



Neurodiversity:

A concept applicable to research

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Neurodiversity, a term first coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in 1999, is a new manner of describing all the ways in which human brains differ. We speak of neurodiversity when describing autistic and dyslexic people, or those with ADHD, because their way of thinking and seeing the world differs from that of the majority, which we refer to as “neurotypical”. Rather than viewing these differences as disorders, neurodiversity sees these conditions as natural, legitimate, and worthy of respect and inclusion in our society. However, this does not deny that certain specificities linked to autism or other conditions may manifest as a disability in some situations. Simply put, proponents of the neurodiversity movement recognize the challenges that autistic people face, but also their potential.

The neurodiversity movement advocates, amongst other things, for the active participation of autistic people in research that concerns them. This type of engagement can actually benefit research and autistic people around the world. Indeed, autism research was long conducted without the direct implication of autistic people. Many clinicians and researchers thought that autistic people were not capable of contributing to research, whether it affected them or not. Autistic researchers, such as Damian Milton and Michelle Dawson, proved this idea wrong by making important contributions to science. Their work demonstrated not only that autistic people were able to conduct research, but that certain traits linked to their autism in fact made them stand out as top researchers. The neurodiversity movement encourages us to value

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autistic people's research contributions. Even with these ideas gaining wider traction, scientific research involving autistic co-investigators remains relatively uncommon.


The neurodiversity movement also considers that autistic people should be consulted when determining priorities on research that concerns them, as is best put by the slogan, "Nothing about us without us". One of the aims of research on any minority is to improve quality of life in that population. Autistic people, as with any other minority, have opinions on what is important to them, which does not always coincide with what researchers or funding organizations deem important. A British study actually illustrated this point by demonstrating that areas of research prioritized by autistic adults were amongst the least funded. For example, research on adapting public services to the needs of autistic people, which autistic participants listed as a top priority, received only 5% of research funding between 2007 and 2011. It is therefore crucial that autistic people are given a voice if we are to prioritize research that will improve their quality of life.

Lastly, the neurodiversity movement has over the years highlighted several instances in which autistic people found that research published about them did not mirror their experiences. This has furthered research in numerous cases, by encouraging the revision of previously established theories. For example, research assumed for many years that autistic people were lacking in empathy. This hypothesis was sharply critiqued by autistic people, who instead argued that the issue was one of how empathy was defined. Autistic researcher Damian Milton notably suggested a "double empathy problem", suggesting that difficulties with social interaction between autistic and non-autistic people were not unidirectional, but rather a case of mutual misun-

derstanding. For further information on this topic, we encourage you to consult Noémie Cusson's article in this issue (page 10).



In viewing autism as a different way of functioning, neurodiversity can advance research, by forcing us to reconsider what we consider "normal" behavior. For example, a recent study analyzing interactions between autistic people playing video games identified several autism-specific behaviors used to facilitate social exchanges, despite the fact that these interactions may seem incoherent to non-autistic people. The authors namely cited conversations made up entirely of movie quotes, which seemed to promote social understanding between these young autistic adults.

In conclusion, neurodiversity does not necessarily signify "good science", nor does it represent a seal of approval from the entire autistic community, or justify all actions undertaken in its name. However, by accepting that all human conditions have equal value, and that autistic people have the right and the ability to guide research and policy that affects them, we can simultaneously accept and develop people's strengths, without denying specific needs inherent to each condition. 

Main references:

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