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Anne Hansen

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Culture is the interaction between an individual and their identity. This exchange allows for communities to form; groups finding comfort through shared beliefs and experiences. At the very least, most cultures are recognized by others, even if they aren't respected. However the Neurodivergent¹ community –a camaraderie of those with Neurodevelopmental Disorders²– hasn't been as fortunate. Instead of recognizing these conditions –such as Autism, ADHD, Down-Syndrome, Dyslexia, and Dyscalculia– as elements of an individual's identity, Neurotypicals³ tend to view them as curable diseases that need to be eradicated from society. In addition, neurodivergent individuals are forced to grasp at straws, greatly simplifying their experience in an attempt to make it more digestible. Despite incisive efforts to increase empathy and understanding, society's lack of interest in the perspective and wellbeing of neurodivergent individuals forces the contrary. Indifference to the neurodivergent experience diminishes respect for the community's language, increases misrepresentation in media, and escalates harmful behavior –eugenics⁴ and brutality– towards those with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Finding the words to describe the neurodivergent experience is difficult, even more so when nobody wants to listen. However one

¹**Neurodivergent** - differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal; not neurotypical. (Oxford Languages)

²**Neurodevelopmental Disorders** - disabilities in the functioning of the brain that affect [an individual's behavior], memory or ability to learn (World Health Organization)

³**Neurotypical** - not affected with a developmental disorder and especially autism spectrum disorder : exhibiting or characteristic of typical neurological development (Merriam-Webster)

⁴**Eugenics** - the selection of desired heritable characteristics in order to improve future generations, typically in reference to humans (Encyclopedia Britannica)

analogy has managed to make some headway: The Spoon Theory. Originally created by Christine Miserandino –an advocate for lupus⁵ patients– to describe chronic pain, the Spoon Theory compares the amount of energy a person has to a fixed number of spoons. Each task performed takes a spoon: brushing your teeth, taking a shower and washing the dishes. Disabled individuals simply have less spoons at their disposal, forcing them to perform fewer tasks per day. Since its creation, this analogy has become widely used to not only describe living with physical disabilities, but mental ones too. Although this analogy has helped to spread word about the neurodivergent experience, its oversimplified nature has contributed to the overall infantilization of the community. People already think of neurodivergent individuals as juvenile and less developed. Being forced to dumb-down our experience only further pushes this narrative. However verbal communication is not the only facet of neurodivergent language that has been stifled.

Growing up with ADHD, experiencing frequent motor tics⁶ and sensory overload⁷, I was constantly shamed by others for my disability, particularly my teachers and peers. One of the first major instances of ableism⁸ I experienced was in the first grade, when my teacher would take away my chair everyday, because I couldn't stop rocking back in it. Of course, the situation would be different if she was doing it solely for my safety, but she would shame me in front of my peers for not being able to stop and most of the time, would not let me kneel or sit down. I was already experiencing ostracization -both socially and academically- so I began using rocking as a stimming⁹ behavior –a way to self-soothe. I didn't understand how to stop, thus throwing me in a cycle of punishment and shame. The situation could have been properly resolved if she opened a dialogue with my parents after noticing that negative reinforcement wasn't making me any safer. This could have resulted in me receiving treatment, directing me to more helpful stimming behaviors. In the

⁵**Lupus** - a chronic (long-term) disease that can cause inflammation and pain in any part of [the] body. (Lupus Foundation of America)

⁶**Motor Tics** - fast, repetitive muscle movements that result in sudden and difficult to control body jolts or sounds (National Health Service)

⁷**Sensory Overload** - when [an individual gets] more input from [their] five senses than [their] brain can sort through and process (Kathryn Watson, Dillon Browne, Ph.D., Healthline)

⁸**Ableism** - a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities (Leah Smith, Center for Disability Rights)

⁹**Stimming** - behavior consisting of repetitive actions or movements of a type that may be displayed by people with developmental disorders; self-stimulation (Oxford Languages)

end, I wouldn't receive this treatment until my senior year of high school, resulting in me having to adapt by masking my stimming, to make neurotypical people around me more comfortable. Because of the way the educational system was designed, this experience is common amongst the neurodivergent community, forcing many who stim or tic—something that is an integral part of our body language—to censor themselves and their behavior, in order to have a chance of being respected.

Even when the rare chance for someone to share their experience arises, neurotypical voices often drown out those of the community, making broad assumptions about the neurodivergent experience, misrepresenting us from the outside perspective. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in Media, as any representation of autism, ADHD, and other developmental disorders is often written and portrayed by someone who is neurotypical. Some of the most blaring, recent examples of this misrepresentation include *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Good Doctor*, and the movie *Music* by Sia. All three of these examples have neurotypical actors portray autistic individuals, inadvertently having them mock neurodivergent behavior, however *Music* is the most recent and arguably most harmful example. Not only was the movie written by Sia, who is neurotypical, but the main character was played by Maddie Ziegler, who also doesn't have any diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders. The character was originally slated to be played by an autistic individual, but that person was not able to continue as they were bombarded with ableist working conditions. Instead of listening to the autistic community, who suggested adjusting the environment on set so it would be able to support an autistic actor, Sia chose to put a neurotypical individual in their place, because it was simply easier than properly portraying the disorder. Furthermore, the movie went on to encourage a type of violent restraint used on autistic individuals during meltdowns¹⁰, that often can be lethal. Despite this harmful rhetoric and the intense backlash from the autistic and broader neurodivergent community, the movie was still nominated for two Golden Globes. In this way, even when the neurodivergent community is given the chance to speak, it often isn't heard.

It's not only the misrepresentation and mocking that harms the

¹⁰**Emotional meltdown** - result of severe, overwhelming emotional distress. Symptoms can range from uncontrollable crying and weeping, or uncontrollable rage. It can also be more prolonged and lead to depression, severe anxiety, and can cause... moods to swing wildly.

neurodivergent community, but multiple forms of physical harm as well, such as eugenics and police brutality. In the case of eugenics, corrupt charities, like autism speaks, promote the elimination of neurodivergent behavior, often searching for some type of cure, screening for the disorder before birth, and advocating for those who have the disorder to avoid having biological children. The organization is the largest and most popular, despite only having only one autistic individual on the board of 29. Very little of the donations to the charity go towards services for autistic people in the first place, approximately four cents per dollar. The organization also portrays autism as a horror that plagues parents, framing autistic children as troubled and burdensome, using a puzzle piece as their logo to insinuate that they are missing something or broken. On the other hand, neurodivergent individuals also experience heightened rates of police brutality due to the lack of proper police training on meltdown assistance. Most of the time they will use excessive force on individuals who display neurodivergent characteristics, resulting in serious injury or even death. In 2016, half of the victims of police killings had a mental disorder. Because of this and the heightened rates of brutality against the black community, black disabled individuals are one of the groups who are at the highest risk, with more than half of disabled black people being arrested by the age of 28, however these voices are often the least heard and respected in the community.

If the neurodivergent experience continues to be ignored, the culture will remain suppressed and individuals within it will be forced to continue to mask their identity and symptoms, despite their disabilities being an integral part of themselves. However, if we strive to amplify neurodivergent voices, actively listening to their needs and grievances, we can improve the quality of life of those with neurological developmental disorders. Maybe this way, we can save some of the "spoons" for ourselves.

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