

Neurodiversity: Towards an interdisciplinary approach

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Neurodiversity
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The concept of neurodiversity is exerting a powerful influence in academia and the real world. There has been a sharp increase in publications referring to ‘neurodiversity’ since 2000 (Figure 1), many people now identify as ‘neurodivergent’, and there are worldwide public initiatives such as Neurodiversity Celebration Week that actively promote the concept. In light of this growth, we are pleased to announce the launch of *Neurodiversity* – a new journal that will focus on interdisciplinary approaches to improving understanding of neurodiversity and its application in real-world settings. Following in the spirit of the emergence of the neurodiversity concept from the autism rights movement, *Neurodiversity* represents an exciting new addition to Sage academic journals, like *Autism*, dedicated to advancing understanding and improving the lives of neurodivergent people.

The concept of neurodiversity has immense potential, both to revolutionise our understanding of neurodevelopmental differences across the lifespan, and as a powerful force for positive social change (see Sonuga-Barke & Thapar, 2021 and Shaw et al., 2021 for recent discussions). Yet there remain large knowledge gaps – in research, practice and in interpretation – that must be addressed if we are to realise its full potential. An interdisciplinary approach is critical if we are to achieve this. *Neurodiversity* aims to lead this endeavour by bringing together theoretical and empirical work from a range of disciplines into the same outlet, and working closely with the neurodivergent community, to foster a truly cross-disciplinary, internationally collaborative, understanding of neurodiversity. Working closely with Sage to achieve this overarching goal, we have already taken several important steps to build a strong foundation from which to launch the journal.

Generalist editors

We are delighted, privileged, and excited to lead the development of this journal as joint editors. Compared to many neurodiversity scholars and practitioners, we are generalists, with wide-ranging expertise in concepts, theories, and methods (e.g. brain imaging and both quantitative and qualitative approaches) that spans several disciplines

(e.g. psychology, developmental science, cognitive neuroscience, education, sociology) and a broad range of neurodevelopmental differences, including autism, ADHD, developmental prosopagnosia, and special educational needs. Joni’s research group uses the core principles of empirical psychological research to provide mechanistic accounts of child development and understand childhood neurodevelopmental differences from a transdiagnostic perspective (e.g. Astle et al., 2018; 2022; Bathelt et al., 2018; Guy et al., 2022; Holmes et al., 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; Mareva et al., 2019; 2023; Siugzdaitė et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2022). Punit’s research group focuses on neurodiversity in adulthood, including a pioneering body of work testing the strengths putatively associated with neurodivergence (e.g. Taylor et al., 2019; 2021; 2022; 2023), alongside research on the complex links between neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions (e.g. Hargitai et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2023). Our combined expertise covers the lifespan. This is especially important given the need to identify and accept unmet needs without judgement, and provide appropriate accommodations, at school, in the healthcare system, and in the workplace, for neurodivergent individuals. We are confident that we, our editorial board, and the journal’s ethos, provide the necessarily strong cross- and multi-disciplinary foundations to move the field towards a truly interdisciplinary approach to neurodiversity.

Diverse editorial board

Working with Sage, we have recruited an exciting and diverse Editorial Board, including many internationally leading academics and clinician scientists who have championed the neurodiversity concept for understanding

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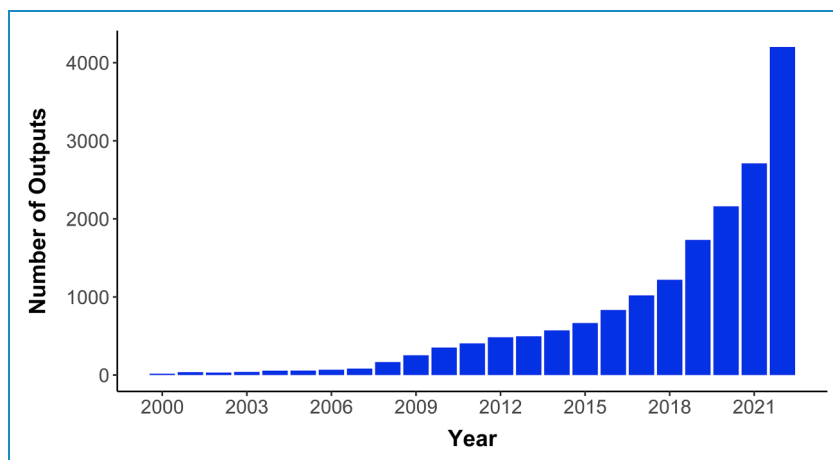


Figure 1. Scholarly outputs including ‘neurodiversity’. Google Scholar analysis on 06/09/2023 for outputs including ‘neurodiversity’ as a term, showing an average year-on-year increase of over 40% between 2000 and 2022.

neurodevelopmental differences (e.g. Bölte et al., 2021; Fletcher-Watson, 2022; Gilberg, 2010; Kapp et al., 2013; Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015; Milton, 2012; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). We have also made a concerted effort to recruit emerging talent, such as world-class Early Career Researchers who are already making important theoretical and methodological contributions to the field (e.g. den Houting, 2018; Dwyer, 2022; Livingston & Happé, 2017; Shaw et al., 2021; Williams & Gotham, 2021).

The guiding principle for establishing an Editorial Board, which is rich in academic expertise and representative of wider society, has been a focus on *strength in diversity*. We considered geographic spread and socio-demographic characteristics, while concentrating on establishing a Board of specialists that draws from several disciplines (e.g. psychology, law, education, economics). We should also emphasise that a sizeable percentage of the Board are neurodivergent and/or directly support neurodivergent people (e.g. family members), and there are numerous scholars from minoritised groups who are traditionally underrepresented in academia. It is crucial to have such breadth and depth of representation of lived experience because the Board will serve as expert reviewers for manuscripts submitted to the journal and inform the development of the journal’s interdisciplinary foci moving forward.

Broad aims and scope

Neurodiversity welcomes submissions of manuscripts on anything and everything neurodiversity related. We especially encourage submissions that cut across or transcend traditional disciplinary and diagnostic boundaries, including work that links neurodiversity to health and wellbeing (very broadly defined) and other important societally relevant topics (e.g. organisational culture). We also welcome research on neurodivergence traditionally constrained to a

specific diagnostic category (e.g. ADHD, Dyslexia), particularly where it has theoretical and/or methodological implications for understanding other neurodevelopmental conditions or neurodiversity more generally. Research on neurodiversity that has wider implications, beyond advancing understanding of neurodiversity *per se*, will also be very welcome. For example, neurodiversity research has informed basic developmental science in fundamental ways (e.g. Annaz et al., 2009; Klin et al., 2003) and we look forward to receiving submissions of this nature. If authors are unsure about the suitability of their research for *Neurodiversity*, we encourage a direct submission via the online submission portal where we aim to provide a quick editorial decision as to its suitability.

We are launching the journal with traditional article types that align with *Autism* and other leading Sage journals to help authors expedite the dissemination of high-quality work if it is unsuitable for publication in similar existing outlets. These include original Research Articles, Short Reports, Reviews, Commentaries, and Letters to the Editor. But this is only a starting point. We want the readership and neurodivergent community to contribute ideas for new ways to disseminate scholarly findings, and we look forward to co-producing a more innovative range of article types in due course.

Meaningful co-production and participatory scholarship

We are excited about the opportunities for embedding inclusive working into the journal. In the lead up to the launch, we established three initiatives to facilitate neurodivergent people, including non-academics, to develop a stake in the journal. First, we launched a highly successful international cover competition that led to the brilliant cover image for *Neurodiversity* (Figure 2). Second, we

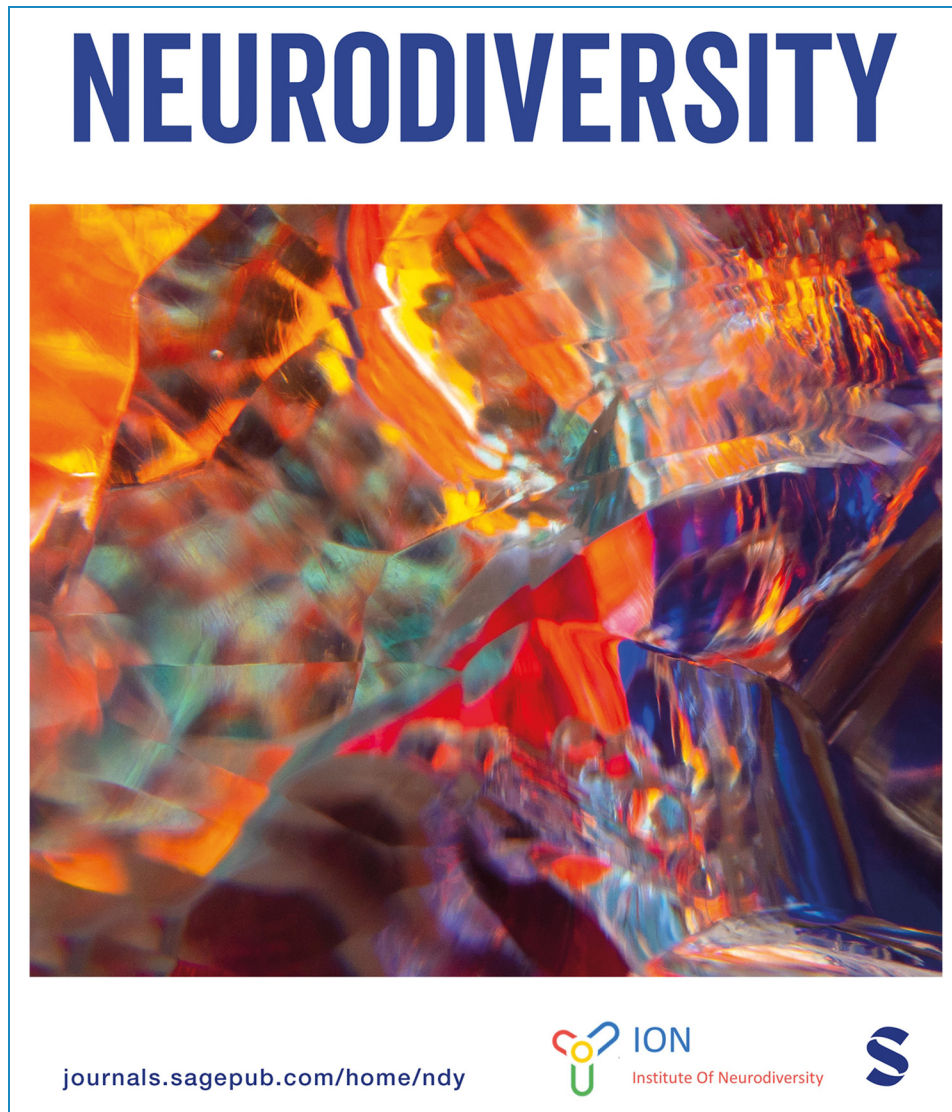


Figure 2. Journal cover. An international competition, calling neurodivergent artists, directly inspired the design of the journal cover – <https://perspectivesblog.sagepub.com/blog/calling-all-creative-and-neurodivergent-individuals>. The judging panel included both neurodivergent and neurotypical people, as well as judges with neurodivergent family members. Cathy Martin, who produced this winning design, wrote eloquently about how in the ‘*neuroverse, a turn of the human kaleidoscope produces infinite diversity*’.

commissioned an Editorial from the winner, Cathy Martin, which has been co-authored with Kerry Barner, our Publisher at Sage (Martin & Barner, 2023). Third, in addition to an Editorial board that has a strong representation of neurodivergent scholars, we are enabling non-academic neurodivergent people to be involved in shaping the journal by sourcing their reviews as ‘experts by experience’ for manuscript submissions. This is a new way of working which, we are sure, will improve and evolve with time. It is naturally adding to the existing pressures of peer review (e.g. DeLisi et al., 2022), necessarily slowing the speed at which manuscripts are processed. We urge patience and hope that submitting authors can see the value of this contribution to their work and to the journal, in line with wider

moves towards joining the ‘Fast Lane to Slow Science’ (Frith, 2020). We are delighted to have already received several high-quality submissions – including work from high profile authors – and neurodivergent academics and non-academic stakeholders have played an active part in reviewing and enhancing the work.

Moving forward, we are encouraging article submissions that have been co-produced with neurodivergent people or other stakeholders (e.g. parents/teachers of neurodivergent individuals). We encourage authors to highlight co-production in their submissions using the most relevant mechanism for their work (e.g. by assigning authorship, in the Author Note, and/or in the Methods section of empirical work). Our aim here is to maximise

flexibility and avoid being prescriptive where participatory approaches are concerned. Indeed, we are elsewhere seeing calls – as reviewers and authors – for the mandatory involvement of neurodivergent people and for mandatory community involvement statements. This is sometimes to the extent that authors are being asked, and potentially pressured, to make personal and sensitive disclosures about their diagnoses and neurodivergent identities. We do not believe that this is the optimal and most inclusive way forward for *Neurodiversity*. But we are open to hosting debates on this matter, with a view to advancing approaches to participatory research. At present, where there is no co-production or involvement of neurodivergent individuals, we are encouraging authors to explain why it was not possible or relevant, to consider whether it is a limitation of the work, and to consider whether and why co-production might be required in future research. We hope that our existing and planned initiatives ensure that *Neurodiversity* becomes a safe and constructive space for academic and non-academic neurodivergent contributors, and the wider community, to actively contribute to the publication, and to shaping its future.

Constructive and open debate

While the concept of neurodiversity has enormous potential as a force for positive social change, and for transforming how we understand developmental differences, it is not without controversy and debate (see e.g. Dwyer et al., 2022; Fletcher-Watson, 2022). Terms and definitions, and their application, differ considerably as a function of several factors (e.g. language, geographical location, political context; see Keating et al., 2022 for a recent international study on autism terminology). There are different conceptualisations of neurodiversity that vary in their alignment to more social, political, or medical models. The language used to describe neurodiversity and its characteristics differs. There are different views on the value, and application, of diagnostic categories, and so on. The field is sometimes contentious, and the neurodiversity concept is evolving, especially as contributions from different academic disciplines emerge. The creation of a journal dedicated to neurodiversity is an enormous opportunity, but also a real challenge, which will require an approach that stretches the framework for current approaches to academic publishing as we try to synthesise new knowledge and advance the field.

To this end, we are embracing an inclusive approach by including theoretical and empirical work from a range of disciplines in the journal and working closely with neurodivergent academic and non-academic communities. Despite our best efforts, as we have started to lay out in this Editorial, we will make decisions that are potentially considered unpopular or inappropriate. We will be embracing this opportunity to ‘get things wrong’ for there to be meaningful advances in the field, and we look forward to

engaging with the readership, through our Letters to the Editor, to do just this. We will also be encouraging submitting authors with opposing viewpoints and results to engage in constructive but respectful debate, even when there are disagreements (e.g. through so-called ‘adversarial collaborations’).

Thinking beyond academia

To realise the full societal potential of the neurodiversity concept, it is vital to think beyond academia. We have already described our drive to make the journal inclusive for non-academic neurodivergent individuals and stakeholders, but we also want to integrate the views, voices, and valuable efforts of practitioners who work with neurodivergent individuals. As such, we will have a practitioner focus highlighting innovative practice developments in clinical, educational, and workplace settings. For example, we are collaborating directly with the Institute of Neurodiversity (ION), whose purpose is ‘to influence for an equal, inclusive world in which neurodivergent people are well understood, represented, and valued equally to all other people’. This partnership is already paying dividends, as we benefit from the input from influential neurodivergent business leaders, like Charlotte Valeur (Coulter Partners, 2023). Much more fundamentally, we hope that such partnerships with influential non-academic and commercial organisations provides a unique and direct pipeline through which to translate findings published in the journal into real-world settings across the globe. There is a growing impetus to generate impact from academic work and we are confident that the journal, by innovatively linking with practitioners and non-academic organisations, is well positioned to positively contribute to this important effort.

Summary

Neurodiversity launches with a strong foundation built from (i) generalist editors covering neurodiversity across the lifespan, (ii) a diverse Editorial Board of current and future academic stars, (iii) a broad and interdisciplinary scope for submissions, (iv) meaningful but non-mandatory requirements for participatory research, (v) a commitment to open research and debate, and (vi) embedding the impact agenda into the fabric of the journal. Overall, we hope the journal provides an outlet for outstanding scholarly work and lively academic debate, enabling us to move towards an interdisciplinary and internationally collaborative understanding of neurodiversity and its application for the greater good of neurodivergent people.

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