

Divergent Futures: Consideration of Underexplored Autistic Potentials

Matthew P. Larson

Transpersonal Wilderness Therapy, Naropa University

May 16, 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 have been selected and re-ordered from the original text into a quick reference version of the rich exploration originally provided (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)), available at:

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

Divergent Futures: Consideration of Underexplored Autistic Potentials

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 it occurred to me that focusing on a hotbed of *shenpa* in my own practice might prove to be transformative work on my own 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 such as BIPOC, which lend themselves to bypassing like assumption of cis/het/white/male privilege as default, in my work. Frank and transparent exploration of the astounding lack of 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 these needs requires, and those negatively affected 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.

This simultaneously privileged and oppressed intersectionality affords an incredible breadth of understanding, and when considered in concert with the profound depth of understanding allowed by access to monotropic focus, it has allowed me 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. This privilege of knowing, 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 lived in multiple separate and entirely oppressed and frequently erased realities, 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.

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 is 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 to replace the void left by removing normative conformance, the inherent gravity of normative conformance will invite defaults and assumptions into community praxis.

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 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. 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 other communities on campus and beyond.

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 strictly one-way affairs dominated by those expressing needs for neurotypical conformance) (Yergeau, 2018), appears to be 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 that moment.

[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)

I am keen to explore autistic 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. 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.

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 volatility. My internal reference library has a way of returning *everything* found in a given query for relevant items in data storage. It is very difficult to filter for optimal neurotypical engagement effectively, especially 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 gleefully 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. Most of the harassment I endure is owing to lacking 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 willful ignorance of prior agreements because from their abled 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 the violence in enforcement of hidden curricula.

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)

The work required to even show up in these generally abusive spaces has not 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.

The 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 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, and is often witnessed as coincidental to a sense of boredom from privileged social locations. Even the mere act of consideration is rejected as onerous. Left behind is one big stinking pile of stigma.

Conclusions

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:

[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)

This notion is impressively defended by Yergeau (2018), and it resurfaced consideration I also resonated with while reading and responding to the work presented by Watters (2010) (despite the framing as disease or illness being fundamentally incorrect with regard to autistic neurology):

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.

In general practice, I freely offer the wisdom I've collected over a lifetime of oppressive experiences, and find it almost entirely left aside as pointers to what appears to be considered unnecessary integration work, or mocked as the 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, as though clinicians have the capacity to unpack bias and meet people who show up differently with care and validation while also tending to professional obligations. I haven't witnessed much of that work in progress yet....

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)

[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 such as that imparted by Walker, 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 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.

References

- Chödrön, P. (2019). *Taking the Leap : Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears*. Shambhala Publications, Incorporated.
- Larson, M. P. (2023a). *Divergent Presentation: Autistic Views on Neurodiversity in Research*. gurumojito autopublishing. <https://presentation-archive.herokuapp.com/divergent-presentation.pdf>
- Larson, M. P. (2023b). *Divergent Review: Consideration of Recent Autistic Research*. gurumojito autopublishing. <https://presentation-archive.herokuapp.com/divergent-review.pdf>
- Larson, M. P. (2023c). *Divergent Value: Examining the Myth of the Normal Brain*. gurumojito autopublishing. <https://presentation-archive.herokuapp.com/divergent-value.pdf>
- Price, D. (2021). *Laziness Does Not Exist*. New York, NY: Atria Paperback
- Walker, N. (2019). *TRANSFORMATIVE SOMATIC PRACTICES AND AUTISTIC POTENTIALS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION*. https://neuroqueer.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Nick_Walker_Dissertation.pdf
- Walker, N. (2021). *Neuroqueer Heresies : notes on the neurodiversity paradigm, autistic empowerment, and postnormal possibilities*. Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press, LLC
- Watters, E. (2010). *Crazy Like Us : the globalization of the American psyche*. Free Press.
- Yergeau, M. (2018). *Authoring Autism : on rhetoric and neurological queerness*. Durham: Duke University Press

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)