DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This landmark editorial by Simon Baron-Cohen argues for a revolutionary shift from viewing autism as a "disorder" to embracing it as a form of "neurodiversity." He systematically dismantles the "disorder" label by presenting evidence from genetics, neuroscience, and cognition that points to "difference" rather than "dysfunction." The paper provides clear definitions for the terms disorder, disease, disability, and difference, advocating for a more balanced, respectful, and strengths-based framework that has profound implications for psychiatry, clinical practice, and human rights. This text is a foundational manifesto for Enlitens' entire mission.

FILENAME

Baron-Cohen_2017_Neurodiversity_A_Revolutionary_Concept.md

METADATA

- **Primary Category**: NEURODIVERSITY
- **Document Type**: editorial/perspective
- **Relevance**: Core
- **Key Topics**: neurodiversity, autism, disorder vs. disability, strengths-based models, human rights, assessment critique, pathology paradigm
- **Tags**: #neurodiversity, #autism, #disorder_vs_disability, #strengths_based, #human_rights, #pathology, #identity, #DSM_critique

CRITICAL QUOTES FOR ENLITENS

"This editorial focuses on the question of whether autism is properly characterised as a disorder and whether the neurodiversity framework should be embraced."

"But when we examine the cognition and biology of autism, arguably what we see is not evidence of dysfunction but rather evidence of difference."

"Aspects of social cognition reflect areas of disability in autism, and if a person is not showing any sign of disability, he or she would not warrant a diagnosis. But the language of disability is very different to the language of disorder. Disability requires societal support, acceptance of difference and diversity, and societal ‘reasonable adjustment’, while disorder is usually taken to require cure or treatment. These are very different frameworks."

"Steve Silberman's terrific book Neurotribes is a kind of manifesto for the neurodiversity movement, encouraging us to recognise autism as an example of diversity in the set of all possible brains, none of which is ‘normal’ and all of which are simply different."

"In many ways, the concept of neurodiversity is just the next step in this more respectful way of thinking about our planet and our communities."

"To expand on the quote attributed to a person with autism, ‘we are fresh water fish in salt water. Put us in fresh water and we are fine. Put us in salt water and we struggle to survive’."

"The case for not applying the term ‘disorder’ to autism is that, in an autism-friendly environment, the person can function not just well, but sometimes even at a higher level than a typical individual."

"Genetic or other kinds of biological variation are intrinsic to the person’s identity, their sense of self and personhood, which seen through a human rights lens, should be given equal respect alongside any other form of diversity, such as gender."

KEY STATISTICS & EVIDENCE

- **Growth of DSM Categories**: The number of listed disorders in the DSM increased from 106 in DSM-I (1952) to 300 in DSM-5 (2013).
- **Genetics of Autism**:
    - Approximately 12% of people with autism have rare inherited or *de novo* single nucleotide variants (SNVs) or copy number variants (CNVs) associated with autism.
    - Almost 50% of the genetic associations with autism involve inherited common variants like single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). These common variants reflect natural variation in the population, not dysfunction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Neurodiversity Framework The central framework advocated for in the paper, presented as a revolutionary concept for psychiatry.

- **Origin**: The term is attributed to Judy Singer, an Australian social scientist with autism, and was first printed in 1998.
- **Core Concept**: Neurodiversity posits that there are many ways for a brain to be "normal." It frames autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions as examples of the natural diversity of human brains, which are simply wired differently, not defectively.
- **Analogy to Biodiversity**: The concept is presented as analogous to biodiversity, encouraging a respectful attitude towards the rich variation of human minds, just as we respect the diversity of life forms in our environment.
- **Human Rights**: The framework is highly compatible with a civil rights perspective, calling for the acceptance and respect of minorities without pathologizing them. It views biological variation as intrinsic to a person's identity and personhood.
- **Implications**: The framework challenges the default assumption that autism is a disorder to be eradicated, prevented, or cured. Instead, it calls for a balanced view that gives equal attention to a person's strengths and challenges, and promotes support and "reasonable adjustments" over "treatment."

Proposed Definitions for Key Terms The paper proposes a rubric for when to use different, often conflated, terms:

- **"Disorder"**: "'Disorder' should be used when there is nothing positive about the condition, or when despite trying different environmental modifications, the person is still unable to function." The paper argues this is incompatible with the concept of neurodiversity.
- **"Disease"**: "'Disease' should be used when the biomedical mechanistic cause of a disorder becomes known, perhaps through medical testing or through scientific research."
- **"Disability"**: "'Disability' should be used when the person falls below an average level of functioning in one or more psychological or physical functions, and where the individual needs support or intervention." This concept is presented as compatible with neurodiversity.
- **"Difference"**: "'Difference' should be used when the person is simply atypical, for biological reasons, relative to a population norm, but where this difference does not necessarily affect functioning or well-being."

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Shifting Clinical and Societal Perspectives The neurodiversity framework has several key messages that translate into practical applications for clinicians, researchers, and society.

1. **Embrace Diversity**: Recognize that there is no single "normal" way for a brain to be wired.
2. **Use Ethical Language**: Adopt non-stigmatizing language and concepts for people who are different or have disabilities. The paper strongly argues for moving away from the term "disorder" and towards "disability" or "difference" when appropriate.
3. **Adopt a Balanced, Strengths-Based View**: Move away from a model that "pathologise[s] and focus[es] disproportionately on what the person struggles with." Instead, give equal attention to the person's strengths and talents, such as attention to detail and pattern-recognition in autism.
4. **Focus on Support, Not Cure**: The framework shifts the goal from "cure or treatment" to "societal support, acceptance of difference and diversity, and societal 'reasonable adjustment'." This implies focusing on creating "autism-friendly environment[s]" where autistic individuals can function well and even excel.
5. **Respect Identity and Choice**: Recognize that an individual's neurotype is an intrinsic part of their identity that should be respected. While individuals should have the freedom to choose interventions that help them, this is different from a default assumption that their neurotype needs to be eradicated.