

What is neurodiversity?

Dana Lee Baker is a professor for Political Science at California State University Channel Islands. She has published widely on autisms and disability policy.

“For the purposes of this book, neurodiversity refers to atypical functionalities found in individuals who have identifiable neurological differences and to their interactions with individuals considered neurologically typical in the context of public infrastructures built around a presumption of neurotypicality. For the most part, this implies that communities referred to as neurodiverse include only those that incorporate individuals who have been formally diagnosed (or could be, given access to professionals) with a disability believed to involve a significant brain-based difference compared to what is currently considered the human norm.” (Baker, 2011, p. 22)

“Fundamentally, neurodiversity asserts that neurological differences can be understood and experienced as much as a source of community and communal identity as can differences more routinely associated with politicized diversity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Groups dedicated to neurodiversity evolved to help promote this interpretation of living fully with neurological differences in the face of potentially overwhelming messages to the contrary.” (Baker, 2011, p. 20)

Robert Chapman is a Research Fellow at the University of Bristol. They are autistic, and have published widely on the topic of neurodiversity.

“Over seven years of working on the subject, I have come to see it being more of an epistemically useful concept than anything else. By ‘epistemic’ I mean relating to knowledge; and in describing it as being ‘epistemically useful’, I mean in terms of helping us access and generate new forms of knowledge. From this perspective, a core function of the concept regards how it helps us imagine the world differently to how it currently is. For instance, it helps us to both reimagine pathologised and dehumanised kinds in a more humane and compassionate way and reimagine the world in a way that is less hostile to such kinds. In turn, by adopting a neurodiversity perspective, we can alter actual relations; all the way from how we empathise with neurological others on a personal level, to how we design scientific experiments or public spaces. Similarly, within and between neurominorities, it helps us foster not just solidarity and resistance, but also grounds the development of shared vocabularies for making sense of our experiences and increasing our understanding of both each other and ourselves.” (Chapman, 2020, 219f)

Judy Singer co-coined the term neurodiversity in the 1990ies, when she was active on an Independent Living“ mailing list. Judy Singer was the first person to discuss this notion in research – her bachelor thesis (Singer, 2017). Judy Singer has since developed and elaborated on her original definitions. Her current perspective is reflected a blog post, from which these two extracts were taken:

“We are ALL Neurodiverse because no two humans on the planet are exactly alike

Our planet has a neurodiverse population

If you are an employer, for example, you can talk about a neurodiverse environment eg. a workplace or team, if you mean that you consciously seek to increase the neurodiversity of your workplace, because it makes good business sense

But you can't say that Worker A is "neurodiverse" while Worker B is not.

However, if Worker A has identified themselves with a specific syndrome, e.g. Autism, they can be called "autistic". But they are no more neurodiverse than anyone else on the planet”

“The NeuroDiversity Movement is an umbrella term used to advocate for the common interests of various neurological minorities, as were originally described and differentiated by the 20th century Psycho-Medical Complex

(...) The movement's aims evolve dialectically, that is, its boundaries are fuzzy and represent the locus of debate and discussion by those who engage with it

Despite there being no official definition or spokesperson for the movement, its consensual aims can be discerned. They are to:

- shift mainstream perceptions of marginalized NeuroMinorities
- replace negative, deficit-based stereotypes of NeuroMinorities with a more balanced valuation of their gifts and needs
- find valued roles for neurologically marginalized people
- show that all society benefits from the incorporation of NeuroMinorities.” (Singer, n.d., n.p.)

Fergus Murray is a science teacher and autism activist.

“One aspect of human diversity is the variety of processing styles we have: what we call neurodiversity. Like other kinds of diversity, it is probably a net positive, but it comes with serious challenges for those who are seen as divergent.” (Murray, 2020, p. 105)

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