

# NEUROQUEER

## THE WRITINGS OF DR. NICK WALKER

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## NEURODIVERSITY: SOME BASIC TERMS & DEFINITIONS

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*I wrote “Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms & Definitions” back in 2014. So far, of all the pieces I’ve written, this is the one that’s been most frequently cited in other people’s work (academic and otherwise).*

*The definitive, citable version of this essay, along with supplementary comments, can be found in my book **Neuroqueer Heresies**.*

*When referencing my work, please remember that my pronouns are she/her.*



New paradigms often require a bit of new language, and this is certainly the case with the neurodiversity paradigm. I see many people – scholars, journalists, bloggers, internet commenters, and even people who identify as neurodiversity activists – get confused about the terminology around neurodiversity. Their misunderstanding and incorrect usage

of certain terms often results in poor and clumsy communication of their message, and propagation of further confusion (including other confused people imitating their errors). At the very least, incorrect use of terminology can make a writer or speaker appear ignorant, or an unreliable source of information, in the eyes of those who *do* understand the meanings of the terms.

For those of us who seek to propagate and build upon the neurodiversity paradigm – especially those of us who are producing writing on neurodiversity – it’s vital that we maintain some basic clarity and consistency of language, for the sake of effective communication among ourselves and with our broader audiences. Clarity of language supports clarity of understanding.

And, as I increasingly find myself in the position of reviewing other people’s writing on neurodiversity – grading student papers, reviewing book submissions or submissions to journals, consulting on various projects, or even just deciding which pieces of writing I’m willing to recommend to people – I’m getting tired of running into the same basic errors over and over.

So, as a public service, I’m posting this list of a few key neurodiversity-related terms, their meanings and proper usage, and the ways in which I most commonly see them *misused*.

## NEURODIVERSITY

### What It Means:

**Neurodiversity** is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

### What It Doesn’t Mean:

Neurodiversity is a biological fact. It's **not** a perspective, an approach, a belief, a political position, or a paradigm. That's the **neurodiversity paradigm** (see below), not neurodiversity itself.

Neurodiversity is **not** a political or social activist movement. That's the **Neurodiversity Movement** (see below), not neurodiversity itself.

Neurodiversity is *not* a trait that any individual possesses or can possess. When an individual or group of individuals diverges from the dominant societal standards of “normal” neurocognitive functioning, they don't “have neurodiversity,” they're **neurodivergent** (see below).

### Example of Correct Usage:

*“Our school offers multiple learning strategies to accommodate the neurodiversity of our student body.”*

### Examples of Incorrect Usage:

*“Neurodiversity claims that...”*

This writer is actually trying to talk about either the **neurodiversity paradigm** or the **Neurodiversity Movement**. Neurodiversity, as a biological characteristic of the species, can't “claim” anything, any more than variations in human skin pigmentation can “claim” something.

*“Neurodiversity is a load of nonsense.”*

Really? So human brains and minds don't differ from one another? There's an awful lot of scientific evidence that shows quite plainly that there's considerable variation among human brains. And if we all thought alike, the world would be a very different place indeed. The person who wrote this sentence was probably trying to object to the **neurodiversity paradigm** and/or the positions of the **Neurodiversity Movement**,

and has ended up sounding rather silly as a result of failing to distinguish between these things and the phenomenon of neurodiversity itself.

*“My neurodiversity makes it hard for me to cope with school.”*

The correct word here would be **neurodivergence**, rather than neurodiversity. An individual, by definition, cannot be “diverse” or “have diversity.”

*“Autism and dyslexia are forms of neurodiversity.”*

Nope. Nope nope nope. There’s no such thing as a “form of neurodiversity.” Autism and dyslexia are forms of *neurodivergence*.

## NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

### What It Means:

The **neurodiversity paradigm** is a specific perspective on neurodiversity – a perspective or approach that boils down to these fundamental principles:

- 1.) Neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity.
- 2.) The idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of brain or mind, or one “right” style of neurocognitive functioning, is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid (and no more conducive to a healthy society or to the overall well-being of humanity) than the idea that there is one “normal” or “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture.
- 3.) The social dynamics that manifest in regard to neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest in regard to other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include the dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential.

### What It Doesn’t Mean:

The neurodiversity paradigm provides a philosophical foundation for the activism of the **Neurodiversity Movement**, but the two aren't the same. For instance, there are people working on developing inclusive education strategies based on the neurodiversity paradigm, who don't identify as social justice activists or as part of the Neurodiversity Movement.

### Example of Correct Usage:

*“Those who have embraced the neurodiversity paradigm, and who truly understand it, do not use pathologizing terms like ‘disorder’ to describe neurocognitive variants like autism.”*

## NEURODIVERSITY MOVEMENT

### What It Means:

The **Neurodiversity Movement** is a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent.

### What It Doesn't Mean:

The Neurodiversity Movement is not a single group or organization, is not run by any single group or organization, and has no leader. Like most civil rights movements, the Neurodiversity Movement is made up of a great many individuals, some of them organized into groups of one sort or another. These individuals and groups are quite diverse in their viewpoints, goals, concerns, political positions, affiliations, methods of activism, and interpretations of the neurodiversity paradigm.

The Neurodiversity Movement began within the Autism Rights Movement, and there is still a great deal of overlap between the two movements. But the Neurodiversity Movement and the Autism Rights Movement are not one and the same. The most significant

distinction between the two is that the Neurodiversity Movement seeks to be inclusive of all neurominorities, not just Autistics. Also, there some who advocate for the rights of Autistics but who cannot rightly be considered part of the Neurodiversity Movement because they still consider autism to be a medical pathology or “disorder,” a view at odds with the neurodiversity paradigm.

## NEURODIVERGENT and NEURODIVERGENCE

### What It Means:

**Neurodivergent**, sometimes abbreviated as **ND**, means having a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurodivergent is quite a broad term. **Neurodivergence** (the state of being neurodivergent) can be largely or entirely genetic and innate, or it can be largely or entirely produced by brain-altering experience, or some combination of the two. Autism and dyslexia are examples of innate forms of neurodivergence, while alterations in brain functioning caused by such things as trauma, long-term meditation practice, or heavy usage of psychedelic drugs are examples of forms of neurodivergence produced through experience.

A person whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant societal norms in multiple ways – for instance, a person who is Autistic, dyslexic, and epileptic – can be described as **multiply neurodivergent**.

Some forms of innate or largely innate neurodivergence, like autism, are intrinsic and pervasive factors in an individual’s psyche, personality, and fundamental way of relating to the world. The neurodiversity paradigm rejects the pathologizing of such forms of neurodivergence, and the Neurodiversity Movement opposes attempts to get rid of them.

Other forms of neurodivergence, like epilepsy or the effects of traumatic brain injuries, could be removed from an individual without erasing fundamental aspects of the

individual's selfhood, and in many cases the individual would be happy to be rid of such forms of neurodivergence. 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).

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

The terms **neurodivergent** and **neurodivergence** were coined in the year 2000 by Kassiane Asasumasu, a multiply neurodivergent neurodiversity activist.

### What It Doesn't Mean:

*Neurodivergent* is not a synonym for *autistic*. There are countless possible ways to be neurodivergent, and being autistic is only one of those ways. There are myriad ways of being neurodivergent that have no resemblance or connection to autism whatsoever. Never, ever use *neurodivergent* as a euphemism for *autistic*. If you mean that someone is autistic, say they're autistic. It's not a dirty word.

### Examples of Correct Usage:

*“Our school aims to be inclusive of students who are Autistic, dyslexic, or otherwise neurodivergent, though there are some types of neurodivergence that we're still seeking ways to accommodate.”*

*“This group is for people who identify as both queer and ND (neurodivergent).”*

## NEUROTYPICAL, or NT

### What It Means:

**Neurotypical**, often abbreviated as **NT**, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

Neurotypical can be used as either an adjective (“He’s neurotypical”) or a noun (“He’s a neurotypical”).

Neurotypical is the opposite of **neurodivergent**. Neurotypicality is the way-of-being from which neurodivergent people diverge. Neurotypical bears the same sort of relationship to neurodivergent that **straight** bears to **queer**.

### What It Doesn’t Mean:

Neurotypical is **not** synonymous with **non-autistic**.

Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent, not the opposite of autistic. Autism is only one of many forms of neurodivergence, so there are many, many people who are neither neurotypical nor autistic. Using neurotypical to mean non-autistic is like using “white” to mean “not black.”

Also, neurotypical is not a derogatory word, and has no intrinsic negative connotation. Of course, sometimes people use the word in the context of criticizing the behavior of neurotypicals, but that doesn’t make it an intrinsically negative word. A lot of people criticize the behavior of men, too, but that doesn’t make “man” an intrinsically derogatory word.

### Examples of Correct Usage:

*“If the primary language of the society in which you were born is well-suited to the purpose of describing your sensory experiences, your needs, and your thought processes, you may have neurotypical privilege.”*

*“My sister is NT, but after growing up with an Autistic father and brother, she’s quite at ease with other people’s neurodivergence.”*



## Example of Incorrect Usage:

*“Is your daughter Autistic or neurotypical?”*

This isn't a well-worded question because there are other possibilities. The daughter in question might be non-autistic, but might also not qualify as neurotypical – she might, for instance, be dyslexic or have Down Syndrome.

## NEUROMINORITY

### What It Means:

A **neurominority** is a population of neurodivergent people about whom all of the following are true:

- 1.) They all share a similar form of neurodivergence.
- 2.) The form of neurodivergence they share is one of those forms that is largely innate and that is inseparable from who they are, constituting an intrinsic and pervasive factor in their psyches, personalities, and fundamental ways of relating to the world.
- 3.) The form of neurodivergence they share is one to which the neurotypical majority tends to respond with some degree of prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination, and/or oppression (generally facilitated by classifying that form of neurodivergence as a medical pathology).

Examples of neurominority groups include Autistic people, dyslexic people, and people with Down Syndrome.

It's also possible to be neurodivergent *without* being a member of a neurominority group. Examples include people with acquired traumatic brain injuries, and people who have altered their own neurocognitive functioning through 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”).

## NEURODIVERSE

### What It Means:

A group of people is **neurodiverse** if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning.

Or, to phrase it another way, a neurodiverse group is a group in which multiple neurocognitive styles are represented.

Thus, a family, the faculty or student body of a school, the population of a town, or the cast of characters of a TV show would be neurodiverse if some members had different neurocognitive styles from other members – for instance, if some members were neurotypical while others were Autistic.

### What It Doesn't Mean:

Many people mistakenly use **neurodiverse** where the correct word would be **neurodivergent**.

Of all the errors that people make in writing and speaking about neurodiversity, the misuse of **neurodiverse** to mean **neurodivergent** is by far the most common.

**There is no such thing as a “neurodiverse individual.”** The correct term is “**neurodivergent** individual.” An individual can diverge, but **an individual cannot be diverse**.

Neurodiverse does **not** mean “non-neurotypical.” The opposite of **neurotypical** is **neurodivergent**, not neurodiverse. Neurodiverse cannot be used to mean “non-

neurotypical,” because neurotypical people, like all other human beings, are part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity. The opposite of neurodiverse would be **neurohomogenous** (meaning “composed of people who are all neurocognitively similar to one another”).

To refer to neurominority groups or neurodivergent individuals as “neurodiverse” is incorrect grammatically, because **diverse** doesn’t mean different from the majority, it means **made up of multiple different types**. So an individual can never be diverse, by definition. And a group where everyone is neurodivergent in more or less the same way (e.g., a group composed entirely of Autistic people) wouldn’t be “neurodiverse,” either.

The **only** appropriate and grammatically correct use of the term neurodiverse is when it’s used to describe a group of people whose members differ neurocognitively **from each other**. In other words, a classroom where everyone is Autistic is not neurodiverse, but a classroom where some students are neurotypical and some aren’t is neurodiverse.

Humanity is neurodiverse, just as humanity is racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. By definition, *no* human being falls outside of the spectrum of human neurodiversity, just as no human being falls outside of the spectrum of human racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

In addition to being incorrect, it’s also **oppressive** to misuse the word “diverse” to mean “minority,” because this misuse of “diverse” is based in the intrinsically oppressive assumption that there’s a default “normal” way of being and that “diversity” is about adding non-normative individuals into the “normal” default environment. This is the assumption that allows tokenization to pass for “diversity” in corporations, schools, and other social institutions.

We can see this same oppressive misuse of the word “diverse” in the discourse of racists who use the term “diverse” as a euphemism for “non-white.” This usage seeks to twist the definition of the word “diverse” to mean “not part of the privileged in-group.” Again, that’s not what the word means, and misusing it in that particular way serves to reinforce a racist

mindset in which white people are seen as intrinsically separate from the rest of humanity, rather than as just another part of the spectrum of human ethnic diversity.

It is the same with the misuse of the term neurodiverse to mean “non-neurotypical.” To describe an Autistic, dyslexic, or otherwise neurodivergent person as a “neurodiverse individual” is not merely an incorrect usage of the word “diverse”—it also serves to reinforce an ableist mindset in which neurotypical people are seen as intrinsically separate from the rest of humanity, rather than as just another part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity.

In summary, then: misusing the term **neurodiverse** to mean **neurodivergent** (i.e., non-neurotypical) is not only plain old bad grammar, it also subtly reinforces ableism and undercuts the fundamental tenets of the neurodiversity paradigm. I hope this explanation will help people to avoid this particular error in the future—and, when possible, to correct such misuse where they encounter it.

### Examples of Correct Usage:

*“We humans are a neurodiverse species.”*

*“We employ a wide variety of creative teaching strategies to accommodate the many different learning styles represented in our highly neurodiverse student body.”*

*“My neurodiverse family includes three neurotypicals, two Autistics, and one person who’s both ADHD and dyslexic.”*

*“I think every single member of their board of directors is neurotypical. An organization that supposedly serves the needs of neurominority children should have a more neurodiverse board.”*

### Examples of Incorrect Usage:

*“This group welcomes Autistics and other neurodiverse people.”*

It’s nice to be welcomed, but there’s no such thing as a “neurodiverse person.” the correct phrase here would be “Autistics and other **neurodivergent** people.”

*“This group is open to both neurotypicals and the neurodiverse.”*

No, no, no. “The neurodiverse?” Seriously? What does that even mean? The spectrum of neurodiversity encompasses the entire human species, so one can’t label any subset of the human species as “the neurodiverse.” And neurotypicals are part of the spectrum of human neurodiversity, so it makes no sense to say “neurotypicals and the neurodiverse,” as if those were two separate things. The correct way to say this would be, “This group is open to both neurotypicals and the **neurodivergent**.”

I hope this list of definitions will help to foster greater clarity and understanding, and more accurate writing, when it comes to the terminology around neurodiversity. I encourage readers to share, cite, or quote from this piece, anywhere it might be useful. If you’re writing up submission guidelines for neurodiversity-related writings, for a journal, anthology, conference, or other project, feel free to include a link to this post in your guidelines. If you encounter a journalist who’s doing a piece on a neurodiversity-related topic, or a group of college students who are writing about neurodiversity, please share this piece with them. And please feel free to use this piece as a resource in any situation in which there’s confusion about what any of these terms mean.





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## Neuroqueer Heresies

NOTES ON THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM,  
AUTISTIC EMPOWERMENT,  
AND POSTNORMAL POSSIBILITIES



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