

THE AUTISM BINARY: FINDING THE CAUSE AND CURE/
ACCEPTING AND HELPING THE AFFECTED POPULATION –
MAKING THE CASE FOR NEURODIVERSITY

By

STEVEN WALKER

A capstone submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in Liberal Studies

Written under the direction of

Professor Timothy Pure

And approved by

Professor Timothy Pure

Camden, New Jersey

May 2017

CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

The Autism Binary: Finding the Cause and Cure/Accepting and Helping
the Affected Population – Making the Case for Neurodiversity

by STEVEN WALKER

Capstone Director:
Professor Timothy Pure

According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), the probability of a child being diagnosed with some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder is 1 in 68. Autism is nondiscriminatory, for it can arise in any family at any time. In light of these facts, the Autistic community has become a veritable part of the western world. Subsequently, a continuing debate exists on whether to find the cause and possible cure for the condition, or to pursue the Neurodiversity movement, which is to accept Autism as a brain variation – not a disability. As an Autistic individual, I concur with the latter motive, for an immeasurable amount of neurotypicals are obsessed with the former idea. In addition, neurotypicals make endless attempts to ‘normalize’ the Autistic populace without their consent whatsoever. Well, what exactly is the true definition of ‘normal?’ Normal is a relative descriptor after all. Therefore, in this paper I will argue in favor of the Neurodiversity movement, for I am a proponent of its core message. We must strongly emphasize the importance of providing better support and acceptance for these individuals who already struggle with the condition versus persistently searching for what causes the ‘disability’ to arise.

The Autism Binary: Finding the Cause and Cure/Accepting and Helping
the Affected Population – Making the Case for Neurodiversity

*There comes clearly the will of a demon
to reach the boundaries of his own being,
and to discover the parallel within himself.
The circle hangs on an equator of truth and deceit
upon the graphic territories that enclose its space.*

*A single truth lies on the mountain of identity,
and preaches its prophecy from golden light within.
Now there comes the peak and the river that
seem to nurture its trees and leaves for eternal youth.
Life is bountiful in its splendor for eternity.*

*A single deceit lies within the womb of magma,
ever prone to expectorating the confining crust that
formulates its evacuating rings of deception.
Now comes the river of malcontent and fear
that entail the coming of ash and shadow.
Worn with age and carelessness of eons,
life is hopeless in its eternal blackness.*

*There within the center of an eternal being,
is the hope of an unknown ecosystem,
destined with a potential serenity of resources
open to the intake of a creasing line.
A line of hope and of despair.*

-written by Steven Walker, 2010

Introduction

The Autism binary has generated much discourse recently among researchers, parents of Autistic children, Autistic individuals and the Autism community, and neurotypicals, particularly since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in 2016 (from its latest study of 2012) that the probability of a child being diagnosed with some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the United States is 1 in 68 (Christensen et al. 1). To draw upon one controversial motion, there are those who center primarily on finding the cause of Autism with a subsequent hopeful ‘cure’ in the near future. However, others aspire to accept and assist the Autistic population by promoting the concepts of the Neurodiversity movement, which was established for and by Autistic individuals with the corroboration of many supporters and researchers.

Disagreement with Finding the Cause and Cure

According to Dr. Temple Grandin, a famous Autistic author and researcher, the *DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)* explains the new criteria used to diagnose ASD under one category, and she indicates her summary of its findings: “Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction; Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” (*The Autistic Brain* 108). With that said and the aforementioned CDC report, those who focus on the cause and cure concept recognize Autism as a disability that must be precluded somehow, and neurotypicals are the main

proponent of this idea. In fact, some see the rise in Autism as a medical epidemic that has led to “an epidemic of autism discourse” as well (Johnson 1).

Parents of Autistic children are especially vulnerable from the prevailing dilemma of finding the cause and cure, because understandably, countless mothers and fathers are frustrated in their quest to help their child. If only they could welcome the reassurance that the Autistic individual does not mean to frustrate their lives. Instead, he just comprehends the world differently, so why should there be a seemingly justifiable requirement for apprehension? Jim Sinclair, an Autistic writer, expounds on their misery in his article, “Don’t Mourn for Us”:

I invite you to look at our autism, and look at your grief, from our perspective: Autism isn’t something a person has, or a “shell” that a person is trapped inside. There’s no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person – and if it were possible, the person you’d have left would not be the same person you started with. (1-2)

Jim Sinclair originally wrote this article in 1993 to be addressed to parents at the International Conference on Autism in Toronto, Canada. He was also addressing the cause and cure concept that many parents were searching for desperately. He bravely continued imploring parents in this same article:

Therefore, when parents say, I wish my child did not have autism, what they’re really saying is, I wish the autistic child I have did not exist, and I had a different (non-autistic) child instead. Read that again. This is what we hear when you mourn over our existence. This is what we hear when you pray for a cure. This is what we know, when you tell us of your fondest hopes and dreams for us: that your greatest wish is that one day we will cease to be, and strangers you can love will move in behind our faces. (2)

These long excerpts by Sinclair are important if one seeks to comprehend the motives behind these parents and other ‘well-meaning’ advocates who are behind the cause and cure idea.

Parents were and still are influenced by the neurotypical organizations who are ‘advocating’ for their children, but who in truth, are procuring sufferable damage to Autistic youths in the place of producing veritable benefits for them. One can cite some past and present examples. For a lengthy stretch of Western history, parents were concerned about the connection between vaccines and Autism. This fear stemmed from a now retracted 1998 fraudulent report by a British researcher named Andrew Wakefield, who supposedly saw an increase in Autism when the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine was administered to children (Ripamonti 60). Even though he was proven wrong, some parents were still forgoing vaccines for their children, and some parents to this day continue to believe in the vaccine link and Autism (Ripamonti 60). It must be noted that “there is currently no clinical genetic test that can reliably determine predisposition to autism” (Ripamonti 59). Parents must realize that the anti-vaccination discourse that is occurring today is dangerous and will only promote the resurfacing of diseases that were once eradicated or under control.

In addition to the anti-vaccination issue, another method was used to invoke fear in parents. Christina Nicolaidis, a physician who has an Autistic child, expounded on a 2007 campaign that was managed by the NYU Child Study Center, which focused on brazen billboards that warned: “We have your son. We will make sure he will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long

as he lives. This is only the beginning – Autism” (504). An imaginative moment can involve a parent with an Autistic child wanting to avoid those billboards while driving by taking an alternate route! Nicolaidis also relates the 2009 video released by Autism Speaks called “I am Autism” that showcased a depressing perspective of the disorder, in addition to previous similarly-based videos of that time period (504). Even the aforementioned CDC report of 2016 may have caused parents to raise the Autism white flag. These examples of the ‘find the cause and cure of Autism’ mantra are just several out of many that have pervaded the Autistic world and the world of the misinformed neurotypicals.

Naturally as a result, parents and others in the community at large who are supportive of the ‘cause and cure platform’ desire to ‘semi-cure’ Autism with ‘normalization’ methods. The factors solidifying their logic are that if they normalize the undesirable behaviors, then they somehow have the closest response to a cure. It is as though the so-called ‘negative’ behaviors – stimming, unsociability, inquisitiveness at improper moments, and meltdowns to name a few – are seen as abnormalities that must be precluded. The Autistic author of this paper was subjected to these notions. On countless occasions when he was stimming as a youth (and occasionally still has remnants of stimming today as an adult), he was stared upon by a variety of individuals. Some were understanding; others were not comfortable with the situation. Fortunately, his parents accepted him as he was and saw nothing ‘abnormal’ with his behavior. How can one justify the negativity about Autism when one cannot define ‘normal?’ Can one really modify or cure an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? As Sven Bölte indicates:

“No agreement exists as to how clinically significant change or cure should be defined in ASD, and which measures might be appropriate” (928). Bølte also states that behavior can be modified and symptoms can improve, but that is the limit of these procedures (928). In addition, Bølte reasoned that “it is unlikely that a certain treatment will have a comparable effect in all individuals with ASD” (930). The story has always been the presumption that an ASD diagnosis was a “tragedy” that will cause much distress in a family (McCollum 44).

The ‘cause and cure’ platform is what led to the entire composition of what provokes the negativity about Autism; however, some are trying to alter that viewpoint into a more positive one. Scott Michael Robertson, an Autistic researcher, comments on this aspect of the negativity: “A deficit model has largely dominated most professional and academic discourse on autism over the last century....Under the deficit model, autistic people are portrayed as broken humans who are ill and require fixing to enable them to function normally in society” (1-2). On the other hand, he indicates that “non-autistic people are viewed as neurologically healthy and psychologically as well. This deficit-focused view of autistic people has largely ignored their cognitive strengths, their diverse way of being, and their gifts and talents” (Robertson 2). It comes as no surprise that parents with Autistic children are deluged with this discourse and search in vain for what they hope will be the cause and cure. One cannot condemn these exacerbated parents, but perhaps one can present ASD to them in a more positive manner and forego the presently negative disposition. Autism may have relevance within genetics somehow, but maybe this concept is something that

should be considered in a more encouraging approach. Tolerance of the condition as it stands rather than the revelation of its definite cause and potential cure is more favorable. In his book *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, Steve Silberman explains a positive genetic mutation as an answer:

In recent years, researchers have determined that most cases of autism are not rooted in rare de novo mutations but in very old genes that are shared widely in the general population while being concentrated more in certain families than others. Whatever autism is, it is not a unique product of modern civilization. It is a strange gift from our deep past, passed down through millions of years of evolution. (470)

Silberman continues this idea by indicating “that instead of viewing this gift as an error of nature...society should regard it as a valuable part of humanity’s genetic legacy” (470). Silberman’s proposal is a brilliant one and establishes the acceptance of Autism as a variation of the brain, not a wretched disability. Even Bólte raises “the question [of] whether cure should always be a goal in ASD, or if alternatives to cure are equally important” (930). Since one cannot define ‘normal,’ how then can one define the scope of Autism? How can one cure what is not fully defined? Dr. Thomas Armstrong excellently ponders: “How absurd it would be to label a calla lily as having ‘petal deficit disorder’ or to diagnose a person from Holland as suffering from ‘altitude deprivation syndrome.’ There is no normal flower or culture. Similarly, we ought to accept the fact that there is no normal brain or mind” (350).

Perhaps if parents of Autistic children and the community at large observe this brain variation as something scientifically fascinating and hopeful, the positive model of ASD will emerge in their hearts. Instead of trying to normalize

the veritable aspects of ASD, one should embrace them as useful entities. As Silberman indicates about Neurodiversity advocates:

They suggest that instead of investing millions of dollars a year to uncover the causes of autism in the future, we should be helping autistic people and their families live happier, healthier, more productive, and more secure lives in the present....But first we have to learn to think more intelligently about people who think differently. (470-471)

Therein introduces the second part of the Autism binary of accepting and helping the affected population – making the case for Neurodiversity.

Making the Case for Neurodiversity

The term Neurodiversity obtains its roots as far back as 1938 when Hans Asperger, a doctor from Vienna, Austria, advocated for his young Autistic clients in his initial discussion on Autism to the public at large in order to promote their unique intelligence (Silberman 16). Steve Silberman defines Neurodiversity as follows:

[It is] the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions. (16)

In fact, Autistic individuals are the ones who can interpret and advocate their condition better than physicians, parents, or the general public (Silberman 16).

The Neurodiversity movement's origin can be traced to an Autistic individual named Jim Sinclair. Although he did not invent the term, he spoke of the positive aspects and new model of approaching Autism in his speech "Don't Mourn for Us" in 1993 at the "International Conference on Autism in Toronto"

(Armstrong 349). Excerpts from his published speech were mentioned previously in this paper to emphasize his disparity with parents over their negative views of Autism. Sinclair was irreparably strained from hearing about the “tragedy” of Autism and instead sought to promote its beneficial assets (“Don’t Mourn for Us” 2). He could not understand why parents would grieve over having an Autistic child as though it were a death sentence. Rather, he alluded to this:

After you’ve started that letting go, come back and look at your autistic child again and say to yourself: ‘This is not my child that I expected and planned for. This is an alien child who landed in my life by accident. I don’t know who this child is or what it will become. But I know it’s a child, stranded in an alien world, without parents of its own kind to care for it. It needs someone to care for it, to teach it, to interpret, and to advocate for it. And because this alien child happened to drop into my life, that job is mine if I want it. (“Don’t Mourn for Us” 3)

The concept of entering an alien world or feeling like an outsider is a common theme for Autistic individuals, because neurotypicals have their own set of ‘norms’ that are obtrusive.

A second origin of the Neurodiversity movement can be traced to another person: “The word itself was first used by autism rights advocate Judy Singer and New York journalist Harvey Blume to articulate the needs of people with autism who did not want to be defined by a disability label but wished to be seen instead as neurologically different” (Armstrong 349). Judy Singer was a student who majored in sociology and anthropology at a university in Australia in the 1990s (Silberman 450). She always felt that she had traits of Asperger’s syndrome, yet did not come to this full realization until her own daughter was diagnosed at nine years old (Silberman 452). She connected with the *New York Times* journalist Blume and they both came up with the core message of the Neurodiversity

movement in 1997 (Silberman 453). According to Steve Silberman, in 1998 Harvey Blume was the first journalist to use the word Neurodiversity for the *Atlantic* (454). Blume wrote the following: “NT [Neurotypical] is only one kind of brain wiring, and when it comes to working with hi-tech, quite possibly an inferior one.... Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will prove best at any given moment?” (Silberman 454). Blume and Singer felt that it was time to persuade the neurotypical world into realizing that the Autistic world needed to be recognized as an asset to society. Since Autism rates were increasing, neurotypicals were faced with making Neurodiversity a viable option.

With that said, Jim Sinclair transitioned his proposal to new grounds, calling for a more diverse society that suits the Autistic individual profoundly. Sinclair does not like the use of “person first language”:

I am not a person with autism. I am an autistic person. Why does this distinction matter to me? Saying person with autism suggests that the autism can be separated from the person....Saying person with autism suggests that even if autism is part of the person, it isn't a very important part....I am autistic because autism is an essential feature of me as a person. (“Why I Dislike Person First Language” 1)

This idea is a controversial one, but only to the neurotypical community. It is as though neurotypicals are not comfortable with addressing the Autistic identity. Therefore, they desire to put the word second, such as ‘the student with Autism’ instead of ‘Autistic student.’ As Dr. Nicolaidis points out, “But by separating the autism from the person, are we encouraging our patients’ family members to love an imagined nonautistic child that was never born, forgetting about the real person

who exists in front of us?” (505). Additionally, putting the word ‘Autistic’ first has sparked controversy among the neurotypical population, because in their minds it defines an uncomfortable aspect of an individual. In other words, some non-Autistics simply do not want to apply the use of “autistic identity politics” (Ortega and Choudhury 332). Again, as Jim Sinclair has indicated, the neurotypical population just cannot understand why Autistic individuals prefer their own nomenclature:

Saying person with autism suggests that autism is something bad so bad that it isn’t even consistent with being a person. Nobody objects to using adjectives to refer to characteristics of a person that are considered positive or neutral.... We might call someone a blue-eyed person or a person with blue eyes, and nobody objects to either descriptor. It is only when someone has decided that the characteristic being referred to is negative that suddenly people want to separate it from the person. (“Why I Dislike Person First Language” 2)

The latter part of this excerpt transpired to the Autistic author of this paper. While interviewing for the job of an assistant for ‘students with Autism’ at a school, the author referred to this position as one who is helping ‘Autistic students.’ Even though the interviewer knew that the applicant was an Autistic individual who preferred this nomenclature, the applicant was corrected for not using the ‘person first language.’ Hence, this applicant was not called back for a second interview, and he could not help but speculate if the neurotypical phraseology was used, would the outcome have been a different one? This incident verifies the importance of understanding why the concept of Neurodiversity is fundamental to Autistic individuals, and why neurotypicals need to be cognizant of its value:

“Self-advocates remind us to reflect on the images and language we use.

Communicating a strengths-based approach to autism may not only afford autistic

patients the respect and dignity they deserve, but may also help family members better understand and support their loved ones” (Nicolaidis 505).

The non-Autistic populace may puzzle over why Autistic individuals are hyper-sensitive – surely, does not the Autistic populace struggle with this ‘disability’ and face great difficulty to adapting in society periodically? What is considerable about the Neurodiversity movement? An Autistic individual can answer these questions by relating to several factors in the neurotypical world that are not Autistically compatible ones. Hence, the ‘disability’ is created because of these incompatibilities. Autistic individuals are well aware of the challenges they face and have already encountered in society because of their neurological variations. As Dr. Nicolaidis excellently explains:

Despite claims to the contrary, leaders in the neurodiversity movement clearly recognize autism as a disability. Autistic self-advocates often vividly describe the disabilities they experience. They also maintain, however, that difficulties experienced by people with disabilities are contextual and that living in a society designed for nonautistic people exacerbates the challenges experienced by autistic individuals. (505)

In other words, Autistic brain variation becomes a ‘disability’ in the eyes of neurotypical society. Autistic individuals feel quite normal as they are, thank you. However, the Autistic populace only recognized the term ‘disability’ when, unfortunately, neurotypicals assigned the word to them; this does not mean Autistic individuals accept it.

Autistic individuals therefore encounter a non-Autistic society that either yearns to normalize them or validate their strange ‘behavior’ from a neurotypical perspective. One can clarify the latter with a humorous example. If a known Autistic person was perambulating along a sidewalk in his neighborhood

conversing with himself, some may assume this unconventional behavior is by reason of his ‘disability.’ (This particular incident befell the author). However, this aforementioned Autistic author witnessed a neurotypical sashaying down the street wearing a small Bluetooth device on his ear and confabulating randomly out loud. Of course, this latter behavior was viewed as ‘normal,’ because those around the Bluetooth wearer saw nothing abnormal about that scenario and did not stare. In all seriousness, the concept of society at large trying to normalize the Autistic populace precipitates much sensitivity and authenticates the acceptance of the Neurodiversity message. For example, various forms of social skills are coerced upon the Autistic individual. A profusion of non-Autistic people are obsessed with social exercises such as eye contact and small talk – the illogical manner of discourse with no apparent reason or objective in mind. There have been many awkward situations where an Autistic individual may be content with a void – no discourse, yet the neurotypicals surrounding him find this scenario rather uncomfortable or disconcerting. In their article, “Neurodiversity: Accepting Autistic Difference,” Owren and Stenhammer acknowledge these situations and ask:

Why is neurotypical society so preoccupied with getting autistic people to make eye contact, when it is obvious that so many do not like it, or find it too intense and distracting? It may simply be basic human nature, faced with what seems unfamiliar and strange, we will often –almost instinctively – react by trying to make it less strange if in a position to do so. (35)

Why indeed is the neurotypical population uncomfortable with Autistic traits such as stimming and diminished socialization skills? Their obsession with the normalization of Autistic individuals provokes the hypersensitivity that arises. In

addition, Autistic individuals use stimming as “flight-or-fight responses, attempts to avoid the pain that can result from sensory overload” (Owren and Stenhammer 37). Non-Autistics must understand that normalization, or modifying these aforementioned behaviors according to *their* definition of ‘normal,’ is an illogical undertaking. This scenario confirms why the Neurodiversity movement answers the question of why Autistic individuals feel neurotic after the admonishments of neurotypical people:

By autistic standards, the “normal” brain is easily distractible, is obsessively social, and suffers from a deficit of attention to detail and routine. Thus people on the spectrum experience the neurotypical world as relentlessly unpredictable and chaotic, perceptually turned up too loud, and full of people who have little respect for personal space. (Silberman 471)

So if Autistic individuals reject normalization, what then do they request of the non-Autistic populace in this regard? Since the aim of Neurodiversity is to show that Autism is a variation of the brain and not an abnormality, then neurotypicals should heed this advice: “Find ways to better accommodate and support autistic individuals so that they are afforded the same opportunities as typical peers, while maintaining their autistic strengths and differences” (Nicolaidis 508).

How Neurotypicals Can Help the Neurodiversity Movement Better

There are endless ways that neurotypicals can assist in promoting the Neurodiversity movement. However, they must first consult with the Autistic individuals themselves. Since normal is a relative descriptor, then so are intelligence and communication techniques. Accordingly, then neurotypicals can focus on and implement a more positive method, which is explained by Jennifer

Sarrett. She recommends “looking to the autism community and neurodiversity movement as a guide for how to develop a construct of human rights that recognizes a range of ability and intelligibility without relying on traditional testing measures or norms of behavioral expressions that lead to unnecessary value judgments” (Sarrett 12). For example, an Autistic college student may house various behavioral expressions that depend on the current activity. Sometimes, this student will enunciate a form of communication that seems contrary to the neurotypical student. An Autistic student is highly intelligent yet may express his convictions verbally, non-verbally (by facial distortions if something is disagreeable or disturbing to him), and at times he may say nothing at all and sit in silence when in a sensory overload mode – much to the discomfort and awkward gazes of his neurotypical classmates. Subsequently, then a more positive template must be observed by the non-Autistic community in the classroom and in the public domain. Jennifer Sarrett explains this approach further and why it works: “This model places everyone in a sphere, instead of on a spectrum or level, of human variation respecting differences without the implication of a value based where on the spectrum one falls” (12). Sarrett indicates that “nearly everyone possesses a characteristic or trait” that could be considered Autistic, such as “intense focus, shyness, difficulties with communication, a distinctive gait, a preference for routine” and other factors (12). Sarrett emphasizes that “instead of pathologizing a certain amalgamation of the traits, accepting all of a person’s traits would facilitate an ethos of inclusion” (12). What must be perspicuous is that an Autistic individual does not deny that at

times he may have difficulty with certain situations, such as social cues, multitasking, organizational skills, money management, and sensory overload – to name just a few. Just living day to day is an enormity for an Autistic person. As mentioned previously, what makes these occurrences more pronounced is that the Autistic populace must navigate the world at a disadvantage. One can use the example of an alien arriving on the planet Earth arduously trying to understand its ecosystem. It has advanced upon a planet with established patterns of living by the dominant society at hand. Of course, the Earthlings see the alien as a curiosity and a potential threat – they would adamantly expect the cosmic being to adapt to their own specifications of living. However, what if the alien's relentlessly fraught attempts at conformity prove futile? An inclusive process would be necessary. Likewise, one can visit a foreign land, yet be unfamiliar with its language and traditions. Those indigenous to the land can create a more inclusive environment to help the foreigner navigate his way. Whether one can assimilate is not the issue; the indigenous people should help foster a welcoming atmosphere to ease the sensory overload of a new environment. These two exemplifications describe the Autistic individual (alien/foreigner) in a strange world/land trying to understand its neurotypical ideas, customs, and language. He feels like an outsider trying to open a locked door. Neurotypicals can help greatly by opening the door of Neurodiversity.

To be fair, some neurotypical establishments, such as colleges and universities, already have implemented aspects of the Neurodiversity movement with positive mechanisms. Knowing that Autistic students have difficulty with

organizational skills, many colleges and universities have established Autism services to help students cope with the magnitude of course expectations. There are many support services that will graciously extend their hand of tutelage with writing papers, navigating the campus, and coping with the stress of a neurotypical environment. The college library has a respectable staff to assist with researching information, electronically accessing information for research papers, and navigating the library website in general. The Learning Center offers assistance as well to struggling Autistic students. Finally, the advisors and professors help mitigate the classroom experience of the Autistic student, so he can then have the confidence to obtain the highest educational degree desired in spite of the neurotypical obstacles. The Autistic author of this paper was privileged to experience these thoughtful accommodations at the two collegiate institutions he attended – The Community College of Philadelphia and Rutgers University-Camden, New Jersey. Both institutions offer an innumerable amount of helpful resources for Autistic students in an inclusive, diverse environment.

However, no matter how understanding and greatly accommodating these collegiate entities are, they cannot ‘make’ all neurotypicals understand neurodiversity. Some non-Autistic students are kind and can sense when another student is suppressed and overwhelmed with sensory overload – without even knowing if this particular student has Autism. Then one has the unfortunate pleasure of coming in contact with the occasional neurotypical who would glare awkwardly at the overwhelmed student and avoid him when the occasional stimming resurfaced. Fortunately, the latter situation dissipated as this Autistic

author enrolled in graduate school at Rutgers University, because he encountered remarkably kind neurotypicals – professors and students alike – who afforded time and effort to understand Autism. Autistic authors Scott Robertson and Ari Ne’eman offer suggestions for the college communities: “Colleges and universities can host gatherings and events focused on learning more about autistic college students and the neurological diversity they contribute to their campus environment” (6). Robertson and Ne’eman indicate that colleges and universities can expound on their already established diversity-themed gatherings: “A neurodiversity-focused expansion of these diversity events would integrate activities focused on embracing the diversity of autistic people and other neurodiverse population groups” (6). The unfortunate paradox of these college experiences can be found in the federal laws protecting the registered Autistic students themselves. Colleges and Universities by law cannot disclose to the student population who among them has Autism, of course. Unless the Autistic student voluntarily chooses to divulge his condition, then the neurotypical students are left to ponder the ‘different’ person in their classroom. Then, another sub-Autism binary eventuates: To tell or not to tell? From the Autistic perspective, in accordance with the experiences of this author, revealing one’s condition in college does greater good over remaining silent. There are many benevolent non-Autistic collegiate classmates of the author’s respective campus who are very understanding once the condition is revealed to them. They will pour out every last known amount of effort that can spawn from every ounce and fiber of their being to ensure that they understand and accept the Autistic

classmate. Eventually, they will also benefit from an alternative viewpoint that can be decidedly intriguing and refreshing. In this way, the non-Autistic populace is helping the Neurodiversity movement.

With that said, however, the normalization process becomes implemented unintentionally in many situations of the neurotypical environment of the collegiate classroom and beyond. Although accommodating to the Autistic college student, many professors present syllabi that promote neurotypical discourse, even ironically, if one is enrolled in a disability-themed course. Logically, professors are under the assumption that the majority of the students in their classes are neurotypical – with a sprinkling of say, Autistic students. This assumption is not to fault the professors, because even with the aforementioned syllabi, all the instructors this Autistic author has had the pleasure of knowing have been very accommodating and understanding. The premise behind these various collegiate situations is to explicitly point out the difficulties faced by the Autistic student – unbeknownst to the neurotypical populace. While many students peruse through their various syllabi and quickly decipher the instructors' expectations in their classrooms, the Autistic student is left to ponder and read the syllabi frequently – with dictionary in hand to decipher the complicated words and neurotypical nomenclature. Similarly, the requirements for a research paper demand much reading for long periods of time, deciphering the text, and relying endlessly on the dictionary and thesaurus. The Capstone project alone is a dive into the eternal abyss. Beyond the scope of the collegiate construct, the Autistic student unremittingly continues with the difficulties of the required neurotypical

discourse at job interviews, social gatherings, and public sectors. Unfortunately, the Autistic individual is generally ignored or construed as ‘strange’ whenever he exhibits any form of stimming in these latter situations and must deal with the impending disastrous outcomes.

Therein exist the other feasible suggestions that neurotypicals can implement into assisting the Neurodiversity movement better:

- Read more about Autism, particularly Steve Silberman’s book, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*.
- Shadow an Autistic college student or high school student for several days.
- Be less judgmental when observing a sensory overload or ‘strange’ behavior; with the Autism rate at 1 in 68, the person exhibiting behavior may be Autistic.
- Show compassion to others who appear different behaviorally. In the college classroom, one must understand that if the discourse is disturbing, the Autistic student may revert to an unrelated or less intensive topic. This does not indicate a lack of intelligence, but a coping mechanism to shield himself from the neurotypical discourse at hand.
- Finally, if the Autistic college student reveals his condition, ask him about information on the Neurodiversity movement and how one can help.

By eliminating the social stigma of Autism and gleaning the bona fide voices of Autistic people in the Neurodiversity movement, the non-Autistic populace can better ascertain their needs and desires. Autistic individuals are already aware of the multiple services available to them – Autism Speaks, ANI (Autism Network International), ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network), NAS (National Autistic Society), ASA (Autism Society of America), and AASPIRE (Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education) – to name several that help with

life skills, employment, and general advice. With that said, the Neurodiversity movement seeks to shift the focus from the ‘disability’ conviction and have neurotypicals embrace “the autistic culture” (Gobbo and Shmulsky 3).

Neurotypicals can support the Neurodiversity movement further by exploring the significance of this movement’s core message via books, the internet, and the Autistic individuals who favor it. Furthermore, by collaborating directly with Autistic students/individuals, neurotypicals can then help improve the formers’ “quality of life” (Robertson 3).

Controversy with the Neurodiversity Movement

Undoubtedly, there are opponents to certain aspects of the Neurodiversity movement, and these include some neurotypicals and some Autistic individuals as well. As Dr. Nicolaidis indicates, “At some levels, the two sides of the debate may be irreconcilable” (506). Some people stress that the Neurodiversity movement focuses on the ‘higher functioning’ end of Autism Spectrum Disorder: “For others, autism acceptance neglects to account for the challenges experienced by those who live with the most severe forms of ASD, which may preclude independent living and be accompanied by related medical issues such as seizure disorders, gastrointestinal conditions, obesity, and insomnia” (Gobbo and Shmulsky 5). Temple Grandin promotes most aspects of Neurodiversity but believes that severe forms of ASD must be addressed differently:

Many individuals with high-functioning autism or Asperger’s feel that autism is a normal part of human diversity.... There are numerous interest groups run by people on the autism/Asperger spectrum and many of them are upset about attempts to eliminate autism. A little bit of the autism trait

provides advantages but too much creates a low-functioning individual who cannot live independently. The paradox is that milder forms of autism and Asperger's are part of human diversity but severe autism is a great disability. (*Thinking in Pictures* 122)

Grandin delivers some justifiable points. However, those belonging to the higher-functioning end, such as this Autistic author, are fully aware of the varying degrees of Autism. Those with more severe forms may exhibit stimming more frequently and have more difficulty with language, communication, and basic daily living activities.

What must be established here is that some Autistic individuals who are now on the 'higher end' had severe tribulations with the aforementioned difficulties as well, in varying degrees in their young lives, such as this Autistic author had likewise experienced. As Autistic adults, they are not bothered or do not even react to an Autistic child who is stimming or is confounded with language difficulties – this constitutes normal behavior to an Autistic adult.

Wretchedly, it is the non-Autistic person who is distressed and uncomfortable with the self-stimulatory behavior of an Autistic individual. The Autistic author of this paper experienced neurotypicals reacting unfavorably to him when he started stimming – for example, those situations when he stood on his toes and flapped his arms as a sensory-overloaded child. When the author was finished with his unconscious stimming, he felt all eyes on his persona; fortunately, it was his loving parents whom he saw reprimanding the neurotypical culprits, who had laughed and then indicated their discomfort with this Autistic lad's behavior. One must inquire who is the stimming Autistic individual harming? In addition, language and communication do accelerate over time with help and diminished

sensory overload. These tasks are lengthy, but they do not facilitate what neurotypicals insist must be *normalization* of the Autistic individual. Stimming will always be a part of him throughout his life. Steve Silberman logically explains the behavior of the sensory-overloaded Autistic individual through an illuminating approach and disagrees with any method of punishment or normalization technique to preclude the behavior:

Researchers would eventually discover that autistic people stim to reduce anxiety – and also simply because it feels good. In fact, harmless forms of self-stimulation (like flapping and fidgeting) may *facilitate* learning by freezing up executive-functioning resources in the brain that would otherwise be devoted to suppressing them. (308)

If the non-Autistic populace would abstain from the ‘normalization’ mantra for Autistic individuals, then perhaps they will better appreciate the intelligence and the audaciously wonderful viewpoints that all Autistic people have to offer this world. As Dr. Nicolaidis denotes about the Neurodiversity controversy: “I believe that a great deal of the neurodiversity argument has been misunderstood....They [Neurodiversity advocates] advocate for increased acceptance, accommodations, and supports and are very welcoming of research, therapies, and services that help them improve their quality of life” (506). Neurodiversity’s continued acceptance depends upon future efforts from the Autistic populace and the neurotypical community.

The Future of the Neurodiversity Movement

More people, Autistic and non-Autistic alike, are understanding and taking heed of the Neurodiversity movement’s message – the acceptance of brain

variation with all of its magnificent eccentricities. Steve Silberman foresees great hope with this newfound acceptance:

A growing coalition of educators, clinicians, and disability-rights advocates are embracing the concept of neurodiversity, and refusing to view autistic people only in light of what they can't do....And the horizon of what they *can* do is expanding all the time, as more schools, workplaces, and service providers learn about the kinds of accommodations that enable people on the spectrum to express their full potential. Inclusion is not about doing something nice for disabled people; it's about making sure that everyone has the best chance to succeed. (482)

Once the normalization concept is precluded, then acceptance of the Autistic individual's behaviors will be forthcoming.

Fascinatingly, there is one organization that has changed its mission statement to reflect its acceptance of portions of the Neurodiversity movement indirectly – Autism Speaks. Originally, the mission statement for Autism Speaks was as follows:

We are dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments, and a possible *cure* (the Autistic author's emphasis) for autism. We strive to raise public awareness about autism and its effects on individuals, families, and society: and we work to bring hope to all who deal with the hardships of this disorder. (“Autism Speaks Develops”)

The mission statement now reads, as of October 2016, the following:

Autism Speaks is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the lifespan, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and *acceptance* (Autistic author's emphasis) of autism spectrum disorder, and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions. Autism Speaks enhances lives today and is accelerating a spectrum of solutions for tomorrow. (“About Us”)

In addition to this revision, this organization's goal now incorporates portions of the Neurodiversity movement's ideas indirectly: “It will require an inclusive

approach that values diversity and individual needs” (“About Us”). Note that the word ‘cure’ is absent from the new mission statement. This omission and the new wording are very important, because they signify the ‘acceptance’ of Autism. Autism Speaks is not presenting a negative model as implied in the original statement, as though Autism was some abhorrent disease. By embracing the acceptance and understanding of Autism, then Autism Speaks can now appreciate the implication of the Neurodiversity movement.

The future of the Neurodiversity movement hinges on change, the same change that an organization such as Autism Speaks initiated and in the voices of the Autistic populace. Originally, that was why Autistic individuals used the slogan “Nothing about us, without us,” for the Neurodiversity movement, because Autism Speaks was initially against any advice from the Autistic populace, who were in a better position to know what kind of assistance was needed for them (Silberman 473). Steve Silberman indicates the importance of cooperation for the continued success of the Neurodiversity movement: “Ultimately, however, the most important changes are happening in the hearts of those on the front lines: the autistic people who are demanding that they be included in decisions that affect their lives, and the people who help them achieve their fullest potential” (483). Neurodiversity is not controversial; it is unequivocal.

Conclusion

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the Neurodiversity movement does not matter to the Autistic individual who is a proponent of its core message – that Autism is a natural brain variation. However, the Autism binary has been presented to show some of the important aspects from each standpoint. Autism is nondiscriminatory, for it affects everyone in some respect, yet the manner in which it is perceived is important in its reception. The Neurodiversity movement presents a positive model of Autism, and it strives to remove the ambiguity of ‘disability.’ The way to support an Autistic individual is to afford him the same possibilities as his neurotypical counterparts. This paper has presented the quandaries that an Autistic individual encounters in a neurotypical society that has defined ‘normal’ on its own terms. Again, what exactly defines ‘normal?’ Since this question is eternally unanswerable, then perhaps the Neurodiversity movement can find the best solution. As stated previously, once the normalization concept is precluded, then the Autistic individual will have a new genesis.

Works Cited

- “About Us.” *Autism Speaks*. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.
- Armstrong, Thomas. “The Myth of the Normal Brain: Embracing Neurodiversity.” *AMA Journal of Ethics*. 17.4 (2015): 348. Web. 7 Jan. 2017.
- “Autism Speaks Develops a New Mission Statement.” *Council for Disability Awareness*. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.
- Bölte, Sven, “Is Autism Curable?” *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology* 56.10 (2014): 927-931. Google Scholar. 16 Nov. 2016.
- Christensen, Deborah, et al. “Prevalence and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years – Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2012.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Surveillance Summaries. 65.3 (April 2016): 1-23. Web. 6 Oct. 2016.
- Gobbo, Ken and Solvegi Shmulsky. “Autistic Identity Development and Postsecondary Education.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36.3 (2016). Google Scholar. 31 Jan. 2017.
- Grandin, Temple. *The Autistic Brain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013. Print.
- . *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*. New York: Vintage, 2006. Print.
- Johnson, Jenell. “Negotiating Autism in an Epidemic of Discourse.” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33.2 (2013). Google Scholar. 9 Jan. 2017.
- McCollum, Sean. “A New Frame of Mind: What Autistic Students Wish You Knew About Who They Are and How They Learn.” *Education Digest* 82.2 (2016): 43-48. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.
- Nicolaidis, Christina. “What Can Physicians Learn from the Neurodiversity Movement?” *Virtual Mentor* 14.6 (2012): 503. Google Scholar. 23 Jan. 2017.
- Ortega, Francisco, and Suparna Choudhury. “Wired Up Differently: Autism, Adolescence and the Politics of Neurological Identities.” *Subjectivity* 4.3 (2011): 323-345. Google Scholar. 23 Jan. 2017.
- Owren, Thomas, and Trude Stenhammer. “Neurodiversity: Accepting Autistic Difference.” *Learning Disability Practice* 16.4 (2013): 32-37. EBSCOhost. Web. 9 Jan. 2017.

- Ripamonti, Lidia. "Disability, Diversity, and Autism: Philosophical Perspectives on Health." *The New Bioethics* 22.1 (2016): 56-70. Google Scholar. 9 Jan. 2017.
- Robertson, Scott M., and Ari D. Ne'eman. "Autistic Acceptance, the College Campus, and Technology: Growth of Neurodiversity in Society and Academia." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28.4 (2008). Google Scholar. 16 Nov. 2016.
- Robertson, Scott Michael. "Neurodiversity, Quality of Life, and Autistic Adults: Shifting Research and Professional Focuses onto Real-Life Challenges." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2009). Google Scholar. 16 Nov. 2016.
- Sarrett, Jennifer, "Autistic Human Rights – A Proposal." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32.4 (2012). Google Scholar. 23 Jan. 2017.
- Silberman, Steve. *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. New York: Avery, 2016. Print.
- Sinclair, Jim. "Don't Mourn for Us." *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* [Online], 1.1 (2012): n. pag. Web. 29 Jan. 2017.
- . "Why I Dislike Person First Language." *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* [Online], 1.2 (2013): n. pag. Web. 28 Jan. 2017.