

# Neuroqueer frontiers: Neurodiversity, gender, and the (a)social self

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## Abstract

This paper critically synthesizes leading edge scholarship on neurodiversity, arguing that sociology could expand its account for the relationship between self and society through attention to the (a)social practices of those constructed as neurologically disabled. Autistic scholar-activism birthed the neurodiversity paradigm, which claims respect for neurological diversity and its social manifestations. Sexual and gender variation are among those. I review research on the confluence of neurological, sexual, and gender variance, pointing to opportunities for documenting the roles of social institutions in constructing and regulating divergent bodyminds, as well as new intersectional identities and social movements. Next, I synthesize nascent literature developing neuroqueer theory. “Neuroqueer” articulates the queer nature of neurodivergence and examines the entwinement of the two. Centering the epistemic authority of bodyminds problematized as lacking self-control/intent, perspective-taking, and reliance on the social symbolic, neuroqueer scholars forward (a)social ways of knowing, communicating, communing, and being human. Focusing on neuro-normativity, interdependent with better-recognized normativities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, etc.), neuroqueer theory offers fresh perspective on how dominant concepts and relations render some bodyminds problematic—legitimate

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objects of exclusion, marginalization, and “rehabilitation.” In doing so, it troubles sociological ideas about agency, sociality, communication, and what it means to be/have a (social) self.

#### KEYWORDS

actor-network-theory, autism, disability, epistemology, medicalization, queer theory, transgender

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Can you imagine people saying, today, that homosexuals should be abused until they became heterosexual, and such practices being openly advertised, mainstreamed, praised and covered by insurance?

That's what Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) does to Autistics: it advertises a “treatment” to make us “better”, to “recover” us from the “tragedy” of being neurodivergent, and “experts” praise this as if it is not abuse, while parents fight for insurers to pay for such abuse.

- [Amy Sequenzia](#), Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network

Because keeping up the act of humanity is what is required to be thought of as human.

- [Kassiane Asasumasu](#), Radical Neurodivergence Speaking

These statements, culled from Autistic advocacy and blog sites, are part of a growing push back against medico-scientific conceptualizations of neurodivergence as pathology and associated practices of normalization, particularly ABA. While the growing international movement to ban ABA<sup>1</sup> is itself worthy of sociological interest, this paper is not about that. The #BanABA movement is but one illustration of the social and political stakes of science in the lives of those who have been considered only in regard to their exceptionality from the “truths” we have established. Here, I focus on this broader concern, calling for (re)consideration of sociological truths about what it means to be gendered, social, or be/have a self through critical synthesis of leading edge work in one area of scholarship centering those with “brain based” (dis)abilities. While many neurological “impairments” come into existence as social facts through the medicalization of social difference and disruption, social deviance “recovered” from disability, such as homosexuality and gender variance, has received considerably more sociological attention than differences medicalized as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, borderline personality disorder, etc.

As medico-therapeutic industries expand their gaze, as well as their reach through other social institutions, those biosocially hailed via diagnosis as “kinds” of people respond by organizing communities and social movements (Fritsch, 2016). Autism spectrum disorder is one prominent example. The size of this constituency has steadily increased since the [Centers for Disease Control](#) began monitoring prevalence, from 1 in 150 children aged 8 or younger in 2000 to 1 in 44 in 2018. At the same time, adults increasingly self-diagnose (Lewis, 2016; Sarrett, 2016) or seek medical diagnosis in adulthood (Huang et al., 2020). Autistic rights advocacy and scholarship birthed the neurodiversity paradigm, often glossed as a social movement in itself (Singer, 1999). This paradigm asserts that brain variation is a natural and therefore normal part of humanity; thus, there is no such thing as a “normal” brain; thus, claims about normal perception, processing, feeling, and behavior are socially constructed, to the detriment of

subjects interpellated as “abnormal”.<sup>2</sup> The associated claim is for respect and celebration of neurological diversity and its social manifestations (c.f., [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#)). Research suggests that sexual and gender variation are among those (e.g., Warrier, et al., 2020). This paper addresses the growing body of social research and theorizing examining the confluence of neurological, gender, and sexual variance, mapping opportunities for sociological contribution and refinement.

First, I briefly review research on the socio-historical imbrications of these variances, pointing to sociological absences and opportunities for better documenting the roles of medicine, law, family, and other social institutions in constructing and regulating divergent bodyminds.<sup>3</sup> Next, I critically synthesize the nascent literature developing neuroqueer theory. Situated in the context of the neurodiversity paradigm and building on queer, decolonial, and critical disability traditions, this perspective challenges sociological ideas about what it means to be a social self, troubling both terms and their relation, invoking questions about agency, sociality, and communication. Because effective consideration of these challenges requires us to notice when we are applying taken-for-granted interpretations of central disciplinary concepts, I employ the queer parenthetical to suggest double reading. Thus, for example, I refer to the (social) self to call readers’ attention to how certain notions of sociality are embedded in our ideas of what it means to be/have a self. Similarly, I employ (a)social to trouble assumptions about whether or not the thing so-referred is one or the other, ultimately suggesting that rather than considering neurodivergent people and their practices as exceptions to established truths about what it means to be/have a gender, self, or sociality, sociologists could expand our ability to account for the relationship between self and society through critical attention to the (a)social practices of those constructed as neurologically disabled.

## 2 | THEORETICAL CONTEXT: PATHOLOGIZATION, INTERVENTION, AND IDENTITY

There is a well-established literature examining the intersection of neurological, gender, and sexual divergence, with most attention devoted to the intersection of autism and gender variance. Dominated by medico-psychological and neurobiological approaches, much of this work is dedicated to mapping co-occurrence of traits/behaviors/diagnoses (e.g., Corbett et al., 2023; Qualls et al., 2018; Rudolph et al., 2018; Strang et al., 2014; Warrier et al., 2020) or considering questions of care (e.g., Karti, 2021). These constructions of sex-gender and neurology/disability emerge in the context of a shared history of pathologizing and medicalizing social deviance. Scholars have documented two core veins of socio-historical imbrication: (1) shifting and overlapping pathologization of “inappropriate desires” and (2) use of behavioral techniques to en-able a normal (read normative) future. I briefly outline this history, raising questions for sociological investigation in three main areas: the role of social institutions in social construction and discipline; the emergence, operation, and impact of social movements; and the formation and circulation of social identities.

Autism as a diagnostic and social category was invented when white, middle-class parents sought a (re)habilitative future for their children. Parents brought their children to Leo Kanner, the scientist credited with identifying autism, because they disputed the futureless “feeble-minded” diagnosis given to their children (Eyal, 2013; Gibson & Douglas, 2018). At the time, feeble-minded was a medicolegal classification of social incapacity that often resulted in lifelong incarceration (Carey, 2009; Eyal, 2013). It was an intersectionally constructed classification that functioned to marginalize, control, and minimize the (social) reproduction of immigrants, non-whites, and those of lower economic classes. Non-normative expressions of sexuality were often used as evidence of feeble-mindedness (Carey, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Yergeau, 2018).

The [American Psychiatric Association](#) currently constructs a number of “inappropriate desires” as mental impairment, such as fetishism and voyeurism (DSM-V). Historically that list included homosexuality, introduced in DSM-I as a “sociopathic personality disorder” and, after several revisions, removed in 1973 (though distress over one’s homosexuality remained a diagnostic category until 2013) (McHenry, 2022). Inappropriate desires cum mental impairment also included gender identity disorder, introduced in 1980 and removed in 2013 (currently

distress over one's sex/gender is classified as gender dysphoria). Autism classifications and criteria have likewise undergone multiple revisions; currently inappropriate desires such as avoiding eye contact and engaging in repetitive movements or vocalizations are diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (DSM-V). Though sociologists have generally taken a critical approach to the medicalization of social deviance, inadequate attention has been paid to how constructions of mental impairment emerge from particular socio-historical conditions and how they disable through the operation of social institutions, such as medicine, law, education, and family. Such analyses are of particular import to understanding the operation of power. How, why, and to what effect have various desires been constructed as inappropriate and mobilized for different and ever-changing diagnostic categories and legal regulations? How have these constructions worked to regulate and discipline? How have these processes been inflected by related hierarchies such as race, sex, and class?

In the 1970s, the use of behaviorism to extinguish "inappropriate desires" was trialed simultaneously by Ole Ivar Lovass on autistic children and, along with his graduate student George Rekers, on "effeminate boys." While behavioral training for effeminate boys eventually became known as conversion therapy, discredited, and banned in many jurisdictions, ABA<sup>4</sup> for autistic children became a juggernaut. It is considered *the* treatment for autism and heavily promoted by parent and professional-led autism organizations (Gibson & Douglas, 2018; Pyne, 2020; Yergeau, 2018). These social movement and professional organizations have lobbied to require ABA coverage in insurance policies and for more widespread availability. These political efforts have contributed to a social reality in which ABA is often the only autism treatment or support covered by insurance (Pyne, 2020; Yergeau, 2018). Stakeholder promotion of ABA and associated therapeutic enclosure exists in a contemporary context of poignant opposition to these techniques, as neurodiversity activists challenge the eugenic goal of eliminating autistic ways of being and recount personal harm from these interventions, echoing the testimony of gay and trans rights activists.<sup>5</sup> Tensions and parallels among these movements, as well as parent and professional movements, provides rich ground for sociological examination of claims-making, authoritative speech, and social movement framing, among others.

Thus far given limited sociological attention, analyses of the social forces and conditions producing such different trajectories for intensive behavioral interventions are also needed. One approach to understanding disparate trajectories for the behavioral "correction" of inappropriate desires is to examine the relationship between gender and disability in discourse and how these function in public policy. Based on an analysis of legislation and media coverage in Ontario, where conversion therapy is banned and ABA is mandated in schools, Pyne (2020) argues that the construction of trans subjects as able-minded has been key to improvements in citizenship, such as reduced pathologization, expansions in care, and extensions in civil rights. Indeed, associations between autism and gender variance have been used to argue that one should be suspicious of and potentially deny affirming care for trans youth, under the logic that cognitive "deficits" may cause false (perceptions of) gender and sexual identity (Hillier et al., 2020; Moore, 2022; Moore et al., 2022; Pyne, 2020, 2021; Shapira & Granek, 2019; Yergeau, 2018). Indeed, as I was revising this article, legislators in my state overrode gubernatorial veto to impose a ban on gender-affirming care for youth that includes a section prohibiting mental health professionals from treating minors who present with a "gender-related condition" without screening them for "comorbidities that may be influencing the minor individual's gender-related condition", specifically including autism spectrum disorder (Saving Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act, 2024).

Research with and writing by trans and non-binary autistic people does suggest they experience gender and autism together. For example, autistic youth and adults describe: being genderless or not knowing what gender they are because (neurotypical<sup>6</sup>) gender identities do not make sense with their experience; variation in gender identification and experience over time; Autistic identification/experience fitting what others label gender; and that communication styles and sensory orientations motivate choices *others* perceive to be about sexuality or gender, such as what kind of clothes to wear (Barnett, 2017; Barnett & Maticka-Tyndale, 2015; Brown, 2016; Hillary, 2014; Pyne, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). These experiences have given rise to Internet-based discussion of intersections among neurological and gender variance, broadly glossed as neurogender (<https://nonbinary.wiki/>

[wiki/Neurogender#Vaguegender](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurogender#Vaguegender)). People have coined a variety of terms to communicate the experience of gender with neurodivergence, such as autigender (with autism). The social construction and function of these identities is not well documented and warrants sociological analysis. What work does an autigender identity do? What are the social conditions enabling the emergence, uptake, and circulation (or not) of these identities?

Research indicates that social misrecognition of neurogender formations is associated with harassment (Barnett, 2017). Clinical misrecognition is evident in concerns about the authenticity of (potentially) autistic individuals' gender. The idea that cognitive differences pathologized as deficits may cause false (perceptions of) gender and sexual identity follows from the logic that if a person manifests (onto-) or comes to know (episteme-) gender differently from the neuronormative, the meaning they make is less real than the meaning made in neurotypical ways. It is an application of able-mindedness to the knowing and doing of gender (Shapira & Granek, 2019; Yergeau, 2018). This logic is used by clinicians, caregivers, and others in positions of power, delegitimizing the gender experiences and identities of autistic people who are transgender and non-binary and impacting processes of self-identification, social legitimation, and access to gender-affirming care (Hillier et al., 2020; Moore, 2022; Moore et al., 2022; Pyne, 2020, 2021; Shapira & Granek, 2019; Yergeau, 2018).

The deficit discourse limits the degree to which the achievements of the Trans rights movement are available to neurodivergent transgender individuals. It also demonstrates the continued liminality of queerness, as it becomes something to be cured or treated when it is "cloaked in disability's trappings" (Yergeau, 2018, p. 145). This is a key observation in a time of concerted legislative efforts to criminalize gender-affirming care for youth in the U.S. Couched in language of development and associated capacity for self-awareness and agency (historically leveled at children, people with cognitive disabilities, women, and people of color), this same deficit discourse undergirds claims-making about the "social problem" of gender-affirming care for youth. How will the Autistic and Trans rights movements navigate this (e)merging landscape? How does (dis)ability delimit contemporary gender (and sexuality) formations? How do we misrecognize these embodied social practices when we fail to consider the constitutive role of (dis)ability in them?

Social research on the confluence of gender, sexual, and neurological divergence has identified pathologization and medicalization of non-normative desires as contributors to associations among these. It has also traced the role of behavioral interventions to normalize these overlapping divergencies. Neither behavioral interventions nor access to gender affirming care have been implemented evenly, with autistic subjects receiving more intensive interventions and less access to care. Research also shows that sexual, gender, and neurological difference are often experienced together, leading to the development of new, intersectional identities. While existing research has laid a foundation, much remains to be understood about the production of sexual-gender-neurological divergence, how it is taken up, how it is regulated, and the impacts of these social relations. Neuroqueer theory has emerged as a lens for critically examining these phenomena.

### 3 | NEUROQUEER THEORY

Autistic activists and scholars M. Remi Yergeau, Nick Walker, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, and Ibby Grace began publicly articulating the theoretical perspective dubbed neuroqueer in 2014. Paralleling the rise of other critical perspectives from scholar-activism, the idea initially developed through essays and conversations on blogs (e.g., [neuroqueer.blogspot.com](https://neuroqueer.blogspot.com)) and in neurodiversity spaces. Walker (2021) defines neuroqueer as a verb, adjective, and social identity label, with usage following that of its parent term, queer. It is used both to articulate the queer nature of neurodivergence and to examine the entwinement of the two. Since the publication of Yergeau's (2018) influential book on autism and rhetoric, neuroqueer has been taken-up across a variety of disciplines. There are four core theoretical and social challenges offered by neuroqueer scholars: recognizing (both identifying and acknowledging the validity of) diverse embrained-embodied knowing; appreciating doing (rather than being) as the

nature of existence; questioning accepted conceptual distinctions and definitions accordingly; and revealing the social control operant through normative concepts.

A through-line of these challenges is the call to rethink what constitutes “social” and what is, by matter of exclusion, outside of that valuing embrace. Yergeau (2018) uses the term *asocial* to both capture the characterization of autistics as lacking sociality (e.g., intentional symbolic communication, internalization of social norms, perspective-taking, etc.) and to suggest the neurodivergent reassembling of the social. À la Latour (2005), neuroqueer theorists contest the use of “social” to name a preconfigured, taken-for-granted set of actors (i.e. people) and relations that is also a yardstick for functionality, epistemological authority, and personhood. Following Cole (2021), I use (a)social to indicate these claims and to trouble any prejudgment of whether activities and assemblages are outside of or a reconstitution of the social. A central sociological invitation posed by this line of theorizing, then, is the investigation of autistic practices and relations not as exceptions to established notions of sociality but as constructors of the social we seek to understand.

### 3.1 | Embrained-embodied knowing

In line with disability scholarship articulating the bodymind (Price, 2015) and sociological work on embrained-embodiment (Pitts-Taylor, 2016), neuroqueer scholars forward an epistemology that centers the imbrications of body-neurology-consciousness in socio-environmental context. Walker (2021) argues that “mind is an *embodied* phenomenon” (54), referencing both the physical component of mind as brain activity and the fact that the brain is just one part of a nervous system that extends throughout the body, reminding readers that “*neuro*-doesn't mean *brain*, it means *nerve*” (55). Embrained-embodied knowing (e)merges with socio-environmental stimuli (Johnson, 2021; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018), as “tendrils of sensation and interrelation [] invent knowledge and mediate autistic experience” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 116). Interrelations are between bodyminds, as well as objects and phenomena of the natural world, for example, between one's hand and the air it moves through. Thus, in building their conception of how neurodivergent people know, authors emphasize lack of clear distinction between brain and body, as well as emotions, cognitions, movements, and physical sensations, experiencing one as another or using one to shift another (e.g., headbanging, etc.) (Johnson, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). Knowing is an embodied, sensory phenomenon. As such, knowing varies along with bodyminds.

Consistent with Yergeau's (2018) assertion that sensation and interrelation invent knowledge, Walker (2021) argues that there are innate tendencies for movement that when expressed rather than repressed open up possibilities for more deeply knowing the self. These self-knowledges are “reclaimed” through sensory and motor engagement. A common example is hand movements, frequently glossed as tics or stims, short for self-stimulations, when perceived as expressions of neurodivergence. Walker (2021) contends that moving differently enables perceiving and thinking differently, echoing authors arguing for sitpoint theory (Garland-Thomson, 2002) and Deaf gain (Bauman & Murray, Eds., 2014). Friedner and Block (2017) articulate this as reformulation of social and cultural capital, presenting clear opportunity for sociological investigation of how (dis)ability assembles capital in various social fields. Thus, neuroqueer theorists claim the embrained-embodied experience of autism as a legitimate space of meaning-making that is necessarily generative, making meaning currently unrecognized by dominant, non-disabled society.

Scholarship on the intersection of autism and race points to how this failure of recognition stems from and reinforces the devaluation of non-white and non-European, as well as (dis)abled, bodyminds. Hilton (2017), for example, unpacks the racial logics extended in representations of autistic bodyminds as unruly because unable to control the “sensuous impulse” to movement, joining others in arguing that the unrestrained sensory motor engagement neuroqueer scholars forward as central to knowing is taken as evidence of irrationality and thus diminished personhood according to white, masculinist, Western logics (de Hooge, 2019; Hilton, 2017; Yergeau, 2018). de Hooge (2019) contends that it is the valuation of whiteness and cis-masculinity that undergirds the

culturally privileged position of the rational, “high functioning” autistic person, who is contrasted with the irrational, “low functioning” autistic who intra-acts with the physical and non-symbolic.

Acknowledging the role and value of the physical and non-symbolic in the epistemological process, neuroqueer scholars forward (a)social ways of knowing. For example, in considering the intersection of neurological, sexual, and gender divergence, Jackson-Perry (2020) raises the explanatory potential of “bottom-up” versus “top-down” processing. One of the differences used to distinguish autistic and non-autistic cognition is that while non-autistic people unconsciously apply established conceptual (therefore social) categories to the immediate interpretation-experience of phenomena (top-down), autistic people are more likely to encounter phenomena detail-by-detail, with less extreme conceptual mediation (bottom-up). This explanation is consistent with research documenting autistic clothing and grooming choices based on sensory preferences, regardless of conceptual (social) interpretations of those body practices (Barnett, 2017). Lawson (2021) suggests other cognitive differences, such as limited interoception (i.e. awareness of internal states, such as arousal) or object permanence (e.g., a status, such as gender, still is when not being experienced), may be relevant for explaining how autistics know gender and sexuality differently from non-autistics. In contrast with approaches that pathologize neurological diversity and thereby discount the epistemological authority of neurodivergent people (Yergeau, 2018), neuroqueer scholars ask what we can learn about embodied social constructs, such as gender and sexuality, and the processes through which they are ascribed, internalized, and performed, when we take diversely embrained-embodied knowing seriously. In other words, what social is assembled when we examine the linkages between components (and grant epistemological competence) rather than assuming their association (and pathologize unexpected assemblages) (Latour, 2005)? These are sociological questions.

### 3.2 | Ephemeral ontology

Following from this episteme of embrained-embodiment, neuroqueer scholars theorize human nature as doing rather than being. Performance, process, practice, non-arrival, and refusals of fixity or associated labels characterize the approach. This is true first and foremost about neuroqueer/ing (Acevedo, 2021; Attias, 2020; Klee-kamp, 2020; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). “Neuroqueer/ing” is described as an experience of permanent flux, a “motioning,” “lurching,” or “ticking” toward futurity (Acevedo, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). “To be neuroqueer is to always be striving toward being neuroqueer” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 76). It is something you do, not something you are (at least not stably).

Walker (2021) makes the most explicit rejection of “neuroessentialism,” or the idea that you have/are a type of brain, emphasizing instead the plasticity of the embrained-embodied self and the “verbed” nature of selfhood. You are/become what you do, both materially (neurological plasticity) and consciously (fluid self). Morrison (2019) affirms this dynamic in the intrapersonal and institutional processes of diagnosis and accommodation, discussing how people must learn to both act and interpret their actions as APA defined autism, echoing sociological work on labeling and role-taking. Yergeau (2018) also rejects neuroessentialism, framed as a rhetoric of “my neurons made me do it.” Scholars argue this rhetoric obviates the agency of the autistic, rendering them demi-persons and thus “proper” subjects of violence (Roscigno, 2019; Yergeau, 2018). At the same time, neuroqueer scholars affirm the experience of having one’s bodymind respond in ways that are unchosen or not completely within one’s control. The rejection of *being* a neurotype is tempered by *having* proclivities. It is this inner (a)social inclination that one follows in neuroqueering, or refusing to perform normativity (Acevedo, 2021; Johnson, 2021; Roscigno, 2019; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018).

Neuroqueer theory renders gender, sexuality, and neurotypicality all in terms of performance of normativity, or the performance of socially constructed and valued concepts. Milton (2021) suggests that performances of neurodivergence, “naturally subvert gendered norms and expectations” (26). Following (a)social inclinations for

body use inevitably violates gender, as (neurotypical) others perceive through a gender-normative lens (Barnett, 2017; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). For example, the (a)social inclination to experience the pleasure of a flapped hand or articulated wrist becomes a sign of effeminacy in boys (Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). Empirical research supports this theoretical contention, with autistic reporting that they experience gender and sexuality-based harassment for what they consider autistic characteristics (Barnett, 2017) and that sorting out whether their inclinations are related to gender *for them* (rather than others) requires considerable reflection (Barnett, 2017; Lawson, 2021).

In the context of education, Acevedo (2021) and Attias (2020) argue that centering process over product is a neuroqueer act, because it destabilizes the normative focus on achieving an end or producing a thing, bringing a “queer politics of non-arrival” to cognitive endeavors. The queer relation of neurodivergence to futurity is a common theme, arising from the social construction of those labeled with cognitive disabilities as perpetual children, unable to competently know/speak for themselves, and/or in need of on-going intervention, never fully arriving as agents (Morrison, 2019; Richter, 2017; Trento, 2020; Yergeau, 2018). This is the case with autism, figured in dominant discourse as a condition of childhood (Yergeau, 2018). Roscigno (2019) argues that “both disability and childhood contain an inherent queerness and precarious relationships to futurity, marking autistic or otherwise neurodivergent children as doubly-queer” (406). Arrival or closure is rejected as both ontologically illegitimate and as a form of social control, with scholars arguing that non-arrival is forced upon the neuroqueer subject either by how their neurology actually works or by how the working of their nervous system is conceived in the context of neuronormativity (Acevedo, 2021; Morrison, 2019; Roscigno, 2019; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018).

Examining the role of neuronormative futurity in constructing families as “at-risk” and recruiting them into “therapeutic” surveillance and regulation, Richter (2017) argues that, “the production of a curative futurity for the autistic subject is what loosens social relations; in expecting an impossible [neurotypical] future, the present of the family is shattered” (340). Neuroqueer scholars are motivated to conceive a future that is not foreclosed by neuronormativity, or the attempt to produce a normative (social) subject, psychically or physically maiming and killing neurodivergent bodyminds in the process (Richter, 2017; Roscigno, 2019; Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018). From this perspective, by refusing to be a thing, refusing to have one's (a)social doing contained by neuronormativity, neuroqueer/ing expands ways of inhabiting and understanding the world, with attendant expansions in knowledge, justice, and life-chances.

### 3.3 | Troubling concepts

Following from an epistemology that recognizes diversely embrained-embodied knowing and an ontology that rejects stasis and closure, neuroqueer scholarship troubles accepted concepts as reflections of neuronormative (heterocispatrilial, white) dominance, in the linked senses of meaning-making and sociopolitical containment. Scholars question a number of taken-for-granted concepts which reflect and reinforce dominant ideas of the normal, first and foremost the idea of a normal brain.

Expanding on the ontological rejection of *being* a neurotype, Walker (2021) argues that “neurotypical” does not refer to a type of brain, but to a person who, “live[s], act[s], and experience[s] the world in a way that falls within the boundaries of ... what the prevailing culture *imagines* a person with a ‘normal mind’ to be like” (58). Yergeau (2018) similarly asserts that allistic (a term for the non-autistic) names a neurological ideal and ideology rather than a kind of brain or person. Some point to how the neurological ideal reflects race and ethnicity as well. Shannon (2020) examines how expectations about “normal” communication marginalize polylingual children in an Anglo-centric classroom, and Acevedo (2021) details the profoundly intersectional nature of her experiences of exclusion and discrimination as an autistic, Mestiza immigrant woman. Theoretical rejection of being a discrete, consistent, “kind” of person is applied in neuroqueer identity practices.



Egner's (2019) analysis of the emergence of neuroqueer online describes it as a project of disidentification and reliance on Munoz' work is common (e.g., Acevedo, 2021; Shannon, 2020; Yergeau, 2018). Egner (2019) reports that a central neuroqueer project is creating (a)social space for those excluded from identity-based social spaces due to identity fluidity. Research documents greater proliferation and refusal of sexual and/or gender identity labels among neurodivergent populations than characterizes neurotypical identity practices (e.g., Oswald et al., 2021). Jackson-Perry (2020) suggests that autistic gender practices often pathologized by clinicians as socio-cognitive deficits, such as "not knowing" what (neurotypical) gender is or selecting multiple or no sexual identities on a form, may be read as (neuro)queering gender and sexuality, a socio-political intervention in the domination of neurotypical sexuality and gender concepts.

Neuroqueer theorists in education trouble disciplinary standards for performance, noting how they are both limiting and exclusionary (Acevedo, 2021; Attias, 2020; Kleekamp, 2020; Morrison, 2019; Shannon, 2020; Smilges, 2021). These arguments often trouble boundaries, as with Shannon's (2020) questioning of the boundary between music and noise when considering the participation of diverse bodyminds in music class. Rejection of binaries, proliferations of categories, and considerations of "betweenity" characterize the neuroqueer perspective. The application of these to discussions of (a)social modes of communing are of particular sociological interest.

Unsurprisingly, given the pathologization of autism as a social communication disorder, neuroqueer theory calls for the reexamination of dominant understandings of communication and sociality. Scholars challenge, in particular, the necessity and delineation of intent and symbolism for meaning and communication. Attias (2020), for example, positions art as a form of nonverbal communication, one in which neither intent nor the social symbolic determines communicative capacity. Similarly, Yergeau (2018) argues that autistic stims and echoes (physical or auditory repetition of stimuli), typically interpreted as neurological eruptions lacking intent or (social) meaning, indeed have meaning and may express a "betweenity" of intent. Yergeau (2018) takes the argument furthest, suggesting that moving or "motioning" is communicating and often a central component of autistic perception and processing, nodding to Nolan and McBride's (2015) work on embodied semiosis and sensory utterances. They note that in neurodivergent spaces, such as autistic conferences & neurodiversity organizing, stims function as a form of communication—though it may be a polyvalent one (Yergeau, 2018). Arguments challenging the definitions of and requirements for intentionality and symbolism for communication are consistent with an embained-embodied epistemology that takes interrelations of bodymind and environment as a way of knowing, decentering dominant ideas of who/what is "social".

Communication that does not rely on the social symbolic grounds articulation of alternative socialities or (a) socialities. "While antisocial rhetorics are typically conceived as those rhetorics that pervert and disrupt normative structures—that is, negating the already social—asocial rhetorics are rhetorics that complicate what we've come to understand as social. ... we might think of asociality as that which is ecologically oriented and perseverative, that which extends notions of communion and relationality beyond the human" (Yergeau, 2018, pp. 71–72). Neuroqueer theory connects a bodymind that *knows* through interrelations among bodies, objects, and natural phenomena with a bodymind that *relates*, or is (a)social, with objects and environment (Attias, 2020; Cole, 2021; Richter, 2017; Yergeau, 2018).

This relationality may be one of pleasure. For example, Yergeau (2018) discusses the "queer pleasure in echoing" which "might be read asexually or demisexually, as interbodily attractions that do not take others or even entities as their objects of desire" (199), while Hilton (2017) considers how railroads and tree lines impel the "sensuous impulse" to wander in some autistic people. Currently taken-for-granted as outside the social, the "inappropriate desire" for these sensuous (a)socialities is interpreted as a "symptom" of autism cum social communication disorder. Scientific understandings of sociality matter. Considering the implications of such "object-orientations" for the field of communication, Cole (2021) calls for a reconsideration of questions such as, "What is sociality?" and "What can/does interact?"

These are fundamentally sociological questions. Our discipline is poised to guide discussion of (newly recognized) forms of interaction and what constitutes sociality. For example, current conversations would benefit from deeper consideration of how structure or social field delimit what is valued as communication or interaction. There are also clear opportunities for intellectual dialogue with actor-network-theory, considering neuroqueer contentions about object relations and demi-intent/collective agency. Our discipline is also poised to learn from these discussions. For example, how is our understanding of the (gendered, racialized, etc.) self, and the self in relation, limited by assumptions about what constitutes communication or sociality? For whom do our theories fail to, or inappropriately, account?

### 3.4 | Controlling concepts

Training our gaze on how accepted conceptual definitions reflect *neurotypical* meaning-making, neuroqueer theory reveals how neuronormative ideas function through institutions to socio-politically marginalize and contain (neurodivergent) bodyminds. Walker (2021) calls neuronormativity a “pervasive social force” embedded in “social conventions, systems, and institutions”, comprising socially constructed norms “related to nearly every aspect of embodiment, development, cognition, expression, communication, comportment, conduct, and interaction” into which we are socialized from birth (180). These neuro-norms, co-constituted with separate but related normative regimes (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.), define what it means to be (fully) human. Neuroqueer scholars emphasize how scientific, especially clinical and neurobiological, narratives of neurodivergence frame these modes of being as deficient in areas considered central to human “being”, such as will, empathy, and (symbolic) communication. Yergeau (2018) argues that “mental disability signals a kind of rhetorical involuntariness” (10) such that the diagnosis or status is perceived to “do” more than the person. Focusing on autism, they claim, “Human beings exist perspectively [able to take another’s perspective] and intentionally [having will and making choices], and without this knowledge, autistics are absented from the larger project of being human” (Yergeau, 2018, p. 15).

These contentions present sociological invitations. The first is the study of neuronormative socialization. Sociologists have long traced the way patterns of behavior biologized as innate (e.g., gender) arise from material conditions and social relations. These methods would help us identify neuronormative, or mental ability, regimes and how they are both distinct from and interdependent with other regimes, as well as how they vary by culture. Second, challenges to exclusionary ideas about what it means to be human, or have a (social) self, invite us to reconsider disciplinary theories of self (e.g., role of perspective-taking) and agency. What reformulations are necessary for our theories to be useful for understanding the full range of embodied selves? What might we need to measure differently so we can accurately observe diversely embrained-embodied selves in assorted associations or (a)socialities?

Scholars argue that the subhuman construction of autistic bodyminds renders them imminent threats of personal social death, as well as a “threat to national futures” (Roscigno, 2019, p. 411), because they disrupt the normal functioning of liberal capitalist society (Pyne, 2021). This threatening future enables reframe of “therapeutic” punishment (ABA) into service or benevolence (Roscigno, 2019), justifying the use of techniques criminalized in other contexts (Pyne, 2020). Behavioral training to become (or mimic) non-autistic is considered an acceptable cost of social inclusion. Neuroqueer scholars thus cast the therapeutic juggernaut of ABA as a technology of control for managing “unruly bodies” (Roscigno, 2019). This technology operates through diverse social institutions. A key component of ABA is how it recruits everyone in an autistic child’s life, including the child, into the project of normalization (Eyal, 2013), as surveillance and correction must be constant. In this way, medical and scientific ideas about humanity-neurotypicality organize not just those two social institutions, but education and the family as well.

Scholars thus point to the consequences of dominant ideas about what it means to have a (social) self and reject “inclusion” on neurotypical terms. Morrison (2019), for example, argues that disability accommodations in the

academy function to “contain and control” difference while leaving ableist, neuronormative values and practices intact (694), and Shannon (2020) contends that (re)habilitative interventions that make neurodivergent subjects “includable” by masking their most divergent tendencies result in a person allowed physical but not psycho-social presence. Strategies of containment in which recognition morphs into heightened surveillance and securitization along with assimilation practices that seek to change people rather than standards of valuation have racial and ethnic origins and intersections (Griffin, 2022; Hilton, 2017). Critiques of institutional practices in science, medicine, education, and the family beg for sociological analyses accounting for organizational structures and the interdependence of social institutions.

They also challenge our discipline to interrogate how our own practices, norms, and concepts emerge from and reinforce neuronormativity-ableism. A central critique from the neuroqueer paradigm is the role of scientific concepts in disciplining, marginalizing, and maiming (neurodivergent) bodyminds. This critique is consistent with studies in the sociology of science documenting the socio-political roles and impacts of the institution. This critical gaze is less frequently trained on the roles of social science and law as knowledge-producer-participants in social relations (Vogler, 2019). From a neuroqueer perspective, it is important to critically interrogate (mental) ableism in the academy and produce non-stigmatizing accounts of neurodivergence (Acevedo, 2021; Cole, 2021; Jackson-Perry, 2020; Kleekamp, 2020; Morrison, 2019; Pyne, 2020; Smilges, 2021; Yergeau, 2018) so people can “claim space in the public sphere” (Johnson, 2021, p. 655). This critical interrogation will also strengthen our understanding of individuals in society, as we are better able to account for the full range of embrained-embodied selves and the structures of their (a)social relations.

The emerging conversation on neurological queerness has four core contentions: diverse bodyminds produce legitimately diverse knowledges, bodyminds are always in-process, dominant concepts reflect the knowing of culturally-valued bodyminds, and able-minded concepts are central to regimes of discipline and social control that marginalize and oppress. These contentions invite consideration of the degree to which our discipline has produced neurotypical sociology, accounting for the embrained-embodied selves and social relations of those who, “live, act, and experience the world in a way that falls within the boundaries of ... what the prevailing culture *imagines* a person with a ‘normal mind’ to be like” (Walker, 2021, p. 58). Can our social explanations grant some agency to the bodymind without yielding to neuroessentialism? Can we reconcile our notions of self and agency with radical diversity in perspective-taking, intention, and (social symbolic) communication? Can we consider yet more methods and modes of sociality? What disciplinary explanations and institutional practices require revision?

## 4 | CONCLUSION

This paper further encourages sociology's turn to disability, focusing on an area ripe with challenges and opportunities. Medicalization of social difference figured as neurological impairment has resulted in a wide range of people coming to understand themselves as neurodivergent/disabled, with associated growth in activist, parent, and professional movements, as well as the complex of medical, legal, educational, and family practices organized through diagnoses. Recognition of the experience of neurological difference *with* sexual and gender difference has led to the articulation of intersectional identities, as well as (re)considerations of access to gender affirming care. With limited sociological attention, our understanding of empirical processes in traditionally sociological areas, such as social movements and identities, is constrained. Scholars attempting a social account of neurological diversity and its associations with sexual and gender diversity have developed a theoretical perspective, called neuroqueer, to aid the endeavor. Centering the epistemic authority of bodyminds problematized as lacking self-control/intent, perspective-taking, and reliance on the social symbolic, neuroqueer scholars forward (a)social ways of knowing, communicating, communing, and being human. Focusing our attention on neuronormativity and its interdependence with better-recognized normativities (e.g., gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.), neuroqueer theory offers fresh

perspective on how dominant concepts, relations, and expectations render some bodyminds problematic and legitimate objects of exclusion, marginalization, and “rehabilitation.” In doing so, it troubles key sociological concepts such as self, agency, and communication, calling for us to reconsider how we define “social”. Will sociology accept the neuroqueer invitation to refine our work through meaningful engagement with a broader range of the diverse bodyminds and associations for which we claim to account?

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest related to this publication.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> C.f. <https://autcollab.org/aba/>; [https://medium.com/@kim\\_crawley/what-violates-a-un-convention-fails-a-us-department-of-defense-analysis-and-is-hated-by-those-eb9d909bc4a0](https://medium.com/@kim_crawley/what-violates-a-un-convention-fails-a-us-department-of-defense-analysis-and-is-hated-by-those-eb9d909bc4a0); <https://www.change.org/p/joseph-r-biden-outlaw-aba-therapy>; <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2023/05/parents-call-for-action-on-controversial-autism-therapy-aba/>.
- <sup>2</sup> In the social and relational models of disability, it is this interpellation and associated social regimes that create disability: identity, as well as disadvantage, marginalization, and oppression on the basis of real or perceived deviation from a mythic norm of ability (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Kafer, 2013; Wendell, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Bodymind articulates the inseparability of physicality and consciousness (Price, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Applied behavioral analysis is now commonly called Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI or IBI).
- <sup>5</sup> c.f. <https://neuroclastic.com/invisible-abuse-aba-and-the-things-only-autistic-people-can-see/>; <https://autisticstrategies.net/nonspeaking-autistics-against-aba/>; or Leaf et al., 2022 for a scholarly review and response.
- <sup>6</sup> Expressing dominant ideals of how a “normal brain” perceives, experiences, etc.

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