Neurodiversity in the Field

Advanced Field Instructor Training

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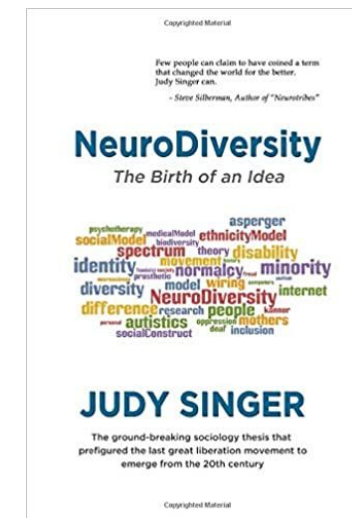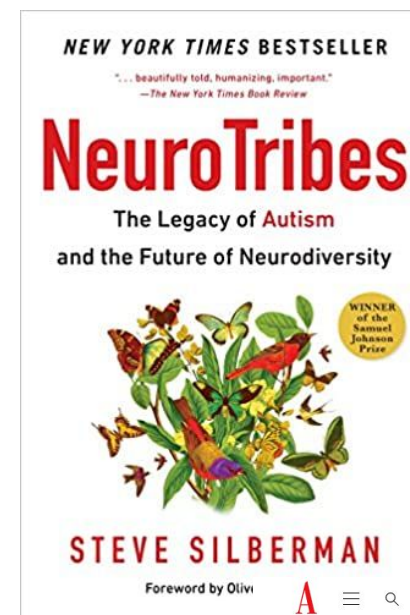March 6, 2024

NEURODIVERSITY**MATTERS**

Key points

- Why neurodiversity matters in social work – and social work placements

- Barriers faced by neurodivergent social workers and social work students

- Principles for neurodiversity-affirming field instruction

- Small group discussion

What is neurodiversity?

- Attributed to Judy Singer & Harvey Blume in 1998
- Increasing popularity and recognition in recent years (e.g. Silberman, 2016)

- ND challenges the dominant beliefs that many human differences and experiences are "pathological" or that they should be "fixed"

- Close links to Autistic activism, disability rights, and disability justice movements
- Mostly developed in and through communities, not professions

Few people can claim to have coined a term
that changed the world for the better.
Judy Singer can.
– Steve Silberman, Author of "Neurotribes"

NeuroDiversity
The Birth of an Idea

JUDY SINGER

The ground-breaking sociology thesis that
prefigured the last great liberation movement to
emerge from the 20th century

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"… beautifully told, humanizing, important."
—The New York Times Book Review

NeuroTribes
The Legacy of Autism
and the Future of Neurodiversity

WINNER
of the
Samuel
Johnson
Prize

STEVE SILBERMAN

Foreword by Oliv[…]

A ≡ Q Popular Latest   *The Atlantic*

TECHNOLOGY
Neurodiversity
On the neurological underpinnings of geekdom.
HARVEY BLUME   SEPTEMBER 1998 ISSUE

If you've happened across Jon Katz's columns on "Geek
Force" in recent editions of *HotWired*, you're likely to have
read pronouncements like the following: "The idea of geek
pride [is] stirring, ascending. The rise of the geeks has an
epic feeling." As Katz describes them, geeks are nerds plus modems; they have the nerd's

What does neurodiversity challenge?

- Calls for greater decision-making from ND-identified people and communities – often called "neurodivergent"

- Critiques functioning labels and interventions that "normalize"

- Advocates for people to have their support needs met and set their own goals

- Promotes anti-oppressive social change and disability justice
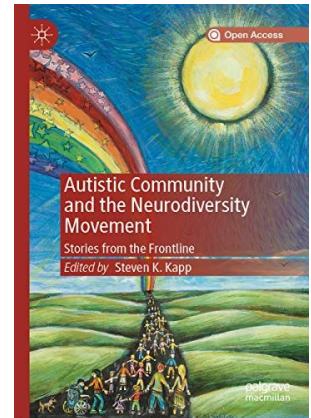
Why talk about neurodiversity?

- All of us are different from each other in the ways that we think, sense, respond, communicate, and act. Pretending otherwise is going to cause problems and impose barriers, in education and in practice.

- People who are neurodivergent – people whose ways of thinking, sensing, responding, communicating, and act are notably different from the "typical" – face many forms of oppression. As social workers, we should care about neurodiversity as a matter of social justice.

- Many of the people we care about and work with want us to know more about neurodiversity.

- Many of us are neurodivergent. Many of our students are neurodivergent. Sometimes we have learned not to talk about it.

- But most importantly...

We need neurodivergent social work students more than they need us.

Yup. This isn't just about being "nice".

Our field desperately needs the ideas, experiences, and approaches that neurodivergent social work students can bring.

We need to stop pushing them out.

"Neurodiversity Matters" research project

- Funded by a SSHRC Insight Development Grant, 2019-2022; UW SSHRC Exchange Grant 2022; Renison University College Research Grants 2018, 2022, 2023

- Two branches of the research

    1. Discourse analysis

    - Critical examination of academic publications on neurodiversity
        - livingstone, Gibson, Douglas, Leo, & Gruson-Wood (2023). Weighing in: academic writers on neurodiversity. *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice.*

    2. Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005)

    - Observations of 7 public, online events

    - Interviews with 60 people who had thoughts to share about neurodiversity

People who care about ND can't be restricted to just one group.

60 Participants

_____4

4 identified with neurodiversity

34 identified as service providers

31 identified as a family member of a neurodiversity-identified person

ND-identified, provider, and family member are overlapping categories – even as there are important differences between them.

Neurodiverse/ Neurodivergent identities in the study

Autistic (30 participants)

ADHD

Mad-identified

Mental illness

Dyslexia

Intellectual disability

Learning disability

Psychosis

Eating disorder

Gifted

Epilepsy

Highly Sensitive Person

Trauma

PTSD

Anxiety

Depression

Doesn't believe in labels

Neurodiversity is widely used in some circles, and rarely heard in others

- Some people are really well-connected to discussions of neurodiversity and others are not.
  - Some people participated in the research to learn more about neurodiversity
  - Activist, online-savvy participants were most familiar with the term

- Racism, sexism, and other interlocking oppressions can shape who is able to claim neurodiversity and find community supports.

- How can we expand the number of people who know about neurodiversity? Social work education is one space for this!

Defining neurodiversity in community

I'm definitely part of a group and community that uses the term in a lot of different ways. We're very open with the term. -- Neurodiversity-identified student

Sometimes, within the community, there are debates. They'll say,
"No, I'm Mad; I'm not neurodivergent." Or people will say, "No, Mad people aren't neurodivergent," who themselves aren't Mad, and I'll be like, okay, well, I'm neurodivergent and Mad. -- Neurodiversity-identified SSW student

I went online and I started doing some research and I got lucky in that I found some blogs by autistic people pretty quickly, so I was sort of able to get to a point where I thought, oh, okay, neurodiversity, thinking/acting differently, doing things differently, that's okay, that's a normal part of the human experience. -- Neurodiversity-identified student

Finding: Systems and practices need to change

- Participants pointed to struggle and trauma being caused by dominant beliefs and practices
    - Diagnostic criteria, systems, stereotypical representations...
- People describe ableist barriers in employment that require them to mask neurodivergence or even leave workplaces
- Education was a central area where people described ableism, violence, confusion, inaccessibility, and hostility
- Social services were seen as pushing out the ideas and contributions of ND people, or forcing them to mask their differences

Field education combines employment, education, and social services – we can expect this to be a tough space for many neurodivergent students.

And at the same time, communities want neurodiverse providers!

Lack of provider education

Interviewer: Have you heard service providers using this [neurodiversity] language?

Speaker: Not really, no. I do notice a trend of a service provider only using it because they end up having a neurodivergent client for the first time ever. Basically, this client would end up teaching them.

-- Neurodiversity-identified individual

Social change is needed

I feel that, generally, the public looks at autism as almost like a pitiable, taboo thing to have… – all of this insecurity about what starts it ... It has to be "why are they like that?", where, honestly, they need to relax and just realize we're everywhere. Whether they like it or not, we are everywhere. I would like to even take a tally. Maybe we even outnumber neurotypicals. Who knows?

…I don't know, but we've always been here. It's always been a thing… It's just been so focused on this negative and this taboo and this pitiable thing. It's just so much more than that. It just needs to be broadened and normalized. Normalize it, I think, would be the key takeaway. That would be my two cents.

-- Neurodiversity-identified service provider

Building on findings

Neurodiversity: 10 Tips for Service Providers – Infographic shared with you and also available at

https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/neurodiversity-matters

Article in the International Journal of Disability and Social Justice, plus others under review – stay tuned...

For links to related papers and presentations, see
https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/presentations

Potential barriers for neurodivergent placement students

- There may be few – or no – openly neurodivergent mentors.

- Students may regularly encounter ableist assumptions and beliefs.

- Pressures in social work placements overlap with but extend beyond what students experience in the classroom.

  ○ There are many more hours at a time than students are usually required to be "on" than in classroom settings, and there might be little privacy.

- Sometimes "how things have to be done" is very set and rigid and there might be little time to discuss or challenge this.

  ○ Students are regularly put into new situations and then judged for how they respond – often in comparison with the experiences of the field instructor.

More barriers

- There are often very normative (neurotypical) and unspoken expectations of behaviour and communication.
  - Ex: eye contact, volume/pace of speech, productivity

- Students usually have very little control of their learning/practice environment (e.g. noise, lighting, space) and few supports around things that other people assume are "easy" (e.g. keeping track of time, taking notes in meetings).

- Ideas of "professionalism" are often more about how people appear and less about what they do – enforcing neurotypical and ableist beliefs.

And more barriers

- Field instructors can feel overloaded and under surveillance, which can make them reluctant to consider other ways of teaching and practicing.

- Disclosing disability, including neurodivergence, can be risky – especially for people who are already facing other barriers. So field instructors and students might not even share their experiences around neurodiversity.
  - This is why people often "mask" or "camouflage" their neurodivergence

What about diagnoses?

- Who people are is always multidimensional – a diagnosis is not usually enough to know what people are good at or where they need additional support.

- You are not entitled to know people's diagnoses as a field instructor.

- You do need to offer the accommodations that people require wherever possible.

- Sometimes diagnoses help people anticipate and explain what supports will be helpful.

- Sometimes people with the same diagnosis have really different support needs.

- Many people can't get access to diagnosis at all.

Principles of neurodiversity-affirming field instruction

- These are great for working with all students!

- Be relational.
  - Assume that students are individuals who need different kinds of instruction, and that learning goes both ways.
  - Share details about how the placement is structured during the interview.
  - Ask how they learn best and what they need support with. Respond.
  - Keep checking in and encourage ongoing conversation.

Principles of neurodiversity-affirming field instruction

- Recognize individual strengths and value people's contributions.

  - Appreciate genuine strengths and skills from lived experience.

  - And avoid assuming that all neurodivergent people have the same strengths!

- Be flexible wherever possible.

  - Assume that there are many different ways to do most things, and that different clients/ groups/ communities will appreciate the variety of approaches.

Principles of neurodiversity-affirming field instruction

- Think of creative ways to support a student if they are struggling in learning a skill.
  - If one way teaching isn't working, trying another way.
- Encourage discussions of disability and neurodiversity across all teams.
  - Discuss these as a part of everyday life, not something to be nervous or ashamed about.

Principles of neurodiversity-affirming field instruction

- Support neurodiversity in your own workplace.

  - Support neurodivergent colleagues. Connect students with different kinds of mentors.

- Challenge ableism.

  - Learn about neurodiversity-affirming research and activism. Be ready to change your own practice. Be critical of training and research that perpetuate pathologizing beliefs.

Neurodiversity Tips for Service Providers

Please use this in your breakout room discussions

Also available at
https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/neurodiversity-matters

Scenario 1

Scenario: Your agency has a strict attendance and lateness policy. Since beginning placement, your student has been arriving late for their shifts. They have not disclosed a formal or self-diagnosis to you and are not enrolled with accessibility services at their university.

Discussion Questions

How might you approach this situation to best support your student?

What are some policies or expectations at your agency that may be normative or rigid without needing to be? What can we do as field instructors?

Scenario 2

Scenario: It is time to complete your midterm evaluation for your student.

Discussion Questions

Looking at the Neurodiversity Tips sheet, what might you want to think about as you discuss their performance?

Field instructors can often have certain expectations of students because of external placement requirements and evaluations. How can you advocate for and support your student in the way you approach evaluations?

Scenario 3

Scenario: Your student takes a long time to hand in work you ask them to complete, and when they do so, they've put in much more effort than you thought was necessary. Although you've told them they don't need to do so much, they continue doing their work this way. They are now behind on their placement work.

Discussion

How would you address this? What strategies and resources would be helpful?

What are some assumptions you have about learning and social work practice? Where might you have learned these? Could some of these ideas about social work practice be more flexible?

Thank you!

Questions?

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This presentation draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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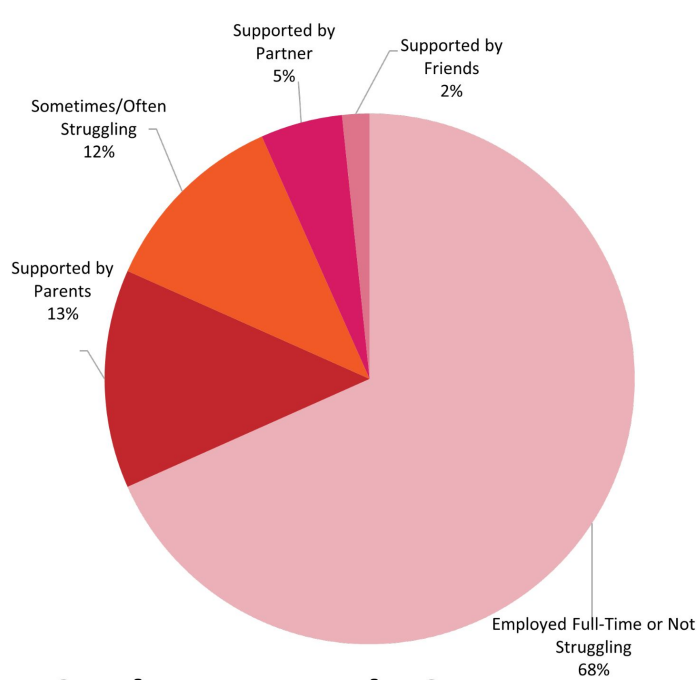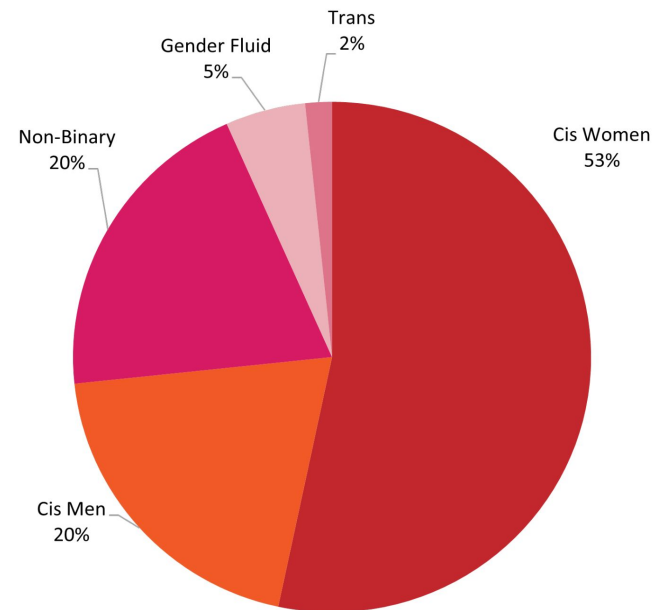
People come to these discussions from different identities and contexts
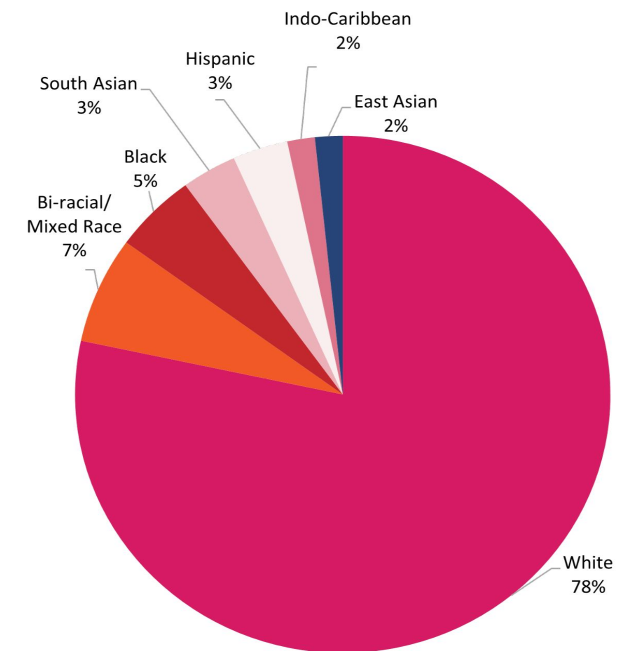
Race, gender, sexuality, class/ income, other disability identities were all important in these conversations

Socioeconomic Status

- Supported by Partner 5%
- Supported by Friends 2%
- Sometimes/Often Struggling 12%
- Supported by Parents 13%
- Employed Full-Time or Not Struggling 68%

Gender

- Trans 2%
- Gender Fluid 5%
- Non-Binary 20%
- Cis Women 53%
- Cis Men 20%

Race

- Indo-Caribbean 2%
- Hispanic 3%
- South Asian 3%
- East Asian 2%
- Black 5%
- Bi-racial/ Mixed Race 7%
- White 78%
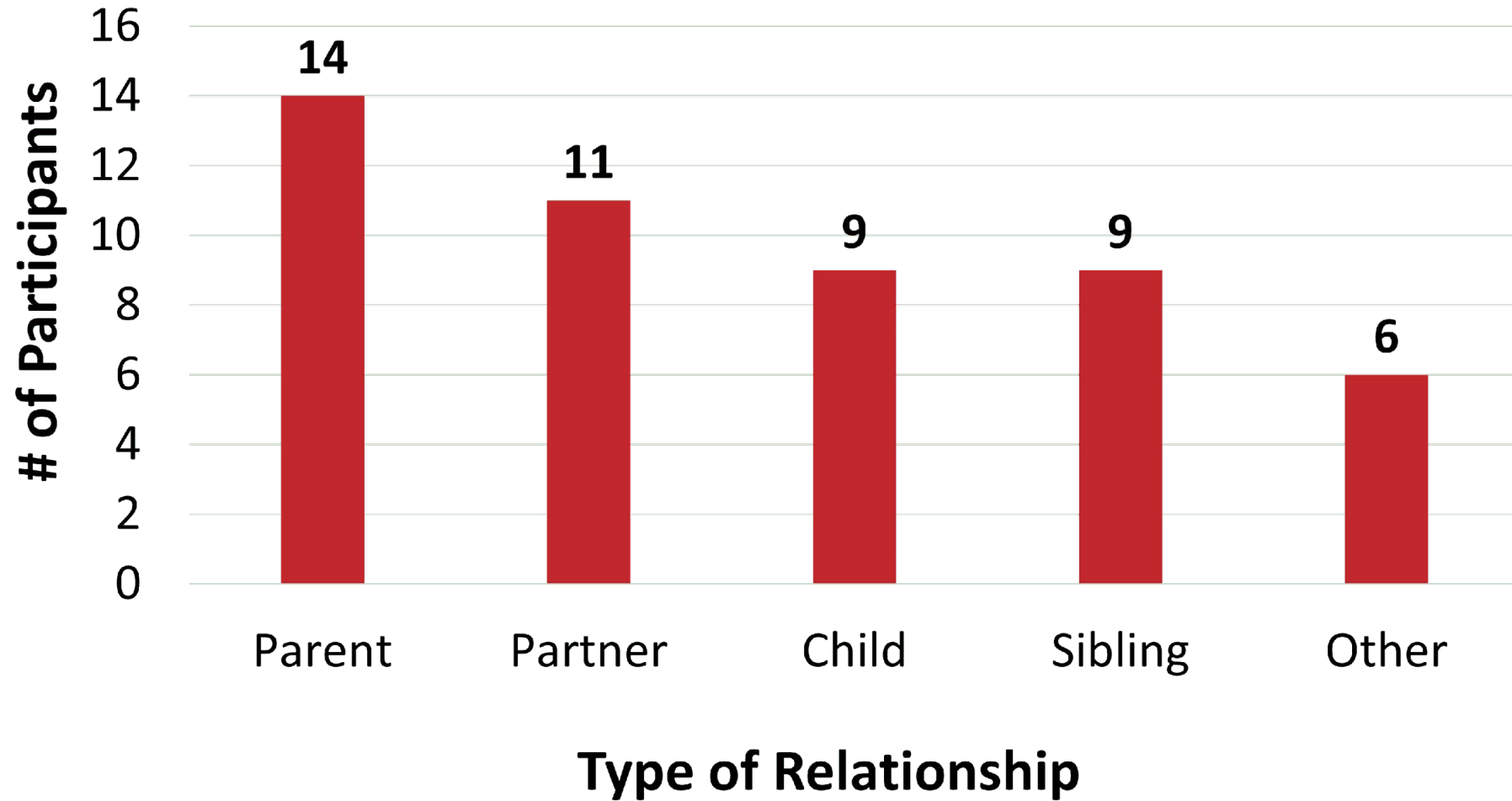
Neurodiverse Familial Relationships

Service Providers

Service Provider Roles (y-axis) vs **# of Participants** (x-axis)

Service Provider Role	# of Participants
Clergy	1
Corrections	1
Occupational Therapist	1
Tutor	1
Child and Youth Worker	2
Crisis and Support Worker	3
Other Non-Profit Work	3
Student in Social Work/SSW	6
Therapist/Counselor	7
Educator/ECE/EA	10