

Divergent Futures: Consideration of Underexplored Autistic Potentials

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May 25, 2023

Author Note

This paper represents the author's reflections on the dissertation of Dr. Nick Walker, the challenges she puts forth with regard to the prevailing pathology paradigm, and the rarely pondered potentials inherent in autistic liberation. Quotations from Walker's (2019) writing (considered by the author to be a must-read for every Naropian, both present and future (at least until such a time as newer work supersedes it)) were selected and re-ordered from the original text into a quick reference version of the rich exploration provided:

<https://presentation-archive.herokuapp.com/divergent-futures.html>

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Three major areas of focus were found to be suggested for future research by Walker (2019) in her doctoral dissertation:

- prevalence of underexplored autistic potentials and how they might be more consistently recognized and cultivated
- autistic participation in communities of practice; not only how autistic participants in such communities benefit, but also how they contribute
- exploitation of autistic labor and autistic talent

I find myself drawn to all of them, with each presenting hooks into my own lived experience. Throughout a multi-decade technology career I worked longer hours for less pay than many of my peers (several of whom I mentored before they were promoted beyond my role), so labor exploitation has plenty of applicable history in my recollection. I'm only just beginning practice in community, having launched myself into mindful awareness decades ago (after reading extensively on the topic and finding no local options where I could afford to participate). Again, no depth of directly related experience, but intense interest and much recent thought (having devoured Walker's *Neuroqueer Heresies* (2021) in a single sitting when it was first published, and leading up to personal discovery of Walker's (2019) autoethnographic exploration of transformative practice relevant to, and centering the needs of, autistic community) had me pondering how the surfacing of unrecognized, though repeatedly voiced, needs as an openly autistic member in a contemplative education cohort might have arrived with more ease. Our last group process, if not the entire duration, of our first year together was truly torturous.

For some time now I have wondered how I might tap into the latest research in progress with regard to autistic experience. It would not be hyperbole to report that I was overjoyed to encounter Walker's prepackaged, deliciously relevant to my own lived experience, and relatively

recently published options to ponder, having contemporaneously completed a graduate level course in psychological research and program evaluation. One dominant perspective in my own view into this space is something I've been seeking to reinforce all along:

[To] improve a neurodivergent person's wellbeing would mean to improve it by that person's own personal subjective standards rather than by neurotypical standards of what a person's life ought to look like from the outside. (Walker, 2019, p. 259)

While sitting for a while with these options for future study it occurred to me that focusing on *shenpa* discovered during my own practice might also reveal transformative work along my individual path to liberation (Chödrön, 2019). A few questions bubbled up as well. How have I, as an autistic nonbinary bisexual with the possibility of access to white male privilege, both benefited from and contributed to this contemplative community? How will this work seek to center recognition and cultivation of autistic potentials? And finally, how may I be susceptible to exploitation throughout the planning, execution, and analysis of this work?

Giving and Taking

I hold embodied privilege. Assigned male at birth into a family bearing predominately Norwegian ancestry, I have been afforded deference and access otherwise prohibited for non-white non-male embodiments. While that wording may strike some readers as cumbersome, I won't be using terms or acronyms which lend themselves to bypassing like the assumption of cis/het/white/male privilege as default in my work. Frank and transparent exploration of the astounding lack of ongoing introspection and unpacking of bias found among privileged social locations (and especially in my peer group as a clinical mental health counselor in training) is long overdue. Centering marginalized needs requires, and those negatively affected by bias deserve, continual work as we each toil separately toward mutual liberation.

Throughout my life, despite the advantages noted above, I have encountered enduring barriers to any continuation of the access my body affords, beginning with the very moment I am judged to be queerly presenting in some way. With commonly encountered thin slice judgments based on neurotypical conformance (Yergeau, 2018), mere moments of recognized oddity solidify decisions to withdraw support once offered, or refuse support being requested, at any time in most of the relationships in which I have intentionally engaged in the work of being in relationship. Lacking public comprehension of the impacts and manifestations of trauma even further complicates and compounds stigma at the intersection of marginalized autistic neurology, nonbinary gender identity, and bisexual attraction. Based on my own lived experience within each of these identities, I am not at all surprised to read about suicidality orders of magnitude beyond that found resident within neurotypically cis-normative hetero-normative conforming embodiments among my peers in queer. One might pause to wonder why this needs voicing....

This simultaneously privileged and oppressed intersectionality affords an incredible breadth of understanding, and when considered in concert with the profound depth of understanding allowed via access to monotropic focus (Murray, 2020), I have found myself consistently able to expose false binaries and genuinely perceive multiple (assumed as) opposed viewpoints concurrently. I am granted sweeping ranges of epistemic privilege, of a sort only rarely valued, much less validated, by holding space for vast fields of cognitive dissonance. These are the vital places where innovation and creation are cultivated. These declared and commonly embraced polarities, when embraced not simply as “both options”, when viewed as a distinct and tiny sampling out of a multitude of possibilities, are revealed to hold much more than the dichotomies so often proffered.

Defaults of inference through access to privilege disappear under close examination of any lived experience of marginalized community members. Exposing choice points, when they are welcomed into diverse spaces, parallels the lessons needed locally and described in many of our assigned readings. They are not often, however, the subject of observable discussion or integration efforts unless those in privileged social locations make the conscious choice to engage with more vulnerability than their privilege requires of them.

Having lived out ignorant default experiences via early and oft repeated training to wield a dominant archetype purported as resident within my embodiment, as well as having simultaneously lived in multiple separate and entirely oppressed and frequently erased realities, this privilege of seeing and knowing cuts in many different directions. Owing perhaps to mistrust of the unfamiliar and/or fear of exposing vulnerability, the wisdom I voice as an integrated product of heart and head space is very frequently mocked and/or discarded. Anyone holding privilege within the group may, and many times has been witnessed as doing precisely so, simply opt out. This aggression, which is almost certainly not allowed to be named as such in the moment, reveals contempt for anything less than the impossible ideal of broad reaching abled/cis/het/white/neuro-normativity. This is where slogans such as “silence is violence” ring the most true. Being located with privilege and simply opting out perpetuates marginalization.

I arrived within this community, barely beyond broken, in an utterly burned out state. I was welcomed (by many, though by no means all, present) even after broaching the depths of my marginalized experiences during our early encounters together. I was not, however, granted accommodations in accordance with my very real needs, nor have I achieved this goal to date. While embracing contemplative approaches, this institution remains a product of the system in

which it was built. That is to say, the master's tools created something familiar despite the invitation to move in the opposite direction being centered (Walker, 2021). One way that shows up in my own experience might be viewed as absence of cohesion; centering an intent may be effectively argued as beneficial practice in and of itself, and lacking explicit expectation setting up front in most contexts leaves me othered by default all too often.

Without anything being specifically offered in replacement of the void left by removing normative conformance, the inherent gravity of normative conformance will invite defaults and assumptions into community praxis. Those defaults and assumptions relevant to the identities I embody are frequently and violently enforced through lacking curiosity, negligent practice, and overt bigotry. Inclusion and true welcoming into community requires queering of the status quo, and decolonizing our interior landscapes. I continue to offer my perspective to those walking along a learning path, though continual unpacking of bias as one holding privilege is the work required of any deserving of aid in such journeys. I believe it to be a fair exchange for access to lessons without any requirement of bearing relevant scars; never demanding anything like perfection, and consistently seeking signs of progress.

Cultivating Potential

I took huge risks. Exposing vulnerability in a world so often described as dog-eat-dog, with extra emphasis on individuation and supremacy in North America, is not a practice most of my peers throughout life have been as prepared as I to embrace. Openly discussing my own divergence from typically normative notions of "right" and "correct" has been described by peers as abdication of privilege, and in so doing exposed an obvious and deep lack of perspective and understanding with regard to marginalized realities and the relevant and frequent lack of choice

present in those locations (Pearson & Rose, 2021). Add to that truly astonishing levels of ableism, ageism, ... sizeism, etc., *et voilà!* Opportunity galore has presented itself within this graduate psychology cohort, as well as throughout surrounding communities.

[The] wellbeing of autistics might be better served not simply by aiming toward goals of long-term psychospiritual development and self-actualization, but by actively choosing to prioritize those goals over the imposition of neurotypical standards of normativity. It's worth reiterating here that the imposition of normativity can be outright harmful, and that at least in my case it proved to be in direct conflict with the path of wellbeing and self-actualization. (Walker, 2019, p. 271)

Having spent much of my recovery from burnout to date devoted to the study of theory and praxis surrounding each of the identities I might authentically claim, to say I arrived at grad school with a well defined sense of purpose would be an understatement. Speaking to ways I have been othered via hidden curriculum violations (which one might recognize as sometimes violently enforced one-way affairs dominated by those expressing demands for neurotypical conformance) (Yergeau, 2018), it appears as space that ends up bounded by an ever-widening window of opportunity to practice non-attachment. It also models possible futures for others who, for varying reasons, may not step into the emerging role in those same moments.

I am keen to explore neurodivergent community in more depth. I have learned, at times overwhelming truths, through the connections I've forged within digital autistic spaces and seek to more openly express a particularly neurodivergent love language, that of infodumps. When one with vertically oriented connections goes deep, or opens to a capacity for holding whatever is emergent, incredible lessons are surfaced from frequently ignored (or unlearned altogether) communication channels. Eschewing sociality in favor of universality may sound imbalanced, but those words feel like the best labels available at present. Taken beyond Walker's (2019)

detail in the various modes of connection one might embrace, the horizontal orientation of attunement to social connection has only very rarely served me well outside of advantage secured via body privilege; the vertical orientation of attunement is at once invigorating and soothing, a home place for a perpetual pariah, a constantly available stream of lovingkindness.

How does this benefit anyone from dominant social locations? Those of us who were forced into learning multiple ways of relating in any given moment stand ready as experienced guides. The mere act of standing in solidarity with marginalized people and advocating for atypical or unanticipated needs opens doors to learning without incurring any of the cost endured by living these frequently painful truths. One dubbed an ally by marginalized people has engaged in efforts that might be described as altruistic or prosocial, and in so doing has stepped beyond assisting a marginalized community. They have also directly benefited in terms of exposure to innovative ideas, expanded awareness of potentials and threats, safety in difference (while accepted into spaces non-allies dare not go), recognition as one working toward the benefit of others, diversity in community, and so much more.

With so much recent (as well as historical) emphasis placed on “superpowers” present in neurodivergent embodiments by those seeking to capitalize on unique skills, I frequently eschew discussion of related benefits to privilege holders. The assertion I hold in these selfish moments might rest in confronting a privileged lack of need, and the resulting option to bug out at any moment without facing dire consequences or future exclusions. It might describe a certain obligation to work toward equity, regardless of social location, with a reminder that we are all likely to be disabled at some point during our lives. Mostly though, it rests in recognition of value inherent to any given embodiment or ecology. My own lack of knowledge rarely presents

as problematic; any lack of using lessons learned has often resulted in conflict. However, the main difference in managing fall-out from behavior deemed to be aberrant is that I frequently suffer blame while any holding comparative privilege rest easy in default experiences.

Risking Exploitation

I walk the razor's edge. Without exposing a transparently available treasure trove of experience and knowledge, I rapidly find myself entirely isolated, even within groups that keep telling me I am welcome and accepted. While revealing vulnerable parts for the edification of others provides me with lessons as well, most often I am left isolated because of sharing some (unvoiced as unacceptable) mysterious perception, or (assumed) resentment, or (previous lack of newly perceived) volatility. My internal reference library has a way of returning *everything* found in a given query for relevant items in data storage, so it is very difficult to filter for optimal neurotypical engagement effectively. This is especially true with multiple competing interests presenting (at times talking over each other, preventing my effective parsing of any of the overlapping messages), and especially based on timestamps and related demands for meeting clock time estimates. My clockworks are not aligned by default with international standards of measure. My internals run with cosmic transits and rapid oscillations alike, depending on emergent needs and opportunities. At times I deliver "impossible" or innovative solo efforts, while at others I struggle to maintain a healthy diet or effectively manage administrative tasks. My skills have never quite manifested like "normal" skills, nor have they been temporally stable, much less actively supported (vs. capitalized upon).

Quite often in socially centered practices, I end up depleted of resources while those from privileged social locations have neglected or bullied me into overextending to fulfill their own

demands for comfort. Expressing my needs is frequently met with attribution as controlling, demanding, or privilege seeking (as opposed to establishing equitable relating). Having been met with harassment in most settings I occupy, as with name-calling including the full range of possibility between moron, spastic, or freak all the way to the more benign descriptions of other as aggressive, obtuse, or unprofessional, I understand that field of options as driven by the very real and truly damaging ignorance of sensory overwhelm and the various ways it manifests, leaving me unsupported much more often than otherwise.

I didn't blame myself for the difficult circumstances of my life or for the fact that I'd been able to achieve so little of what I wanted. These were consequences of economic injustice, systemic ableism, and the dynamics of a warped and brutal society that denied most nonaffluent people and autistic people the opportunity to live lives worthy of their potentials. (Walker, 2019, p. 187)

Most of the harassment I endure is owing to apparent lack of introspection and acceptance of responsibility in those with greater access to advantage through privilege. It shows up as unwillingness to mitigate the production and/or exposure to harmful sound and lighting environments. It shows up as unwillingness to negotiate common expectations up front, the setting of clearly stated shared intents for whatever practice in which we might collectively engage, or even willful ignorance of prior agreements because from an ableist and normative compliant perspective, "nobody ever really needs that."

Unfacilitated group work, in my experience, means facing introjections of unvoiced expectations and subjecting myself to violence in the enforcement of hidden curricula. The work required to even show up in these generally abusive spaces has only rarely been weighed in consideration of how tasks or deliverables are split among group members for fulfillment. This

may be viewed as perfectly reasonable from privileged perspectives, yet it has resulted in the unacknowledged doubling of my personal work load on many different occasions.

One aspect of this sort of othering practice that I have yet to see anyone with privilege hold effectively is the slippery slope. If a strongly held, yet unvoiced, expectation goes unmet I find myself often held responsible for making up the difference in effort or time unaccounted for during planning (*if* planning was even recognized as a vital and necessary stage of the “shared” experience up front). So the unwillingness to open up to consideration of unexpected realities cascades into unwillingness to adapt to emergent needs falling out of the original unvoiced expectation. Those emergent needs are then refused as unreasonable requests for not having been raised up front, while the demand that spawned those needs remains in effect (if the requests are even heard at all before application of censoring or tone policing). This type of double standard might be witnessed in effect at any time over the course of a project, or within any level of abstraction that wasn’t painstakingly clarified for intents and purposes in advance of implementation. It is often witnessed as coincidental to a sense of boredom from those with privileged social locations; even the mere act of consideration is rejected as onerous. Left behind is one big stinking pile of stigma.

Conclusions

In considering the exchanges of resources, skills, and perspectives, the recognition and cultivation of oft ignored potentials, as well as the risks of exploitation and continued exclusion inherent to any socially normative experience, we have within these pages a collection of some of the ways marginalized members of a contemplative community have been interacting with peers. We also see suggestions for positive change on behalf of those marginalized and

acknowledgment of various benefits of inclusion to holders of privilege. As with physical impairments, accommodations for invisible disabilities are consistently shown to benefit not only those seeking accommodation, these practices also benefit privileged community members.

I hold a great appreciation for the level of inquiry that is beautifully exposed in the exploration of autistic potentials found in Walker's dissertation. For example:

[How] well have the members of any minority group ever fared when their own voices and perspectives haven't had primacy in shaping the dominant discourses and systems of praxis pertaining to their lives...? (2019, p. 255)

The underlying notion of the importance of self-defined rhetorics present above is impressively defended by Yergeau (2018), and it resurfaced consideration I also resonated with while reading and responding to the work presented by Watters (despite any framing as disease or illness being fundamentally incorrect with regard to autistic embodiment from a neurodiversity perspective):

Is this an indication that white Americans lack the sympathy or kindness to care for their mentally ill? (Watters, 2010, p. 162)

Because the American (and arguably international) standard of care for clinical mental health diagnosis pathologizes autistic experience, I hold that the quote is perfectly suitable in this case. Regardless of diagnostic impressions or social locations, my own lived experience aligns with incredible precision to the messages coming from the cited collection of authors. From my perspective, members of dominant social intersections must continually yield in support of marginalized peers if deep wisdom is to be saved from extinction.

The emergent neurodiversity paradigm represents a very real and viable alternative to the pathology paradigm's long, shameful, and still-ongoing history of oppressive discourse, bigotry masquerading as theory, and fundamentally unsound and abusive praxis. (Walker, 2019, p. 249)

In general practice, I freely offer the lessons I've collected over a lifetime of enduring abusive experiences, and find them almost entirely left aside as pointers to what appears to be considered unnecessary integration work, or mocked as sophomoric unknowing of privilege. I look forward to that wisdom being embraced by people expressing neurotype conformance. I long to live in a world where client centered therapeutic endeavor *actually* holds these truths as venerable and necessary consideration. I seek to serve in a world where clinicians exercise their capacity to unpack bias and meet people who show up differently with humble offerings of care and genuinely expressed validation while also tending to professional obligations. I haven't witnessed much of that work in progress yet....

[A] two-stage formula, in which techniques for centering and grounding are learned before de-armoring commences, is also recommended by some somatic psychotherapists as an approach to working with trauma. (Walker, 2019, p. 276)

Embrace of autistic identity and building neurodivergent community, in addition to sharing wisdom imparted by neuroqueer thought leaders, is a future I'm creating in my present. Holding weekly group discussions of relevant topics with those who responded to a call for queering the status quo has been a level of extracurricular work that caring advisors have called out in awareness of much needed self-care, and it has also been some of the very best healing, learning, and potential for long overdue change I have experienced throughout the entire first year of a clinical mental health counseling degree program that has seen marginalized students exiting in droves (while the same cannot be said of normative compliant peer populations).

Acknowledging that some wisdom may remain out of reach, we may yet hold truths presenting in unexpected places or by unexpected means. Are we centering, grounding, and integrating lessons, or are we grasping at past stories, "expert" advice, or unexamined bigotry...?

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Although undertaken as humanitarian outreach, these efforts often look more like massive attempts at indoctrination. (Watters, 2010)

The Laziness Lie has set us up to expect more productivity out of ourselves than is really feasible or sustainable. As a result, many of us live continuously on the edge of breaking down. (Price, 2021)