

Wired This Way

**– Neurodiversity, disabilities
and mental health —————**

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Spring 2022

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Title of thesis Wired This Way -Neurodiversity, disabilities and mental health		
Department Department of Media		
Degree programme Master's Programme in Photography		
Year 2022	Number of pages 142	Language English

Abstract

This Master's thesis portrays individuals who are neurodivergent through their stories and photography. In addition to neurodevelopmental disorders issues around mental health are also discussed. While I will examine the topic through artistic work, through photographs and interviews, I will also approach this multidimensional subject through such theoretical concepts as neurodiversity and mental health.

The aim of the thesis is to make the invisible more visible for everyone interested to see, learn, share, talk and reflect on different life experiences, stigmas and myths, as well as the accepted ideas of ‘normality’ and conformity. By questioning the boundaries between predominant neurotypes and ‘others’, including for example dyslexics, autistics and ADHDers, many neurodiversity studies and work are redefining what it means to be human.

The thesis *Wired This Way* consists of a written and an artistic part. The artistic part consists of seven portraits of different neurodivergent participants. The portraits are paired with monologues, where the participants open up their own experiences with mental health or neurodivergence diagnosis. In the written part of the thesis, I will introduce the reader both to the concept of neurodiversity and research in the context of popular culture, photography, arts, and history. I will also go through some of my own experiences as a neurodivergent person.

During the introduction and first chapter, I explain my starting points, open up neurodiversity more as a concept, and the motivations behind the work. In the first chapter, I explain the key terminology related to neurodiversity such as: neurodivergent, neurotypical, neurodivergence, neurodiverse, neurominority, ableism, neurodiversity movement, and society. I also bring out some common criticism around neurodiversity. In the second chapter, I focus on the neurodiversity’s history, feeling of otherness, and history of sickness through art and photography. I also discuss neurodiversity through popular culture and arts. Final chapter describes the methods and process of photographing the portraits, including my reflections on them. The last chapters will include the artistic part of the thesis and the conclusion.

Photography is both fascinating and challenging. It is fascinating to learn a lot more about neurodivergent minds and lives, and it is challenging because I am dealing very closely with sensitive and personal issues such as mental health and wellbeing. The work has indeed communicated how important it is as a society to talk about mental health and stigmas around it, even taboos. I think visibility makes it also more thinkable. One of the reasons why I started this work was not only to understand how it is to be human, but also to seek safety, safe spaces, understanding and purpose for oneself.

Keywords neurodiversity, neurodivergent, diagnosis, mental health, photography, ADHD, autism, dyslexia

Tekijä Nora Sayyad		
Työn nimi Wired This Way -Neurodiversity, disabilities and mental health		
Laitos Median laitos		
Koulutusohjelma Valokuvataiteen maisteriohjelma		
Vuosi 2022	Sivumäärä 142	Kieli Englanti

Tiivistelmä

Tämä taiteen maisterin opinnäytetyö kuvaa neuroerityisiä henkilöitä. Neurokehityksellisten oireyhtymien lisäksi myös mielenterveyteen liittyviä asioita tuodaan esille. Taiteellisen työn, kuvien ja haastatteluiden, lisäksi lähestyn moniulotteista aihetta myös teoreettiselta pohjalta kuten neurokirjo ja mielenterveys.

Opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on tuoda näkymätön enemmän näkyväksi jokaiselle siitä kiinnostuneelle. Sen tarkoitus on saada näkemään, oppimaan, jakamaan, puhumaan ja pohdiskelemaan erilaisia elämänkokemuksia, stigmoja ja myyttejä, ja herättelemään ajatuksia hyväksyttyjen normien ja ‘normaaliuden’ sekä mukavuuden ympärille. Kyseenalaistamalla rajoja vallitsevan neurotyypin (neurotyypillisen) ja ‘toisien’ kuten esimerkiksi dysleksikkojen, autististen ja ADHD-diagnosoitujen ihmisten välillä moni neurodiversiteettitutkimus ja -työ uudelleen määrittelee sen, mitä tarkoittaa olla ihminen.

Opinnäyte ‘Wired This Way’ koostuu kirjoitetusta ja taiteellisesta osuudesta. Taiteellinen osuus koostuu seitsemästä erilaisen neuroerityisen henkilön potretista. Kuvia yhdistää monologit, jossa kuvattavat kertovat avoimesti heidän omista kokemuksistaan mielenterveydestä ja heidän neurokehityksellisistä diagnooseistaan. Kirjoitetussa osiossa tutustutan lukijan neurodiversiteettiaiheeseen ja tutkimukseen populaarikulttuuria, valokuvausta, taidetta ja historiaa tutkimalla. Käyn läpi myös joitakin omia kokemuksiani neuroerityisenä henkilönä.

Johdannossa ja ensimmäisessä luvussa avaan lähtökohtia työlle, neurodiversiteettiä konseptina ja motivoivia tekijöitä työn takana. Toisessa luvussa avaan auki terminologiaa kuten: neuroerityinen, neurotyypillinen, neuroerityisyys, neurovähemmistö, ableismi, neurodiversiteettiin liittyvä liikehdintä ja yhteiskunta. Toisessa luvussa keskityn neurodiversiteetin historiaan, toiseuden tunteeseen ja sairauden historiaan taiteen ja valokuvan näkökulmasta. Keskustelen aiheesta myös pop-kulttuurin ja taiteen kautta. Viimeiset luvut käsittelevät aiheita kuten ‘metodit ja prosessit potrettien takana’ mukaan lukien omat pohdinnat niistä. Viimeiset luvut sisältävät taiteellisen osuuden päätelmän.

Valokuvaus on samanaikaisesti kiehtovaa ja haastavaa. On kiehtovaa oppia erilaisista mielistä ja elämistä. Samaan aikaan koen sen haastavaksi, sillä olen läheisesti tekemisissä kiperien ja henkilökohtaisten aiheiden parissa kuten mielenterveys ja hyvinvointi. Tämä on työ on tuonut minulle selväksi sen kuinka tärkeää on yhteiskuntana puhua mielenterveydestä ja stigmoista liittyen siihen, jopa taboista. Mielestäni näkyvyys voi luoda aiheista enemmän ajateltavaa. Yksi syy, miksi lähdin tälle matkalle on ollut syy ymmärtää ihmisyyttä, oikeutta hakea turvaa, turvallisia tiloja ja ymmärrystä sekä tarkoitusta itselleen.

Avainsanat neurokirjo, neuroerityisyys, nepsy, neuropsykiatrinen, diagnoosit, mielenterveys, valokuvaus, ADHD, autismi, lukihäiriö

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Grants

Aalto ARTS Production Grant

JOKES – The Foundation to Promote Journalistic
Culture Grant

Timetable

Research and writing during 2020–2022

Pictures during 2019–2021

Thesis to be submitted for evaluation 2022 Spring

**Wired This Way
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and mental health**

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The design and layout choices in this thesis
have been made with neurodiversity and learning
challenges in mind.

typefaces: Verdana and Courier

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WIRED THIS WAY

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Photography work, discussion, and stories of people whose brain and mind function differently than the neurotypical brain, as well as mental health.

Some of these quotations made me think of the reasons why it's important to discuss neurodevelopmental conditions in society and raise awareness of them.

Thus, neurodivergence is not intrinsically positive or negative, desirable or undesirable – it all depends on what sort of neurodivergence one is talking about¹

...No longer overfocusing on just our challenges or only on our strengths. Each of us is a complex human being.²

So ironically, when embraced, these diversities often act as a source of creative potential. But too often these dynamics 'produce' social power dynamics inequalities.³

We've decided as a society that it's too expensive to modify the kid's environment. So we have to modify the kid.⁴

1. Walker, N., <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)
2. Solden, S. & Frank, M. 2019, 193.
3. Walker, N., <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)
4. Schwarz, A. 2012. (accessed 4.1.2022) <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/health/attention-disorder-or-not-children-prescribed-pills-to-help-in-school.html>

In this thesis I will examine neurodiversity through research and through my artistic work. The aim of the thesis is to make the invisible more visible for everyone interested to see, learn, share, talk and reflect on different life experiences, stigmas and myths, as well as the accepted ideas of 'normality' and conformity. Many neurodivergent diagnoses are not 'visible' per say, and individuals become often more aware of them through their own struggles and life experiences, which lead to inner work. By questioning the boundaries between predominant neurotypes and 'others', including for example dyslexics, autistics and ADHDers, many neurodiversity studies and work are redefining what it means to be human.⁵

In the first chapter, I explain the concept of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity in a nutshell means that variation of the human brain should be accepted as a natural and valuable part of genetic legacy, also in a non-pathological sense. Human brain variations can be noticed regarding sociability, attention, mood, learning and other mental functions. Neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD and autism are not necessarily "abnormal", but rather a variation of the human brain that are often biological. The term, neurodiversity, emerged as a challenge to prevailing views that certain neurodevelopmental disorders are inherently pathological, and instead adopts the *social model of disability*, in which societal barriers are the main contributing factor that

disables people. Ableism refuses to see disability as self-evident; normal, even. It is important to approach the possible contradiction between ableism and neurodiversity through understanding that one does not have to override the other. Therefore, an important mark lies in the status quo, in which a neurotypical brain and person often benefits most in today's industrialised and digitised societies, leaving neurodivergent individuals uneasy or easily on the outside.

In the first chapter, I explain my starting points, open up neurodiversity more as a concept, and the motivations behind the work. I will also explain the key terminology related to neurodiversity. In the second chapter I focus on the neurodiversity's history, feeling of *otherness*, mental illness, history of sickness through art, and photography. I also discuss neurodiversity through popular culture and arts. Final chapter describes the methods and process of photographing the portraits, including my reflections on them. The last chapters will include the artistic part of the thesis and the conclusion.

5. Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., Chown, N., Stenning, A. Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm. 2020

1.

THEORY, BACKGROUND AND CENTRAL NOTIONS

Shortcuts used for terms used in the thesis

NEURODIVERGENT (*in Finnish neuroerityinen, neurokirjava, nepsy / neuropsykiatrinen*) = ND

NEUROTYPICAL (*in Finnish neurotyypillinen*) = NT

I will begin chapter two by first opening up some of the motivations behind what have embarked my interest to write, following up some of my own personal experiences. I will be more theoretical in order for the reader to understand more what is meant by neurodiversity and individuals whose minds and brains are wired differently than the so-called neurotypical ones. Themes in chapter two are following: Neurodiversity and ableism, statistics in neurodiversity in the population, terms such as neurodivergent, (and neurodivergence), neurotypical, neurodiverse, neurominority, neurodiversity paradigm, and neurodiversity movement. I will also write about criticism around neurodiversity and society.

1.1. Conversation and backstory of Neurodiversity

As I began my project in 2019, I discovered how underrepresented the theme was, and how hard it was to find sources in Finnish about the topic. Because of this I made the conscious decision to include discussion about the terminology and definitions of neurodiversity as a significant part of my thesis.

When I first started to google neurodiversity (in Finnish *neurodiversiteetti, neuroerityisyys, neuropsykiatrinen*) in 2019 in Finnish the Google matches have increased rapidly ever since, especially during the years 2020-2022, which is a positive sign, at least. For example, I can quite

clearly remember when I started to do simple Google research in Finnish using words such as *neurodiversiteetti* (neurodiversity) on the matter around 2019 and I literally saw very few matches, circa 3-6. Now you can find a lot of information in Finnish when you do a simple Google search.

The Finnish terminology seems to have also increased with terms such as *neuroerityinen* and *neuropsykiatrinen* (*neuro* specific and neuropsychiatric) appearing. I personally think neurodiversity (*neurokirjo*, *neurodiversiteetti*) and neurodivergent (*neuromoninainen*, *neurokirjava*) is more accurate than '*special*' (*neuroerityinen*). Even literature around diagnosis has increased lately in Finland, with many neurodivergent producing and publishing books, lecturing, and promoting them in platforms such as Facebook. The awareness around it seems to have increased, especially in social media platforms such as Instagram (especially in English produced by several nationalities), even to the point where people have started to self diagnose themselves with neurodivergent disorders or conditions in social media.⁶

However, there is still too little attention paid to neurodiversity in public conversations in Finland and not just by most people in general but also by both healthcare professionals and sometimes by neurodivergent individuals themselves. To some extent the problem seems to be somewhat universal, especially in non-English speaking countries. Maybe this is the reason why I wanted to search

the subject also in the Finnish context. A lot of research and discussion has and is being done in the Anglo World (English-speaking nations), but also in Sweden. So why not in Finland?

Because there was and is not enough literature on the topic in Finnish, I decided to build my thesis by doing research in English and Swedish, which offered much more information on the topic. This led to my decision to also write in English. At the time it felt more comfortable to write in English since there was a lot more conversation and 'hustle and bustle' around the subject matter in internet and social media platforms, where I also found a safe haven to start a project like this.

Simultaneously, while making research, I also went through personal pondering. Growing up, like many others, it was made clear to me by society that I was "a dreamer", "different", "impractical", "distracted", "goofy", "lazy" or "incapable". As I am writing this, I know that most of the neurodivergent readers or people that have lived or are living close to a neurodivergent person, will understand this feeling immediately with the same or different words depending on one's diagnosis. Although you know it's not true, when you hear these words your whole life, you start to believe in them. It makes you feel you spend your whole life being put down. A lot of the future of oneself is about undoing that conditioning.

If you said it was "stupid," "insane," "crazy," "lame," or "dumb," you have (unknowingly or not) participated in spreading ableist language.

6. Friman, L., <https://yle.fi/aihe/a/20-10002400> (accessed 20.03.2022)

You may be surprised to learn that your response was a form of discrimination. People use ableist words and phrases everyday without realising the harm they do.

It stigmatises already marginalised people.⁷

I went to Steiner school (*Waldorfschule*) from grades one to nine and I remember already struggling with reading and writing, but it was something easily bypassed since I had moved from Sweden to Finland and many thought it was just difficulties learning and adapting a new language. Before I got into an art high school I was never really able to get the support I needed. From what I have understood, Steiner pedagogy is based on a belief that every kid is different. Then again, it did not necessarily understand and address in a meaningful way the issues, which neurodivergent individuals often face such as challenges regarding attention, functioning, mood, processing, learning, and behaviour. It was much later in life, during my early high school years, when I discovered I had dyslexia, although somewhat mild. Dyslexia and other kinds of learning challenges are very common among many neurodivergent people, such as individuals with ADHD like me.

Now, at the very last year of my twenties, I have understood that all the challenges I have had in life and all the 'mysteries' of not truly understanding my own struggles managing with school and everyday life were

because of something that I was not aware of. I was not in fact impractical, distracted, goofy, lazy, incapable or however the society made me feel or perceived me. I started to understand that I am neurologically different from the majority; my brain and mind works differently. I believed that certain things were not possible for me because whatever thought or feeling of incapability or the discouraging opinions that came across from the adults in schools, universities, healthcare workers and employers – society simply. It was never really a healthy way to view my challenges but rather a false picture of neurodivergent challenges. This newfound understanding acted as a starting point for my thesis, the importance of representation.

As I received my diagnosis at the age of 29-30 after a very long examination in Finland it turned out that my ADHD (known before as ADD) type is called *inattentive ADHD*. Problems with sleep and tiredness are very common in this type. The type I have is often the hardest one to depict and goes seemingly under-diagnosed, especially with girls and women. According to an American study, girls with ADHD struggle in life without receiving any diagnosis and 14% are misdiagnosed with depression when the number for boys is only 5%.⁸ For years before receiving the right diagnosis I was diagnosed with depression, but that could never solely explain my condition or the obstacles I faced with my identity or the struggles to try and fit in throughout my life.

7. Arni Ravishankar, R. 2020. <https://hbr.org/2020/12/why-you-need-to-stop-using-these-words-and-phrases>

8. Borg Skoglund, L. 2020, 191.

I started to realise aswell how some of my friends and I had similar ways of 'being', studying, and understanding the world – always thinking in 'a different way or out of the box'. The strength in the neurodivergent brain is in fact that thinking and solutions tend to be more often unconventional than what is often presented by neurotypicals peers.⁹ Eventually, when one of my closest friends told me about his diagnosis, I started to realise similarities in us. Unlike me, he had been diagnosed already at the age of seven, and thus had received assistance from an early age. I often perceive him as someone successful in life – believing he could progress in life in the directions he wanted to. Like so many of us, my process also included questioning not only myself, but also the society I lived in. What if I had received help and been able to understand myself earlier? It took me a long while to notice that I am actually smart and capable of things and curious, and aware of the world. As someone with ADHD, I find one of my biggest assets to be emphatic.¹⁰ This might not be the case for every person with ADHD but it has been studied that many neurodivergent people, not just people with ADHD, are very often more empathetic with others. One of the reasons for this might be their feeling of being different and the struggles life puts them up against. Many people with ADHD for example have an exaggerated sense of justice.¹¹

9. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

10. Low, K. <https://www.verywellmind.com/sensitivities-and-adhd-20473> (accessed 10.11.2021)

11. Borg Skoglund, L. 2020, 191.

While using media I had rarely seen people with ADHD like him or been aware of their ADHD. Not to mention how people with ADHD were and are still portrayed in a very one-dimensional way in media and society, and how many people diagnosed go quietly about it, resembling a big secret. I do not blame them, for the attitudes society has against many diagnoses are still very stereotypical, discriminative, unaware, ignorant, and aggressive, even. Neurodivergence truly comes in so many different shapes and forms even though two people would have the same diagnosis. The dilemma is often between 'to tell or not to tell'. Either one is not a wrong or right option, but rather how people with diagnosis are or will be faced. Some might be afraid of losing their credibility, others might feel they will be blamed by an unaware employer or in the worst case, lose their jobs or not get invited to a job interview, because of bias. I have had discriminating experiences in my life too. The attitudes we have as individuals or society, no matter how aware we see ourselves, has an unconscious and conscious impact on others and how we perceive them.

I think the psychiatric doctor Lotta Borg Skoglund has said it well when thinking about how to confront a world that can be questionable, stereotyping or that these diagnoses are seen as 'super powers':

Think about the situations where you will have to motivate or defend your diagnosis. You can put as much information as you want into that situation depending how close you are to that person and how much effort you want to put to make that person understand. You

*don't have any obligation to explain your diagnosis to anyone else but to yourself. The important advice is to understand how your diagnosis affects you.*¹²

1.2. Neurodiversity

In this chapter I will focus on terminology around the theme of neurodiversity. In addition to terminology, this chapter will introduce the main goals of the Neurodiversity movement and also criticism surrounding it.

Neurodiversity and ableism

Neurodiversity as a term and a word emerged to popular use in the late 1990s by an Australian sociologist, Judy Singer. She invented the new word neurodiversity to describe conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Singer hoped to move the focus of discussion about atypical ways of learning and thinking away from the usual repetition of disorders, deficits, and impairments. By reminding people of terms like biodiversity and cultural diversity, her neologism called awareness to the fact that many atypical forms of brain wiring also deliver unusual skills and gifts.¹³

12. Borg Skoglund, L., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxEtyAsW8ZU> (accessed 12.03.2022)

13. Silberman, Steve., <https://www.wired.com/2013/04/neurodiversity/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Neurodiversity is referring to the diversity of human minds and brains, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within human species. It is a term used in a non-pathological sense to point out the variation in the human brain regarding attention, learning, mood, sociability, and other mental functions.¹⁴

Neurodiversity emerged to challenge prevailing views that certain neurodevelopmental disorders are inherently pathological. Instead, it adopts the social model of disability meaning that societal barriers are actually the main contributing factor that often disables people.¹⁵ One of the key points of neurodiversity, as mentioned earlier, is to understand that societal barriers and society are sometimes the main contributing factors that disables people. Not fitting into the so-called social norm or pattern is eventually harmful for both neurodivergent individuals and society as a whole.

*Neurodiversity is not a perspective, an approach, a belief, a political position, or a paradigm. That's the neurodiversity paradigm, not neurodiversity itself. Neurodiversity is not a political or social activist movement. That's the neurodiversity movement, not neurodiversity itself.*¹⁶

14. Baumer, N. and Frueh, J. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-neurodiversity-202111232645> (accessed 12.03.2022)

15. Cigman, R. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/medicine-and-dentistry/social-model-of-disability> (accessed 12.03.2022)

16. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

*Disability, in contrast, is the political and social repression of impaired people. This is accomplished by making them economically and socially isolated. Disabled people have limited housing options, are socially and culturally ostracised, and have very few career opportunities.*¹⁷

I am approaching the contradiction that may lay between ableism and neurodiversity through understanding that one does not have to override the other. There seem to be many neurodivergent people who do not necessarily deny being disabled in some way or form, but rather many wish to have more space and possibilities as individuals to inform their diagnosis and identities before social circumstances or society decides their diagnosis and identities for them. I think also neurodiversity and ableism have a lot in common –being isolated from the overall society.

*"Thus, neurodivergence is not intrinsically positive or negative, desirable or undesirable – it all depends on what sort of neurodivergence one is talking about."*¹⁸

17. Scientific American. 2019. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/> (accessed 4.1.2022)

18. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Types of neurodivergence

When making research of the neurodivergent conditions I rarely came across only one or two different categorisations, but rather noticed that many conditions, disorders, and even mental health issues could be categorised under the medical model of neurodivergent disorders and diagnosis. The most common ones listed were often autism, ADHD and dyslexia.

Neurodevelopmental conditions can be such as ADHD spectrum, autism (Autism spectrum disorder, ASD), Developmental speech disorders, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysnomia, Dysgraphia, Tourette syndrome, Meares-Irlen Syndrome, Synaesthesia, Hyperlexia.¹⁹

Many forms of neurodivergence are often innate (genetic). They do not derive from bad upbringing, which is one of many myths of conditions such as autism and ADHD.²⁰ Individuals can have two or more neurodivergent diagnoses (for example, autism and ADHD). Such individuals are called multiple neurodivergent and this is common among neurodivergent people.²¹

Neurodivergence can also be strengthened, 'produced' and caused through experience and environment ('brain-

19. All colleges, PGR Experiences. <https://uofgpgprblog.com/pgrblog/2021/3/24/neurodiversity> (accessed 10.11.2021)

20. Liman, L. 2017, Storytel.

21. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

altering experience') or some by the combination of the two (experience and genetics).²² Things that can affect this are trauma or heavy usage of psychedelic drugs.²³

Many other and mental health disorders and conditions can be classed as a form of neurodivergence too such as: Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), Depression, Anxiety, Trauma, Epilepsy, Bipolar, Personality disorders, Anti-social personality disorder, Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective disorder, Dissociative disorder, Seizure disorders, Intellectual disabilities, Developmental language disorders, Developmental coordination disorders, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Giftedness, Sensory integration/processing disorder, Auditory processing disorder, Irlen Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Apraxia, Mental illnesses, Parkinson's, Multiple Sclerosis, Disorders of the corpus callosum (agenesis or dysgenesis), and Specific learning difficulties, differences, and disabilities.²⁴

Acquired brain injuries (often referred to as ABI) usually befall after accidents or illnesses and can cause difficulties similar to those allied with neurominorities such as dyslexia or ADHD. However, not all brain regions are affected. Areas such as verbal or good memory, visual abilities, strong

22. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

23. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

24. Dyan. Andnextcomesl. <https://www.andnextcomesl.com/2021/03/types-of-neurodivergence.html> (accessed 10.11.2021)

work ethic and practical skills may be enhanced during rehabilitation.²⁵

There are forms of neurodivergence that could be removed or at least altered from a person such as epilepsy or the effects of traumatic brain injury. In many cases, it is also the wish of the individual having these conditions to get rid of them:

*The neurodiversity paradigm does not reject the pathologizing of these forms of neurodivergence, and the Neurodiversity Movement does not object to consensual attempts to cure them (but still most definitely objects to discrimination against people who have them).*²⁶

Highly sensitive persons (HSP), also known as Sensory-Processing Sensitivity (SPS, the trait's scientific term)²⁷ is not oftentimes considered as disorder or part of neurodiversity. I still think mentioning it is important, since a lot of neurodivergent people are also highly sensitive. It has also been studied that approximately 15-20% of the population are highly sensitive.²⁸

25. Genius within. <https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/acquired-brain-injury/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

26. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

27. The terms SPS and HSP were coined in the mid-1990s by psychologists Elaine Aron and her husband Arthur Aron. Aron, E. <https://hsperson.com/> (accessed 12.03.2022)

28. Aron, E. <https://hsperson.com/> (accessed 12.03.2022)

According to a study by doctor Anders Hansen it is well known that many neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, dyslexia and ADHD have many benefits and strengths that society and neurotypical people have failed to see, value and recognize in neurodivergent people. This is probably one of the reasons why I started this project that will perhaps continue to grow and foster – to try and understand also the positive strengths neurodevelopmental and neurodivergent conditions have without omitting the so-called *downsides* and romanticising the *strengths*.²⁹

Statistic: neurodiversity in the population

In Britain around one in seven people are considered neurodivergent. This makes it indeed important to question the status quo of today's industrialised and digitised societies that are not always as accommodating for humans as one would expect.³⁰

In recent years, big companies including Hewlett Packard, Vodafone and Microsoft have all run autism-focused employment programmes. With these efforts they want to improve the diversity of workplaces by focusing on hiring for "neurodiversity", meaning neurodivergent individuals who might have conditions such as dyslexia, autism or ADHD.

29. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

30. Genius within. <https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Statistics published in 2017 show just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment in the UK, even though 77% of unemployed autistic adults want to work.³¹

Figures that indicate neurodiversity in the population:

90% of disabilities are invisible

5% of the population have ADHD

1-2% of the population is autistic

10% of the population are dyslexic

5% of the population are dyspraxic

1-2% of the population have Tourette Syndrome

7 % of the population have mental health needs

5% of the population have an acquired brain injury" ³²

31. Wojciechowski, R. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190719-neurodiversity> (accessed 10.11.2021)

32. Genius within. <https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Terms neurodivergent (and neurodivergence), neurotypical, neurodiverse, and neurominority

Shortcuts used for terms

NEURODIVERGENT (in Finnish *neuroerityinen*, *neuropsychiatriinen*) = ND

NEUROTYPICAL (in Finnish *neurotyypillinen*) = NT

Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of what is considered "normal": neuronormative or neurotypical (NT). Neurodivergence (in Finnish *neuroerityisyys*) means 'the state of being neurodivergent'.^{33, 34} A term that occurs also from time to time for a neurodivergent brain is an 'atypical brain'.³⁵

The terms referring to people that are neurodivergent was framed in the year 2000 by a neurodivergent *neurodiversity* activist Kassiane Asasumasu. Their previous term was neurodiversity, which refers to the biological reality that people's brains are different, but could not alone describe a

person or an individual who is neurodivergent.³⁶ That said, neurodiversity is not a "trait that an individual possesses or can possess" according to autistic author and educator Nick Walter. Walter thinks that when "an individual or group of individuals diverges from the dominant societal standards of "normal" neurocognitive functioning, they do not "have neurodiversity, they are neurodivergent."³⁷

Neurodiverse

Neurodiverse is a term that refers to a group of people that are neurodivergent so people whose neurocognitive functioning differs from other members. There can be multiple styles of neurocognitive represented in a neurodiverse group.³⁸

Neurominority

Neurominority is used to describe a population and minority that share a similar form of neurodivergence, for example an autistic support group. It also refers to a form of neurodivergence where the forms are largely innate and that has a huge impact on their personalities, psyches and other

33. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

34. Jääskeläinen, E. 2017, 79. https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/193640/Jaaskelainen_Sosiaalityo.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y (accessed: 07.04.2022)

35. Solden, S. and Frank, M. 2019, 193.

36. Chapman, R. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/neurodiverse-age/202108/negotiating-the-neurodiversity-concept> (accessed 15.02.2022)

37. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

38. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

fundamental ways of relating to the world. Neurominorities often face discrimination, prejudice, misunderstanding and oppression by the majority.³⁹ Examples of neurominority groups include autistic people, dyslexic people, and people with Down Syndrome. It is also possible to be neurodivergent without being a member of a neurominority group. Examples include people with acquired traumatic brain injuries, and people whose own neurocognitive functioning have been altered through their extensive use of psychedelic drugs. The word neurominority can function as either a noun (as in, “autistics are a neurominority”) or an adjective (as in, “autistics are a neurominority group”).⁴⁰

Neurodiversity paradigm

Neurodiversity paradigm⁴¹ is an approach and perspective. The neurodiversity paradigm describes itself as something natural and valuable for human diversity.

According to Nick Walter, some forms of innate or merely innate neurodivergence such as autism can be fundamental factors, in a quote, “an individual’s psyche, personality, and fundamental way of relating to the world.” So in other words, instead of pathologizing such forms of neurodivergence, the neurodiversity paradigm rejects it. It also argues that the

39. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

40. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

41. Meaning of paradigm: a model of something, or a very clear and typical example of something.

societal idea that there is only one “normal, right, healthy” style of neurocognitive functioning is in fact just a social or cultural construction. In similar ways it is just as harmful to an idea for a healthy society, human, personal wellbeing and humanity, than other societal dynamics of ideas about “one right or normal”: gender, ethnicity, or culture.⁴²

Neurodiversity movement

The neurodiversity movement, like any social justice movement, also aims for equality, rights, understanding, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent. The Neurodiversity movement in short opposes attempts to “get rid of the diagnoses and conditions” and receive help and treatment.⁴³ Although the Neurodiversity Movement began within the Autism Rights Movement, it has expanded to reach out to many other neurodiverse groups, seeking to be inclusive of all neurominorities, not just autistics.⁴⁴

Similarly to many civil rights movements, The Neurodiversity Movement is often organised in groups. Naturally, these groups are diverse in their methods of activism, goals, concerns, and even political positions.⁴⁵

42. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

43. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

44. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

45. Walker, N. <https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Criticism around neurodiversity

The neurodiversity movement is very much at its beginning. Research psychologist and autistic activist Jacqueline den Houting felt that the more members of the autism community become aware of the movement, the more she found herself encountering less sophisticated and nuanced criticism around it, and instead confronted a lot of quote on quote: “misinformed arguments against a fictional conceptualisation of ‘neurodiversity’ that is not the paradigm to which I subscribe.”⁴⁶

I also came across a lot of criticism while I was researching the topic. I will present some of the most common criticisms I came across. I also noticed how many of the criticisms are often somewhat condescending in their tone, as Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole note well exemplifies:

In this paper, my aim is to set out the limits and possibilities of a ‘politics of neurodiversity’ in a neoliberal social policy context. I will argue that while the neurodiversity movement has sought to shape neoliberal social policy by arguing for recognition and acceptance of ‘autism-as-difference’, its achievements have been and, perhaps, can only be limited. I will argue that this is because social movements, like the neurodiversity movement, which rely on identity politics will inevitably fail to trouble the ‘us’ and ‘them’ upon which neoliberal

*societies are premised and through which such societies both subordinate and commodify difference. The paper ends with a call to move away from a reliance on identity politics towards a politics of identity that steps away from essentialist claims.*⁴⁷

I think, like in any other movement, the neurodiversity movement is in fact in the intersections of privileges. And therefore, it has never been a question of ‘Us and Them’ and such arguments, in my opinion, can be misleading. In human history and psychology, it has always been part of humans and human history to divide themselves in groups whether it is a tribe, nation, cultural and a political or social group.⁴⁸ I guess one of the positive aspects of it is in fact to seek safety, safe spaces, understanding and purpose for oneself – that seems to be the case in neurodiversity. Whether it be a support group for autism, dyslexia, OCD or ADHD, some individuals might actually benefit from it.

A common criticism is in fact the claim that the neurodiversity paradigm frames neurodiversity as a ‘difference, cultural identity or as identity politics’ instead of a disability. Many critics refer to this as a ‘weakness’ of neurodiversity. As mentioned earlier in my work while discussing ableism and while reading a lot about neurodiversity I have come across frequently the fact that many neurodivergent people do not necessarily deny being

46. den Houting, J. 2019. <https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/doi/pdf/10.1177/1362361318820762> (accessed 10.11.2021)

47. Runswick-Cole, K. 2009. 2014-08-09, Vol.29 (7), p.1117-1129.

48. Hansen, A. <https://webb-tv.nu/din-hjarna-svt-play/> (accessed 21.03.2022)

disabled, at least in some ways or form. The issue is that many would rather wish to have more space and possibilities as individuals to inform their diagnosis and identities before social circumstances or society decides everything for them.

Another criticism that one often comes across with is the argument that the neurodiversity paradigm would only make sense to apply or be used around neurodivergent people with lower needs of support, often described as being 'high functioning'. Those with higher support needs, often described as 'low functioning', are generally considered by critics to be too significantly disabled to be included in the neurodiversity movement.⁴⁹ This overlooks the fact that critics and people who make these kinds of arguments actively lack a neurodivergent voice and thus lack the experience of neurodivergent individuals.⁵⁰ For me neurodiversity is not denying the struggles that come with individuals with high support, but allowing people like myself with lower needs to allow one to define their needs, understand their diagnosis, be critical of societal systems and look into the strengths, and weaknesses that comes along with the specific diagnoses. During the process of my work, I noticed repeatedly that there is no one way of being neurodivergent just like there is no one way of being neurotypical.

49. den Houting, J. 2019. <https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/doi/pdf/10.1177/1362361318820762> (accessed 10.11.2021)

50. den Houting, J. 2019. <https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/doi/pdf/10.1177/1362361318820762> (accessed 10.11.2021)

I have also myself received criticism. I often got discouraged by neurotypical individuals, but often completely understood by neurodivergent persons when I was trying to explain the subject matter of my thesis. This was quite literally what happened to me when I tried to present my working idea for the first time in 2019 in Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture at the Photography department to fellow students. I was met with discouragement from some fellow art students, including one teacher who described my work with words such as "controversial" and "unknown". I do not even remember how many times students and people have asked me the following: "What is neurodiversity?" Or perhaps made a note by saying: "I have never heard about neurodiversity before". It says a lot how little we are aware of it as societies, nations and on an individual level, even though it's a significant part of being a human – how different brains function and reasons behind behaviour patterns. Therefore, neurodiversity is also an intersectional question. The discouragement I received at the time really unmotivated me to continue with the work and I think it affected my work for a long while. In the beginning it felt that the encouragement and understanding behind the motivation mostly came from neurodivergent individuals with different diagnoses such as: Autism disorder, OCD and ADHD. Later on, more people started to open up to the subject matter and I was encouraged by many other people as well, including art teachers and students.

1.3. Society

There are a lot of challenges for neurodivergent people that are more painful and heavy than to other people. There is a lot of data that shows that many neurodivergent people have a high risk of not getting proper treatment, are more often on sick leaves due to depression and many other issues, unemployment, divorce, shorter life expectancy and suicide risk. We pay almost no attention in general on how to help neurodivergent people to find their place in life or society, which is very unfortunate. Many would need better conditions than society has to offer today such as support in education, better treatment and health care and a more welcoming and suiting work environment.⁵¹ Neurodivergent people should not constantly “be cured” by society or incompetent healthcare workers, family or anyone in order to be good enough for the society. You cannot get rid of a neurodivergent brain, only treat the symptoms.⁵² This is of the many myth neurodivergent people keep facing in the hands of incompetent therapist, psychologist, teachers, family members, and so on.

Very few societies have intended to try and normalise the current discussion by depleting the social stigma, which still permeates in our modern society. The biggest discussion and literature is probably provided in the countries in the Anglosphere such as the USA and Britain. It can be

51. Borg Skoglund, L. 2020, 191.

52. Resnick, A. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627> (accessed 18.12.2021)

considered a privilege to even receive help since mental health issues, let alone neurodevelopmental conditions, are barely discussed in many parts of the world. But it is still important to stress out that this is certainly not always the case in every country. Class and wealth in general is also something that often plays a crucial part whether someone is able to receive support or get diagnosed – and often early on.

As a neurodivergent person myself, I feel it is all more important to recognise and understand neurodiversity more. Many get easily burned out and left wondering what’s going on or ‘wrong’ with them as simultaneously we have never been more aware of our diverse minds and brains as more people are receiving diagnosis. It would be very important to reshape societies in ways that could be much more inclusive for people in any intersections whether it’s neurodiversity, ableism, differences among women, sexuality, economical status or class, nationality, religion or language.

*Neurodivergent people exhibit their conditions in different ways based upon their gender, race, and culture, and some neurodivergent people (e.g., autistic people or those with ADHD) may mask their neurodivergent characteristics in order to fit into society’s standards of neurotypical behaviour; this is called neuronormative. Therefore, intersectionality always has a hand to play, so it is good to keep an open mind for both awareness and inclusion purposes.*⁵³

53. All colleges. <https://uofgpgprblog.com/pgprblog/2021/3/24/neurodiversity> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Forcing someone into 'commonly accepted societal norms or models' is in the long run extremely harmful to a neurodivergent person. Perhaps neurodiversity as a viewpoint changes the status quo by breaking the fact that the so-called neurotypical is and should be the only norm. In a way, it offers ways for neurodivergent people to find spaces for themselves. In some areas of the world, countries and cultures have only started destigmatizing mental health issues, but neurodiversity or neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism or ADHD still in fact goes widely unspoken.

There are more to many neurodivergent people than the stereotypes that are often repeated to a large portion of people. One of the common stereotypes is that ADHD is only presented by a young white boy who is either loud, hyper active or aggressive or all of them. Another stereotype must be a white savant autistic little boy who is highly intelligent. In a way we all carry a form of one or another stereotype and it does not make anyone's struggle or story less valuable. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are not necessarily true, but the fact that they are not the whole truth.⁵⁴ And they often lack gender, identity or racial representation.

People are individuals that consist not only of diagnosis, but rather of various experiences, backgrounds, environments, societal classes, traumas and genetics, and much more. All of the latter can affect your brain development,

54. Ngozi Adichie, C. 2019.<https://thewritelife.com/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie/> (accessed 10.04.2022)

neurodivergent brain (*counter to neurotypical*), disorders or diagnosis. Neurodivergent conditions come in nuances and are multi-sided, complex and sometimes even beyond our capacity to fully understand them completely. If something is easy to understand –neurodiversity such as nature's biodiversity has invariably been among us.

Society should be less unforgiving, ignorant and stop sweeping all diagnoses into some kind of one-minded and one-dimensional stereotypes, when in reality such is not even possible. Neurodivergent people come from all paths of life and are very different from one another even if individuals would have the same exact diagnosis.

It is also essential to stress out, without romanticising the issues, that many people with neurodivergent diagnosis have abilities, which often receive little or no acknowledgement. The other side of the coin tends to be forgotten, sometimes because of unawareness, sometimes because of society's fixed ideas and stigma. Understanding both severe, in-between and mild neurodivergent and neurodevelopmental cases is crucial. But to place all the neurodivergent individuals into the same box leads to alienation and fearfulness, forgetting that diagnosis is not always equated to a disability or identity politics. And not all identity politics are made to be egalitarian, but when it comes to the Neurodiversity Movement, a more equal society is a goal to strive for.⁵⁵

55. Morrison, T. 2017.

It is also meaningful to ask why these diagnoses have existed and still exist, what kind of purposes they could possibly have in the human genepool today and how society could better accommodate different people with different minds and brains, and skills even?

2.

HISTORY AND ART

2.1 Notes on neurodiversity's history

The advantages of the genes linked to ADHD and autism are thought to have evolved more than 10,000 years ago as a result of the circumstances some individuals were put through.⁵⁶ When the human brain was formed, the world was very different from today's industrialised and digitised societies – which have only affected the last few generations. Differences between people are essential, but sometimes our modern society tends to underestimate these differences and pigeonhole them into what we refer to only as disabilities and disadvantages.⁵⁷

Psychologist Devon MacEachron and doctor Anders Hansen describe that much as biodiversity in nature, neurodiversity is a biological fact and something that has existed in the human genepool for thousands of years for a reason and has had and continues to have its own benefits for human kind. The challenges in today's highly digitalized and capitalised world are crucial to talk about because they easily shut out people in minorities.⁵⁸

56. Hansen, A. <https://webb-tv.nu/din-hjarna-svt-play/> (accessed 21.03.2022)

57. Hansen, A. <https://webb-tv.nu/din-hjarna-svt-play/> (accessed 21.03.2022)

58. Hansen, A. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRRHzROidD4> (accessed 21.03.2022), NowThis Opinions (episode 45). <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisOpinions/videos/2050535798369867> (accessed 7.4.2020)

Conditions like autism, ADHD and dyslexia are not abnormal but rather a variation of the human brain. People had to develop certain abilities due to the risk they faced in their natural environment; for instance, heightened sense perceptions, rapid change, variety, creativity, a precise eye for details, exceptional memory skills, and enhanced understanding of systems such as animal behaviour.⁵⁹

Some strengths that certain neurodivergent diagnoses may hold “suggest an evolutionary explanation for why these disorders are still in the gene pool” according to an American Ph.D. Thomas Armstrong who is concentrated on issues related to learning and human development. He also says that:

*A growing number of scientists are suggesting that psychopathologies may have had specific evolutionary advantages in the past as well as in the present. The systemizing abilities of individuals with autism spectrum disorder might have been highly adaptive for the survival of prehistoric humans. Temple Grandin, an autism activist with autism, surmised: Some guy with high-functioning Asperger’s developed the first stone spear; it wasn’t developed by the social ones yakking around the campfire.*⁶⁰

59. NowThis Opinions (episode 45). <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisOpinions/videos/2050535798369867> (accessed 7.4.2020)

60. Armstrong, T. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/myth-normal-brain-embracing-neurodiversity/2015-04> (accessed 10.11.2021)

Similarly Armstrong continues by stating that the three-dimensional thinking seen in some people with dyslexia may have been highly adaptive in preliterate cultures for designing tools, plotting out hunting routes, and constructing shelters, and would not have been regarded as a barrier to learning. The key symptoms of ADHD, including hyperactivity, distractibility, and impulsivity, would have been adaptive traits in hunting and gathering societies in which people who were peripatetic in their search for food, quick in their response to environmental stimuli, and deft in moving toward or away from potential prey would have thrived. There might also have been evolutionary advantages in prehistoric times for people with mania, since “high energy and creative expression might have fueled sexual and reproductive success.”⁶¹

I will take as an example ADHD. Swedish doctor Anders Hansen has written a book about ADHD that also has a fascinating chapter about human history, migration and evolution. In his book he writes about a specific gene called DRD4-7R (dopamine receptor) that is associated with ADHD. This is surely not the only measurement of how ADHD appears nor is it the only gene attached to ADHD (DAT1, DRD5, DBH and 5HTR1B). The DRD4-7R gene is often called an adventure or novelty seeking gene and might be part of the reason why our ancestors were capable of

61. Armstrong, T. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/myth-normal-brain-embracing-neurodiversity/2015-04> (accessed 10.11.2021)

spreading all around the world from Africa. No other species on earth has had a similar need to spread so seamlessly. Hansen mentions as well that the longer distance people went and the more often and eager they went to wander or moved away the more likely they carried a variation of the DRD4 gene such as DRD4-7R variant that is very common among people that has been diagnosed with ADHD (which is the reason why the pleasure centre is 'lazier' to activate itself). This kind of desire to seek novelty again and again was not common among the Neanderthals but became more needed for our somewhat closer ancestors. Hansen warns to be careful with these kinds of studies because there are many other factors that have an effect on people's personalities such as the surrounding environment. Likewise, the migration of human beings all around the world is a very complex phenomenon that has been affected by numerous aspects such as wars, conflicts, hunger and climate change. One gene cannot possibly be responsible for all of the explanations and possibilities for why people started to wander and migrate. Yet, there is a pattern that has been found all over the world, which in Hansen's words, shows that the longer distance our ancestors travelled during the last 30 000 years, the more likely they were and are to have the gene DRD4-7R (so-called ADHD gene).⁶² The study showed the following:

62. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

DRD4-7R gene's popularity among some of the world's population⁶³:

Europe 15%

USA 20%

South America 50-70%

Japan & China 0-5%

Although places like China and Japan scored low, this does not exclude the factor that ADHD would not exist in places like China, for example. In fact, it seems to be very common also in China, but appears as a gene variation DRD4-2R instead, which appears to work and affect in similar ways than its cousin variation DRD4-7R.⁶⁴

When the gene has been altered, it is called mutation. According to Hansen the gene DRD4-7R is a mutation that is believed to have arisen by coincidence. Our ancestors' genes have been passed forward wrongly by chance. The person who carries the DRD-7R- gene mutation, which is often referred as the ADHD gene, the so-called recompensing system does not work as effectively as for others. This leads to impatientless, restlessness, and sometimes to hyperactivity. He, she or they most likely observes the

63. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

64. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

environment constantly and reacts to the slightest stimulus, which had an advantage, as mentioned earlier as well, during the hunter-gatherer culture.⁶⁵

The cumulative effect of looking into history and these studies suggests there has been a reason behind these “disabilities” and “illnesses” and that sometimes the concept of disorders can also be replaced with a “diversity” perspective that would take into account both weaknesses and strengths.⁶⁶

65. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

66. Armstrong, T. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/myth-normal-brain-embracing-neurodiversity/2015-04> (accessed 10.11.2021)

2.2. Definition of mental illness, history of sickness and (art) photography

How do we decide whether any individual human brain or mind is abnormal or normal? To be sure, psychiatrists have their diagnostic manuals. But when it comes to mental disorders, including autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disabilities, and even emotional and behavioural disorders, there appears to be substantial uncertainty concerning when a neurologically based human behaviour crosses the critical threshold from normal human variation to pathology.⁶⁷

I became interested in how sickness is defined and about the history of defining sickness in (art) photography. I think sickness is closely dealing with neurodevelopmental or neurodivergent conditions, and mental health, especially in its past, but also presently. What gave me more perspective to the connection of pathology and neurodivergent conditions was Maija Tammi’s doctoral dissertation ‘Sick Photography: Representation of Sickness in Art Photography’.⁶⁸

When reading Tammi’s definitions of the terms ‘sickness or illness’ and ‘disease’ seems to be somewhat different.

67. Armstrong, T. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/myth-normal-brain-embracing-neurodiversity/2015-04> (accessed 10.11.2021)

68. Tammi, M. <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/28901> (accessed 18.12.2021)

Illness on one hand seems to be something that needs to be 'managed such as feelings of pain, discomfort, distress, weakness, fatigue'. These two things are not mutually exclusive, and they often occur together. On the other hand, 'disease is something that needs to be cured.' The contradiction perhaps, in neurodivergent conditions arrives when some psychologists, therapists, and other health workers seem to want to treat neurodivergent conditions almost like diseases – to be cured. In fact, most neurodivergent conditions cannot be cured, only treated. Sociologist Judy Singer coined the neurodiversity term, and wanted to challenge the idea that autistic spectrum disorders diagnoses are disabilities or that they need to be cured.⁶⁹ The more we allow ourselves as societies to understand how the brain operates, the ways in which it treats those who are neurodivergent will also change. Many advocates write that there is much work that has been done to stop treating autism, dyslexia and ADHD as an illness that must be cured.⁷⁰

69. Silberman, S. <https://www.wired.com/2013/04/neurodiversity/> (accessed 10.11.2021)

70. Resnick, A. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627> (accessed 18.12.2021)

Most commonly, sickness has been seen as something that naturally opposes health. In 1948, The World Health Organisation defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. The definition made by WHO has not since been revised.⁷¹

Definitions of sickness, disease and illness have surely changed over the decades and centuries. One of the very first names for ADHD was called "an abnormal defect of moral control in children" that was meant to describe children with ADHD's problematic or less wanted behaviour in the early 1900s. For long, conditions like ADHD were believed to disappear as people grew into adulthood, which today is of course a false belief. I find the historic variation in naming the conditions very describing in methods how the condition has been viewed, treated and how it has changed until today.⁷² They have been debated and negotiated time and time again. One example is the name of ADHD, which is still debated over its name and a well-known brain researcher Nora Volkow has even suggested that ADHD name should be changed into AMDD (attention and motivation deficit disorder).⁷³

71. Tammi, M. <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/28901> (accessed 18.12.2021)

72. Tammi, M. <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/28901> (accessed 18.12.2021)

73. Hansen, A. 2017, 199.

On the other hand, as Tammi describes, Michel Foucault defined sickness as a cultural, legal, political, historical and medical construct, specific to each historical era, which is an important observation when thinking about differently wired brains and minds. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of times societal barriers are the main contributing factor that often disables people such as school and workforce environments, especially for the so-called highly functioning individuals.⁷⁴

2.3. Neurodivergent identity and the experience of *otherness*

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary *otherness* is defined as “the quality or state of being other or different or something that is other or different”.⁷⁵

At the worst scenario a person can feel ostracised for being ‘weird’ and often one can start to develop self esteem issues and internalise the identity of they themselves being the problem.⁷⁶

74. Tammi, M. <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/28901> (accessed 18.12.2021)

75. Merriam-webster dictionary. Otherness. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/otherness> (accessed 5.1.2022)

76. Edelstein, J. <https://open.spotify.com/show/5p4435jmJiX5uBuG3s1OnL?si=9356b6e3443c4f4e> (accessed 23.2.2022)

Between 2018-2019, I was observing myself unconsciously around my friends. I could not help but to notice how disgraceful it was even to talk about diagnosis. When I started to genuinely express my worries for the first time to some of my closest friends that I might have ADHD, along with my already earlier diagnosed mild dyslexia, some were almost amused and told me that I am “fine”, “highly functional”, “normal” or “smart” and that there is no way I could have it. By saying “normal” they already had imagined someone who is completely unable to live a somewhat what we often call a “normal” life under highly digitalized and capitalistic societies, and therefore someone who is not suitable for work or ‘normal’ stable life even. People are often imagining a person who is “only” disabled to the point that they are unable to function in society without getting regular help.

Also the interviews of the people photographed showed many examples feelings of otherness throughout their life, as Rosanna’s, Leo’s, Guilherme’s, and Lotta’s experiences well describe:

Rosanna, autism:

I definitely don’t see it as something negative that should be excluded from society. I don’t think it should be uplifted either. Like: “Ooh that person has autism.” I don’t think it should be overpraised just because you have it. The point goes past people. We should listen more to each other and understand. Instead of: “Ooh she has autism and she can do anything, she is a great writer

because of that.” That’s at least what people have said about me and my writing. My poetry and my writing is of course a product of me but the product that is me isn’t defined by the diagnosis I have. I have more things in me than my diagnosis and people don’t always see that. In Finland autism isn’t discussed as it should be. I think neurodiversity is not researched as much as it should. We don’t help these people enough.

Leo, ADHD:

I don’t think it’s seen as a negative thing as much as it was when I was younger. I think it’s starting to get better, because you know, the system that we live in is basically designed for all the people that aa, that you know, function normally. And the norm is to be quiet, peaceful, hardworking and, I don’t know, intelligent. And I’m pretty much the opposite of all of those things. I think now we’re starting to learn that, I think people are starting to learn that the ones that have ADHD, their voices are also getting heard and they are more understood than when I was a kid.

I guess people that have ADHD are very different from me. I guess my ADHD might be what is considered the “normal” ADHD, loud, full of energy, can’t really stay still and doesn’t like to listen to teachers. But others with ADHD, can be really quiet and keep to themselves. They just can’t focus like other people, which is what I have too; I’m just not quiet. I’m very vocal, and I’m very loud.

Guilherme, ADHD (ADD):

I was flying and I watched this movie ‘ The Joker’ and one of the scenes that caught my attention the most was the one where he wrote a note saying something like: The worst part of having a mental illness is having to pretend that you don’t have it or people wanting you to pretend like you don’t have it. I think that translates to me like it’s hard not to be able to be yourself sometimes. So if you are wired differently it’s obvious that you will express yourself differently, act differently, you will impart the message differently. I think the stigmatisation will be there. It will always be a challenge. I don’t think the solutions to stigmatisation are easily found. But the more we talk about it, the better it is. The least we talk about something, the more taboo it becomes. I think we should start talking more. Maybe with time taboos will not be much of a taboo and people will be more comfortable with it.

I think people that think differently are usually judged a lot by other people for not being able to fit in societal patterns. I have been judged a lot. You forget your homework, you forget to do something and you come off as someone very unreliable. That has the power to put you down and then somehow you start looking down on yourself and thinking that maybe yes, I am this, I am very unreliable. It’s very hard for me to do simple things. This is the worst part, because when you are so young and you receive this message from everywhere that you are not doing this right. You are not able to do

this. People doubt you a lot, and as a result of that you start doubting yourself. It's really hard for you to get to a point in your adult life to break free from all those years of really hard criticism towards you. This comes off as a cliché, but it's very true, we are judged a lot. So today when I fail to do something because of my anxiety or because I cannot focus, my brain automatically goes into that place: What are people going to think of you? You know, you should be writing this essay. You shouldn't be asking your professor for an extension. You know, what is he going to think? It's just a freaking essay. Umh, but hey there you are asking for three more days. Those three more days are sometimes the end of the world, it has the power to put you down. As in, you know, it has this power, to ask for more time, it has the ability to let you down. My anxiety makes everything worse. Not being able to focus is the worst.

Yeah, it's complicated. Sometimes in class you try not to let that show, but hey this is how you are. The longest time now, I don't care if that shows. I will be talking about something and then I go like what was I talking about again? Ah yeah this thing! With time you learn how to cope with that. Then it's nice to see that some students relate to that, because wow this teacher is just as human as I am. But some others would start doubting me. Am I able to trust what this teacher is saying? You know, and I think again. We get that a lot. If you hesitate, if you need a second to consider something or to remember something then people feel they have the right to discredit you or question your knowledge or who

you really are and what you know. It's sort of some kind of second guessing, they feel they are entitled to second guess you. This is hard, this happened more often when I was teaching adults. Because adults naturally judge you more, the same way I judge them as a teacher, they judge me more. But as a teacher that makes me more forgiving with my students. Hey you make more mistakes, didn't pay enough attention here, but let's do it again, the second time you will get it right.

*I think the world is not only with my condition but with so many other societal issues the world is much more aware of. We have to be constantly aware our reality is not the reality of so many places. So a lot of people like me must still suffer a lot in some other places due to the lack of knowledge. The perception of my condition has changed, but I don't want to turn a blind eye to the reality of so many people who still face a lot of discrimination and possibility of still not getting any help. For people like me, we will always be judged in one way or the other. Let's say if you are someone who checks all the boxes: tick, tick, tick, you are normal this, you are normal that, you are normal whatever, you are already judged, a lot. And for somebody like us that doesn't tick all the boxes of normality (*laughs*), societal normality, we will always be judged. So I don't expect miracles to happen. What I do expect is that people have more dignity like everyone should have. I hope people will be able to access treatment, help or whatever kind of support they may need.*

Lotta, Bipolar Disorder:

Concerning stigmatisation, what I have faced was once when my boyfriend told me in the beginning when we started dating that he first had his doubts because I have bipolar disorder. His close friend had a girlfriend with the same condition and it had been very tough. It had gone very badly. He started to have doubts whether dating would be possible, does it make close relationships difficult, and what he had noticed from his friend and his ex-girlfriend. He noticed that I don't do similar stuff and that I am not like her. He said he had had his doubts in vain. That's perhaps the only stigma that I have noticed in my own life.

I would like people to understand the basic idea of the condition, which includes two different episodes: mania and depression phases. Having bipolar disorder doesn't mean you have bad and good days. Everyone has bad and good days. What bothers me is when people find out I have bipolar disorder and say: "Me too, sometimes I wake up with a really good feeling and then suddenly I have a bad feeling and then all of a sudden I am feeling good again." Of course it can be that there is a lot of undiagnosed bipolar disorder out there, for sure, and I don't want to question anyones own experiences. It does seem condescending though when people compare their mood changes to your diagnosed mental health disorder. Sometimes it feels bad. Once I got offended when I told one acquaintance that I have this condition and because of it I get rehabilitation benefits, which I only received

during high school. My friend answered me: "I should also get myself some madness like that so I could get money." I was shocked. What should I answer? It's utter ignorance towards mental health patients. Like I would really want this condition just because of rehabilitation benefits. I would choose not to have this condition. I have gotten so much perspective out of this, but I think you can get perspective also easier.

Ville, High sensitive:

I have partly been teased because of my sensitivity. It was bullying that was maskered into teasing and banter. I would get angry or frustrated very quickly. Only a snap would make it. That started to be the thing that everyone would pick on, because people thought it was funny how easily I could get frustrated or mad. So it was masqueraded in a way that they had nothing to do with it. It wasn't straight up in your face, kind of bad mouthing. This lasted the first and second class.

I think when it comes to me, being highly sensitive means that I can also deal with my environment pretty well. I can appreciate, understand and take other people's needs into account. I don't usually leave people out, even if I would like to. I know from my own experiences that it's not a nice feeling to be left out.

Joy, OCD:

I think the world sees my condition as a sort of need-to-freakily-clean-thing, which of course can be a dimension of it, that you do not like when things are not symmetrical or you don't like when things are misplaced or messy. But I think really often people think that's all it is. And it is quite common for people to say they are really OCD because they are tidy. It didn't used to bother me but nowadays it gets me, mostly because I have seen how it makes other people feel - it kind of diminishes the emotional pain that there actually is in the brain process that happens when you get a tick or an intrusive thought. I think the world can stop stigmatising these conditions by being honest about them even if they sound ridiculous, or silly. Mental health conditions are rooted in such a weird place in your brain that it sounds crazy to even say those feelings out loud unless you are going to a specialist, and even then it can be difficult. At least for me, as soon as I become honest about how I feel, a lot of people around me become honest about how they feel, or talk to me about what they are going through. So there is a power in living your truth and henceforth letting others live theirs. And I think more awareness leads to less stigmatisation.

I feel much like the snippets above of the long interviews I originally had of neurodivergent lives were full of depiction of otherness and feeling of otherness, although this was never my intention and I never asked anything of otherness. It was something that I repeatedly came across.

Other examples in race and appearance

Toni Morrison wrote in her book *The Origin of Others* that racism and living in otherness matters and should not be bypassed when thinking of equality, but the heartbreaking truth about this is that it hardly will change, because people abandon their privileges often less unselfishly.⁷⁷ One extreme example is death when thinking of how it's to live in otherness and how you are less likely to die due to police violence, and even poverty in the USA, because of your white skin colour than you are with your black skin.⁷⁸ The book describes that people who benefit from whiteness will abandon their privileges only when they become a luxury to which they cannot afford. As the civil war in the USA was prolonged, black were accepted to fight in the same lines and die. Morrison's thoughts made me think of other examples in history where people have been used and photographed because of their otherness. In the following paragraphs I will go through some documented examples in race and appearance.

77. Morrison, T. 2017.

78. Morrison, T. 2017.



Mary Ann Bevan (20 December 1874 – 26 December 1933) was an English woman, who developed a rare medical illness called acromegaly, which distorted her face and other features. She toured the sideshow circuit as “the ugliest woman in the world”.⁷⁹

After Mary Ann Bevan’s husband had died, she was left alone with her children and found herself in a difficult place. She then decided to enter a competition known as “the ugliest woman in the world” organised by an American circus. She was offered a job in the Barnum and Bailey circus, which she was first reluctant to, but then decided to join after considering economical causes. The shows would feature individuals with some kind of abnormality, genetic disorder or illness, which were considered as spectacular. These features could be people who would suffer from conditions that lead to gigantism or dwarfism.⁸⁰

79. Historic Photographs. <https://z-upload.facebook.com/HistoricPhotographs/posts/2012541258919614> (accessed 07.04.2022)

80. Forgotten Lives. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSINVERu9Lk> (accessed 18.03.2022)



Rosa Lemberg 1899.⁸¹

I wanted to bring an example of race and racism in Finland and I came across Rosa Lemberg. Her being a mixed race child born to a Namibian mother from a bantu tribe and British father, she was soon after her birth abducted and taken away from her mother to a British household. At the age of four, she was relocated to a Finnish 'foster family' (working as Missionaries in Africa) to whom she worked as a servant without pay. She became one of the first Afro Finns with a Finnish nationality. Her family exposed and mistreated her in Finland by showing her in different Christian events and audiences as 'exotic Rosa' while forcibly singing christmas songs in Khoekhoe (hottentottikieli in Finnish) despite that not being her mother tongue. Her job was to collect money from the audience, which she couldn't keep herself. In these events, she was often photographed.⁸² I will examine the connections of photography and otherness a bit further down in my thesis, but before that in the next chapters I will examine the representations through popular culture, photography and art.

81. Helsingin Sanomat. 2020. <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000006504130.html> (accessed 10.04.2022)

82. Suomen kirjallisuuden seura. <https://kansallisbiografia.fi/kansallisbiografia/henkilo/9823> (accessed 20.03.2022)

2.4. Representations of neurodiversity in popular culture

Films, TV and other sorts of pop culture have for decades failed to portray neurodiverse characters with nuance, complexity, respect and accuracy. There are many patterns on how neurodivergent people, nonfiction, and fictional characters tend to be featured in Films and TV.

Many series and films are excellent examples of how neurodivergent traits are often used in many of the characters we know. Some main patterns that can be distinguished are the fact that neurodiverse characters are often 'driven', especially when portraying autism. Some are overly simplified or lacking nuance. Then again, some are glorified, mystified and made into superhero characters without human needs.⁸³ Sometimes these characters are made to offer mystical insights that:

*Will revolutionise other people's outlook and even when they are the main character the neurodivergent character in all these portrayals is often there to help neurotypical people to learn something.*⁸⁴

83. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

84. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

For example, Forrest Gump who is there to share his wisdom in seeing beauty in the world and the protagonist Shaun from The Good Doctor is an excellent surgeon is also there to lead medical knowledge and show what truly matters is the truth, finding solutions and hope in situations that seem impossible to solve. What is often in common with these characters is that a lot of them are performed by non-neurodivergent actors. Perhaps, it's also ironic that many of the characters we tend to like or find interesting, charming or captivating such as Amélie are ways for writers to try to create interesting and even lovable characters. Many writers often encrypt these types of neurodivergent characters without necessarily intending to. One explanation to this can be the fact that differences are what make people "unique, special and interesting".⁸⁵ On the other hand, when the writing does not explicitly say that "different" characters are neurodivergent,⁸⁶ it sets them apart mainly via their "refined skills or intelligence, the narrative is not consciously pushing on what we consider 'acceptable differences'." ⁸⁷

85. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

86. ND; Short term for Neurodivergent

87. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

Some characters have extended focus and hyperfocus, which is a very common way to portray autism spectrum. These characters are often losing track of everything else and hyperfocusing on a specific interest that they may have. These neurodivergent characters often focus in highly competitive fields and they tend to see the world differently. They can use their unique perspective to solve complex problems and think outside the box, which gives them an advantage over neurotypical thinking. Still, Film and TV sometimes overemphasise these traits to a degree, which might lead audiences to falsely imagine that all neurodiverse people are for example autistic savants – characters who lack social skills and clues, but are often geniuses in one specific area or more. Yet, autistic savants make approximately 10% of all autistic people making them overrepresented in pop culture.⁸⁸ Another harmful example might be the lack of other neurodiversity representation; either missing or given a narrow view of it. People with ADHD are often characters that 'cannot hold still'. But in fact, there are three different types of ADHD diagnoses and often a person might have a combination of them. Winnie the Pooh and his friend Tigger are fictional examples of different types of ADHD as Tigger is an example of a more stereotypical ADHD type, Winnie on the other hand has a subtype or another type of ADHD called inattentive ADHD. The Canadian medical study made by the inhabitants of Winnie the Pooh, Christopher Robin and their forest friends

88. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

is rather fascinating, yet saddening. The article begins by describing them as 'seriously troubled individuals' and that this well-known innocent world has a dark underside:

On the surface it is an innocent world: Christopher Robin, living in a beautiful forest surrounded by his loyal animal friends. Generations of readers of A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh stories have enjoyed these seemingly benign tales. However, perspectives change with time, and it is clear to our group of modern neurodevelopmentalists that these are in fact stories of Seriously Troubled Individuals, many of whom meet DSM-IV/3 criteria for significant disorders (Table 1). We have done an exhaustive review of the works of A.A. Milne offers our conclusions about the inhabitants of the Hundred Acre Wood in hopes that our observations will help the medical community understand that there is a Dark Underside to this world.⁸⁹

89. Shea, S., Gordon, K., Hawkins, A., Kawchuk, J., Smith, D. 2000. <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/163/12/1557.full.pdf> (accessed 12.12.2021)

Table 1: DSM-IV multiaxial diagnosis of conditions demonstrated by the inhabitants of the Hundred Acre Wood

Inhabitant	Axis I Clinical disorders	Axis II Personality disorders/ mental retardation	Axis III General medical conditions	Axis IV Psychosocial/ environmental problems
Winnie-the-Pooh	ADHD, inattentive subtype; OCD (provisional diagnosis)	Borderline intellectual functioning (Very Little Brain)	Poor diet, obesity, binge eating	–
Piglet	Generalized anxiety disorder	–	Failure to thrive	–
Eeyore	Dysthymic disorder	–	Traumatic amputation of tail	Housing problems
Rabbit	–	Narcissistic personality disorder	–	–
Owl	Reading disorder	–	–	Housing problems
Tigger	ADHD, hyperactivity– impulsivity subtype	–	–	–
Kanga	–	–	–	Single parent, unemployed, overprotective of child
Roo	–	–	–	Single parenthood, undesirable peer group, victim of unusual feeding practices (extract of malt)
Christopher Robin	Gender identity disorder of childhood (provisional diagnosis)	–	–	Lack of parental supervision, possible educational problems

Note: ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, OCD = obsessive compulsive disorder.
*The Axis V (global assessment of functioning) scale was deferred.

1558 JAMC • 12 DÉC. 2000; 163 (12)

Table 1⁹⁰

In fiction neurodivergent protagonists have found a home in the detective genre, some might say because of Sherlock Holmes’ legacy. His extraordinary deduction skills, photographic memory and lack of social and empathy skills are all commonly thought of as autistic traits. All these traits come useful in his profession and they give him abilities to focus on the tasks at hand. Simultaneously, these kinds of stories – no matter how beloved, glorify neurodivergent traits, and even mystify them. He is subtly othered –

90. Shea, S., Gordon, K., Hawkins, A., Kawchuk, J., Smith, D. 2000. <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/163/12/1557.full.pdf> (accessed 12.12.2021)

painted into a magical superhero rather than a person with needs, and occasionally referred to as inhuman or robotic by the neurotypical people around him. In that sense Sherlock represents a bridge between the older and never understanding of neurodiverse. He is characterised as the autistic savant trope.⁹¹

A less fantastic portrayal of an autistic female detective called Saga can be seen in the Danish series The Bridge (Bron in Swedish or Bruen in Danish). Whereas Sherlock’s coldness sometimes manifests as comedic and his intelligence as superhuman, Saga is more down to earth and perhaps more ‘real’. It is not said directly that she is or may be autistic, but it is implied in the way we are oftentimes used to seeing and understanding autistic people. The actress Sofia Helen who plays Saga has stated the following: “To me she has Asperger’s.” Also, widely diagnosed by viewers as being on the autistic spectrum: “She is lauded not just because she is a leading character with the condition, but - more unusually - because she is a woman with it.” She is blunt, does not understand jokes and struggles to build relationships. She strips down to her underwear to get changed in the office without embarrassment, and asks and answers questions with often excruciating honesty. “Would you like the recipe?” asks her dinner host. “No, thanks, it was not tasty,” came her reply.⁹² She also disproves the

91. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

92. Townsend, L. 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/disability-34995327> (accessed 7.4.2020)

assumption that autism only affects men. Autism was once described as a manifestation of an “an extreme male brain” - the theory being that maleness involved a predisposition for mechanistic or logical thinking. Paediatrician Hans Asperger first defined the form of autism which now takes his name after observing boys with regular intelligence and language development, who nevertheless displayed autistic traits. He originally believed that no girls were affected by the syndrome, although clinical evidence later caused him to revise this.⁹³

Neurodivergent characters are often portrayed as the ‘odd one out’ presented as the single neurodivergent in a group of neurotypicals. In a way this story structure can salute what makes them unique, but it can also be othering putting the focus on how their neurodiversity impacts people around them instead of what their experiences are.⁹⁴

Often autism, for example, is portrayed by neurotypical people trying to cure it. For example, early representation of ND characters on screen can feel uncomfortable. Many of these portrayals can be patronising and represent a very narrow view of what neurodiversity is like. Characters are frequently made non-verbal, to the extent that they can’t communicate any emotions at all, turning them into puzzles for neurotypical characters to solve or depicting them as

basically unaware of their surroundings. In the context of their time some of these films’ representations could actually be groundbreaking.

In 1988’s *Rain Man*, one of the first films to centre a neurodivergent protagonist and specifically name the condition autism, Ali Vaux says that: “To even suggest that Raymond was a human with basic dignity was a really big deal.” In today’s standards, most past iconic films about neurodiverse characters contain elements that come off as cringeworthy⁹⁵ or offensive. And the same goes for critical conversations around films. Robert’s Ebert’s review of *Rain Man*, while positive and empathetic overall, opened up by asking: “Is it possible to have a relationship with an autistic person? Is it possible to have a relationship with a cat?” Todd McCarthy’s 1994 review of *Forrest Gump* describes him as a “semi-imbecile”, which in today’s context is ableist words and discrimination. ND characters are often there to share their understated wisdom with the audience. In *Forrest Gump* the protagonist is never diagnosed beyond being evaluated for his low IQ. Forrest’s simplicity allows him to find beauty in the world that others cannot see, and his uncomplicated perspective on life is held up as something we should learn from.

93. Townsend, L. 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/disability-34995327> (accessed 7.4.2020)

94. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

95. Definition of cringeworthy: so embarrassing, awkward, or upsetting as to cause one to cringe at a cringeworthy performance. Merriam-webster dictionary. Cringeworthy. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cringeworthy> (accessed 23.2..2022)

Even in their most compassionate form these portrayals can present neurodivergence in an oversimplified one-dimensional way and risk making neurodivergent characters the punchline. Because the focus on these stories is overwhelmingly on how the ND character impacts others when they are not being a magical helper, the film might encourage a lot of audience sympathy for the neurotypical people who have to deal with these characters' needs. In *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, Arnie is loved by his family, but he is still presented as a burden and his narrative purpose is to create obstacles to others around him.

In some series, there is a way to depict which mental health issues might be more "trendy" at the moment. One of the people interviewed, who has bipolar disorder, had seen several examples of characters with bipolar disorder, which is always in a similar way lacking nuance and wider representation of the condition. Bipolar characters are often described in one-dimensional ways: lacking a sense of rationality, heavy drug addiction, crazy partying and heavy mania.

"This condition is stigmatised, but I feel that most of the people don't know what it is about. I think it has come from basic mental health stigmatisation, but not as much as schizophrenia has. These days, I often feel that this is sort of a "fashion disorder". I have seen characters with bipolar disorder from multiple TV-series such as Shameless (USA) and the Norwegian teenage series called SKAM. All of the bipolar disorders are always shown as the type one, as very strong. So it means that the mania

episodes are always portrayed that you make all sort of crazy and extreme idiotic stuff, but it's not even close like so, that everyone would have it so intense. I have never had it like that. It's never like how it's shown in the series." Lotta, bipolar disorder

There are some outliers in early representations of neurodivergent people that attempt to show them in a more complex, less tokenistic way. The 1989 documentary *John's Not Mad*, following a young boy with Tourette's syndrome, shows a number of different sides to the condition and allows him to talk about the conditions for himself. The film attempts to break down the stigma around neurodivergence and promote understanding rather than pity.

What does the future hold in pop culture for neurodivergent characters?

Perhaps the biggest impact of improving neurodivergent characters is the term neurodiversity itself. It is true to say that modern neurodivergent characters can still fall into outdated stereotypes showing that our mainstream understanding still has some ways to go.

The future holds a different tone to this conversation partly because there are more actual, so-called high-profile people speaking publicly about their neurodiversity than ever before. One of them is the Swedish climate activist Greta Thurnberg, who said in *CBS This Morning* that:

"In some circumstances, it can definitely be an advantage, to be neurodiverse because that makes you

different, that makes you think differently.” Thunberg has credited her rare drive and sense of purpose in climate activism to her different way of seeing things: “I saw the world from a different perspective, so I saw what was wrong with the world.”⁹⁶

Another example is the actor Anthony Hopkins who has credited his neurodivergence benefiting or helping his acting: “I definitely look at people differently. I like to deconstruct, to pull a character apart, to pull out what makes them tick and my view will not be the same as everyone else.”⁹⁷

Documentary filmmaking has also given representation for many ND characters on screen, sometimes succeeding in countering the harmful stereotypes widely perpetuated by some fiction films. One outdated trope of ND characters is that they are not interested in love or romantic relationships. Netflix’s reality show Love on the Spectrum perhaps challenges this myth or general belief.

Similarity to the Me Too movement has also been acknowledged in the world of film and TV when it comes to neurodiversity. One is the critical review given to performances where neurodivergent characters have not been used to play a neurodivergent character or their portrayal could be harmful. Sia’s Music was heavily criticised

96. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

97. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

for including scenes where its neurodivergent protagonist is restrained (a practice now considered to be abusive within the autism community) and for using a neurotypical actor to play a non-verbal neurodivergent part. The lead actress also imitated stimming and facial expressions that made her look autistic, much like in outdated films from decades earlier.⁹⁸

The long tradition of neurotypical actors being highly praised and winning top awards for their performance as neurodiverse people has been criticised for being damaging and even some have termed it “cripface”.⁹⁹ Neurodivergent actors have seldom been included in that process. Perhaps a more cynical view would suggest that disabilities can be an identity that can be temporarily assumed for the purpose of entertaining people, in the best scenarios, having mocking undertones.¹⁰⁰ And in the worst, it devalues disabled people’s very existence. Another issue that arises within the roles and characters being displayed is that they are often white and therefore lacking neurodiverse characters that are non-white portraying neurodivergent character through whiteness and often maleness.

98. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

99. “The term cripface has gained popularity as a means to refer to actors without visible disabilities who play characters with visible disabilities. Obviously, it is meant as a condemnation of the practice by those who find it insulting, disempowering and marginalising.” People Aren’t Broken: Disability from the Inside Out. CripFace. <http://www.peoplearentbroken.com/?p=611> (accessed 23.2.2022)

100. The Take. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvwtPD6o_z4 (accessed 12.12.2021)

2.5. Art students

One of the key elements of me doing a project around neurodiversity was seeing a lot of art students that had been diagnosed as neurodivergent, but it is a subject rarely discussed in the context of arts. As mental health usually is, I feel diagnosis and struggles around mental health is still stigmatised, taboo, and often discussed only with a few.

According to a group of Swedish and British research articles published in The British Journal of Psychiatry and based on the Swedish national health statistics art students are more likely to suffer from schizophrenia, bipolarity and other mental health conditions.¹⁰¹ The study found out that those who have studied at art colleges are more likely to end up in hospital due to a mental disorder than the rest of the population. The explanation for it seems to be that the “same genetic factors that lead to creativity and intelligence can also lead to mental disorders”.¹⁰² The article explains that the connection in the brain may be explained by the fact that in schizophrenics and their creative siblings, the hemispheres of the brain are not normally locked into their own tasks, but the flow of information between the hemispheres is flexible and flowing. At its best, flexibility fuels creativity. But if the cognitive process becomes too disturbed, a person loses grip on consciousness and reality.

101. Kivimäki, A. <https://www.hs.fi/tiede/art-2000005675022.html> (accessed 23.2.2022)

102. Kivimäki, A. <https://www.hs.fi/tiede/art-2000005675022.html> (accessed 23.2.2022)

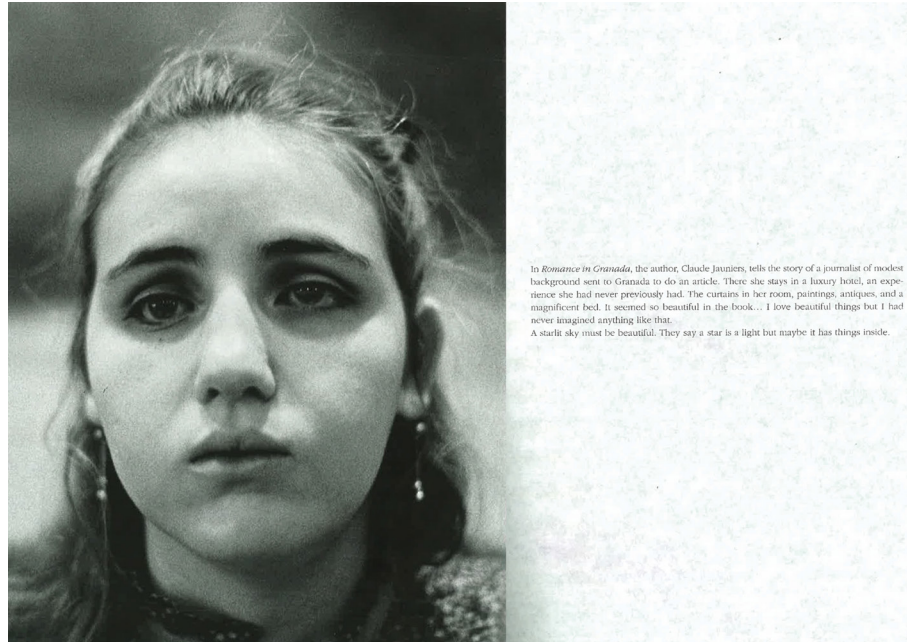
The study also emphasises that “not all creative people use their gifts in pursuit of art schools, and not everyone who has studied at art schools may be particularly creative”.¹⁰³

On the other hand, the positive aspects and strengths of a neurodivergent student and the reasons for seeking art studies have also been studied. Research in Art and Design, with interrelations with Neurodiversity and Art Education, has shown that the decision to study art, for example for dyslexic students, is higher than other cases. Students with dyslexia often show and demonstrate artistic abilities and creative approaches to thinking and exploring information. Responding positively to different learning needs creates a constructive atmosphere of creation and experimentation, which is key to unleash research questions, open-up new possibilities, building questionnaires and critical arguments.¹⁰⁴

103. Kivimäki, A. <https://www.hs.fi/tiede/art-2000005675022.html> (accessed 23.2.2022)

104. Damiani, L. <https://www.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.14236/ewic/EVA2017.40> (accessed 23.2.2022)

2.6. In the context of arts and photography



In Romance in Granada, the author, Claude Jauniers, tells the story of a journalist of modest background sent to Granada to do an article. There she stays in a luxury hotel, an experience she had never previously had. The curtains in her room, paintings, antiques, and a magnificent bed. It seemed so beautiful in the book...I love things but I had never imagined anything like that. A starlit sky must be beautiful. They say a star is a light but maybe it has things inside.

Besides writing about pop culture through the interest in films and having a minor in documentary film, I was fascinated to see representations in photography when it comes to diversity, ableism, disabilities or sickness, for example.

One of the first books that I came across and that fascinated me was Sophie Calle's work *Blind*. The book shows mostly the faces of people who were born blind and who had never been able to see, photographed by Sophie Calle. The work has writing, but also text in braille. Braille is a writing system used by people who are visually impaired. If you riffle through the book with your right hand you can see thin white paper covering the portraits that in a way gives more visibility to the text in braille. The book starts with black and white portrait of several blind people, usually without sunglasses, with a text next to it answering the question Calle asked them, which was: What was their image of beauty? Many answered sea, blue or colours of green, but also answers like hair, sheep, fur, harmony, love, seeing in dreams, running away from the concept of beauty or one's own home came out. The things that the people portrayed had answered to be beautiful were photographed in the next spreads. It's hard to say, but I felt many things that were considered beautiful not only to be seen, but also felt and touched. Which for me makes beauty more inner and private.¹⁰⁵ Ethically thinking, I was glad to see braille incorporated in the work, but what struck me was the invisibility of the people photographed, who had now become

105. Calle, S. 2011.

part of an art work. There were hardly any names mentioned of the people portrayed and it made me think of the reasons why.

I wonder what I could take out of this book into my own work. What could inspire me if I ever felt like doing an actual physical book would be to think of impairing photos with a short text. And perhaps add something more into my work besides these portraits. I think this could also make my work more visually captivating. I have decided to use text in my thesis that is designed for people with reading difficulties such as dyslexia. These are some of the things I want to think of when building the visual and layout part: what colours and what kind of text is suitable to use when thinking of learning difficulties.

Another example of art that I found fascinating was Lotta Blomberg's work about photography, trauma and constructed dissociation.¹⁰⁶ In her work she discusses the history of mental health issues and trauma through 'the invention of hysteria', which has in today's view a very patriarchal and misogynist history. Hysteria and even mental health issues were very much attached to women. Even the word, 'hysteria' is Greek and means uterus.¹⁰⁷ Hippocrates stated that the womb was easily shrivel after abstinence, which "made it travel in the human body like an animal" and in order to treat this condition or syndrome, marriage and

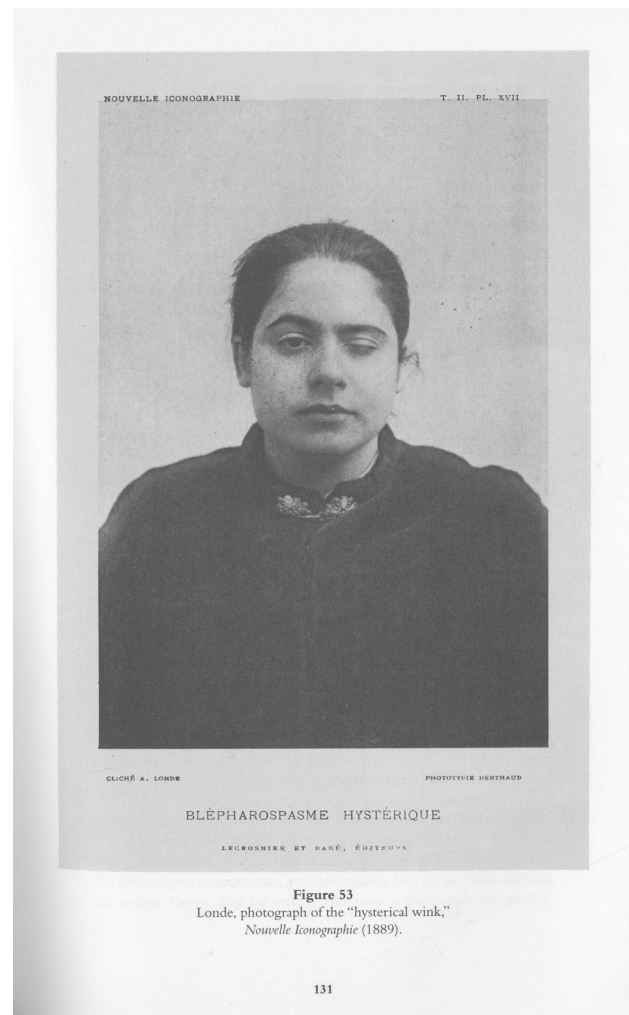
106. Blomberg, L. 2015.

107. Blomberg, L. 2015.

pregnancy was recommended. The same mental state and conception lived in Europe until modern times. Hysteria in women continued to be seen through women's sexuality in Christian ideals of abstinence and witch hunting. Doctors of the time agreed on the frightening character of the phenomenon; divided personalities were found among the hysterics and scenes were drastic.¹⁰⁸ Later on mental health issues were also more strongly connected with men, especially men that had been traumatised in wars. Yet, when it came to men suffering from mental health issues were seen as moral weakness.¹⁰⁹

108. Blomberg, L. 2015.

109. Blomberg, L. 2015.

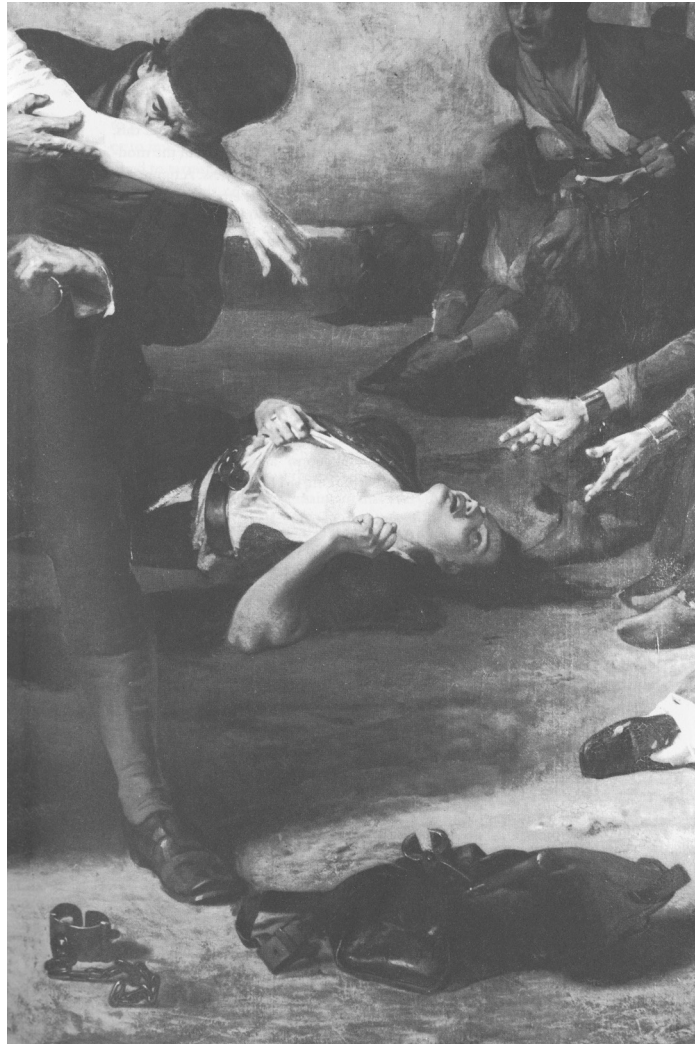


Photography work of the ‘hysterical or mad women’ in Parisian Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.¹¹⁰

French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology, Jean-Martin Charcot, was known to be the medical superintendent of France’s biggest and most notorious mental hospital, Salpêtrière, where ‘non-wanted’ Parisian women were packed such as beggars, the mentally ill and prostitutes – more than 250 of whom died of “mental illness” in a year. One doctor was found per hospital for circa 500 patients. Salpêtrière was for tourists touring a “three-star” sightseeing and enclosed in the narrow chambers Charcot and his colleagues chose the most charismatic and the most descriptive patients among the women to express the hysteria. Medical photographs that were widely published in newspapers and printed in books with pictures presenting the disease of hysteria. Blomberg writes that, in the times of Victorian photographers there was not much interest in capturing everyday life but instead in the layed much deeper interest in capturing ‘supernatural and extreme phenomena’. Photography was seen as evidence that could capture hysterical possessed conditions, which were materialisation of the patients’ invisible mental disorders.¹¹¹

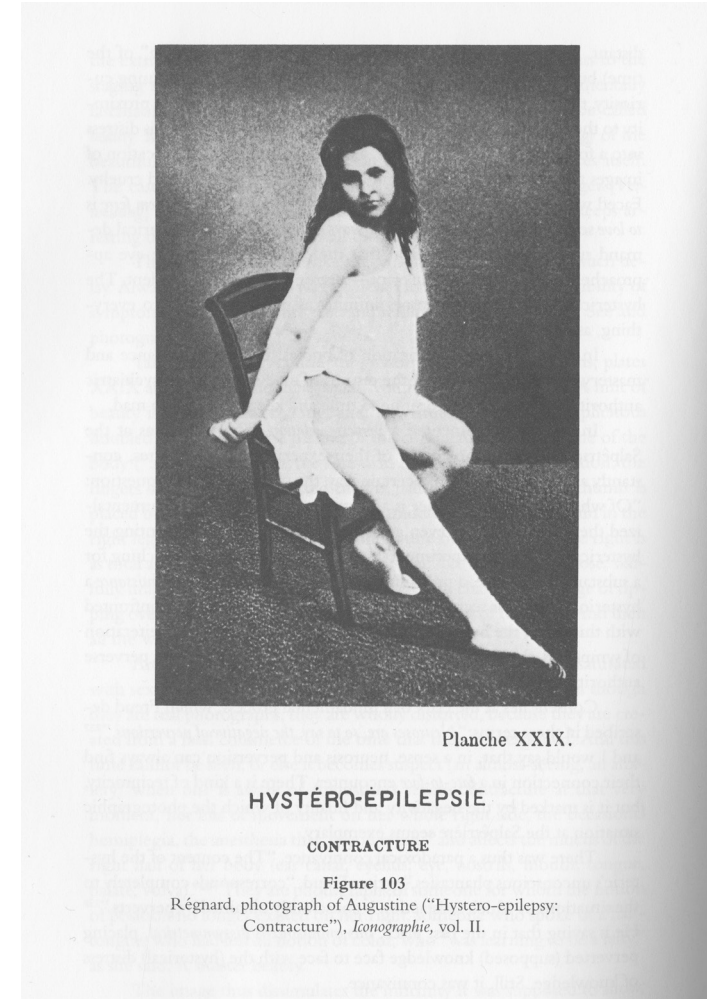
110. Didi-Huberman, G. 2003.

111. Blomberg, L. 2015.



Fleury, Pinel Liberating the Madwomen of the Salpêtrière (detail), Bibliothèque Charcot, Salpêtrière. Photography work of the 'hysterical or mad women' in Parisian Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.¹¹²

112. Didi-Huberman, G. 2003.



Photography work of the 'hysterical or mad women' in Parisian Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.¹¹³

113. Didi-Huberman, G. 2003.

Show-Stopper

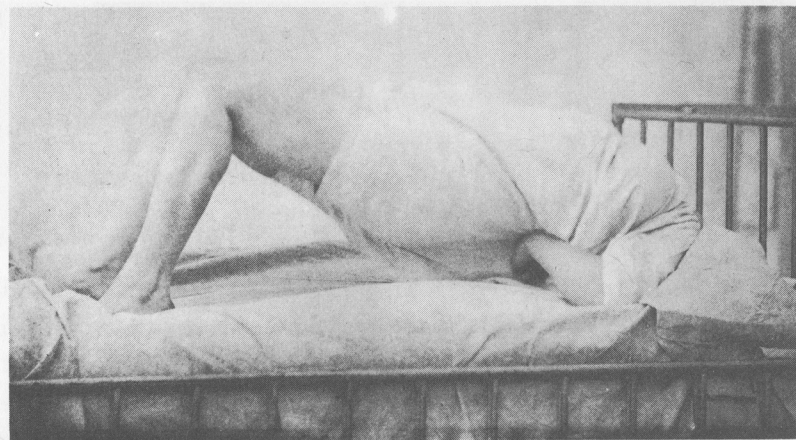


Figure 106

Régnard, “Hystero-epileptic attack: *arc-de-cercle*,”
Iconographie, vol. III.

Photography work of the ‘hysterical or mad women’ in
Parisian Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.¹¹⁴

114. Didi-Huberman, G. 2003.

Repetitions, Rehearsals, Staging



Figure 69

Londe, “Hysterical Sleep,” *La photographie médicale* (1893).

Photography work of the ‘hysterical or mad women’ in
Parisian Hôpital de la Salpêtrière.¹¹⁵

115. Didi-Huberman, G. 2003.

There have been several photography and art projects done that include mental health issues, some having more ethical methods than others. One that came into my mind is the Finnish empowerment project for girls that grew up in children's homes called *Maailman ihanin tyttö* by photographer Miina Savolainen, which translates into *The World's Most Wonderful Girl*. I think the project gives *value* to the photographs allowing the individuals, girls, to see themselves more kindly and accept themselves more and it seems that the photographer wanted and needed such. Of course, thinking more critically, one could argue that the methods of showing girls from humble and harsh beginnings and life experiences as *princesses* is not only negotiable, but also questionable, and perhaps even cliché. It gives out a narrow view of what it means to be a girl, woman, loved, beautiful, empowered, and kind to oneself. The project seems to have received a lot of attention and is widely spread, which made me think of the ethics behind marketing; presenting *females as princesses* makes them a punchline not only to spread a message but also to sell. Another example of another mental health project is a dutch project called *The Fifth Season*, which is a book made or artist that stayed in a residency and made art in a psychiatric clinic Willem Arntsz Hoeve/Altrecht GGZ collaborating with the residents, carers and psychiatrists of the clinic and art residency. The book does not reveal much of the lives of the residents or of the workers, or even the artists. I think this kind of methods are interesting, but it showed that some of the projects were truly Interdisciplinary by bringing awareness and constructing possibilities not only to the

artists in question, but also to the residents who made, exhibited and sold art.¹¹⁶

When thinking of my own work, *Wired This Way*, and in which direction I want it to grow, I am almost sure the main point wouldn't be 'giving wings' to the photographed or to try to make it to an empowerment project, although I do definitely not deny it might have that effect too and if it has it – I am glad it did that for some. I would like to bring neurodiversity more into daylight and raise awareness through visual work and stories. It sounds scientific to me almost, and I think I view a lot of my documentary photography as notes of cultural anthropology. I am collecting material and trying to make sense of it. The purpose has been to make 'realistic' portraits, and I think it can be simultaneously hard to tell stories through this method or perhaps not. It's something I am still definitely thinking of, how to develop the visual images to talk about neurodiversity and mental health without romanticising or making the struggles the only punchline. Or without being too boring. So far I am most satisfied with the portraits where I used flash, and would be ready to re-make the ones that do not have flash on them. The flash has made the images more connected to one another and more interesting.

116. Het Vijfde Seizoen (The Fifth Season). 2011, 238.

3.

METHODS BEHIND THE PHOTO PROJECT

3.1. The artistic baselines and artist statement

The aim of this work is to make the invisible more visible for everyone interested to see, learn, share, talk and reflect on different life experiences, stigmas and myths, as well as the accepted ideas of 'normality' and conformity. By questioning the boundaries between predominant neurotypes and 'others', including for example dyslexics, autistics and ADHDers, many neurodiversity studies and work are redefining what it means to be human.

The work's focus is on individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions such as: ADHD spectrum, Autism spectrum, and dyslexia. Some others are also mentioned, interviewed and photographed, but the main focus lies on ADHD, Autism and dyslexia. Not because other diagnoses are irrelevant in any sense but rather because I wanted to narrow down the topic of this thesis to a specific perspective in order to examine the subject more extensively. I also wanted to tackle the issue facing negativity around the subject, which in today's climate feels important. Although, the diagnosis or conditions that ended up in the thesis are: ADHD, autism, OCD, Bipolar disorder and Sensory-Processing Sensitivity (Highly Sensitive).

I think society could encourage discourses a lot more in understanding neurodiverse individuals through their stories. There is a lot to be understood when it comes to neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions such as seeing people as individuals first before their diagnoses.

But also seeing long-term harms of the heavy stigmas and myths, as well as the accepted ideas of normality and conformity in the only way to be part of society. Without glamorising and romanticising the issues and strengths that neurodivergent people have, many feel it is also essential to stress out the beneficial abilities, which often receive no acknowledgment from other people or society.¹¹⁷

Having met numerous neurodivergent people I noticed how they all share a mutual understanding of each other which often shows through empathy. Many of the neurodivergent people I have met whether it was someone with Autism spectrum, OCD or ADHD, almost everyone had a story of another neurodivergent person with a different condition to theirs. Many told me how they felt empathy or understood each other quite well. I feel the same kind of understanding often with people from diverse and intersectional backgrounds outside of the status quo whether it is someone from the LGBTQI+-community, body positivity groups or people of colour.

Disorders and mental health conditions are actually quite common, yet many times they are unspoken of, because of stigma and shame. Not necessarily because the person in question is ashamed of whatever condition they have, but merely because society teaches individuals to be ashamed. Or to hide them, which then often leads to constructing survivor mechanisms or to become 'super decent' or 'a

117. Hansen, A. 2017, 199. NowThis Opinions (episode 45). <https://www.facebook.com/NowThisOpinions/videos/2050535798369867> (accessed 7.4.2020)

perfectionist'. Which can then lead to burnout or combined with several struggles.¹¹⁸

Through this project I have had the honour to get to know people who are very captivating in terms of telling their own story and struggles. To tell about your own life takes a lot of courage in a world that is often quick to categorise, judge, and diminish even, especially in regards to mental health and differently wired minds.

Process in starting point

I think as a maker, artist and photographer I have always followed my intuition first. Surely it took me to places that I found surprising in one way or another. I did not want to diminish this natural intuition of mine this time either and these days I find it an important part of my art making process.

Everything started by imagining the project that actually happened before I even knew the word neurodiversity. And then by slowly visualising it and actually meeting people, making photographs, interviews, and writing down research. I was also interested in watching photos, series, documentaries, and films that had neurodiversity and mental health represented in some way or form. I think this whole process started as some kind of process for myself to reflect on these issues and try to understand it not only through myself but also through others.

118. Borg Skoglund, L. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxEtyAsW8ZU> (accessed 12.03.2022)

The irony with diagnosis is that you cannot always tell that some people would necessarily have any kind of diagnosis until they mention it. Perhaps, you start thinking that some of their actions or ways make 'more sense' now and start noticing some actions as 'odd'. Would my perception of a person have changed if I would have known they are neurodivergent? Do I have enough information to 'judge' a person according to their diagnosis? These are the questions that often pop up in my head when I try to decide if it is my 'responsibility' or not to tell people of my diagnosis and how people would or would not treat me by knowing this about me. It takes a lot of trust and feeling of safety sometimes to be able to share that kind of information with another person and worrying of the risk of being misinterpreted with or without telling. Many times, it came as a total surprise as I was talking about my project to someone and in a mid sentence the other person would start telling about their diagnoses. This is how some of the connections were built, without the slightest clue that another person would have a neurodivergent condition.

Visualisation of the project

Neurodiversity as a subject matter is anything but simple and one-dimensional so I unconsciously and consciously wanted the photographs to be simple and holistic. I wanted to show the person first, not the diagnosis. I think the interviews show more the complexity of one's identity and the so-called intervention of diagnosis.

When thinking of my own story and many people who I could relate to in some way or other during this process, I wanted to distance my work a little from the conventional representation of how mental health issues, diagnosis, and conditions have been and are often photographed. A lot of times, it includes showing 'the darker side' of a person's struggles or only extreme cases, which then ends up usually being the only side shown in mainstream media. I do not think I am avoiding or afraid in any way of showing a darker side, but I wanted to shift the focus and tell the story from another perspective. I still think many layers and sides can be added later on as the work evolves, but for now I made the decision to make simple portraits. I listen, digest, and do research. I also wanted to photograph people in a simple way because diagnoses are very common among us, yet go widely unspoken about, partly also how we as society tend to see, and imagine how diagnoses look like, should look like or have been visualised before. There is no one way of being neurodivergent or someone with mental health struggles and working around issues with different stories and aspects feels important and needed. I wanted to show the side that is often not shown, without patronising or comparing in any way the reality of severe cases, that diagnosis truly comes in all shapes and forms. And that it does not necessarily make you any less capable of doing or achieving things. My own story also inspired me to understand my own condition better through research and others. Through my photos, the main message is to normalise talking about mental health issues and diagnosis, and to make it a bit easier.

The idea behind these photos was to take one portrait of each individual in a place they feel comfortable or interested to take a photo at, and often these portraits ended up very simple. Just a picture of a person of the way in which they wished to be portrayed: sometimes at home, sometimes at a cinema or somewhere else. Clothing was entirely in the models' or subjects' hands. Clothing was not planned, but I discussed with a few what colours could perhaps work in each environment. I used flash only a few times and mainly because of the lack of light during winter months. During this process I also learned much about what not to do and what methods work better at portraiture.

I learned how much time the visualisation and writing takes separately. Because of the responsibility I felt over the subject matter, I used much more time forming and writing the text than I did with photographs. As the text is ready, I can finally focus more on developing the visual side of the work making it into more people, interviews, and stories. One idea that has started to immerse me is how to further utilise the flash used in several of the images taken. Perhaps, in making the series more coherent, a flash used in these photos could bring up some kind of element of 'exposure' or weirdness into each portrait. I see this especially in the portraits taken of Joy and Rosanna. This is the kind of visual 'attitude' I would like to further develop and think of. And also to allow myself to take more control over the photo making.

Visualisation behind each portrait

Joy – OCD

Place

Joy was at that moment living together with her ex-boyfriend in the city centre of Helsinki in an old building. The original tenant lived at that moment abroad which gave them the opportunity to live there. I knew the house was old and beautiful so we thought it would be a nice and peaceful place to photograph.

Posture

I was interested in investigating if there would be a possibility to make a simple picture of a woman sitting in her chair by using the body as a tool to make the photo more captivating. We started to go into different positions together little by little after me gently trying to suggest different ways of being to Joy. It was very easy to work with Joy and she was open to ideas so it made me more relaxed to ask her about looking into arms and how she could perhaps use them. I have always been interested in hands and arms, and the poetry of the human body that can be visualised in many ways from different angles.

Photo angle

It was important to me that the viewer could have eye contact with the subject and I think that is the reason why I unconsciously chose to photograph many subjects from the front.

Lightning

I had rented two simple portable softboxes, which I placed to the sides on classic forty-five angles. There was really no other option than to use some kind of studio lighting that was available for me, since it was dark inside the flat during mid-winter. The original plan was to use analog photos by using a film camera, but since I did not have a light metre at the time, all of the pictures were exposed. Luckily, I had taken my digital camera also and managed to take one image that really captured my attention, which I then ended up also choosing.

Clothes

I have not asked Joy why she chose to dress in black, but I think it fits the photo really well because everything, except her face and hands are pretty dark. I feel she is coming through from the darkness.

Gaze of the subject

I think Joy is extremely photogenic and making her relax in front of the camera did not seem to be difficult to her. I love her intense, yet warm gaze that is posing in the way you see women often posing in fashion magazines.

Colour world

I took photos of Joy during winter time and that is the biggest reason for the dark atmosphere.

Interaction between the person photographed and photographer

I received Joy's contact information through an editor-in-chief in a newspaper I worked at over the summer of 2020. We connected first through Palestine as I am a Finnish-Palestinian very much interested in the Palestinian plight and she happened to be a Pro-Palestine activist. The interaction was friend-like and very easy with Joy from the very beginning. We quickly developed a friendship and I remember her mentioning her OCD the first time we met when I mentioned that I was working on my thesis and that the subject is neurodiversity.

Rosanna – Autism

Place

I photographed Rosanna at her home as she felt most comfortable that way and there were not a lot of options during winter.

Posture

I think the exact same thing happened with Rosanna than with Joy. In an ordinary photo, I was trying to break the dimensions by adding some small twist in body posture, again, by using hands.

Photo angle

As with every person I chose to photograph, I felt most comfortable taking a photo from the front as I wanted to have a strong eye contact with the person portrayed.

Lightning

Here too, the original plan was to use analog photos by using a film camera, but since I did not use a light metre, all of the pictures were exposed again. Luckily, I had taken my digital camera also and managed to take one image that really captured my attention. I had rented two simple portable softboxes which I placed to the sides. There was really no other option than to use some kind of studio lighting that was available for me, since it was inside a flat and mid-winter.

Clothes

I do not remember telling the people being portrayed at all what to dress. Rosanna has a very unique style and way of being, which for me was interesting enough to capture.

Gaze of the subject

For me there is an attitude, yet, she seems to be careful and focused. I think she looks 'feminine' in the way she is in the photo.

Colour world

The colour world is similar to Joy's picture, it is dark and a bit cold. Both these photos were taken during the winter time.

Interaction between the photographed and photographer

I found mine and Rosanna's interaction extremely interesting! There was something that felt simultaneously extremely homely and strange. I felt safe around her as she started talking about how she was often 'the weird one' and the one that was bullied and completely misunderstood again and again during her younger years growing up. I could not help but to feel how unforgiving people have been and are sometimes. Everyone would like to have a second chance and a possibility to be accepted as they are, but very often I have felt that a lot of people can be very consumed by their own egos and that there is very little space for

understanding anything that feels different. I think this is the true challenge for many neurodivergent people to be accepted the way they are, both socially and intellectually.

Leo – ADHD

Place

Aalto photo studios

Posture

It was harder to “control” the picture with Leo since he seemed to be very talkative from the very first minute and day I met and took a photo of him. He was talking and moving his body quite excessively, which I partly thought is perhaps natural for him as a dancer and someone seemingly more hyper. Leo and I came along very easily and very well, he is the kind of person I would probably love to hang out with and have a blast with – and I am sure I am not the only one with this sentiment. He seemed very cheerful, energetic, lively, creative, empathic, talkative, and had a unique character. As half North American, it was funny to realise how thick his American accent was and how ‘typical American’ he came across, but simultaneously being ‘very Finnish’ as well. Although when he spoke Finnish, I could not help but to think how much more easy going he was than the stereotypical not-so-talkative Finn is often pictured. He is a character, that is for sure.

Posture

I think the photo comes across as more serious than his personality, but I think the fact that he is upside down in the picture makes it more dynamic since he is very lively. He went to this posture while waiting for me and got probably tired of me preparing the surroundings and camera.

Photo angle

At some point he went upside down and I asked him to stay in that position and I captured the photo of him through film.

Lightning

It was a positive surprise that the films of Leo came out well because I still did not have a light metre. Weirdly the pictures came out much better than the digital ones. I remember using one light with Leo and a Mamiya 6 film camera.

Clothes

Leo came as himself like all of the people photographed.

Gaze of the subject

I have tried to think of Leo’s gaze a lot, since I do not seem to take a hold of it myself. I guess Leo was already in the same position for a little while, which probably made his blood sink more or less into his head. I am not sure if it is the reason behind his mysterious, mellow gaze or something

he was going through in his head. His bubbly personality perhaps does not come alive in the picture at all. I remember he mentioned that he feels very uncomfortable in pictures and I realised his personality did change as soon as I took the camera in front of him. He perhaps becomes more uneasy, but I guess that is usually very natural for many people when they know they are going to be photographed any minute soon.

Colour world

I knew I wanted to photograph Leo in a simple way and against a white wall. It gave me space to think about his posture and him as a person as he comes across as very colourful and full of life. I wanted to see another side of him. Since none of my sessions are planned to the very end. I give a lot of space to spontaneity as well.

Interaction between the photographed and photographer

Leo has an extreme charisma and I felt it right away. He is full of personality and it shows in the way he walks into a room, talks and is. He seems to be more or less confident and accepting of himself, yet he also seemed fragile. I received his contact information for the first time through my brother and my brother happened to know he has ADHD. He is quite open about it, perhaps because he was diagnosed so early on or because he comes across as the so-called 'ADHD stereotype', which is often pictured as someone lively, highly energetic and hard to sit still. It is hard to guess and

would need to ask this of him, but for me he seemed more okay with his diagnosis than many other people I have met. I sent him a message and we decided to meet for coffee. Photographing him the same day felt natural, since we connected right away and he was easy to talk to. After the coffee we went to take a portrait of him in Aalto Studios. He told me almost right away that he does not think he is very photogenic and that he sometimes feels uncomfortable in front of cameras. I tried to make him feel as easy as I could.

Riku – ADHD

Place

I met Riku together with his lovely girlfriend who seemed to be very supportive of Riku's condition. We sat in a bar and talked before we actually met for the second time and took the photo.

Posture

Riku's posture seems somewhat hopeful and dreamy. Not much is happening in the photo.

Photo angle

As with every person I chose to photograph, I felt most comfortable taking a photo from the front, but this time instead of having a straight eye contact the subject matter is looking away from the camera, into his own reality or world.

Lightning

Lightning is a bit dramatic, now thinking of it, I would have wanted to create a softer light into it.

Clothes

Riku came as himself like all of the people photographed. I am happy he wore green that day, because it actually goes quite well with red.

Gaze of the subject

I think his gaze is a bit fragile and dreamy.

Colour world

The colour world is similar to Joy's and Rosanna's pictures, it is a bit dark. These photos were taken during the winter time. I still find the tones to be also warm.

Interaction between the photographed and photographer

Riku is a very fascinating person to me, very shy and seemed to view his ADHD mostly as a burden. He told me his head was a constant chaos and had always been that way. Riku's way of explaining things seemed almost scientific. He explained facts of ADHD medication in extremely precise details. For me he came out as someone who thinks and analyses a lot, maybe a bit insecure of what he could actually be able of and introverted. For the two times we

met, he always had his girlfriend with him that seemed very supportive and encouraging. I think I first heard of Riku through his girlfriend. Nevertheless, I got along with both of them well and they seemed to have a very warm bond between them.

Guilherme - ADHD

Place

I flew to Geneva to meet Guilherme. The picture is taken there.

Posture

The fact that he looked a bit away, was a moment when he was not so aware of being photographed and made the photo look more like him in a way.

Photo angle

I think I chose this photo instead of a couple of others knowing that they were not perhaps as flattering. This angle was more flattering, which he seemed to also like himself more.

Lightning

The time I photographed Guilherme was spring time, during the time Corona had arrived in Europe. The light was kind of soft and nice to photograph.

Clothes

Guilherme was himself like all of the people photographed. We did not plan his clothes in advance.

Gaze of the subject

Guilherme is a 'heavy thinker' and intellectual so he looked like he was thinking, which he probably was, was a conscious choice in deciding where he looked 'authentic'.

Colour world

The colours ended up being very strong and bright, which in retrospect makes me glad. I think it goes well with the person photographed since he tends to be a very colourful and warm person.

Interaction between the photographed and photographer

The relationship with me and the subject is extremely close. We are like siblings. Guilherme is someone I look for support when I need to express my feelings or talk about my ADHD. Our relationships with our conditions vary a lot though. Guilherme sees his condition as a burden as I tend to see also the benefits of it too. I do not like the fact that I have ADHD, but I think I am able to see the beauty in it too. I think our conditions are also somewhat different and as my environment allows ADHD to also flourish, I feel, his environment in highly academic surroundings are more demanding and stressful in many ways. Photographing one

of my closest friends is something I wish I could do more of. I feel it's something so precious to capture the people you have so many memories of and you deeply love them.

Lotta – Bipolar disorder

Place

I photographed Lotta at her parent's place in Espoo, the home she grew up in, but has now moved to her own apartment in Helsinki.

Posture

Lotta is probably the most easy going person I have seen in front of my camera. She was so free of any limitation or restrictions, smiling so much that I barely could see any of her sorrow or fragility. She seemed unbelievably positive and strong beside all her conditions that had put her through so far. Her posture was free and joyful.

Photo angle

I think I was a little uninspired by the house environment, it was all so normal for me. A lovely and cosy home with green grass and it was hard to find anything really motivating from outside other than green grass. I think I did not have flashlights with me so I had decided to take the photo outside and not inside the house. I took photos of her mainly from the front, her looking at the camera.

Lightning

Bright summer day, a bit hard to control the hard light.

Clothes

We did not plan in advance her clothes.

Gaze of the subject

Cheerful and always happy. It was hard to get a serious face from her so I stopped trying and just went for it.

Colour world

I think my original plan for Lotta's picture was completely different than it ended up being. I took the photo after a long day of interviewing and for me the backyard of the family home was cosy, but not what I had in mind for the photo because all I could see was green grass endlessly.

Interaction between the photographed and photographer

It was extremely easy to like Lotta and to get along with her. She had extremely good social skills for someone so young. She was easy to talk to and she seemed to trust me. She opened up more than I could have expected. I was surprised how little she had negative experiences of other people when we discussed people's reactions to her condition. She told me she is lucky to have the support system she has: the friends and family of hers are all very supportive.

Ville – Highly sensitive

Place

Ville is Lotta's little brother. I photographed him and Lotta at their parent's place in Espoo. Ville is still living with his parents.

Posture

With Ville, I think, because of his young age, it was more sensible to capture him. I wondered how I could connect with a young boy and what his interests were. He showed me his room and a couple of his cuddle toys. Finally we talked about his blanket, which is specially made for people with sleeping problems, depression and anxiety. He started to cover himself with the blanket and forgot about the camera. I think he went into his own world and stared at both the floor and ceiling, just as I imagined to do when he is alone in his room. He would tell stories every now and then, but would get back into his thoughts and just stare at something. Those were the moments I photographed him.

Photo angle

I am not quite sure if I managed to capture the kind of picture I wanted. As someone highly sensitive like Ville, I think the positive side of the portrait lay in his way of being focused more in his own world than he is in the presence of the camera and me. Yet I would like to further develop this photo of Ville and see if there could be a way to also better match it with other photos taken.

Lightning

Natural light.

Clothes

We did not plan in advance her clothes.

Gaze of the subject

This photo is very different from all of the rest of the series.
He is in his own world. I feel I would like to break the pattern
and photograph the future potratures.

Colour world

Light and clear.

Interaction between the photographed and
photographer

It was not as hard as I had imagined to connect with a
younger child and he would quite openly tell me of himself
and of his life. It was quite nice to talk to him and just learn
from his reality. He seemed like someone with a lot of heart.

How does neurodiversity (the diagnosis) reflect from the overall portraits?

I don't think neurodiversity shows in the photos and that is
what I think as a photographer, artist, someone interested in
the subject and neurodiverse myself, should sometimes be
like.

- to neutralise and normalise the subject matter
with ordinariness

This is probably really hard to write. I think my main point
was never to consciously "neutralise or normalise" the
subject matter. It was more something that happened
along the way: I intended to photograph the human first,
not the diagnosis.

- "normality" in portraits: what does normality
look like? How does it show in human posing,
clothing and shooting situations etc.?

I think normality looks like something that is usually
socially understood and accepted as 'normal'. Maybe it
is the way people are expected many times to stand, sit,
smile, dress or pose. But again, my intention was not to
try and pull anything out that did not already exist. I was
able to use the person's personality to assist or control
the poses a little bit, sometimes by suggesting a pose or
coming up with it together. Or sometimes by giving advice
that could perhaps look good.

3.

CONCLUSION

When starting to work on my thesis, I set out the goal to have at least ten images with the accompanying text. Through this project, I have learned more about neurodiversity and about myself than I first thought. Before I knew it, I was completely immersed in doing research on the topic, maybe at the expense of the artistic part. I think since the subject matter was, and still is a bit strange for most people, I developed more pressure on explaining the subject matter than I eventually had estimated. This work has certainly challenged me in so many ways. It has pushed me to do a project on a somewhat unfamiliar subject matter, even when it has started to be discussed, also in non-English speaking countries. Therefore, visual story making is definitely something I want to deepen. I ended up with a lot of research and seven images and some of them I see more as drafts of what is about to come.

I think at the beginning, I was more afraid than I am now. I was afraid of taking too much control over the outcome photographs, but I have learned that I could have actually taken a lot more control over them, especially with someone being neurodivergent themselves and wanting to deal with the issues delicately. The questions of photographer's control over their subjects, and the questions of who can represent who, are something that I will be focusing on also in the future. My natural interest in human rights, mental health and minorities can be seen in this work and my way of trying to produce work; without traumatising people that may already be traumatised for whatever reason. I think I have learned that there is more space to be playful and creative although the subject matter is serious. I think a more

refined and thought out aesthetic could help capture people's attention and make them spend time on reading the text of what the project is actually about. My work is dealing a lot with de-stigmatisation and how to aspire visibility through it. I think this is something I would like to investigate more.

I have learned how closely neurodiversity is linked to the subject of 'otherness' and intersections of privileges; how human value is defined in history and today. I have come to understand that the subject matter I am dealing with is much more connected with feminist studies, queer studies and critical race theory than I first had presumed. All of the aforementioned studies challenge the universality of propositions about human nature, and in neurodiversity this means questioning the boundaries between predominant neurotypes (neurotypicals) and 'others' (for example dyslexics, autistics and ADHDers). Neurodiversity studies contribute to a cultural need to redefine what it means to be human. I think art and photography are very powerful tools to impart the message. And I am glad if I can contribute to it in any way through visual framework; photography, visual storytelling and interviews.

I consider *Wired This Way* as an ongoing project. Although I am now graduating with this thesis, I plan to continue to photograph and interview more people. A project like this takes time.

—— ARTISTIC PART ——
Portraits & Quotes



Joy

“For me, an OCD thought is not just a thought, but an actual process through which a bad thing is not going to happen now because I did a random physical act, a tic. I would describe it as an intrusive thought that my brain has convinced me to control the physical actions and happenings around me, even if I rationally know that they don’t – but if I don’t do the tick, I get very anxious, I start overthinking, and I feel very uneasy.”



Leo

"I guess people that have ADHD are very different from me. I guess my ADHD might be what is considered the "normal" ADHD, loud, full of energy, can't really stay still and doesn't like to listen to teachers. But others with ADHD, can be really quiet and keep to themselves. They just can't focus like other people, which is what I have too; I'm just not quiet. I'm very vocal, and I'm very loud."



Riku

"Almost immediately after getting my diagnosis I started the medication. And the difference was clearly visible, everything wasn't suddenly easy but I would say it was less difficult."



Rosanna

"I definitely don't see it as something negative that should be excluded from society. I don't think it should be uplifted either. Like: "Ooh that person has autism." I don't think it should be overpraised just because you have it. The point goes past people. We should listen more to each other and understand. Instead of: "Ooh she has autism and she can do anything, she is a great writer because of that." That's at least what people have said about me and my writing. My poetry and my writing is of course a product of me but the product that is me isn't defined by the diagnosis I have. I have more things in me than my diagnosis and people don't always see that. In Finland autism isn't discussed as it should be. I think neurodiversity is not researched as much as it should. We don't help these people enough."



Guilherme

"I was flying and I watched this movie ' The Joker' and one of the scenes that caught my attention the most was the one where he wrote a note saying something like: The worst part of having a mental illness is having to pretend that you don't have it or people wanting you to pretend like you don't have it. I think that translates to me like it's hard not to be able to be yourself sometimes. So if you are wired differently it's obvious that you will express yourself differently, act differently, you will impart the message differently. I think the stigmatisation will be there. It will always be a challenge. I don't think the solutions to stigmatisation are easily found. But the more we talk about it, the better it is. The least we talk about something, the more taboo it becomes. I think we should start talking more. Maybe with time taboos will not be much of a taboo and people will be more comfortable with it."



Lotta

“There are two types of bipolar disorders, roughly speaking. Both of them have depression. Every individual has their own level of depression. The categorisation is made based on the difference in mania phases. In Finnish, bipolar disorder is called “tauti” (malady, condition) and it feels like that. It’s called bipolar because it goes down to depression and up to mania. My first symptoms started somewhere in the end of ninth grade. I think bipolar disorder is commonly more often diagnosed when you reach the age 20. I received the diagnosis at the age of 16, when I was in my first year of high school.”



Ville

"I feel that I am almost always a bit highly sensitive. The first time my mom drew attention to my sensitivity was when I was about seven or 8 years old. I was constantly sensitive to noises, smell and taste. My sight wasn't part of my sensitivity challenges, but bright light could also affect me. Everything that went "slightly over" for me. It could even hurt me. Also touching as well. I have learned to live my sensory defensiveness."

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ATTACHMENTS

Question examples of the interviewed.

- What diagnosis do you have and when did you get it?
- In what way does your diagnosis manifest (to you)? How would you describe it?
- Tell me about your childhood and youth (and how did the diagnosis manifest then)?
- How did you like school? How did the other people call you when growing up (cons and pros) and how did that make you feel?
- When does your state get worse (under stress etc) and have you learned to make it easier for you?
- How is your attitude towards your condition / disability nowadays compared in the past (child vs grown-up)?
- What are the strengths of your condition?
- What are the possible weaknesses and addictions (if not already answered)?
- Do you use medication?
- Do you know something interesting about how the medication works?

- Do you have an idea what is going on in your brain (your diagnosis)?
- In what way do you navigate in the world?
- Is there any way to control your habits, emotions especially the ones that you think are linked to your condition? Is it necessary and why?
- How do you think the world sees your condition today and has the perception changed since you were younger (or the time your parents were young)? In what way?
- How could the world stop stigmatising neurological diagnosis (focus on your's)?
- What would you like people to know?
- What kind of things could help or improve your state?
- What kind of other information could you provide me with? What do you know a lot about?

Other possible questions:

- How has neurological perception evolved historically?
- How can neurodiversity shape accepted concepts of 'normality' and ideas of industrialisation and digitised societies?

