

The Colors Between Us

Cognitive Developmental Disabilities Across Cultural Spectrums

This paper attempts to examine how cognitive developmental disabilities, mainly focusing on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is perceived, and understood within New Zealand's Māori communities, comparing these perspectives with western, primarily American, viewpoints. The analysis explores this cultural intersection through key channels: social media discourse, academic literature, and public-facing media. This provides insight into how different cultural frameworks shape these disabilities, and understanding communication, in an opinionated and informational format to raise awareness of changing the narrative regarding cognitive disabilities, in a general society for collective action purposes.

Warning:

The multi-modal forms of primary sources included in this research paper include short clips with explicit language or content. Viewer discretion is advised. They may be accessed by double clicking on the video. The same follows suit with embedded links.

THE MĀORI POPULATION, CULTURAL CONTEXT

[The Māori people](#), as the tangata whenua (people of the land) of New Zealand, have a history marked by adaptation and resilience. Their ancestors first arrived in New Zealand before 1300 CE, sailing from various Pacific islands. This journey demonstrates an early example of their adaptability, as they navigated vast distances to settle in a new environment. Upon arrival, they further showcased this trait by adjusting their lifestyle to utilize the resources of their new home. They hunted native species like seals and moas, cultivated crops, and established communities, first along the coast, and later, some moved inland to the forests.

The arrival of Europeans in the early 1800s presented a new set of challenges, leading to significant changes within Māori communities. The introduction of Christianity by missionaries led many Māori to adopt the new religion. They acquired literacy skills through reading and writing, opening opportunities for trade, particularly with agricultural products like pigs and potatoes. These changes reflect the Māori's ability to integrate new ideas and systems into their society. However, the arrival of Europeans also brought conflict. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, aimed to establish a framework for British governance while acknowledging Māori land rights. Unfortunately, the treaty's interpretations differed between the two parties, leading to wars in the 1840s and 1860s as Māori defended their land and authority. The aftermath of these conflicts saw Māori losing significant portions of their land, highlighting a dark period in their history.

Despite the hardships faced, the Māori continued to adapt and persevere. The 20th century saw a resurgence of Māori culture and identity. Leaders like Āpirana Ngata and Te Puea Hērangi spearheaded movements to improve living conditions and revitalize cultural practices. There was a renewed interest in the Māori language, and traditional art forms like carving and weaving experienced a revival. This period underscores the enduring spirit of the Māori people, as they actively worked to preserve their heritage and strengthen their communities. Following World War II, many Māori migrated to urban areas in search of work, reflecting their continued adaptability in the face of changing socioeconomic landscapes. In the present day, the Māori population, nearing 915,000 in 2024, is largely concentrated in urban areas, a trend stemming from post-World War II migration patterns. [This year, the population has seen a net increase of nearly 11,000 persons, with a median age of men, 26, and women, 28.](#)

WHAT IS AUTISM, THE HISTORY OF AUTISM, AND HOW IS AUTISM PERCEIVED ACROSS THE WORLD IN GENERAL?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a multifaceted neurodevelopmental condition, and its understanding and perception are deeply influenced by cultural context and upbringing. Across different societies, cultural beliefs, traditions, and values, shape how ASD is recognized, interpreted, and addressed. This cultural variation is not merely a contemporary phenomenon; it has deep roots in the historical treatment of individuals with differences.

For centuries, a lack of understanding about disabilities often led to attributing their causes to supernatural forces or parental failings. Ancient societies, such as the [Spartans](#), dealt with disability through infanticide, reflecting a harsh and uninformed approach. This practice demonstrates the drastic measures taken in the absence of knowledge and compassion. Religious beliefs also played a significant role in shaping perceptions, as evidenced by biblical texts that either restricted individuals with disabilities or attributed their conditions to demonic possession. Such religious interpretations likely contributed to the stigmatization and exclusion of individuals with differences for centuries.

Moving into the 19th century, while religious explanations for mental retardation declined, societal perceptions remained negative and stigmatizing. Terms like “village idiots” were commonplace, and individuals with mental retardation were often left to beg for survival, underscoring a continued lack of understanding and support. This historical context highlights

that even as explanations shifted from the supernatural to the social, societal views did not necessarily become more humane or supportive.

The 20th century witnessed the formal recognition of autism as a distinct condition. However, early understandings were often marked by harmful misconceptions. The “refrigerator mother” theory, advanced by figures like Leo Kanner and Bruno Bettelheim, wrongly attributed autism to emotionally distant mothers. This theory, popularized in the 1960s and 1970s, caused significant distress and guilt among parents who were unjustly blamed for their children’s condition. While now majorly discredited, it had a profound impact on how autism was perceived and, on the parent-professional relationship.

Over time there was a gradual shift towards a more scientific understanding of autism in the western world, largely attributed to the work of Bernard Rimland, who emphasized its neurological basis. However, this shift also gave rise to new controversies; For example, particularly surrounding the alleged role of vaccines in autism, which continues to this day despite overwhelming scientific evidence refuting any causal connection. Andrew Wakefield’s discredited research, published in *The Lancet* and later retracted, significantly fueled anti-vaccination movements, and caused lasting damage. The persistence of these sentiments underscores the powerful influence of fear and misinformation, even in the face of scientific consensus.

In some cultures, in the modern era, mainly western, autism is viewed through a medical lens, focusing on diagnosis and intervention to support the individual’s development. Conversely, other societies may interpret ASD through spiritual or supernatural frameworks, associating it with divine intervention or misfortune. These perspectives can significantly affect the availability

of resources, community support, and societal attitudes towards individuals with ASD. For example, a community that embraces a neurodiversity paradigm may celebrate differences in cognitive functioning, while another that stigmatizes disabilities could limit opportunities for inclusion.

Furthermore, cultural upbringing influences how families respond to ASD diagnoses. Parents' experiences, expectations, and access to education often dictate their approach to seeking or resisting interventions. For instance, collectivist societies might prioritize familial and communal caregiving, while individualistic cultures may emphasize specialized therapies or institutional support.

By understanding the profound role of world history, cultural context, stakeholders in healthcare, education, and social work can foster more inclusive and effective practices. Acknowledging these diverse perspectives is essential for creating culturally sensitive approaches that respect individual and family values while promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities for those on the autism spectrum.

THE MĀORI POPULATION, VIEWPOINTS OF COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

What do you think the Maori people think when they hear the word autism? It is a spectrum for everyone. We can obtain one viewpoint of a Maori, Keri Opai, a linguist, educator, and author, who has done exemplary work throughout his career on cultural issues around mental health, addiction and disabilities, has a work for autism: “Takiwatanga”. This means for an individual to be in their own time and space. This word emerges from a project called "Te Reo Hāpai - The Language of Enrichment", aiming to establish accurate and culturally relevant Māori

terminology for the mental health, addiction, and disability sectors. This conceptualization reflects Opai's understanding of autism as being characterized by unique timing, spacing, pacing, and life rhythms. This notion challenges the dominant western medical perspective that often views autism through a deficit-based lens, focusing on deficits in social communication and interaction. Instead, Takiwātanga emphasizes the individuality and inherent value of autistic experiences. Opai's personal experiences significantly shaped his interpretation. Having faced racism and witnessed the marginalization of those perceived as "different" during his school years, he felt a strong connection to individuals with disabilities, particularly his friend Peter, who had autism. This connection fueled his desire to create a term that honored Peter and recognized the challenges faced by autistic individuals. Opai's journey towards developing Takiwātanga involved consultations with clinicians and experts, but he found their perspectives overly clinical and jargon filled. He sought a more culturally grounded understanding, engaging in conversations with individuals with autism, such as researcher and policy analyst Matt Frost. These conversations, reminiscent of the teachings of kaumātua (Māori elders), provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of autism. Takiwātanga, therefore, represents a culturally specific understanding of autism that emphasizes the importance of respecting individual differences. The term embodies the Māori concept of “He mana tō te kupu,” meaning "Words have great power". Through this powerful word, Opai aims to shift perspectives towards acceptance and understanding, promoting a more inclusive and respectful environment for individuals with autism and their families.

WESTERN VIEWS, NON-DIAGNOSIS BASED ON SOCIAL STIGMA, AND

REAL LIFE STORIES THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

(@MYAUSTISMSTAR, SPECIAL BOOKS BY SPECIAL KIDS)

For many Americans, personal interactions with individuals with autism are infrequent or non-existent. Based on [census research data from the CDC](#), around 2.21% of American adults have ASD. That seems insignificant, but in a population like the United States', that's over 5 million citizens. In fact, from a [Rutgers University study](#), 1 in every 4 people are undiagnosed with some sort of area on the spectrum. In addition, according to the CDC, [around 30% of those with ASD, are labeled with "profound autism"](#). This means to be experiencing one of the following: being non-verbal, have a self-harm episode, lower IQ scores, etc... It is noted that these individuals with ASD are to have around the clock self-care. However, from this alone, we are noticing a trend. Why is it that when we discuss autism, from a westerner's perspective, it is all about diagnosis or misdiagnosis, following effects, treatment, and other non-positive connotations? In fact, I was myself questioned to have ASD as a child because I was experiencing symptoms like being anti-social, low reading levels, inability to start, and maintain conversation, and minimal eye-contact. Many individuals will go un-diagnosed. It is time we begin to raise awareness about ASD, since based on research, it is more common than we think. This is the spectrum of colors between us.

Thankfully, living in an age with digital media has allowed people to share their stories, reach a mass amount of users, at nearly what feels like the speed of light. Meet Darius and his mother, Irisa Nickie Leverette, also known as @myautismstar on Instagram via Meta (Formerly,

Facebook). His mother has leveraged social media and indirectly, artificial intelligence has been on their side, making the right people famous at the right time. Day in and day out, Irisa posts videos of her son, Darius, doing daily tasks like cooking, cleaning, and taking trash out, interacting with others at school, working on speech and writing, and most famously, stimming. A good definition with those unaware with stimming can be defined from [WebMD](#): “Stimming refers to repetitive behaviors or motions that you may use to help cope with emotions.” Irisa has utilized these digital media channels, with greater than two-million followers across multiple platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram, to spread awareness about autism in general. Irisa mentions how she initially used the platform to just show off her “King Darius” because she is a loving mother, but it has also been a great tool to generate potential income for a needing boy, as she is also a math teacher. In Irisa’s first YouTube post, [“What I would tell a new parent about Autism...”](#), she gives advice to parents that are learning their child has ASD for the first time. To this day it only has just over 1000 views and 32 likes. However, Irisa did not know that her and her son would blow up all over social media. Most famously, he is known for his [“closet stim”](#), where Darius is in his mothers’ closet, on camera and unfiltered, where he is stimming to cope with emotional stress. The social media community, mainly around Instagram reels, has begun to take Darius in, as also their “King”, and are beginning to spread more awareness about stopping the stigma around having autism to be a deficit, and more of a superpower; Where it is creating a safe space for people to feel proud of their child and embrace the disability. Darius now has a following of users that have created a fan page for him and a Discord community for people to talk about their experiences with ASD. People are coming together to spread awareness, using communication channels, to achieve a common objective, in a digital age where it can be so easy to spread hate online. Instead, users are showing love and are creating a

new perception each day. This here has been a great example of where AI has been used in the right way to spread across a community of Instagram reels users for a common good. Don't take

my word for it,

here are real

examples of

the love being

shared around

the awareness

of autism

through the

channel of

Darius and his

mother. In this

TikTok video

by the creator,

"notsqilly",

he mentions

how he has

learned more

about autism

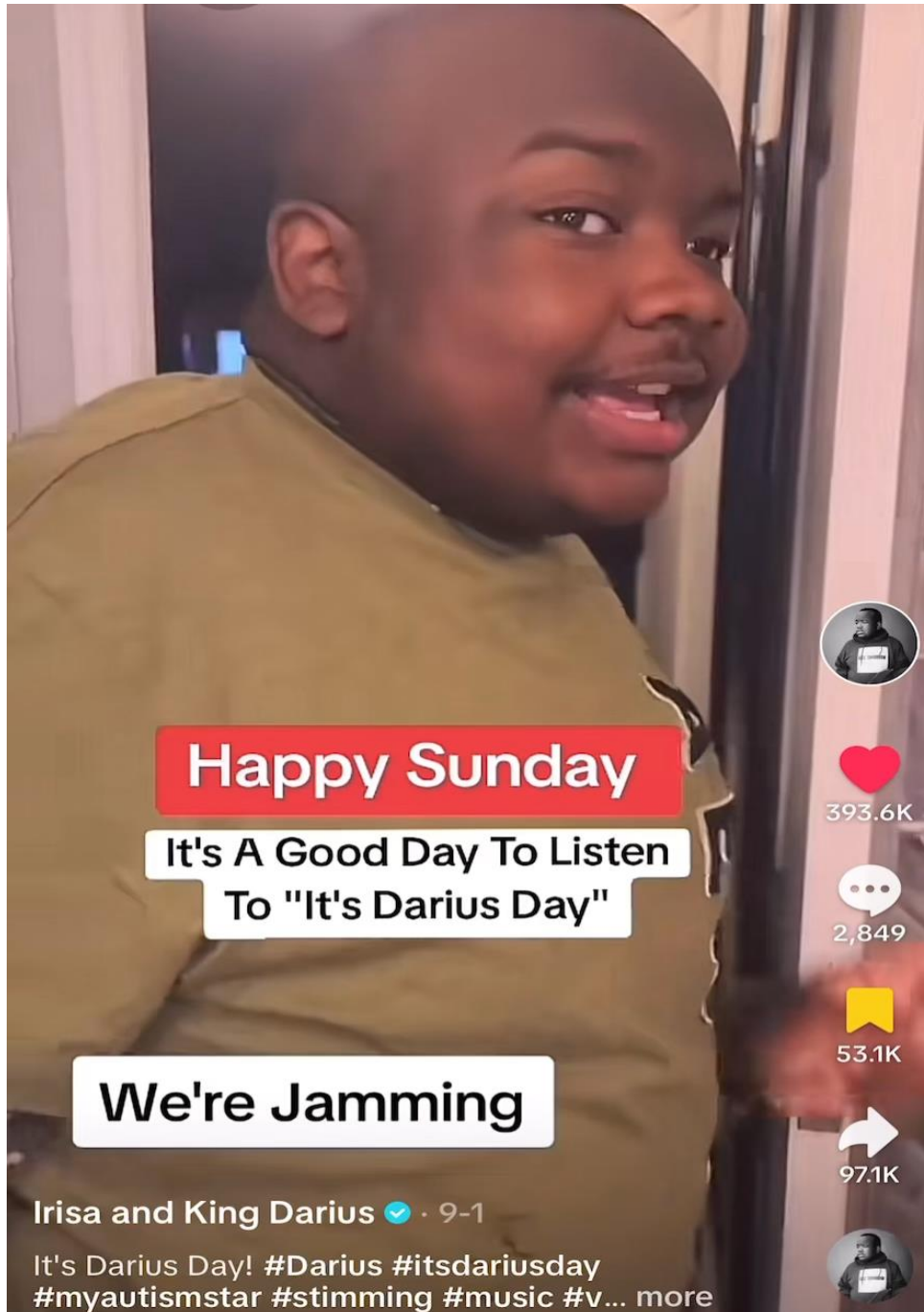


in the past few months through Darius videos, than in his entire life. It goes without mention, that

this is reaching a mass amount of people. A video that is not created by Darius's mother, is

reaching over 90,000 likes, and nearly 500,000 views.

We can notice the nearly effortless, indirect collective action effort that has stemmed from Darius's mother, who initially just posted her son to show "how awesome he is", and now is teaching people on social media about the range of autism and how they can be seen as normal



humans like the rest of the general population. Next, is an example of Darius stimming in a rhythmic manner, and people in the comments loving it!

11:00



Q darius

Search



Search: [rhythmically stimulating](#) Q



2,849 comments



Zone

i would listen to this on repeat

9-1 Reply

❤️ 844



— View 4 replies



Grandlovev

It sure is Darius' Day!

9-1 Reply



❤️ 1,969



— View 5 replies



We love Darius day

9-1 Reply

❤️ 121



Spookysivart

You and Darius bring a smile to my face every time I see you. 😊

9-13 Reply

❤️ 313



— View 8 replies



Add comment...



It is amazing how social media discourse is changing the narrative around autism and how autistic people are perceived in western society. Although Darius is an extreme case, the collective action efforts are raising awareness to everyday individuals to be more aware about the condition and how to socially treat those that may have it

These collective action efforts have not always come with positive feedback. Early on in Irisa's posting of Darius, she and her son were "SWATTED". Swatting is a form of criminal harassment where someone tricks emergency services into dispatching police or other responders to another person's address. This is done by falsely reporting a serious incident, such as a bomb threat, a murder, a hostage situation, or even a mental health crisis like claiming someone is suicidal or dangerous and armed. With great fame, Irisa and Darius were caught in a false incident from somebody on the internet. However, she has remained relentless in her posting endeavors and telling her and her sons' story.

Adding onto the next source of social media being leveraged to tell the stories of the neurodivergent, this video, shared on the YouTube channel "Special Books by Special Kids," tells the story of Darius.

About the [channel](#) from the about section:

"Interviews that are intended to create a more inclusive world.

SBSK started when I was a teacher for students with disabilities. Originally intended to be a book written by my students, SBSK soon grew to be video interviews of disabled people of all ages and diagnoses. Since our beginning in 2015, I have interviewed hundreds of people across

the world while providing over \$1,300,000 to those featured on this channel through a combination of grants and fundraising.

Starting in 2016, SBSK is now a 501(c)3 organization that seeks to normalize the diversity of the human condition under the pillars of honesty, respect, mindfulness, positivity and collaboration. This multi-media movement supports the acceptance and inclusion of all members of the neurodiverse/disability community regardless of diagnosis, age, race, religion, income, sexual orientation, gender or gender expression.

Chris.”

The video uses the platform to raise awareness and foster acceptance of neurodiversity. As the video progresses, you will notice how the interviewer joins Darius in his stimming to let Darius know he is there with him. Irisa mentions how he cannot “mask” his autism and he cannot hide it. She stresses how she really “wants other people to understand him”, to help others understand their own loved ones or people they will eventually meet with autism.

- They (his parents) describe the challenges and joys of raising an autistic child, including Darius's fixations (like his love for rice), his communication difficulties, and the importance of teaching him life skills like dressing himself.
- The video also explores societal perceptions of autism, with Darius's mother expressing her hope for greater understanding and acceptance. She shares her experiences of having to explain Darius's behaviors to others and advocates for patience and sensitivity when interacting with autistic individuals.

- The video's intimate and personal style allows viewers to connect with Darius and his family, humanizing the experience of autism and promoting empathy.
- By sharing their story on a platform like YouTube, Darius's family contributes to a growing online movement of neurodivergent individuals and their families who are using social media to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion.

This channel and video illustrate to us how social media can be a powerful tool for collective action by providing a platform for marginalized groups to share their stories, connect with others, and advocate for change. Since the video is over 20 minutes long, I could not insert it into the research paper, so a link will have to suffice. It can be found [here](#).

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research paper was to understand the societal perceptions of autism from across two different sides of the globe: The Maori, and the western world. We explored the history of the Maori and certain people like Opai, have attempted to view autism in a new light, and how we can compare it to the western views, where historically it is seen more as a deficit to an individual. Technology and artificial intelligence have been directly and indirectly used and benefitted stakeholders in the world, like Irisa and Darius, where social media has been leveraged to shed a new light on learning about autism and its spectrum, as well as to share love and compassion, rather than making fun or staying ignorant about such a common disorder. In the end, interacting with an individual with ASD is not about if, but when, and it is safe to say that people like the Chris, who runs the channel SBSK, are making sure that the word is spread to the general public in a mass media form of communication.

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