

Neurodiversity

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Last year I joined the Stanford University interest group on Neurodiversity. This week, my research group officially started a collaboration with Humber University in Canada. Neurodiversity - autism - is a subject that I know from both sides, both as an experienced expert and as an expert. Diversity is very close to my heart.

Diversity is at stake! Every day species disappear from the planet, biodiversity decreases continuously. Also cultural diversity is at stake. Every year, there are natural languages that are no longer spoken. At the same time, however, with regard to people we speak more and more of neurodiversity. In other words, in addition to the disappearance of bio- and cultural diversity, we actually see an increase in neurodiversity. However, appearance is deceiving, reality is quite different.

People are also becoming more global, there is a regression towards mediocrity. The "standard" citizen of the world can be called neurotypical. In contrast is neurodiversity. A person is called Neurodiverse if (s)he does not fit the general picture of the world citizen who has become independent of where (s)he lives or what language (s)he speaks. We're all globalized persons, everywhere in the world we have access to social media such as Facebook and TikTok, we're watching the same Netflix series and we dream of the same fashion articles. However, the running "in the loop" that our globalized technological world generates isn't just as easy for every type of person. Neurodiverse persons don't (completely) fit in this picture. With the increase in the global scale, so did neurodiversity. Why?

In the loop

To keep a car on the road, the driver must think in terms of the dynamics of wheels, engines, roads and traffic signs. In other words, man's own organic "freedom" to run, jump, and dance or even look around must be put aside to keep the car safely in the system. To drive safely, we are "in-the-loop (ITL)" of the machinations of the system. With the increase in technology, we have placed our entire living environment ITL, including ourselves. This results in a paradoxical situation, which we are now in the middle of. All over the world we admire the same cultural expressions, the same pictures, fashion, stars and stories. It makes it easy to talk to each other. More or less we speak only one world language, about the same topics shared in the world (social) media, with a same global vision generating dichotomies regarding what is news and what is fake news, information or disinformation.

Upscaling has a real downside, with a high price: declining diversity, global environmental and climate problems, and many people who cannot keep up with ITL. The number of diagnoses in psychodiagnostics has tripled in the past five decades. It's time to stand up for neurodiversity.

I hate the D in ASD: disorder. In a Dutch newspaper I read that healing practices related to homosexuality and other forms of sexual identity (trans, bi, etc.) will become punishable. Will trying to cure a neurodiverse person from autism become punishable too? In terms of accepting the sometimes amazing talents that neurodiverse people may exhibit, there's still a long way to go, to let them develop their uniqueness from an early age.

Greta Thunberg had quite successful parents, like most successful people on the spectrum! Large-scale is about everything and everyone in general instead of someone in his or her uniqueness in particular. That is why it contributes to a decrease in diversity and individuality. A paradox again, talking about neurodiversity should not be aimed at reducing that very same diversity. Instead, it should help to accept diversity, and to help people on the spectrum learn to fully exploit their unique strengths and potential. The paradox brings us together worldwide, which is wonderful, to make way for neurodiversity. Not only a collaboration about people on the spectrum, but especially a collaboration with people on the spectrum. That's why I'm involved!