Autism, Neurodiversity, and Ableism: What Clinicians Need to Know

Part 1: Autism, Ableism, & Neurodiversity – The Basics

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A little information about me

• Grew up in the 1970s
• Not diagnosed until I was an adult (32 years)
• Primary issues: social, sensory, vocational
• “Smart but stupid”
• Common trajectory:
  - a lot of difficulty when young
  - things have worked out over time

Quick Language Explanation

• Identity-first language is used frequently in this workshop
• Autism is used to refer to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
• Autism is sometimes used interchangeably with “neurodivergence”
• Neurodiversity: “frontal lobe cousins”: developmental disorders, ADHD, dyslexia, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Trisomy 21, communication challenges, intellectual disabilities...lots of diversities!
Section 1: Autism – What Is It?

Warm Up: Sensory Challenge Game

• Imagine a typical classroom in a local public elementary school
• This is Jose—he is in second grade, on the spectrum
• Teams: list every single possible “sensory violation” he might encounter in his classroom
• You will have 120 seconds

Discussion

• Who are the "Sensory Violation Champions"?
• What should we fix?
Disability As a Socially Constructed Concept

- Disability usually defined as “can’t do something”
- Problem: every society has a different idea of what constitutes lack of ability!

Zosia’s definition of disability:
Disability is part of human nature, a universal possibility in all cultures, sometimes a mini-culture within larger cultural systems, and a socially produced concept – all at the same time.

(Reid-Cunningham, 2009; Waldschmidt & Sépulchre, 2019; Zaks, 2020)

How Autism and Traits Intersect

**Autism**: Diversity in the brain

**Autistic woman**: Traits are what you observe

Autism is the diversity in the brain

Traits: Negative, Positive, or Neutral

**Autism diversity**: Repetitive/restricted interests

**She just won’t stop talking about the history of batteries!**

**She is an expert on the history of batteries!**

**Trait: focus on a narrow topic often to the exclusion of other topics: history of batteries**
Who decides?

Traits: We Decide!

Traditional View
- Upset by changes in routine
- Inflexible, nonfunctional rules
- Narrow interests
- Repetitive behavior
- Unfeeling
- Over-reactive (deregulated)
- Prefers sameness
- Aloof, unloving

New Perspectives
- Prefer quiet, orderly atmosphere
- Rely on clear rules and boundaries
- Contribute special interests
- Empathetic in unique ways
- Extraordinary passions
- Loyal
- Connect to others in unique ways

"Normal" Exercise & Discussion

Instructions provided during the workshop!
Section 2: Ableism

Ableism: Definition

Discrimination against disabled people.

(Nario-Redmond et al., 2019)

Ableism Comes in Many Forms

- Architectural: buildings don’t have ramps
- Physical: wheelchairs can’t fit at café tables
- Informational: signs at a museum can’t be read by blind people
- Legal: laws discriminate against disabled people in some way
- Social: disabled people are segregated from non-disabled people
- Attitudinal: disabled people viewed as incompetent, weird; rejected by peers
- Linguistic: disabled people are “suffering” because they aren’t “normal”
Examples of Ableism

Someone can do a job, but she doesn't get hired simply because she is disabled.

Someone wants to eat in a restaurant or go to a movie, but he can't because the entrance isn't wheelchair accessible.

Someone got into college, but she can't go because no dorms will let her service dog stay with her.

Less Obvious Examples of Ableism

The staff person at a group home treats the adults like two-year-olds and won't let them stay up late to watch the ball drop on the TV on New Year's Eve.

Neighbors talk to the disabled guy who lives on the corner as if he can't understand – they "dumb down" their language.

The special needs high school skips sexuality education because adults on the autism spectrum are assumed to be too socially challenged to need it.

Ableism: Reflection

When might you have been ableist without realizing it?
Section 3: Historical Context of Disability & Autism

Ancient Egypt: Saneb

- Saneb held a high position in the king’s court
- Statue depicts him seated next to his wife
- Their children are at his feet
- Saneb’s name is inscribed next to the children

Take-aways:
- Disabled people have always existed
- Some disabled people in ancient world were fully integrated into society

(Kozma, 2006)

France 1800

- Victor, wild boy of Aveyron, France
- Dr. Jean-Marc Itard shelters him, begins education program, records scientific observations of Victor’s challenges and abilities
- Considered the first “case study” of an autistic child (the word “autism” is not used)

Take away:
Neurodivergent children existed since before modern times

(Bensoquain, 2000; Firth, 2000)
Who “Discovered” Autism in the 1900s?

1920s – 1960s: Historical High Drama

- Dr. Sukhareva
  - Russia 1920s
  - Marxist
  - Community integration
  - Special education
  - Value neurodiverse traits
  - Clinical definition matches DSM-V

- Dr. Asperger
  - Austria 1930s
  - Nazi
  - T-4 Eugenics Program
  - High functioning – “of use to society”
  - Buried Dr. Sukhareva’s work because she was Jewish & Marxist

- Dr. Kanner
  - USA 1940s
  - Jewish
  - Psychopathology model
  - “Refrigerator mothers”
  - Buried Dr. Asperger’s work because he was a Nazi

(Czech, 2018; Poznek Vicenti, 2017; Sterwald & Baker, 2019)

1970s – 1990s: Disability Civil Rights Movement Emerges

“Old” Viewpoint
- Disabled people can’t do things
- Institutions, segregation
- Society is not required to be accessible

New Ideas Emerge
- Disabled people go to school, work, play have relationships
- Disabled people do these activities in communities
- Society has a responsibility to provide accommodations and maximize accessibility

(Langtree, 2020)
1970s – 1990s: Autism Misses the Civil Rights Bus

- Autism is rare
- Autism is devastating
- Children with autism have no chance of a good life
- Autism is a mystery
- Autistic children are abnormal
- Autism destroys families

1990s – 2000s: Autism is a Disease

- Find a cure
- Combat autism
- Stop the epidemic
- Recover the child
- Provide intense therapy as young as possible
- Normalize autistic individuals as much as possible
- Locate the gene
1990s – 2000s: Autism Paraphernalia & Slogans

Not the Far Distant Past

NYU Childmind Institute Ransom Notes Campaign 2007 Billboard

Seattle Children’s Hospital 2013 Bus Ad

Compare and Contrast: Disability Civil Rights vs. Autism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil Rights</th>
<th>Autism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability is part of life</td>
<td>Disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodate</td>
<td>Tragic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>Eradicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocates lead</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective responsibility for accessible society</td>
<td>Family shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal rights</td>
<td>Self-advocates doubted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic integration</td>
<td>Make autistic people as normal as possible</td>
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</tbody>
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2000s: The “Rise” of Neurodiversity

Discussion

What happened?
Defining Neurodiversity

• Neurological: a broad range of brain-based neurological differences
• Psychological: a diagnostic category
• Philosophical: embrace and respect neurocognitive differences
• Cultural: a community that promotes neurodiversity philosophy
• Sociological: a challenge to ableist systems
• Anthropological: a human variation understood through societal lenses
• Ecological/Sociological: systems thrive from diversity
• Political: fight for some or all of the above?

Neurodiversity As a Social Movement

Dr. Devon MacEachran
Website: https://drdevon.com
Summary

- Autism & disability are socially constructed concepts that vary culture to culture and can change.
- Society is challenging ableism that can make life harder for disabled people than being disabled.
- The autism world is catching up to that civil rights idea.
- Neurodiversity asks us to question what we are doing & why.

Questions

April 29: Coming Up!

Part 2: Disability Models, Shifts in Clinical Practice, & Being an Ally

Is there something else we can do other than “normalize”?