

Divergent Value: Examining the Myth of the Normal Brain

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Author Note

This work addresses a rubric copied from our online course platform for a paper examining one of 5 articles provided. We were instructed to thoroughly read the article, look up the summaries, promotions and/or critiques of each article as well as information about the authors to choose an article that not only resonates, but shares information/explores an unfamiliar topic. In this paper I aim to summarize and critique the concepts of the article in a way that a layperson could understand.

Divergent Value: Examining the Myth of the Normal Brain

When considering Dr. Thomas Armstrong's work, and specifically *The Myth of the Normal Brain* (2015), I am left a bit cold. While he takes care in pointing out positive traits of neurodivergence, the balance of the equation of what makes affected people whole is left unexamined. It also leaves me with a taste of the work from doctors very early in the history of neurodiversity, that is to say, those intent on cleansing the world through eugenic pursuits by battling supposed epidemics like autism. Silberman (2015) paints a much more grim, and complete, history inclusive of the negative influences wrought by Hans Asperger, Leo Kanner, and Ole Ivar Løvaas. Asperger in particular, whose name for much of our recent past was reserved for autistic people with low support needs, was intent on proselytizing the marketable qualities of those suffering under the yoke of similar diagnosis by convincing the state of resident ability that might be capitalized upon.

Similarly, repeated misuse of the term neurodiverse as applicable to a singular entity might be directly challenged by reading from Walker (2021), where she repeatedly explains diversity as a quality of a group, and divergence as the quality of one of the entities holding an outlier status within a group. Even acknowledging Armstrong's affiliation with the same thought leading institution at which Walker is currently a professor of psychology (California Institute of Integral Studies, CIIS), we see quite a different position supported by the one who is publicly out as autistic and striving to move awareness into a more holistic embrace of difference. She steps away from promoting qualities and skills relevant to commerce, and the same reasoning shared by Nazi sympathizers like Asperger, to implore acknowledgment of difference without exposing exploitable value to modern business interests.

I can speak directly to the lack of neurodiversity initiatives among the many tech companies where I was recently engaged in interviewing for roles while approaching the end of a 20+ year technology career. Over a six-month span (often with multiple daily meetings, though sometimes only weekly frequency), not a single contact revealed support for different ways of perceiving the world. I was asked to teach the entirely unfamiliar definition of neurodiversity to almost everyone involved. So, while my sometimes unusual skills, keen observations, and pattern matching frequently aligned with business needs, not once during that entire job search was I met with any consideration of how supporting anyone with those valuable skills might manifest, or the multitude of co-occurring conditions which come along with those embodiments and frequently result in disability of would-be work horses for profit.

The primary difference I see between these authors with the same affiliation to CIIS (though admittedly separated by a span of decades), is that one openly embraces their neurodivergence, while the other seeks approval from power structures in offering samples of “neurodiverse” fruit for the plucking. While Armstrong was published in the *AMA Journal of Ethics* in support of cognitive difference, the lacking autistic (or other openly divergent) identifiers raise a red flag among neurodivergent community as a signal of one not to be trusted. This perspective is especially well tended by Yergeau (2018) in her exploration of rhetorics, and the ways in which own voices are essential in using the language referring to a marginalized group correctly, much less compassionately.

We cannot begin to level the playing field, and honor the differences (skilled or otherwise) inherent in neurodivergence, until neurodivergent voices are consistently centered in research, outreach, and interventions from medical and psychological practice. As Walker stated,

years before this article from Armstrong, we'll keep on building the master's house unless we throw away the master's tools (Bascom, 2012). The aim of its creators is to supplant the pathology paradigm with the neurodiversity paradigm, breaking free of the demi-rhetorical position frequently imposed by current systems on neurodivergent people.

“Embracing the concept of neurodiversity would bring the study of mental health disorders in line with movements that have already taken place over the last 50 years around biodiversity and cultural diversity” (Armstrong, 2015). This take reveals similar levels of need to address ignorance, and the need for castigation, with which the house building concept was first delivered by Audre Lorde in a 1979 speech to a mostly white and affluent audience of an international feminist conference (Bascom, 2012). One cannot broadly hold neurodivergence as mental health disorder(s) at the same time as embracing the work of neurodivergent thought leaders. These are opposing paradigms, not nesting dolls which look similar even while being diminished to fit within larger samples of similar work.

With appreciation for Armstrong's final line, I concur that “there is no normal flower or culture ... there is no normal brain or mind” (2015). Diagnostic requirements necessary to meet systemic preconditions for clinical service in many cases are based on old models. These models were built on the concept of normal functioning, and the many variations from that theme shared similar location in pathology. How is it possible that normal functioning could reasonably be expected from a set of non-normal brains? How is it possible that for so long neurodivergent people have not been authentically represented within research teams focused on neurodivergence? And lastly, how is it possible that neurodivergent people are expected to yield to the determinations of people who have no direct experience with neurodivergence?

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