

What is Neurodiversity and How Can Photography Authentically Capture the Experiences of Neurodiverse People?

Introduction

Neurodiversity for many years has been thought of negatively due to a lack of understanding. Neurodiversity has been defined as “the idea that people having a range of different types of brain, including those with and without autism, should be regarded as part of normal human life” (*neurodiversity*, 2023). For the longest time, neurodiverse people were thought of as having something ‘wrong’ with them. Definitions have moved away from the medical model of considering people with different ways of thinking as ‘broken’, instead, embracing “the differences and strengths that these neurodivergent individuals have from their neurotypical counterparts” (*neurodiversity*, 2023).

One of the issues with neurodiversity is that a lot of neurological conditions are invisible to the average person, however they have a massive impact on the neurodiverse person in question. The concept of neurodiversity has therefore expanded to encompass attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning processing disorders, bipolar, and Tourette's (*neurodiversity*, 2023), in order to make this definition more inclusive. Photographs, assumed to be representative of reality and without bias, serve as a powerful tool for informing the public on neurodiversity (Sarrett, 2011). However, as disability activist Garland-Thompson argues, photographs of people with disabilities often reinforce assumptions about reality and are reflections of what society expects the disability experience to be like (Garland-Thomson, 2001). This essay seeks to explore representation of neurodiversity in art, specifically photography, and its impact from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

Historical representations

Despite the rise of the neurodiversity movement since the 1990's, Sarret's (2011) research found that photographic representation of autism in the 1960s and early 2000s tell the same old story of autism based in medical constructs rather than personal experience and strengths. A prominent theme in representation from both time periods is ‘fragmentation’.

The theme of fragmentation is a metaphor that applies to both autistic individuals and their families. Autistic people were portrayed as broken and their diagnosis as a family tragedy (Sarrett, 2011). An example of this can be seen in Bruno Bettelheim's (Bettelheim, 1967). *The Empty Fortress* (figure 1). This photograph looks to be a child deep in thought. It is all in black and white. Detail is placed on some of the child's facial features such as the eyes, mouth and ear whilst solid blocks of black and white make up most of the picture. The child seems to be concentrating with a stern expression on his face. The image however is fragmented with lines breaking it apart making it hard to see the entire face; parts of the image have disappeared from the outside making large sections dark, giving the impression of being 'broken'. Within this image Bettelheim was suggesting that 'autism is so overpowering, so completely breaking a child's selfhood, that he almost is unrecognizable as a person.' (Sarrett, 2011)



Figure 1: *The Empty Fortress*

Contemporary Perspectives

Many neurodivergent people find strength from their 'perceived' weakness. For instance, many people with dyslexia can hold advanced visual-spatial abilities, autistic people are often skilled at IT related subjects and people with ADHD are good at problem-solving (Nyhan, 2018). There is also research to show that people with Tourette Syndrome (TS) are perceptually acute, creative, energetic, good at completing tasks they enjoy and are empathetic (Simpson, 2020). Unfortunately, the general perception of TS is often overshadowed by its outwardly disruptive nature. In contemporary practice, there are many artists who have utilized their neurodivergence to create art that counters general perceptions and stereotypes.

Nora Nord is a Norwegian, neurodivergent, and queer photographer who conducted a photoshoot featuring queer people with ADHD. During the shoot, Nord encouraged the participants to not clean their rooms. Instead to leave them in their natural state before the shoot in order to portray an authentic image that reflect how those with ADHD both struggle and thrive. Nord began capturing her portraits as a way to show the diverse range of those affected by ADHD (Cresswell, 2023).



Figure 2; Rachelle she/they

Nord says there is a common misconception that ADHD is a restless boy being disruptive in class, however it is important to recognise that ADHD is different for everyone. Stereotypes like these can hinder the diagnosing process of ADHD. Waiting for a diagnosis can take many years.

A significant portion of research and projects on ADHD are created by individuals mostly fitting a specific profile: white cisgender men (Cisgender is when someone's identity and gender match their birth sex. (Oxford Dictionary, 2023)). As a result, Nord wants to change the narrative to represent neurodiversity by people who are neurodiverse themselves. (Cresswell, 2023). The person depicted in Nord's image (figure 2) is standing fiddling with their hands. They look lost, not knowing what to do with themselves. They are surrounded by personal possessions such as art, photographs and plants. This gives us an insight into their personality. This photograph could be more revealing due to Nord's inside knowledge of the subject's lived experience. Nord has also had a podcast where she interviews the participants from this project and includes quotes with the photos. Rachelle (depicted in figure 2) talks about how if they had gotten diagnosed with ADHD as a child then they might have been much more forgiving to themselves and might have understood the cause of their academic difficulties.

Kevin Gavaghan is an artist from North London. He draws from his experience with Tourette's, anxiety and Central Serous Retinopathy (*Kevin Gavaghan, no date*). He feels this allows him to paint from the heart and not the external interpretation able bodied people view. His paintings reflect the internal struggles he lives with on a daily basis. His art reflects on his youth and the subconscious influence of his past. Gavaghan paints in bold, vibrant colours and distorts his subjects to "highlight the multi layers of our inner emotions rather than the external likeness of his subject" (*Kevin Gavaghan, no date*).



Figure 3; *The Spectrum of Tourettes*

The person inside Gavaghan's image (Figure 3) is pulling himself apart, stretching himself to possibly fit in to societal pressure. a mournful expression on his face. The shapes of the colour on his body look like his skin has been ripped off, just showing exposed muscles and absences showing parts lost. This could be metaphorical of losing yourself to the expectations of society.

As a person with Tourette's, I can relate to not having anyone to look up to and feeling lost. There is a societal misunderstanding that if you have Tourette's you have to swear and say inappropriate remarks, called coprolalia (Tourettes action, 2014); people presume if you don't have coprolalia, you don't have Tourette's. People presume that if you have Tourette's you have to be ticking constantly. Many people with Tourette's have come across at least one person saying they are faking in their life, resulting in self-doubt (Coleman and Melia, 2023).

In comparison to the above works done by neurodivergent artists, Erick Gibson (likely a neurotypical photographer) has a photographic series reflecting only the external interpretation of Tourette's (Wichard-Edds, 2016). Gibson photographed a 12-year-old boy with Tourette syndrome in mid-tic (Figure 4). Gibson has created nine images all in black and white. The middle photograph has a white background where it appears that he isn't ticking and



Figure 4; *Ignore the Tic, Don't Ignore Me*

the images surrounding it have a grey background where it could be argued that he is in mid-tic.

The viewer is drawn to the middle image where the child makes direct eye contact. This may be related to the name of the photograph, "Ignore the tic, don't ignore me". With attention drawn to the child not ticking, the photographic composition and name, seems to be suggesting that as a society, focus remains on the tic instead of on the actual person. Whilst this is understandable, it can also be perceived as negative because this view removes the tic from the child's identity. In my experience of Tourette's I would rather have people react and laugh at my tics rather than ignore them. I see my Tourette's as an extension of my humour rather than the focal point of my personality. Gibson makes a good point with this work, but still it could be argued that his lack of lived experience with Tourette's shows.

Conclusion

From the imagery of "broken children" to seeing neurodiversity as a strength, the way that neurodiversity has been portrayed in art and more specifically photography has changed drastically in the last century. More art needs to be created with and by neurodivergent individuals, to capture diversity of experiences and voices of those affected by the stereotypes and to break the stigma. Including neurodivergent people's points of views in art can make for more authentic storytelling. When a neurotypical person talks about problems they aren't affected by, the results can be damaging to those who are affected by them. It's important to stop seeing neurodiversity only through a neurotypical lens and to instead start giving neurodiverse people more of a voice in this discussion.

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Figure 2: Nord, N. (2020) Rachelle she/they [photograph]. Available at: <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/akdeye/the-queer-faces-of-adhd-nora-nord-photography-project> (Accessed: 1st December 2023).

Figure 3: Gavaghan, K. (2020) *The Spectrum of Tourettes [Oil paint on Canvas]*. Available at: <https://www.kmqartist.com/kevingavaghanpaintings.html> (Accessed: 1st December 2023).

Figure 4: Gibson, E. (2016) Ignore the Tic, Don't Ignore Me *[photograph]*. Available at:

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