Roundtable ABSTRACT

Roundtable 03: Tracing neurodiversity in the Global South: reimagining identity, community, & care

Organizer: Candidate Paras Arora, Shubha Ranganathan,

Abstract: Reframing differences in cognitive styles and abilities as being crucial to human diversity, neurodiversity is a putative framework that is being increasingly celebrated as an essential mode of claim-making and self-fashioning by disabled individuals and advocates across the world. Pushing the social model of (dis)ability towards radically equitable ends, neurodiversity does more than introduce new regimes of value in ableist contexts. It also reorganizes forms of care, connection, and rehabilitation that people with neurologically divergent dispositions routinely find themselves entangled within. Yet, the dissemination of neurodiversity as an identity and framework is often recited as a unilateral and disruptive movement from the Global North to the Global South. Our panel seeks to ethnographically trace other genealogies of neurodiversity as it continues to be increasingly reclaimed and refashioned by a range of stakeholders in the Global South. Some of the questions that the papers may interrogate include: How is neurodiversity translated into the relational worlds of disabled individuals and their communities of support and obligation? How does disability advocacy reckon with cognitive disabilities differently under the sway of neurodiversity? How might neurodiversity coexist with other frameworks of rehabilitating cognitive variance? How do neurological differences get mutually constituted and experienced alongside other matrices of power such as gender, sexuality, caste, class, ethnicity, and race? The panel seeks thematic, methodological, and geographical diversity in order to sufficiently represent the multitude of ways in which neurodiversity is lived with, aspired towards, and mobilized in everyday life across the Global South.

SESSION SCHEDULE

17.09.2025 | Slot 1| 4-0-3

Izem Aral: Reimagining Local Worlds of Neurodiversity: Self-cultivation and Terbiye at a Disability Awareness Event in Istanbul

Patrick Mckearney: Diverging from Diversity: Intellectual Disability in Kerala

Tanushree Sarkar: All in good time: Temporality, coloniality, and the construction of dis/ability in the global South

Chetan Sastry Vijayakumar: Finding 'neurodiversity' in Indian mental health spaces

Shubhangi Vaidya: EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY IN INDIA FROM A LIFE CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

SESSION PAPERS

Reimagining Local Worlds of Neurodiversity: Self-cultivation and Terbiye at a Disability Awareness Event in Istanbul

Izem Aral

This paper explores how neurodivergence in Turkey is positioned through the moral framework of terbiye—a concept centered on the cultivation of proper conduct through bodily discipline, emotional regulation, and moral comportment. Historically central to both Ottoman and Republican projects of subject-making, terbiye still shapes education, rehabilitation, and familial care today, defining what constitutes a "proper" child and a future citizen. In contexts where clinical diagnoses are delayed, limited, or inaccessible, neurodivergence is often assessed not through biomedical criteria, but through the moral lens of whether a child is deemed terbiyeli—socially adjusted and properly disciplined.

Drawing on participant observation at a national disability awareness event in Istanbul, this paper analyzes a moment in which a neurodivergent college student publicly mocked the politicians on stage, prompting enthusiastic applause from the audience. While seemingly a breach of etiquette, the act was met with joy, particularly from friends, families, and allies, who read it not as failure, but as a sign of communicative competence and social awareness.

By tracing how neurodiversity is lived, interpreted, and contested within local moral worlds, this paper calls for frameworks that move beyond deficit-based models toward neurodivergent modes of mutual recognition, care, and collective life.

Diverging from Diversity: Intellectual Disability in Kerala

Patrick Mckearney

In the South-Indian state of Kerala, a wide variety of ethical ideologies and frameworks motivate an equally wide variety of terminology, interventions and programmes for

people with neurodiversities and disabilities. Rather than examining these languages and ideologies, or assessing how they fit with established frameworks, this paper tries to examine how individuals and their families grapple with the ways people's life-courses diverge from existing expectations and patterns. In doing so, the paper investigates how ethnographic attention to life-courses of individuals and families can move analysis beyond ideological statements about neurodiversity towards an anthropological investigation of the way it differently manifests in particular relational, practical, and cultural situations.

All in good time: Temporality, coloniality, and the construction of dis/ability in the global South

Tanushree Sarkar

This paper offers crip time as a way to examine and reimagine the relationship between time, embodiment, neurodiversity, and schooling in the global South. I demonstrate the ways in which dis/ability is constructed, produced, and maintained through the temporal regimes of schooling, which require surveillance, disciplining, and regulation of children's bodyminds. This paper offers how temporality can expand our analysis of how exclusion occurs and why it is important to consider the entanglements of time and neurodiversity in how we understand inclusion and exclusion in educational contexts. I present findings from ethnographic case studies of two school-NGO partnerships for inclusive education in Ahmedabad and Mumbai. Examining time and temporaility in India, I bring together the ways in which legacies of colonialism inform our understanding of the temporal construction of neurodiversity, childhood, and education policy. I outline three ways children become 'out of time': out of pace, out of sync, and out of age. Through these processes, children are positioned as problems when they fail to conform to the temporal expectations of the classroom and the curriculum. Engaging with the notion of childhood as a temporal encounter, children 'become' out of time because of the ways in which educational contexts focus on speed, the pressures of classroom and curriculum time, and the standardization of predetermined age-appropriate grade-related outcomes. These factors exist within a larger temporal context of international policy pressures of development targets, developmental biases within universalized measures of quality education, and the historical construction of intelligence.

Finding 'neurodiversity' in Indian mental health spaces

Chetan Sastry Vijayakumar

The concept of neurodiversity is still nascent in India. Notwithstanding, its advocacy has sparked growing interest in lived experiences and steered a shift from deficit-based to strength-based approaches. However, the mental health space in India is still dominated by the medical model, and the word neurodiversity is sometimes used as a euphemism for neurodevelopmental disorders. In this paper, I focus on the category of learning disability, which is an umbrella term that includes dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and dyspraxia, indicating challenges in reading, writing, spelling, math, and motor coordination. I broadly ask how the concept of neurodivergence as a social and political identity is fraught with in the mental health clinics. Drawing from my patchwork

ethnography in mental health clinics, special schools and higher educational institutions in urban cities of India, and auto-ethnographic accounts, I discuss how mental health professionals engage with neurodivergent individuals in the context of assessment, diagnosis and psychotherapy. Further, I pay attention to the language of neurodiversity, social media and the gap between using the term neurodiversity and the actual neurodiversity-affirmative practice in mental health spaces.

EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY IN INDIA FROM A LIFE CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

Shubhangi Vaidya

The paper approaches neurodiversity in South Asia and specifically India from a life cycle perspective with a particular focus on changing family dynamics and caregiving arrangements in the backdrop of urbanisation, migration and globalization. It focuses in particular on the transition to adulthood and the preparedness (or lack thereof) of neurodivergent individuals and their families to negotiate with the ageing/death of parents, the separate life trajectories of siblings and the conspicuous lack of affordable and safe assisted living options. It makes a case for foregrounding the issues and challenges of independent living for neurodivergent individuals in public policy and bringing on board all stakeholders.