

# NEURODIVERSITY

## Some Basic Terms and Definitions

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New paradigms often require a bit of new language. This is certainly the case with the neurodiversity paradigm – even the word *neurodiversity* itself is still relatively new, dating back only to the late 1990s.

I see many people – scholars, journalists, bloggers, internet commenters, and even people who identify as neurodiversity activists – get confused about the terminology around neurodiversity. Their misunderstanding and incorrect usage of certain terms often results in poor and clumsy communication of their message, and propagation of further confusion (including other confused people imitating their errors). At the very least, incorrect use of terminology can make a writer or speaker appear ignorant, or an unreliable source of information, in the eyes of those who *do* understand the meanings of the terms.

For those of us who seek to propagate and build upon the neurodiversity paradigm – especially those of us who are producing writing on neurodiversity – it’s vital that we maintain some basic clarity and consistency of language, for the sake of effective communication among ourselves and with our broader audiences. Clarity of language supports clarity of understanding.

And, as I increasingly find myself in the position of reviewing other people’s writing on neurodiversity – grading student papers, reviewing submissions to journals, consulting on various projects, or even just deciding whose writings I’m willing to recommend to people – I’m getting tired of running into the same basic errors over and over.

So, as a public service, I’m posting this list of a few key neurodiversity-related terms, their meanings and proper usage, and the ways in which I most commonly see them *misused*.

### NEURODIVERSITY

**What It Means: Neurodiversity** is the diversity of human brains and minds – the infinite variations in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

**What It Doesn’t Mean:** Neurodiversity is a biological fact. It’s **not** a perspective, an approach, a belief, a political position, or a paradigm. That’s the **neurodiversity paradigm** (see below), not neurodiversity itself.

Neurodiversity is **not** a political or social activist movement. That’s the

**Neurodiversity Movement** (see below), not neurodiversity itself.

Neurodiversity is not a trait that any individual possesses. Diversity is a trait possessed by a group, not an individual. When an individual diverges from the dominant societal standards of “normal” neurocognitive functioning, they don’t “have neurodiversity,” they’re **neurodivergent** (see below).

**Example of Correct Usage:** *“Our school offers multiple learning strategies to accommodate the neurodiversity of our student body.”*

**Examples of Incorrect Usage:** *“Neurodiversity claims that...”*

This writer is actually trying to talk about either the **neurodiversity paradigm** or the **Neurodiversity Movement**. Neurodiversity, as a biological characteristic of the

species, can't "claim" anything, any more than variations in human skin pigmentation can "claim" something.

*"Neurodiversity is a load of nonsense."*

Really? So human brains and minds don't differ from one another? There's an awful lot of scientific evidence that shows quite plainly that there's considerable variation among human brains. And if we all thought alike, the world would be a very different place indeed. The person who wrote this sentence was probably trying to object to the **neurodiversity paradigm** and/or the positions of the **Neurodiversity Movement**, and has ended up sounding rather silly as a result of failing to distinguish between these things and the phenomenon of neurodiversity itself.

*"My neurodiversity makes it hard for me to cope with school."*

The correct word here would be **neurodivergence**, rather than neurodiversity. Individuals diverge; groups are diverse.

### NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

**What It Means:** The **neurodiversity paradigm** is a specific perspective on neurodiversity – a perspective or approach that boils down to these fundamental principles:

- 1.) Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.
- 2.) The idea that there is one "normal" or "healthy" type of brain or mind, or one "right" style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one "normal" or "right" ethnicity, gender, or culture.
- 3.) The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential.

**What It Doesn't Mean:** The neurodiversity paradigm provides a philosophical foundation for the activism of the **Neurodiversity Movement**, but the two aren't the same. For instance, there are people working on developing inclusive education strategies based on the neurodiversity paradigm, who don't identify as social justice activists or as part of the Neurodiversity Movement.

**Example of Correct Usage:** *"Those who have embraced the neurodiversity paradigm, and who truly understand it, do not use pathologising terms like 'disorder' to describe minority neurological variants like autism or bipolarity."*

### NEURODIVERSITY MOVEMENT

**What It Means:** The **Neurodiversity Movement** is a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent.

**What It Doesn't Mean:** The Neurodiversity Movement is not a single group or organisation, is not run by any single group or organisation, and has no leader. Like most civil rights movements, the Neurodiversity Movement is made up of a great many individuals, some of them organised into groups of one sort or another. These individuals and groups are quite diverse in their viewpoints, goals, concerns, political positions, affiliations, methods of activism, and interpretations of the neurodiversity paradigm.

The Neurodiversity Movement began within the Autism Rights Movement, and there is still a great deal of overlap between the two movements. But the Neurodiversity Movement and the Autism Rights Movement are not one and the same. The

most significant distinction between the two is that the Neurodiversity Movement seeks to be inclusive of all neurominorities, not just Autistics. Also, there some who advocate for the rights of Autistics but who cannot rightly be considered part of the Neurodiversity Movement because they still consider autism to be a medical pathology or “disorder,” a view at odds with the neurodiversity paradigm.

### **NEURODIVERGENT, or ND (and NEURODIVERGENCE)**

**What It Means: Neurodivergent**, sometimes abbreviated as **ND**, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurodivergent is quite a broad term. **Neurodivergence** (the state of being neurodivergent) can be largely or entirely genetic and innate, or it can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two (autism and dyslexia are examples of innate forms of neurodivergence, while alterations in brain functioning caused by such things as trauma, long-term meditation practice, or heavy usage of psychedelic drugs are examples of forms of neurodivergence produced through experience).

A person whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant societal norms in multiple ways – for instance, a person who is Autistic, dyslexic, and epileptic – can be described as **multiply neurodivergent**.

Some forms of innate or largely innate neurodivergence, like autism, are intrinsic and pervasive factors in an individual’s psyche, personality, and fundamental way of relating to the world. The neurodiversity paradigm rejects the pathologising of such forms of neurodivergence, and the Neurodiversity Movement opposes attempts to get rid of them.

Other forms of neurodivergence, like epilepsy or the effects of traumatic brain injuries, could be removed from an individual without erasing fundamental aspects of the individual’s selfhood, and in many cases the individual would be happy to be rid of such forms of neurodivergence. The neurodiversity paradigm does not reject the pathologising of these forms of neurodivergence, and the Neurodiversity Movement does not object to consensual attempts to cure them (but still most definitely objects to discrimination against people who have them).

Thus, neurodivergence is not intrinsically positive or negative, desirable or undesirable – it all depends on what sort of neurodivergence one is talking about.

The terms **neurodivergent** and **neurodivergence** were coined by Kassiane Sibley, a multiply neurodivergent neurodiversity activist.

**Examples of Correct Usage:** *“Our school aims to be inclusive of students who are Autistic, dyslexic, or otherwise neurodivergent, though there are some types of neurodivergence that we’re still seeking ways to accommodate.”*

*“This Facebook group is for people who identify as both queer and ND (neurodivergent).”*

### **NEUROTYPICAL, or NT**

**What It Means: Neurotypical**, often abbreviated as **NT**, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurotypical can be used as either an adjective (“He’s neurotypical”) or a noun (“He’s a neurotypical”).

Neurotypical is the opposite of **neurodivergent**. Neurotypicality is the condition from which neurodivergent people diverge. Neurotypical bears the same sort of relationship to neurodivergent that **straight** bears to **queer**.

**What It Doesn't Mean:** Neurotypical is **not** synonymous with **non-autistic**.

Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent, not the opposite of autistic. Autism is only one of many forms of neurodivergence, so there are many, many people who are neither neurotypical nor autistic. Using neurotypical to mean non-autistic is like using “white” to mean “not black.”

Also, neurotypical is not a derogatory word, and has no intrinsic negative connotation. Of course, sometimes people use the word in the context of criticising the behavior of neurotypicals, but that doesn't make it an intrinsically negative word. A lot of people criticise the behavior of men, too, but that doesn't make “man” an intrinsically derogatory word.

**Examples of Correct Usage:** *“If the primary language of the society in which you were born is well-suited to the purpose of describing your sensory experiences, your needs, and your thought processes, you may have neurotypical privilege.”*

*“My sister is NT, but after growing up with an Autistic father and brother, she's quite at ease with other people's neurodivergence.”*

**Example of Incorrect Usage:** *“Is your daughter Autistic or neurotypical?”*

This isn't a well-worded question because there are other possibilities. The daughter in question might be non-autistic, but might also not qualify as neurotypical – she might, for instance, be dyslexic or bipolar.

## NEUROMINORITY

**What It Means:** A **neurominority** is a population of neurodivergent people about whom all of the following are true:

- 1.) They all share a similar form of neurodivergence.
- 2.) The form of neurodivergence they share is one of those forms that is largely innate and that is inseparable from who they are, constituting an intrinsic and pervasive factor in their psyches, personalities, and fundamental ways of relating to the world.
- 3.) The form of neurodivergence they share is one to which the neurotypical majority tends to respond with some degree of prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination, and/or oppression (often facilitated by classifying that form of neurodivergence as a medical pathology).

Some examples of neurominority groups include Autistic, bipolar, dyslexic, and schizophrenic people.

The word **neurominority** can function as either a noun (“Autistics are a neurominority”) or an adjective (“Autistics are a neurominority group”).

## NEURODIVERSE

**What It Means:** A group of people is **neurodiverse** if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning.

Or, to phrase it another way, a neurodiverse group is a group in which multiple neurocognitive styles are represented.

Thus, a family, the faculty or student body of a school, the population of a town, or the cast of characters of a TV show would be neurodiverse if some members had different neurocognitive styles from other members – for instance, if some members were neurotypical while others were Autistic.

**What It Doesn't Mean:** Many people mistakenly use **neurodiverse** where the correct word would be **neurodivergent**.

Of all the terminology errors that people make in writing and speaking about neurodiversity, the incorrect use of **neurodiverse** to mean **neurodivergent** is by far the most common.

*There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse individual.”* The correct term is “**neurodivergent** individual.”

An individual can diverge, but an individual cannot be diverse. Diversity is a property of groups, not of individuals. That’s intrinsic to the meaning and proper usage of the term **diverse**. *Groups are diverse; individuals diverge.*

In addition, neurodiverse does **not** mean “non-neurotypical.” The opposite of neurotypical is neurodivergent, not neurodiverse.

The opposite of neurodiverse would be **neurohomogenous** (meaning “composed of people who are all neurocognitively similar to one another”).

Neurodiverse cannot be used to mean “non-neurotypical,” because neurotypical people, like all other human beings, are part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity.

In North America, Europe, and Australia, white people are the racial group that holds the most privilege and societal power. But we do not use the term “racially diverse” to mean “non-white.” “Racially diverse” means “including members of multiple racial groups.”

To use the term “racially diverse” to mean “non-white,” or to describe a Black or Asian-American person, for instance, as a “racially diverse individual,” would not merely be an incorrect usage of the word “diverse” – it would also be racist.

It would be racist because it would imply that white people somehow occupy a special, unique position separate from the overall diversity of humanity – “There’s us white people, and then there are all those diverse people.” Such usage changes the definition of the word “diverse” to mean “not part of the privileged in-group.”

Again, that’s not what the word means, and misusing it in that particular way serves to reinforce a racist mindset in which white people are seen as intrinsically separate from the rest of humanity, rather than as just another part of the spectrum of human diversity.

It is the same with the misuse of the term neurodiverse to mean “non-neurotypical.” To describe an Autistic, bi-polar, or otherwise neurodivergent person as a “neurodiverse individual” is not merely an incorrect usage of the word “diverse,” it’s also ableist.

It’s ableist because it implies that neurotypical people somehow occupy a special, unique position separate from the overall neurodiversity of humanity. Misusing the word neurodiverse in that particular way serves to reinforce an ableist mindset in which neurotypical people are seen as intrinsically separate from the rest of humanity, rather than as just another part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity. Humanity is neurodiverse, just as humanity is racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. By definition, **no** human being falls outside of the spectrum of human neurodiversity, just as no human being falls outside of the spectrum of human racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

In summary, then: misusing the term **neurodiverse** to mean **neurodivergent** (i.e., non-neurotypical) is not only plain old bad English, it also subtly reinforces ableism and undercuts the fundamental tenets of the neurodiversity paradigm.

I hope this explanation will help to encourage people (especially people who identify as proponents of the neurodiversity paradigm or supporters of the Neurodiversity Movement) to avoid this problematic misuse of the term neurodiverse in the future, and, when possible, to correct such misuse where they encounter it.

**Examples of Correct Usage:** *“We humans are a neurodiverse species.”*

*“We employ a wide variety of creative teaching strategies to accommodate the many different learning styles represented in our highly neurodiverse student body.”*

*“My neurodiverse family includes three neurotypicals, two Autistics, and one person who’s both bipolar and dyslexic.”*

*“I think every single member of their board of directors is neurotypical. An organization that supposedly serves the needs of neurominority children should have a more neurodiverse board.”*

**Examples of Incorrect Usage:** *“This group welcomes Autistics and other neurodiverse people.”*

It’s nice to be welcomed, but there’s no such thing as a “neurodiverse person.” the correct phrase here would be “Autistics and other **neurodivergent** people.”

*“This group is open to both neurotypicals and the neurodiverse.”*

No, no, no. “The neurodiverse?” Seriously? What does that even mean? The spectrum of neurodiversity encompasses the entire human species, so one can’t label any subset of the human species as “the neurodiverse.” And neurotypicals are part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity, so it makes no sense to say “neurotypicals and the neurodiverse,” as if those were two separate things. The correct way to say this would be, “This group is open to both neurotypicals and the **neurodivergent**.” Or, one could say something like, “This group is open to all forms of neurodiversity” (“all forms of neurodiversity” would include the neurocognitive styles of **all** humans, including neurotypicals).

**Example of Possibly Correct Usage:** *“The students in this classroom are neurodiverse.”*

This is correct usage if the speaker means that not all of the students in the classroom share the same general style of neurocognitive functioning. However, it is *incorrect* usage if what the speaker is trying to say is that it’s a classroom for students who aren’t neurotypical – if that’s the case then, once again, the correct term would be **neurodivergent** instead of neurodiverse.

I hope this list of definitions will help to foster greater clarity and understanding, and more accurate writing, when it comes to the terminology around neurodiversity.

I encourage readers to share this post anywhere it might be useful. If you’re writing up submission guidelines for neurodiversity-related writings, for a journal, anthology, conference, or other project, feel free to include a link to this post in your guidelines.

If you encounter a journalist who’s doing a piece on a neurodiversity-related topic, share this post with them. Share it with college students who are writing about neurodiversity. And please share it in online discussions in which one or more of these terms is being misused or misinterpreted, and in online discussions in which someone says, “Help, I’m new to this stuff and I don’t understand what all these terms mean!”

Nick Walker, September 2014

<http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>

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