



Weighing In. Academic writers on neurodiversity.

Plain English Summary

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1. Introduction and background

Neurodiversity as an idea has changed the way we think of being different. People who support neurodiversity do not think that being different means that something is wrong or needs to be fixed. Being different is seen as a normal and helpful thing, and people who are different should be accepted and supported. This paper looks at the ways that academic writers – people who write articles for research journals – are using “neurodiversity”.

Judy Singer first used the word “neurodiversity” in 1998. Autistic and disabled people started using it after this, mostly online and as a part of activism. Recently, academic writers have been using the word more often. This paper looks at how academic writers use the word and idea of neurodiversity in different ways. We argue that when academic writers take ideas from outside of their own circles, they can change these ideas. This is important because researchers are a powerful social group whose words and ideas affect the ways other people think. Our research shows that many academics use the idea of “neurodiversity” in ways that can harm neurodiverse and disabled people.

2. Summary of the research

We collected 94 pieces of writing from social work, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, disability studies, education, and health journals. We used writing by Fairclough (2001; 2003) to create a set of questions we asked about each of the 94 texts. We wanted to understand *what* writers were saying about neurodiversity, and *how* they were saying those things. Asking our list of questions helped us understand how academic authors are using neurodiversity.

3. Findings from the research

First, we noticed that academics have recently started to write about neurodiversity a lot. In the past, most academics who wrote about neurodiversity were connected to



neurodiversity or disability in some way. Now, a lot of academics who write about neurodiversity are not different or disabled themselves.

What is neurodiversity?

Not everyone agrees about what neurodiversity is or what we should do with it. However, our research found three general ways that most academic writers understood neurodiversity. Sometimes there were small differences within these understandings, which we talk about as well.

- **Neurodiversity means difference isn't seen as broken or wrong.** Academic writers agreed that neurodiversity takes experiences that many people think of as wrong or broken and instead sees them as different, but they did not all agree on whether or not this difference is a good thing. Some writers thought that only certain kinds of difference were positive, and that some types of neurodiversity are better than others. Others focused on how neurodiversity and being different is a good thing for individual people and for people in general.
- **Neurodiversity has to do with bodies.** Academic writers agreed that neurodiversity refers to physical differences between people. Many writers talked about brains and genetics when they were explaining what neurodiversity means.
- **There are multiple ways to group people when thinking about neurodiversity.** When thinking about what neurodiversity is, some academic writers thought that people are either neurodivergent or they are not. Other writers thought that neurodiversity exists on a scale where people range between being a little different to being very different. A smaller third group of writers thought that everyone counts as neurodiverse because we are all different from each other.

Who counts in neurodiversity?

Academic writers had different opinions about who counts as neurodiverse. However, we noticed some general trends in how writers approached this question.

- **People see neurodiversity as connected to autism.** Most authors talked about Autistic people when they talked about neurodiversity. Some writers mentioned that neurodiversity includes more than just Autistic people but would go on to only talk about autism. Sometimes they thought that neurodiversity is a new word for autism. Only a small group of academic



writers focused on other diagnoses like ADHD or dyslexia when they talked about neurodiversity.

- **Some people think about “functioning” when deciding who counts in neurodiversity.** Some academic writers focused on people’s struggles when trying to decide who counts in neurodiversity. Some writers thought that only neurodivergent people who don’t need very much support (who are “high functioning”) should be included in neurodiversity. Other writers said that dividing people by focusing on their struggles goes against the most important parts of neurodiversity as an idea.

4. Discussion and implications

In addition to looking at agreements and disagreements about neurodiversity, our research also paid attention to *how* academic writers talked about neurodiversity. We found that most academic writers seemed to think that they knew the most about neurodiversity. Many thought they had the right answers to questions about neurodiversity and that not having personal feelings about neurodiversity made their opinions better. Activists and disabled people did not ask academics to come and solve problems or answer questions about neurodiversity, but that is what most academics did.

This is important because the idea of neurodiversity does not belong to academics. Activists and disabled people have spent years thinking and talking about neurodiversity. For activists and disabled people, an important part of neurodiversity is the idea that everyone should listen to people who are disabled or different. People who are different have important ideas and know the most about what it is like to be different in a society that thinks their kind of difference is bad. Academic writers can think they know the most about neurodiversity, but many do not have these experiences, and do not understand that listening to neurodiverse and disabled people is a very important part of neurodiversity. This is a problem because it tells other people that they do not need to listen to neurodiverse and disabled people. Academic writers are already a powerful group, and the way they talk about neurodiversity strengthens this power.

Find out more

This article is part of a project called Neurodiversity Matters. The project received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada. Margaret Gibson is the principal investigator on the Neurodiversity Matters project, and you can learn more about her and her work at <https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/home>.



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