

**Autism,  
Neurodiversity,  
and Ableism:  
What Clinicians  
Need to Know**

Part 1: Autism, Ableism, & Neurodiversity –The Basics

April 22, 2021

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**A little information about me**

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- Grew up in the 1970s
- Not diagnosed until I was an adult (32 years)
- Primary issues: social, sensory, vocational
- “Smart but stupid”
- Common trajectory:
  - a lot of difficulty when young
  - things have worked out over time

©Zaks personal photo

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**Quick Language Explanation**

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- Identity-first language is used frequently in this workshop
- Autism is used to refer to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Autism is sometimes used interchangeably with “neurodivergence”
- Neurodiversity “frontal lobe cousins”: developmental disorders, ADHD, dyslexia, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Trisomy 21, communication challenges, intellectual disabilities...lots of diversities!

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Section 1: Autism – What Is It?

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**Warm Up: Sensory Challenge Game**

- Imagine a typical classroom in a local public elementary school
- This is Jose – he is in second grade, on the spectrum
- Teams: list every single possible “sensory violation” he might encounter in his classroom
- You will have 120 seconds

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**Discussion**

- Who are the “Sensory Violation Champions”?
- What should we fix?

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## Disability As a Socially Constructed Concept

- Disability usually defined as "can't do something"
- Problem: every society has a different idea of what constitutes *lack of ability!*

Zosia's definition of disability:  
Disability is part of human nature, a universal possibility in all cultures, sometimes a mini-culture within larger cultural systems, and a socially produced concept – all at the same time.

(Reid-Cunningham, 2009; Wäldschmidt & Sépúlchre, 2019; Zaks, 2020)

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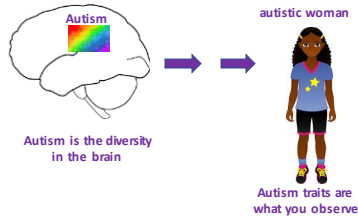
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### How Autism and Traits Intersect



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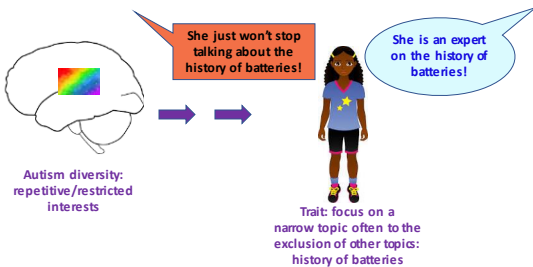
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### Traits: Negative, Positive, or Neutral



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Who decides?



obsessed expert

The illustration shows a person standing next to a scale of justice. The scale has two pans, and the word 'obsessed' is written above the left pan and 'expert' above the right pan.

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**Traits: We Decide!**

<p><b>Traditional View</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Upset by changes in routine</li><li>• Inflexible, nonfunctional rules</li><li>• Narrow interests</li><li>• Repetitive behavior</li><li>• Unfeeling</li><li>• Over-reactive (deregulated)</li><li>• Prefers sameness</li><li>• Aloof, unloving</li></ul>	<p><b>New Perspectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prefer quiet, orderly atmosphere</li><li>• Rely on clear rules and boundaries</li><li>• Contribute special interests</li><li>• Empathetic in unique ways</li><li>• Extraordinary passions</li><li>• Loyal</li><li>• Connect to others in unique ways</li></ul>
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**"Normal" Exercise & Discussion**

Instructions provided during the workshop!

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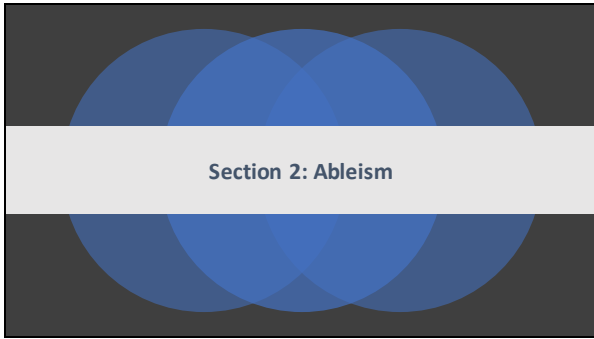
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Section 2: Ableism

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**Ableism: Definition**

Discrimination against disabled people.

(Nario-Redmond et al., 2019)

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- Ableism Comes in Many Forms**
- Architectural: buildings don't have ramps
  - Physical: wheelchairs can't fit at café tables
  - Informational: signs at a museum can't be read by blind people
  - Legal: laws discriminate against disabled people in some way
  - Social: disabled people are segregated from non-disabled people
  - Attitudinal: disabled people viewed as incompetent, weird; rejected by peers
  - Linguistic: disabled people are "suffering" because they aren't "normal"

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### Examples of Ableism

Someone can do a job, but she doesn't get hired simply because she is disabled.

Someone wants to eat in a restaurant or go to a movie, but he can't because the entrance isn't wheelchair accessible.

Someone got into college, but she can't go because no dorms will let her service dog stay with her.

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### Less Obvious Examples of Ableism

The staff person at a group home treats the adults like two-year-olds and won't let them stay up late to watch the ball drop on the TV on New Year's Eve.

Neighbors talk to the disabled guy who lives on the corner as if he can't understand – they "dumb down" their language.

The special needs high school skips sexuality education because adults on the autism spectrum are assumed to be too socially challenged to need it.

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### Ableism: Reflection

When might you have been ableist without realizing it?

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Section 3: Historical Context of Disability & Autism

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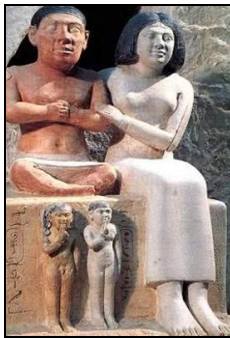
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**Ancient Egypt: Saneb**

- Saneb held a high position in the king's court
- statue depicts him seated next to his wife
- their children are at his feet
- Saneb's name is inscribed next to the children

Take-aways:

- Disabled people have always existed
- Some disabled people in ancient world were fully integrated into society

(Kozma, 2006)

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**France 1800**

- Victor, wild boy of Aveyron, France
- Dr Jean-Marc Itard shelters him, begins education program, records scientific observations of Victor's challenges and abilities
- Considered the first "case study" of an autistic child [the word "autism" is not used]

Take away:

Neurodivergent children existed since before modern times

(Benzaquén, 2006; Fith, 2008)

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**1920s – 1960s: Historical High Drama**

<p><b>Dr. Sukhareva</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia 1920s</li> <li>• Marxist</li> <li>• Community integration</li> <li>• Special education</li> <li>• Value neurodiverse traits</li> <li>• Clinical definition matches DSM-V</li> </ul>	<p><b>Dr. Asperger</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austria 1930s</li> <li>• NAZI</li> <li>• T-4 Eugenics Program</li> <li>• High functioning – “of use to society”</li> <li>• Buried Dr. Sukhareva’s work because she was Jewish &amp; Marxist</li> </ul>	<p><b>Dr. Kanner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USA 1940s</li> <li>• Jewish</li> <li>• Psychopathology model</li> <li>• “Refrigerator mothers”</li> <li>• Buried Dr. Asperger’s work because he was a NAZI</li> </ul>
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(Czech, 2018; Posar & Viscconti, 2017; Sterwald & Baker, 2019)

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**1970s – 1990s: Disability Civil Rights Movement Emerges**

<p><b>“Old” Viewpoint</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disabled people can’t do things</li> <li>• Institutions, segregation</li> <li>• Society is not required to be accessible</li> </ul>	<p><b>New Ideas Emerge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disabled people go to school, work, play, have relationships</li> <li>• Disabled people do these activities in communities</li> <li>• Society has a responsibility to provide accommodations and maximize accessibility</li> </ul>
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(Langtree, 2010)

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ADAPT Protesters protesting inaccessible public transit  
Philadelphia, 1990

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### 1970s – 1990s: Autism Misses the Civil Rights Bus

- Autism is **rare**
- Autism is **devastating**
- Children with autism have **no chance** of a good life
- Autism is a **mystery**
- Autistic children are **abnormal**
- Autism **destroys** families

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### 1990s – 2000s: Autism is a Disease

- Find a **cure**
- **Combat** autism
- Stop the **epidemic**
- **Recover** the child
- Provide **intense therapy** as young as possible
- **Normalize** autistic individuals as much as possible
- Locate the **gene**

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**1990s – 2000s: Autism Paraphernalia & Slogans**




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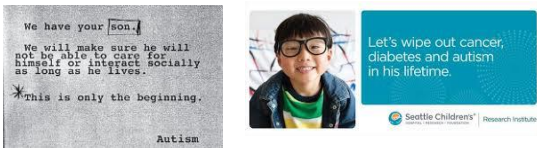
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**Not the Far Distant Past**



NYU Childmind Institute Ransom Notes Campaign  
2007 Billboard

Seattle Children's Hospital  
2013 Bus Ad

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**Compare and Contrast: Disability Civil Rights vs. Autism**

**Civil Rights**

- Disability is part of life
- Accommodate
- Accept
- Self-advocates lead
- Collective responsibility for accessible society
- Legal rights
- Authentic integration

**Autism**

- Disease
- Tragic
- Eradicate
- Fear
- Family shame
- Self-advocates doubted
- Make autistic people as normal as possible

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2000s: The "Rise" of Neurodiversity



KEEP YOUR FEET OUT OF OUR SHOES

ACCEPTANCE IS THE CURE FOR AUTISM

The greatest tragedy that can befall a child with autism is to be surrounded by adults who think it's a tragedy.

autistic pride day - june 18

there is no cure for being yourself.

See, appreciate, love Autism!

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Discussion

What happened?

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Section 4: Neurodiversity

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### Defining Neurodiversity

- Neurological: a broad range of brain-based neurological differences
- Psychological: a diagnostic category
- Philosophical: embrace and respect neurocognitive differences
- Cultural: a community that promotes neurodiversity philosophy
- Sociological: a challenge to ableist systems
- Anthropological: a human variation understood through societal lenses
- Ecological/Sociological: systems thrive from diversity
- Political: fight for some or all of the above?

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**Neurodiversity As a Social Movement**

Dr. Devon MacEachron  
Website: <https://drdevon.com>

Neurological differences like autism or ADHD

NOW THIS

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### Conclusion

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## Summary

- Autism & disability are socially constructed concepts that vary culture to culture and can change
- Society is challenging ableism that can make life harder for disabled people than being disabled!
- The autism world is catching up to that civil rights idea.
- Neurodiversity asks us to question what we are doing & why.

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## Questions

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## April 29: Coming Up!

Part 2: Disability Models, Shifts in Clinical Practice, & Being an Ally  
Is there something else we can do other than "normalize"?

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More to Explore

[Crip Camp - The Movie](#)

Simi Linton: [Invitation to Dance - An Insider's Account of Disability in 21st Century America](#)

Judy Heumann TED Talk: [The Fight For Disability Rights & Why We We're Not Done Yet](#)

Jim Sinclair: [Don't Mourn for Us](#)

Aiyana Ballin: [Clearing Up Some Misconceptions About Neurodiversity](#)

Wendy Lu: [These Things Might Not Seem Ableist But Are](#)

The Guardian: [Seven things you should stop saying and doing to disabled people](#)

Edith Sheffer: [The NAZI History Behind Asperger](#)

Gary Pisano, Harvard Business Review: [Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage](#)

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