

What is the Neurodiversity Paradigm?



Exploring Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Paradigms Through
Autism Advocacy

Pt. 4 Problems with the Neurodiversity Paradigm

Philosopher Ad Absurdum

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Introduction

Society has experienced a significant shift in its attitude towards Autism from Autism as a medical disorder to Autism as a part of the Neurodiversity Paradigm. Such attitudes have seen

the abandonment of adverts that argue that Autism ‘kidnaps’ children to celebrities embracing their identity. However, the media has paid little attention to what is meant by a ‘paradigm’. It is often used incorrectly and explained as merely a set of assumptions. In reality, paradigm refers to a particular philosophical understanding of how science works that was developed by Thomas Kuhn. A particular understanding which may lead people to have problems with the Neurodiversity Paradigm as a basis for Autism advocacy.

This series explains the shift in understanding Autism through Kuhn’s theory of paradigms. [Part one](#) explored the old medical paradigm and how Autism fitted into it. Then, [Part two](#) explored how paradigm shifts occur and how Autism shifted to the Neurodiversity Paradigm. [Part three](#) explored how the Neurodiversity Paradigm has changed how Autism is understood. Finally, part four (this part) will explore how well Kuhn’s theory can accommodate the changing attitudes towards Autism.

How to Criticise the Neurodiversity Paradigm for Autism Advocacy

Before starting, there is an important distinction that needs to be made. There are many individuals who are understandably very protective of the Neurodiversity Paradigm as they feel it is the best way to fight stigma. It is difficult to envisage how the benefits of Autistic advocacy would have come about without the Neurodiversity Paradigm. For many, Autism is a central part of their identity and any form of attack is grounded in hate and stigma.

It is true that there is a significant amount of criticism that continues to perpetuate the harmful messages of the medical paradigm. An example of this is holding that Autistic individuals who subscribe to the Neurodiversity Paradigm are ‘not really Autistic’. They look at those who need to be cared for and hold that that is ‘true’ Autism and anyone else is merely seeking attention. As a result, there has been extensive argument between some parents of Autistic children and Autistic advocates. However, these arguments involve ignoring the lived experience of Autistic individuals. They deny Autistic individuals autonomy and continues to perpetuate stereotypes that Autistic individuals are incapable of defining their own community. As such, this post won’t explore these criticisms.

However, a commitment to validating the lived experience of Autistic people does not mean that the Neurodiversity Paradigm is devoid of criticism. It is possible to be critical of the Neurodiversity Paradigm without endorsing the medical paradigm. For example, the Neurodiversity Paradigm may have so far been the best philosophical tool for Autistic identity creation. Despite this, it still may not be the best one. There may be better approaches that encapsulates all Autistic individuals. This post will explore criticisms from this point of view.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm Does Not Represent the Voices of All Autistic People

One way to criticise the Neurodiversity Paradigm is to argue that the Neurodiversity Paradigm cannot accommodate all of the experiences of Autistic individuals. An example of this is Autistics who have extreme sensory processing disorders. Sensory processing disorders make Autistic individuals extremely sensitive to various sensory inputs, such as noises or bright lights. These individuals may hold that there is no world that would be able to accommodate them. All possible worlds include these intense sensory inputs. As such, they may hold that this is inherent to them and causes them suffering. They may feel that the Neurodiversity Paradigm is unable to accommodate for them and may not be the tool they want to use for advocacy.

The Incommensurability of Paradigms Doesn't Fit the Nuances of the Autistic Community

The problems above don't have to be extensively problematic. It is challenging to develop a philosophy that perfectly reflects all members of a group and thus there may be variation. However, the problem comes with the incommensurability of paradigms. As discussed in part 3 of the series, Kuhn argued that paradigms are incommensurable. They cannot be reconciled together. You cannot look at the rabbit-duck illusion and see both the rabbit and the duck at the same time. You have to change all of your assumptions each time and thus they are not compatible.

In the same way, Kuhn could insist that attitudes of the medical and Neurodiversity Paradigm are at odds and not compatible with each other. This is a position that Nick Walker (she/her) takes. She argues that you cannot hold aspects of the medical paradigm and the Neurodiversity paradigm at the same time. You can't hold that there is natural brain diversity and that an Autistic person has an inherent deficiency. It is one or the other. This can be exclusionary for those who don't hold all of the premises of the Neurodiversity Paradigm as previously discussed.

Handling Incommensurability

One way forward has been to reject the incommensurability of paradigms. An example of this is illustrated by Fern Brady in her interview with the Last Leg. She holds that she does have problems with social interaction, such as monologuing at individuals about her special subject for significant lengths of time. However, she holds that this is a weakness amongst a wider balance of strengths and weaknesses. She compares brain differences to phones – when you compare androids and apple they both have strengths and weaknesses but they are just different operating systems. She asks for neutrality towards Autism.

Such approaches are beginning to be found within disability literature. Barnes talks about it extensively in her book *The Minority Body* and Campbell and Stramondo have written a paper on it called 'The Complicated Relationship of Disability and Well-Being'. This is where disability doesn't have an overall negative or positive effect on an individual's quality of life but it depends on specific circumstances. However, these interpretations have not made it into public consciousness yet in the same way Neurodiversity has.

Is Kuhn's Theory of Paradigms the Best Foundation for Autistic Advocacy?

Kuhn's theory of paradigms creates problems for Autistic advocacy due to its antirealism.

Within philosophy there is a debate between realism and anti-realism. Some philosophers hold that science is required to accurately reflect an independent world with objective facts.

Science can be wrong or right depending on how well it reflects the 'real' world. Science thus progresses forward as more is discovered about the world. In contrast, anti-realists hold that science does not actually reflect the independent world but rather the beliefs and attitudes of scientists that carry out science. It cannot be true or false and science doesn't necessarily progress but changes depending on who is conducting the science.

There have been debates about whether Kuhn was a realist or anti-realist. Kuhn did hold that changes in paradigm were aimed at progressing science. However, he also held that terms

could refer to different things depending on the paradigm that was being used. Kuhn's theory of paradigm strongly falls into anti-realism, where the science being conducted depends more on the assumptions of the individuals conducting the science rather than how well it correlates to the external world.

There are benefits for Autistic advocates using Kuhn's antirealist approach. Without it, it is difficult to see how Autism advocates would have been able to erode the hard objectivity of the medical model. However, it also makes it difficult for Autistic advocates to be able to assert absolutes as well. If it is a matter of the assumptions being applied, what makes the assumptions of the Autistic advocates more valid than those of the medical model? Can it be more than just personal opinion? As such, Kuhn's theory of paradigms might not take Autistic advocates as far as they need to or want to go. A different concept may be better.

What Will Replace the Neurodiversity Paradigm?

Finally, if we follow Kuhn's theory to its fullest, then it must be accepted that something will eventually replace the Neurodiversity Paradigm. Kuhn held that science is always changing. For science to progress, there needs to be a change of the assumptions or paradigm. Eventually, there will be anomalies that the Neurodiversity Paradigm cannot explain. It may no longer provide puzzles and be unable to explain certain anomalies. At this point, the Neurodiversity Paradigm will have to be replaced with new assumptions that lead to new puzzles.

It is unclear at this point what will replace the Neurodiversity Paradigm. Maybe it will be the neutral approach discussed earlier in the article. We just have to wait and see.



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