



Contributions of the neurodiversity approach to understanding autism: a narrative literature review

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INTRODUCTION/OBJECTIVES

Autism is a complex condition that affects a person's development from early stages of life. Over time, different conceptions, theories and approaches have been put forward in attempts to understand and treat autism.

OBJECTIVE: analyse the contributions of the neurodiversity approach to understanding autism.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES: a) to understand the conceptual, historical and social aspects of the neurodiversity movement; b) to problematise the conceptions of autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder, tensioning the medical model based on the contributions of the neurodiversity approach to psychology and education.

METHOD

A bibliographic search was carried out using Scielo and CAPES Journals databases, associating the key search words "autism" and "neurodiversity", published between 2008 and 2023 and produced by Brazilian researchers. The search resulted in 25 articles. Analysing the titles and abstracts with regard to the theme of the articles resulted in the selection of 14 articles that were read in their entirety. Finally, of these 14, one article was discarded because it did not address the topic of neurodiversity. Eventually, the search in each database was rerun in order to find new publications that had not been covered when the material was first surveyed. Four articles were then added to the corpus of this research, which brings the total number to 18.

RESULTS

NEURODIVERSITY AND AUTISM: CONCEPTUAL ASPECTS

Autism has gone through disputes over its nosological status (AYDOS, 2019; RIOS; ANDRADA, 2015). It left the psychoanalytic core, was appropriated by neurological and behavioural perspectives, until it came to be considered a neurodevelopmental disorder, called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ORTEGA, 2009). In DSM-5-TR, ASD is defined as a pattern of persistent impairment in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (APA, 2023). On the other hand, according to the social model of disability, disability is a "socially constructed disadvantage", criticising the aim of a cure (RIOS; ANDRADA, 2015). This new concept argues that autism is a natural variation of the human being and a disability at the same time, due to the difficulty of fitting into a society organised for neurotypicals.

Getting to a similar idea, in 1999, sociologist J. Singer called neurodiversity the atypical neurological connection to be considered a different expression of existence (ORTEGA, 2009), such as autism. Then, a new perspective over this neurodivergence was established. As a movement, it got strengthened by the advances of feminist movements and is based on the social model of disability, from the Disability Studies (SILVA; GESSER; NUERNBERG, 2019), eventually having autistic protagonism.

RESULTS

AUTISM AND ASD: MEDICAL MODEL VERSUS NEURODIVERSITY

After A. Comte used "normal" for the typical processes of human beings, a functioning standard for the species was established/accepted. Whatever deviated from it, came to be considered pathological (WUO et. al, 2019; ARAUJO et. al, 2023), like what we know as disabilities. Called the "personal tragedy" model, the medical model reinforces disability as inherent in the field of illness or its consequences (SILVA; GESSER; NUERNBERG, 2020). This view has not only led to treating people for their so-called deficits, referencing their development by a standard that may never be achieved (RIOS; ANDRADA, 2015) but also to the over-medicalisation of individuals in order to "correct" their functioning and highlighted a stance and language focused on the error and defect that must be corrected (WUO; BRITO, 2023). This attitudes culminated on mischaracterisation of the autistic person's experience in society (NICOLAU; ASSIS, 2023). That's why neurodiversity with its SMD based view appears as an humanising alternative towards people with disabilities.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF NEURODIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE TO PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Some authors have presented important contributions regarding the concept revolution that neurodiversity has caused in psychology and education. A common thread between both areas is the centrality of the subject in the construction of their processes, whether health or educational. Then, professional interventions can only be carried out in accordance with the individual, based on what makes sense, is possible and is not disrespectful to them. Therefore, we can think that in order to establish inclusion and respect, the guiding principle is not equality, but fairness. If a neurotypical person enjoys opportunities that fit within their potential and limitations, why can't a neuroatypical person?

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Results show how neurodiversity has broken paradigms by defending a different way of existing. The difficulties faced by autistic people result from discrepancies between the needs of the individuals and the resources offered by the environment, socially constructing disability. We also see how the medical model sustains the maintenance of this subject-environment deficit relationship, normalising bodies and marginalising groups of people who differ from the norm.

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