealthy or disordered mind (1).



Deviant Status

How is it deviant?

By definition, neurodivergence is associated with divergence from the *neurotypical* norm (1). While the term is intended to provide a distinction from problems such as brain disease and mental illness, widespread medical and psychological teachings and diagnosis still reflect a prevalent association with dysfunction. For instance, the textbook used last semester in my Essentials of Abnormal Psychology course described autism, ADHD, and intellectual disabilities as dysfunctions relating to the brain (Abnormal Psychology). In addition to this formal association, many everyday people have come to look down on neurodivergent individuals as opposed to or in addition to pitying them. As with many conventionally undesirable differences, neurodivergence has been met with hateful attitudes and actions which are considered a form of ableism.

Negative sanctions – Prejudice

As a result of the previously mentioned negative sentiments, neurodivergent individuals face many different kinds of prejudice, discrimination, and hate (4). Even neurotypicals get a sense of these attitudes as they may be called “autistic” or “special” as an insult, particularly when participating in actions seen as strange or stupid. One term, which many have now come to consider a slur for its long history of hateful use against neurodivergent behaviors, is the word “ret*rd” (5). In fact, when it comes to posts about those with intellectual disabilities, “7 in every 10 ... are negative, and 6 in 10 contain a slur” (5). It is common for bullies to target autistic people and behaviors without even knowing that is what they are targeting (6).

Negative sanctions – Murder



Reactions can get violent. Aside from issues such as bullying and tensions with police (Z), there is a strange and heartbreaking phenomenon of parents murdering their autistic or otherwise disabled children. Consider this clip from a film created by the unfortunately popular organization Autism Speaks.

METRO

Death of 8-year-old autistic Bronx ruled a homicide,

By Amanda Woods

Mom who killed 7-year-old autistic son on hike outside Las Vegas sentenced to minimum of 28 years in prison

Desperate Act: Mom Accused of Trying to Kill Autistic Daughter

A Michigan mother has pleaded guilty to child abuse in connection with charges that she tried to kill her severely autistic daughter.

News > UK > Home News

Woman who killed autistic son during lockdown detained in hospital indefinitely

Virginia Mom Sentenced to 55 Years in Prison for Murdering her 2-Year-Old Son With Autism

Newsweek: Did son's autism drive a woman to murder?

When asked why she strangled her kids, Akhter told the 911 dispatcher, "Both are autistic. I don't want my kids to be like that. I want normal kids."

Texas Mom Described Strangling Her 2 Autistic Kids

Mother confesses, gives details of murder on 911 call.

By JOHN
July 22, 2022

Michigan Parents Who Were Allegedly 'Sick of' Being Reported to CPS Are Now Charged with Murdering 8-Year-Old Autistic Son

JERRY LAMBE | Jun 7th, 2022, 2:57 pm

Florida woman accused of killing autistic son faces death penalty

Parents charged with murder of autistic daughter who died 'fused' to sofa after 12 years

3 May 2022, 12:25 | Updated: 5 May 2022, 06:16



[Click image for link to news article.](#)

Negative sanctions – Unintentional

Sometimes sanctions are more subtle. For example, due to the popular view of these conditions as disorders, there is a tendency to attempt to treat and reduce related conditions rather than accommodate them. Furthermore, differences in social understanding commonly present in autism and other forms of neurodivergence can lead to misunderstandings as neurotypicals misread behaviors like failing to maintain eye contact as rude. These factors encourage the common phenomenon of “masking,” which refers to attempts to conceal natural behaviors in favor of “normal,” neurotypical behavior (8).

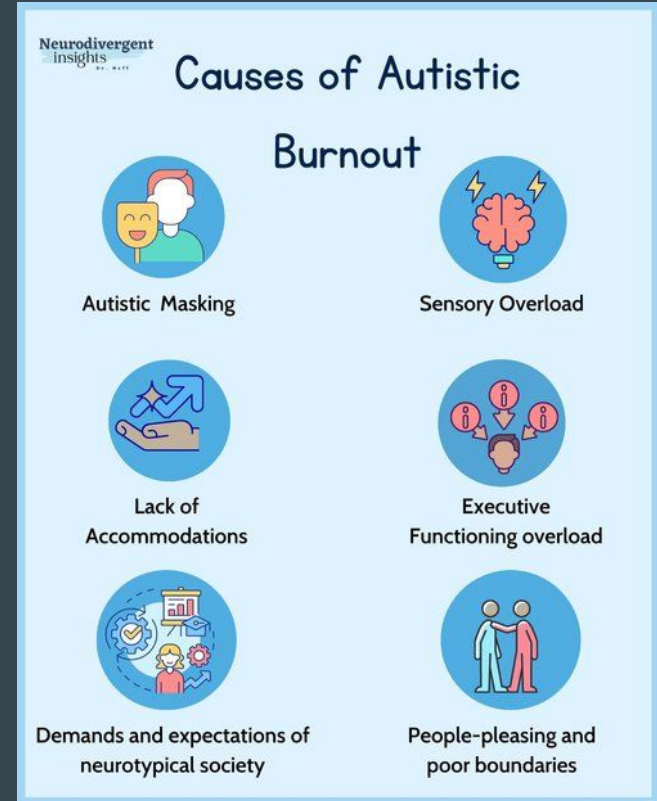
Theoretical Analysis

A Constructionist View: Labeling Theory

Of the constructionist theories, labeling theory appears most appropriate to apply to an analysis of neurodivergence due to its emphasis on society's definition of deviance; after all, no one can simply control the structure of their brain. This aspect of inescapability indicates that neurodivergence is a master status under this theory. This approach would recognize how being neurodivergent is not a negative quality on its own, yet is viewed as undesirable by the majority of society. Arguably, this negative view and the lack of accommodation in our society is a major part of what causes the negative aspects of neurodivergent conditions in the first place. Much of the discomfort of the neurodivergent experience stems from external prejudice as well as the pain and fatigue associated with pretending to be "normal."

A Constructionist View: Labeling Theory

Would autistic people be overstimulated in the middle of a forest? Would people with ADHD be chided for not sitting still in a busy hunter-gatherer or primarily agricultural society? We have already seen how people with Down syndrome possess greater capabilities for self-support than previously assumed (2). How would neurodivergent people flourish in a world designed to accommodate them? And how might neurotypical people struggle if they were excluded?




A Positivist View: Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory helps to explain why, in spite of negative sanctions, people continue to embrace their neurodivergence and allow themselves to “unmask.” As time goes on, we are learning more and more about different forms of neurodivergence as more research is done and resources for knowledge and exposure such as internet access are expanded. This encourages more people to come forward with their experiences of neurodivergence. The internet provides a medium for those who do not feel comfortable sharing their experiences or fully unmasking in person to gain support, find like minded people, and reach others who are then encouraged to be themselves as they witness the courage of others as well as the support they receive (vicarious reinforcement). These role models are present in real life and all over the internet, whether in [news stories](#), [blogs](#), or even [TikTok videos](#).

A Positivist View: Social Learning Theory

When you find out there's many ADHDers out there that get how you feel



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7m

neurodivergentales Follow

fillthedarkvoid asked:

Hi I hope you are doing alright. Anyway ypur blog is very relateble to me. So thanks for making me (and probably some others) feel less alone in this struggle. Just wanted to let you know you are appreciated. :)

Thank you so so much, that means a lot to me! I hope you're doing okay too ❤️❤️❤️



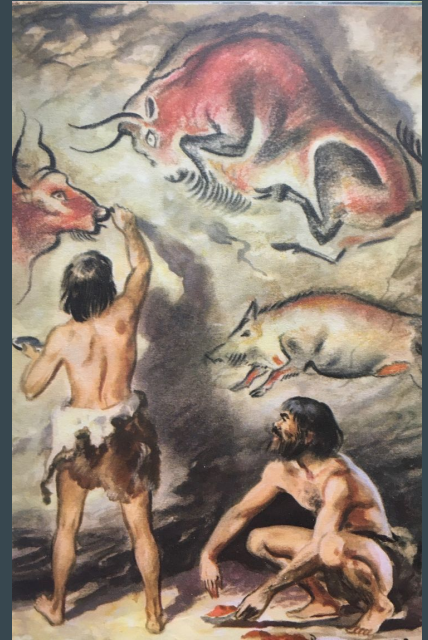
A Positivist View: Social Learning Theory

As neurodivergent individuals begin to imitate role models, even those who continue to experience negative reactions may find the positive results to be worth it. Alternatively, they may attempt to unmask only in certain spaces where they feel comfortable. In any case, when the positive reinforcements such as newfound feelings of freedom, satisfaction, comfort, solidarity, and connection prove to outweigh the negative sanctions, this direct reinforcement leads to repeated expressions of neurodiversity. Now, these individuals may be easily recognized as deviant as opposed to simply holding a status implying deviant tendencies. As they grow more comfortable with their identity and learn to accept who they are, they will internalise the label “neurodivergent” and may no longer require reinforcement.

Historical Evaluation

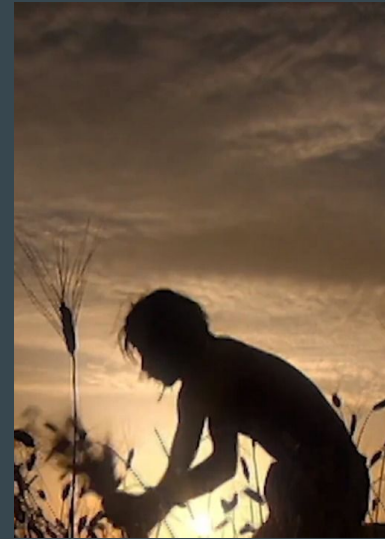
Where did neurodivergence come from?

Many wonder why neurodivergent conditions such as autism have increased in recent years. While researchers do suspect that genetic and environmental variables are leading to these increases, what many fail to consider is the fact that at least a great portion of this is due to increased awareness, knowledge, and diagnosis ([10](#); [11](#)). Also, it follows that growing awareness and acceptance would lead to lower levels of masking, thereby making diagnosis easier. Regardless of recent increases, many assert that neurodivergence has existed since ancient times ([12](#); [13](#); [14](#); [15](#); [16](#)). Therefore, it would have developed as a natural variation in brain structure and function.



A history of attitudes

Research has suggested that in ancient times of widespread hunter-gathering around 100,000 years ago, autism was considerably beneficial to survival ([17](#); [16](#)). As society changed, however, so too would traits seen as desirable. Similar to how neurodivergent youth are targeted by bullies even when the bullies are unaware of their neurodivergence, negative attitudes were present long before society even had names for the associated conditions. For example, Theophrastus' "The Obtuse Man" indicates negative sentiments toward people with signs of ADHD in ancient Greece ([15](#)).



A history of attitudes

Thankfully, autism and other conditions have certainly grown more recognized and respected ([18](#)) as the breadth of research and knowledge expands and organizations such as the Washington Post increasingly prioritize support over eradication through treatment and prevention ([19](#)). In respect to autism specifically, this awareness was made possible by the development of the term in the first place, though its definition and diagnostic criteria have undergone significant changes since its first mention in 1908 ([20](#)). Of course, the neurodiversity movement itself has made immense impacts through its calls for an alternative view of related conditions as neurodivergence as opposed to neurological disorders ([21](#)).



Looking Forward

The future of neurodivergence

Based on the current trend involving increased acceptance and normalization spurred on by the neurodiversity movement, I expect neurodivergence to become more and more positively and neutrally received as time goes on. While neurodivergent perspectives have been valued differently depending on location and time period, it has only been in very recent years that a clear definition not only of conditions such as autism but also of neurodivergence itself has emerged. We have only just begun to study and comprehend these unique perspectives—the first person diagnosed with autism is still living (22)—yet we have already made great progress in understanding. Karen O'Brien states, "The generations between me and my kids have come far in terms of acceptance and belonging," illustrating rapid developments in positive perception (23).

Sources

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- 2 [Interview: Temple Grandin on living with autism](#)

Abnormal Psychology (Slide 5)

- 3 [Why is autism seen as a disorder?](#)
- 4 [Disability discrimination in further and higher education](#)
- 5 [Why the R-Word Is the R-Slur](#)
- 6 [Why autistic kids make easy targets for school bullies](#)

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7 [Autistic adults and their experiences with police personnel](#)

News images (Slide 8)

8 [How "unmasking" leads to freedom for autistic and other neurodivergent people](#)

9 [Down syndrome and family support](#)

[News stories](#), [blogs](#), [TikTok videos](#) (Slide 13)

[Artist credit](#) (Slide 14)

10 [Autism rates have tripled](#)

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- 17 [Autism may have had advantages in humans' hunter-gatherer past](#)

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- 18 [The Ever-Changing Social Perception of Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
- 19 [Media representations are changing to reflect new public attitudes toward autism](#)
- 20 [Autism History](#)
- 21 [What is Neurodiversity?](#)
- 22 [Donald Grey Triplett: The first boy diagnosed as autistic](#)
- 23 [What is it really like to be neurodivergent?](#)