

AUTISTIC MENTAL DISTRESS EPISTEMIC AND HERMENEUTIC INJUSTICES WITH A DOSAGE OF DISBELIEF

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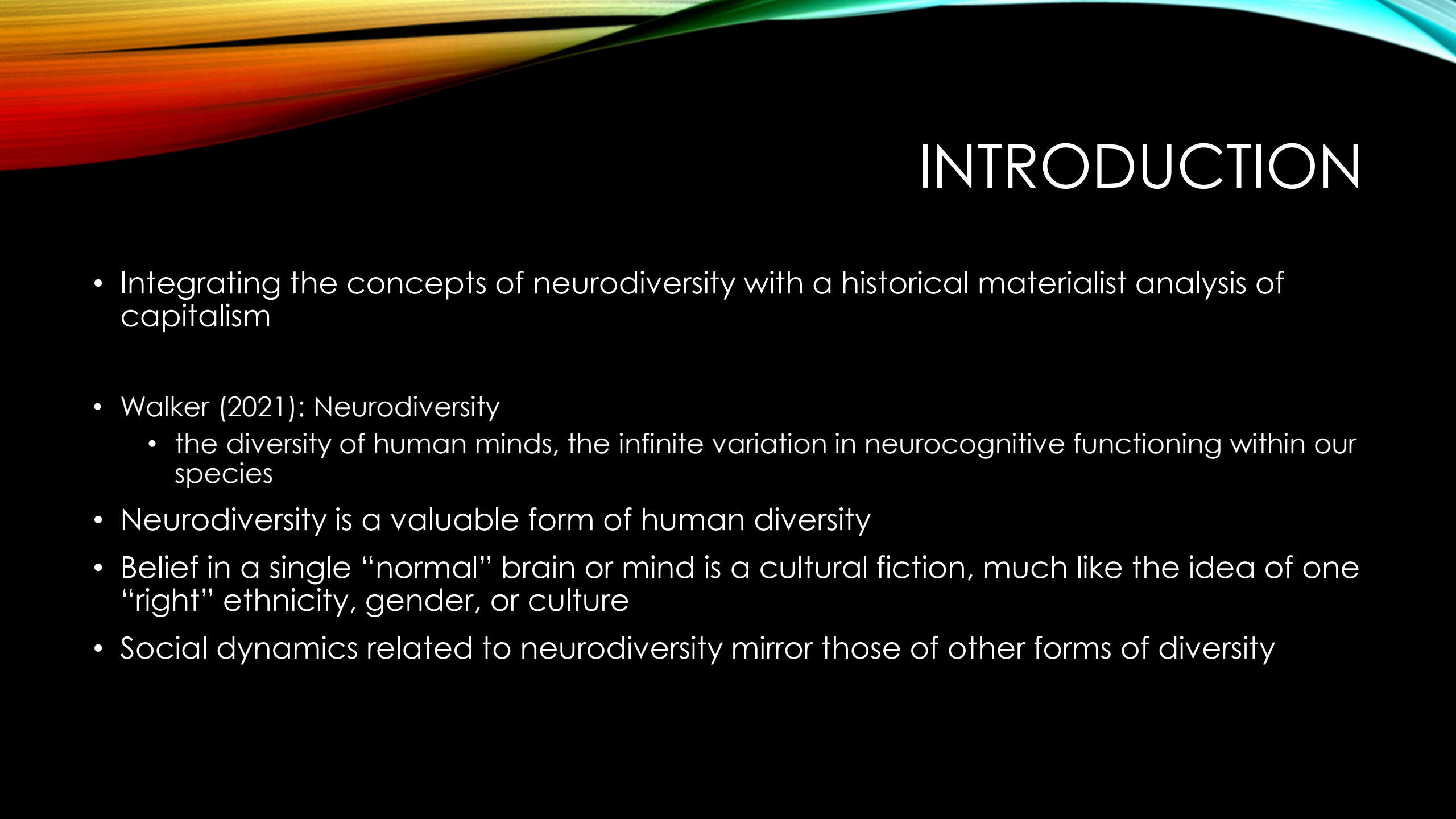
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INTRODUCTION

- The Nature and Reality of Autistic People
 - Difference
- Neurodiversity
- The Spontaneous Social World and being Autistic
 - Autistic lives are context: psycho-emotional disablement (psychological and emotional effects of discrimination, prejudice and exclusion, Reeve, 2002)
- Autistic people face greater mental distress and worse quality of life
- Nonetheless, autistic neurology is different
 - Thus, they will experience the world differently, which could be counter to the normative



INTRODUCTION

- Integrating the concepts of neurodiversity with a historical materialist analysis of capitalism
- Walker (2021): Neurodiversity
 - the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species
- Neurodiversity is a valuable form of human diversity
- Belief in a single “normal” brain or mind is a cultural fiction, much like the idea of one “right” ethnicity, gender, or culture
- Social dynamics related to neurodiversity mirror those of other forms of diversity

INTRODUCTION

- By analysing the economic conditions and material realities that shape societal structures and ideologies
 - We may determine how capitalism has historically constructed and enforced norms around mental functioning
- Furthermore –
 - Chapman (2023) reconceptualises the Marxist idea of alienation
 - Linking it not only to labour but also to enforced cognitive norms
- Neurodivergent individuals experience alienation
 - Both through their separation from labour and through societal expectations of cognitive conformity



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INTRODUCTION

- Admittedly, I will focus more on the cognitive conformity today
 - However, I believe understanding the separation from labour is implicit within this
 - i.e., structures and systems behind conformity, and inform conformity
- I will not explore the extractivism of modern post-Fordist societies
 - In relation to using the strengths of autistic people
 - Although, one point comes close



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MILTON (2025) PSYCH-PLAINING

Psych-plaining and Invalidation (Milton, 2025)

Psychological explanations are used to dismiss or invalidate individuals' experiences and emotions

Individuals' distress are minimised

- By attributing them solely to psychological factors

Milton (2025) emphasises the point that the psychiatric and psychological narratives impede

- Understanding autistic trauma and mental distress

Invalidation of autistic experience



YOUNG (2004) 5 FACES OF OPPRESSION

- The 5 faces of oppression relate to power
- Each represents different ways in which power can be used to oppress individuals or groups
- 1. Exploitation
- This involves using people's labour to produce profit while not compensating them fairly
- Inter-personal victimisation (rather than social class)
 - Financial abuse (Douglas & Sedgewick, 2024; Pellicano et al., 2024)
 - Pearson et al. (2022) found familial abuse throughout autistic lives
- However, there is individual cost of being dis-abled by society (Bowley & Jordan, 2024; Cai et al., 2024)

YOUNG (2004) 5 FACES OF OPPRESSION

- 2. Marginalisation
 - This occurs when people are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in society
 - E.g., Autists are un- or under-employed
 - The systemic barriers to gaining meaningful employment
 - Sustaining meaningful employment
 - Including Access to Work issues – delays dis-abling autistics
- 3. Powerlessness
 - This face of oppression refers to the lack of authority, status, and sense of self
 - Autistics are marginalised
 - Even in places of 'authority', i.e., autistic academics (Martin, 2017)
 - Pathological narrative contributes to stigma
 - Embodying the stigma – self-stigma

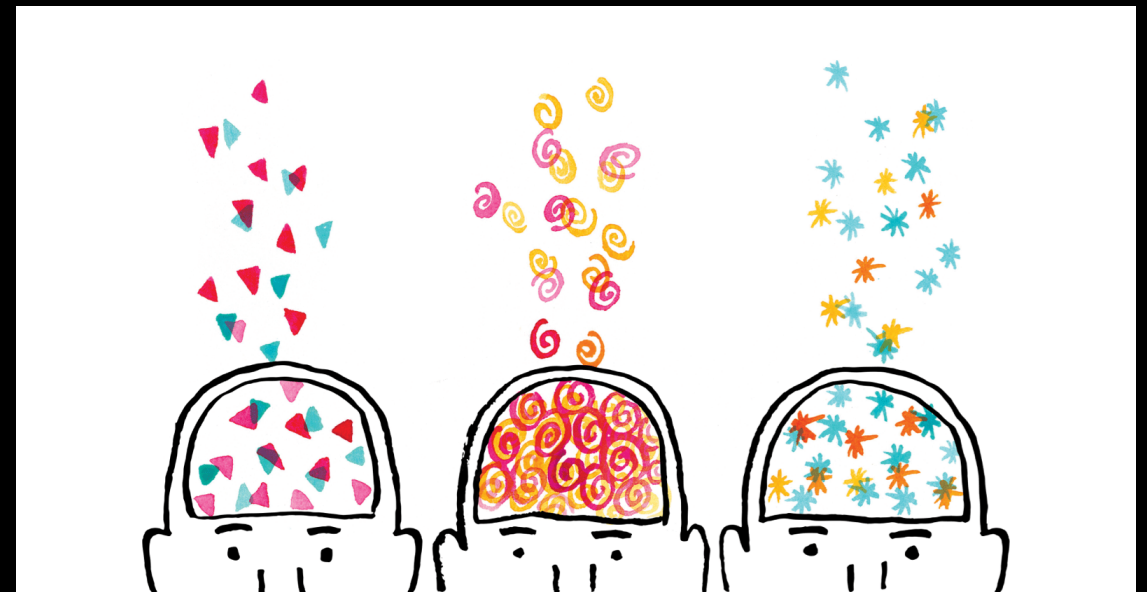
YOUNG (2004) 5 FACES OF OPPRESSION

- 4. Cultural Imperialism
 - This involves the dominant culture imposing its norms, values, and beliefs on other cultures
 - Leading to the marginalisation and devaluation of those cultures
 - The neuro-normative culture is one of norms, values, and beliefs, other to autistic cultures
 - (Dekker, 1999)
- 5. Violence
 - This includes physical violence and the threat of violence
 - Which serves to instil fear and maintain control over oppressed groups
 - With this, we can consider:
 - Neo-eugenics
 - USA registry of autistics!
 - Inter-personal victimisation
 - Care home abuse
 - MH Unit Restraint



INDIVIDUAL OR WIDER?

- Blame the victim ideology (Ryan, 1976)
 - Seems central to the 5 faces and psych-plaining
- Reducing the experiences of autistics to their psychological or neurological 'deficits'
 - Seems at-odds with the social suffering and adversity potentially experienced
- (But) Various autistics are socialised in (familial or local) environments affording them positive experiences



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UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND ADVERSITIES IN THEIR DAILY LIVES

- Consider the structures and systems of the social world:
 - Job interviews and norms
 - Supermarkets and sensory overload
 - Networking and social norms and values
- Deviance marked as a 'blemished' identity (term from Goffman, 1962)
- Identity congruency impacts well-being (e.g., Dhar et al., 2010; Water & Fivush, 2015)
- Many 'autism support schemes' for children and young people focus on neuro-normativity and behaviour
 - Which can undermine individuals, restrict authentic self-expression, and overlook the effects of a hostile environment on autistic well-being
 - McGreevy et al. (2025)
- I.e., thinking of lived experience (link)

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY (KELLY, 1955)

- Individuals interpret the world through a unique set of personal constructs
 - Which are bipolar dimensions of meaning (e.g., happy-sad, strong-weak)
- These constructs help individuals make sense of their experiences and predict future events **
- According to psychologist George Kelly
 - It is our individualised cognitive frameworks that shape who we are, how we perceive the world, and how we relate to one another
- Personal Construct Theory related to meaning-making
 - By integrating Personal Construct Theory
 - Power-Threat Meaning Framework highlights the importance of personal meaning-making
 - In understanding and addressing mental distress
 - Emphasising that individuals' responses to power and threats are shaped by their unique constructs and experiences

AUTISTIC TRAUMA

- Trauma is experienced differently by each individual (Ng-Cordell et al., 2022)
 - Arises not only from the specific event or circumstance
 - But also from how a person perceives and manages that experience
- Reactions to trauma can vary significantly, reflecting a broad spectrum of emotional and interpersonal responses
- Proposed transactional relationship with being autistic and experiencing trauma
 - (Haruvi-Lamdan et al., 2018, 2020; Kerns et al., 2015; Rumball et al., 2021)
- What constitutes a traumatic event, and the reaction to it
 - Varies across autistic and non-autistic individuals
 - (Haruvi-Lamdan et al., 2018; Kerns et al., 2015; Kildahl et al., 2020a, 2020b; Rumball, 2019)

DISBELIEF OF AUTISTIC NARRATIVES

- Disbelief of autistic everyday experiences of adversity can lead to distress and overwhelm
 - (Lewis and Stevens, 2023; McQuaid et al., 2022; Merrington et al., 2024; Petty et al., 2024)
- Develop from this insight
 - Away from discourse about increased mental distress being merely about everyday stress (e.g., McGorry et al. 2024; Hagopian, 2025)
 - Due to being a particularly harmful narrative, resulting in epistemic injustice
- Autistic people face a distinctive form of epistemic injustice already
 - Denied access to epistemic resources - cognitively normative ways of being, knowing, and existing
 - Due to neuronormativity and neurotypical ignorance
 - (Catala et al., 2021)

HERMENEUTIC INJUSTICES

- Miranda Fricker (2013) introduced the concept of hermeneutic injustice as a subtype of epistemic injustice
 - Highlighting the socially discriminatory barriers to self-understanding
- Autistic autobiography - regarding their personal accounts of being autistic
 - (Dinishak, 2021)
- Recognising hermeneutical injustice can deepen our understanding of the risks involved
 - In using interpretive frameworks for autistic experiences
 - Neglect the input of autistic individuals in shaping language and concepts
 - Truly represent their realities
 - (Dinishak, 2021)

DISBELIEF OF AUTISTIC NARRATIVES

2

- Autistic individuals are already marginalized and misunderstood by society (Botha et al., 2022)
 - And furthering this could be damaging
- By highlighting the importance of listening to and valuing the narratives of autistic individuals
 - This approach seeks to challenge and dismantle these harmful practices



DISBELIEF OF AUTISTIC NARRATIVES

3

- Their narratives, whether 'accurate' or not, remain impactful and reflect their lived experiences
 - The adversities stemming from pathological conceptualisations
 - Which portray autistic individuals as devalued and unproductive citizens
 - Are common experiences
 - (e.g., Branton et al., 2023; Grinker, 2020)
- These conceptualisations contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of autistic individuals, further exacerbating their social suffering
- Oddly – link to decoloniality



RESPONSES

- As suggested in McGreevy et al. (2025) the lifeworld-led model of care by Todres et al. emphasises an experience-sensitive framework for mental health practitioners
 - By integrating eight dimensions of care
- This neuroinclusive approach fosters a culture of respect, prioritises personalised care through collaborative decision-making, and supports well-being
 - From an existential, humanistic perspective that embraces autistic diversity
- A shift toward neurodivergence-affirming support is essential for practitioners to improve outcomes for autistic individuals' mental distress
 - Throughout their lives, impacting research, clinical, and educational practices



CONCLUSION

- Paint a theoretical tapestry of the landscape for autistic people and their mental distress
 - Hope to further this with future research and collaborations
- Autistic individuals experience societal expectations of cognitive conformity impinging on their lives
 - Centralises the conceptualisation and societal response to autistic people
- Positioned psych-plainings as an emphasis that the psychiatric and psychological narratives impede understanding of autistic trauma and mental distress, and invalidate the autistic experience
 - Epistemic and hermeneutic injustice
- Employed Young's 5 faces of oppression and Kelly's Personal Construct Theory to illustrate the importance of listening to the autistic experience with belief

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

- If you know where to get funding to develop this work – tell me, please
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