

A Qualitative Study Exploring Neurodiversity Conference Themes, Representations, and Evidence-Based Justifications for the Explicit Inclusion and Valuing of OCD

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Abstract

The inclusivity of neurodiversity conferences is a new field of research. Utilising Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) as an example, this study aims to critically investigate issues of inclusivity in the flyers advertising these conferences. This exploratory research is informed by 22 conference flyers and 14 scholarly articles retrieved from respective internet and Google Scholar enquiries. These articles offered evidence-based justifications for a greater inclusion of OCD-focused content in neurodiversity conferences. The study cautions that the lack of explicit inclusion of OCD as a topic among conferences can be harmful to persons who identify with this particular type of neurodivergence. This study offers a sound base from which future research focusing upon other forms of neurodivergence and issues of neurodiversity conference inclusivity and intersectionality can develop.

Keywords: conferences; inclusion; neurodiversity; Obsessive-Compulsive-Disorder; policy

Publication Type: special section publication

Introduction

Billions are expended on multiple-day conferences each year (Rog & Wolffe, 1994 as cited in Neves et al., 2012). While representing a large investment, the benefits that these conferences can offer attendees are notable. These benefits include keeping up to date in one's field, gaining fresh ideas, and establishing program and interest alliances (Ferman, 2002; Hickson, 2006). Around the world, contemporary disability conferences are presenting studies along with "reflective work" that is centred upon socially created disabling obstacles (Callus, 2017, p.1661). In addition to learning and networking prospects, conferences also present opportunities to travel and relax (Ngamsom & Beck, 2000). At their finest, conferences permit academics to converge in a cooperative community that is devoted to distributing, generating, and absorbing knowledge (Manning, 2018).

While offering many benefits, conferences are, however, not immune from challenges. The complexity of issues that are discussed at large conferences can result in organisers struggling to set clear conference objectives (Mathieson, 2009; Tepper & Hinton, 2003 as cited in Neves et al., 2012). Conferences can also struggle to be more inclusive. Resources, space, and time, together with psychological and physical outlays, can discourage people from joining conferences (Ngamsom & Beck, 2000). De Picker (2019) recognises that the representation of disability

activism within scholarly conferences will continue to be constrained where attendance is availed only to those who have capacity to pay. Crucially, Coe et al. (2019) caution that societies and organisations who fail to provide “diverse and inclusive conferences” should be held to account (p. 590). Moreover, according to Gordon and Gledhill (2018), “the mantra of ‘nothing about us without us’ applies equally to conferences as it does to anything else concerning mental health—what’s more, that must extend to all aspects of the conference in order to be meaningful—organising committees, key-note and concurrent session presentations, posters, attendees, panellists” (p. 110).

Before broaching the topic of neurodiversity conferences, it is appropriate to consider some of the complexities that are inherent to the term. Neurodiversity should not be presumed to be fixed, understood, or universally accepted. Put simply, neurodiversity can take on different meanings for different individuals (Chapman, 2020). Steve Silberman’s (2017) publication *Neurotribes* supports the understanding that all brains are different, and that autism is a sample of such diversity (Silberman, 2017 as cited in Baron-Cohen, 2017). In the U.K., efforts have been made to develop a community that is wider than autism (Arnold, 2017). Hence, moving beyond its original use by Judy Singer (an Australian social scientist who has lived experience with autism) in her description of a “self-advocacy movement,” neurodiversity has grown to encompass a range of conditions including Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Dyslexia, Tourette Syndrome, Dyspraxia, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), among others (Dalton, 2013; Baron-Cohen, 2017). While the 1960s saw Canada recording expressions of Mad Pride in reaction to psychiatric institutionalisation, the neurodiversity movement (NDM) would rally in the latter part of the twentieth century through the use of internet sites that were primarily based in Europe and the U.S. (Dyck, 2020).

Typical of social justice causes, the NDM is not exempt from criticisms (den Houting, 2019). A suggestion is put forward that the movement has been controlled by persons with Asperger Syndrome and other types of “high-functioning autism” (Ortega, 2009 as cited in Russell, 2020). Some argue that “functioning labels” are damaging (Chapman, 2021). Individuals who are seen as high functioning can find it extremely challenging to obtain support, while the low functioning label can overlook abilities (Williams, 2019). Research from Alvares et al. (2020) support movement away from binary descriptors (i.e., low/high functioning) and towards more appreciation of the variance in function that exists throughout the autism spectrum.

Kapp et al. (2013) also note that the NDM has generated controversy in its quest for quality of living and social change over cure. Rothstein (2012) reports that some public figures, “including many parents,” focus on the challenges that can accompany mental conditions (p. 100). Further, Russell (2020) advises of the notable benefits to be realised from medical diagnosis including those of attaining access to services, gaining an understanding of lived experiences, and obtaining an assembly point for political activity. In contrast, the social model sees disability as a consequence of challenging physical and social settings, rather than resulting from the condition itself (Berridge & Martinson, 2018). Friction thus continues between two competing ideologies (i.e., the social model that the movement openly supports and the medical model that it tends to oppose). Some people might thus reject neurodiversity for its failure to treat mental illness, while others might reject being labelled with medical conditions along with any suggestion that they need medical treatment. Still, there are individuals who identify as neurodiverse that find both models to be useful. In this way, neurodiversity advocates exist who are accepting of the medical model (McWade et al., 2015).

According to Parsons et al. (2017), “ableism is most often used to describe the negative treatments of individuals with disability” (p.207). Ableism is steeped in negative assumptions concerning disability (Hehir, 2002 as cited in Storey, 2007). Clare (2004) cautions about ableism in terms of its potential to segregate and deny opportunities to achieve. Conversely, in the NDM, neurological variances are seen as natural (Milton & Moon, 2012 as cited in McWade et al., 2015). Neurodiversity advocates recognise the positive attributes of brains that operate differently (Rothstein, 2012).

Debate too persists around neurodiversity-related language. Strand (2017, n.p.) uses the term neurodivergent to refer to persons who identify as “other than neurotypical.” This latter term depicts “the majority brain” (Murdock, 2020, p.14). Neurodiversity in turn emphasises that variances in brain function are seen as a natural part of human variation (Clouder et al., 2020). The lexicon of the NDM, however, is not beyond contestation. No consensus has been reached on the appropriateness of expressions such as neurodifferent, neurodivergent, and neurodiverse (Doyle, 2020). Russell (2020) argues that the boundary determining who is included in the neurodivergent group is presently ill-defined. Further, as far as the author is aware, a popularly recognised, progressive alternative for the medical term of Obsessive-Compulsive-Disorder (OCD) remains unavailable. The term “OCD” has thus been used throughout in this paper. The author also makes references to the medical model in the context of its capacity to allow for the formal diagnosis of various forms of neurodivergence and subsequent access to accommodations on an individualised basis.

Recognising the complex and dynamic nature of the NDM, it is appropriate to investigate the inclusiveness or otherwise of conferences that are promoted under its banner. Hence, in addition to investigating the topics that are promoted in these conference flyers, this study shall explore the types of neurodivergence that are explicitly mentioned. Of particular interest to this exploration is OCD. According to Sane Australia (2018), “people living with OCD are troubled by recurring unwanted thoughts, images, or impulses, as well as obsessions and repetitive rituals.” It is appropriate at this point, however, to also recognise the possible strengths that might be attributed to this particular form of neurodivergence. The literature has raised potential for OCD and anxiety more broadly to respectively assist in advancing work quality and quantity by motivating one to operate meticulously and diligently (Hayes-Skelton et al., 2013; Johnson, 2014 as cited by Mellifont, 2019). Mellifont et al. (2019) also report on the potential of anxiety to support the completion of PhD level study.

Appreciating that one form of neurodivergence is not more important than another, the author also notes a strong representation of OCD among populations. Such representation is exemplified in the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2020) reporting of 2.2 million American adults who are living with OCD. As many persons have lived experience with OCD, it is appropriate that topics of interest for these individuals do not tend to be overlooked in neurodiversity conferences. While the Annual OCD Conference is dedicated to this particular type of neurodivergence (International OCD Foundation, 2019), to the author’s knowledge, there is a scarcity of information available about the broader inclusion of OCD in neurodiversity conference promotional materials. Utilising OCD as an example, this study aims to critically investigate issues of inclusivity for these conferences.

Method

In order to locate conference flyers relevant to the first aim of this study, an internet search was

implemented using the term, “neurodiversity conference flyers.” A supplementary Google enquiry using the broader search term of “neurodiversity” AND “conference” was then conducted. Conference flyers with a neurodiversity focus (i.e., the term neurodiversity is specifically mentioned in the conference title) and with a conference date between 2014 and 2021 were considered to be relevant. Given the preliminary nature of this study, searches were purposefully confined to the English language. Furthermore, events were restricted to conferences (i.e., large gatherings where professionals share and discuss viewpoints on certain topics) as opposed to symposiums (i.e., smaller scientific gatherings where experts present about a particular topic of interest) (van de Venter, 2019). It is therefore recognised that neurodiversity events do exist beyond those included in this study and that these events are conducted in different languages, for example, “conferencia neurodiversidades” and formats, such as, “symposiums.”

Thematic analysis of pertinent flyers involved: a) reading the texts; b) identifying conference themes, their coding rules, and exemplary quotes, and c) recording this information in tabular form. Following on, descriptive statistics were applied to calculate the proportional representations of these themes among conference flyers. Neurodivergence types and supporting quotes were captured and recorded and descriptive statistics were again used to determine their proportional representations across the promotional materials.

Informing evidence-based justifications for the greater inclusion of OCD focused content in neurodiversity conferences, a Google Scholar search was carried out applying the search term, “neurodiversity” AND “obsessive compulsive disorder” AND “inclusion.” Selection criteria consisted of: document type = journal article; article informs about the potential inclusion of OCD-related topics in neurodiversity conferences; publication date = post 2015; and article is retrievable. The publication date range was purposively selected so as to support a contemporary sample of scholarly articles of sufficient volume to support the study aim. Thematic analysis was applied to the relevant articles. As directed by Braun and Clarke (2006), this analysis involved: a) becoming conversant with the data; b) recognising themes; c) rereading the themes; and d) reporting the results. Evidence-based themes supporting the explicit inclusion of OCD within neurodiversity conferences, their coding instructions, and supporting quotes were documented in tabular form as well.

Results

The Google search for conference flyers produced 149 possibly relevant flyers with 11 of these being accepted after applying the inclusion criterion of the term neurodiversity as promoted within the conference title. The supplementary internet search produced an additional 11 flyers from the first five pages of results, bringing the total number of neurodiversity conference flyers to 22. Conference titles together with their respective locations and dates are provided in the following section (Conferences). Thematic analysis of these flyers produced themes of employment, education, social, advocacy, health, and policy. Themes, their coding instructions, and exemplary texts are provided in Table 1. Table 2 depicts the proportional representations of these themes across the conference flyers.

Conferences (Titles, locations, and dates)

1. 2021 AMF Power of Neurodiversity Conference: Cultivating Success in the Classroom & Beyond! (U.S., St. Louis, Missouri; 25 & 26 March 2021).

2. 2019 National neurodiversity and mental health conference. (England; Liverpool, 4 Oct 2019).
3. St. Louis neurodiversity conference. (U.S., St Louis, Missouri, 24 & 25 Apr, 2019).
4. Empowering neurodiversity - Developing services for neurodiverse young people with neurodiverse young people. (U.S., Phoenix, 51-16 Sep 2016).
5. Neurodiversity in the workplace national conference: A collaborative conference event. (U.S., Maryland, 7 & 8 Nov 2019).
6. Neurodiversity: How prepared are you to train students with hidden disabilities? (England, Bristol; 4 Sep 2018).
7. Solutions for learning conference: Neurodiversity rocks! (Canada, Ontario; 21 Mar 2014).
8. Thinking differently about god: Neurodiversity, faith & church. (England, London; 12 Oct 2019).
9. 2nd annual CUNY neurodiversity conference. (U.S., New York; 11 & 12 Mar 2019).
10. Supporting Neurodiversity. (England, York; 5 Oct 2017).
11. Neurodiversity leaders 2016 in San Francisco. (Unites States, San Francisco; 8 Oct 2016).
12. Nurturing Invisible Superpowers: A Conference on Neurodiversity. (Canada, British Columbia; 27 & 28 Apr 2020).
13. Neurodiversity and the Criminal Justice System. (Ireland, Dublin, Leinster; 1 Nov 2019).
14. The Neurodiversity Employment Conference. (England, Welwyn Garden City; Hertfordshire; 4 October 2018).
15. Diverse Minds: The Neurodiversity Conference. (England, London; 1 March 2018).
16. Online Conference: Neurodiversity and the Creative Arts. (streamed from England, London; 16-17 Nov 2020).
17. Neurodiversity in the High-Tech Workforce: Celebrating abilities in a culture of disability. (U.S.; 7 June 2016).
18. 3rd Annual CUNY Neurodiversity Conference. (U.S., New York; 12 & 13 Mar 2020).
19. Neurodiversity Matters Conference. (U.S., streamed from Rhode Island; 29 & 30 Apr 2020).
20. Neurodiversity at Work: Thinking Differently & Supporting Unique Talents. (England, streamed from London; 14 Jan 2021).
21. Neurodiversity: It takes all kinds of different minds. (England, streamed from London; 10-12 Nov 2020).

22. Neurodiversity and Workplace Inclusivity. (U.S., Washington, D.C. virtual conference); 16 Sep 2020).

Table 1. Neurodiversity conference flyer themes

Theme	Coding Rule	Exemplary Quotes
Employment	Flyer includes neurodiversity-related employment topic(s).	<p>“Top professionals in the field will share their research and strategies building off of strengths and abilities...” (Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020).</p> <p>“Do we want to attract, retain and assist employees with neurological differences?” (Netwoven, 2016).</p> <p>“Join us to learn how Fortune 500 companies and other employers, large and small, are partnering with community resources, higher education, and state agencies to build more inclusive hiring programs that deliver business results” (Cvent, 2019).</p> <p>“Suggested topic areas: strategies for competitive employment” (The City University of New York, 2019).</p> <p>“Breakout sessions explore Diagnosis and Disclosure; LinkedIn as an Employment Tool and The Autism Job Club” (AASCEND, 2016).</p> <p>““What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia and Dyscalculia”” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“Finding workplace support” (YADDA, 2017).</p> <p>“Meet one2one with high profile employers such as Ford, Kantar and Roche” (Able Magazine, 2018).</p> <p>“Diverse minds will make the industry more creative, innovative and profitable” (The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018).</p> <p>...“exploring neurodiversity and creativity” (University of London, 2020).</p> <p>“Leaders and experts in the field will provide best practices for inclusion and promoting student</p>

		<p>success from college to career” (CUNY, 2020).</p> <p>“neurodiversity presents unique competitive advantages in the workplace” (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020).</p> <p>“celebrating neurodiversity or creating an inclusive workplace who is a civil servant in the UK” (Civil Service Local, 2020).</p> <p>“Employers are also beginning to recognize that accommodating neurodiverse people can provide a significant competitive advantage, leading to a range of more inclusive policies, programs and procedures” (ASID, 2020).</p>
Education	Flyer includes neurodiversity-related education topic(s).	<p>“Suggested topic areas: academic support; transition to/from college” (The City of New York, 2019).</p> <p>“In mainstream education, social abuse is widespread and inherent in many schools and the notion of social control, academic gain and cultural conformity leaves those standing outside of the box in an institutional no man’s land” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“Breakout sessions explore Supports for College Success” (AASCEND, 2016).</p> <p>“Understanding and meeting the learning and mental health needs of students in Higher Education” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“Supporting Neurodiversity in Education - Seminars • Secondary • Primary school • Post 16 -College, Uni, life-long learning” (YADDA, 2017).</p> <p>“Join us in cultivating success in the Classroom & Beyond!” (Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020).</p> <p>“Driver and rider trainers should expect to meet a significant number of individuals affected by autism and associated conditions who wish to learn how to drive or ride” (DIA, 2018).</p> <p>“Angie DeMarco, Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury offers this experiential presentation intended to depict a variety of processing</p>

differences faced by students when they are academically challenged in the structured learning environment known as ‘school’” (LDAH, 2014).

“The Conference seeks to promote a shared understanding of neurodiversity: a concept where neurological (brain development) differences are recognized and respected as variations rather than disorders, like any other human differences” (Insight Support Services, 2020).

“The goal is to provide attendees with an up to date understanding of the impact of neurodevelopmental conditions on offending behaviours and to highlight practical strategies that have been shown to be effective in working with individuals who are neurodiverse within the criminal justice system” (Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD, 2019).

Social	Flyer includes neurodiversity-related social topic(s).	<p>“This is a one of a kind conference, bringing a fresh perspective and hope for true inclusion in our society” (Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020).</p> <p>“Suggested topic areas: social inclusion and recreation; independent living” (The City of New York, 2019).</p> <p>“Some of the other sessions at the conference will be: guardianship alternatives; Circling up: parenting support groups; guardianship alternatives” (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019).</p> <p>“Breakout sessions explore Dating on the Spectrum” (AASCEND, 2016).</p> <p>“ADHD is a family affair - how ADHD impacts on the family” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“empower our neurodiverse community in achieving equal opportunity and full participation in society” (Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, 2020).</p>
Advocacy	Flyer includes neurodiversity-related advocacy topic(s).	<p>“In bringing both worlds together we have an opportunity to empower those who are wired differently with those who currently set the rules”</p>

		(Battles, 2016). “in this panel AASCEND Co-Chair Greg Yates moderates a convocation of leading autism advocacy organizations, including Autism Society of America, Autism Global Initiative, Different Brains, GRASP and others to hear the state of autism advocacy and where we share common ground” (AASCEND, 2016). “sharing experience of discovery, discrimination and discernment” (St. Martin in the fields, 2019).
Health	Flyer includes neurodiversity-related health topic(s).	“Some of the other sessions at the conference will be: nutrition and autism; benefits of functional movement in crossfit & autism; Positive Boost of Animal Therapy” (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019). “An opportunity for teachers to trial QB Check ADHD Screening Tool for Schools” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).
Policy	Flyer includes policy-related neurodiversity topic(s).	“A national Strategy for Autism” (ADHD Foundation, 2019). Keynote speech - YADDA–DSSY “Bringing the National agenda to the local level” (YADDA, 2017).

Table 2. Theme proportional representations in conference flyers

Theme	% of conference flyers
Employment	63.6
Education	45.5
Social	27.3
Advocacy	13.6
Health	9.1
Policy	9.1



Table 3 reports on the types of neurodivergence as availed within conference flyers along with supporting quotes. These “types” include autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dyslexia, Tourette Syndrome, specific language impairment, intellectual disability, dysgraphia, neurodiversity (catchall reference), and others. Table 4 provides the proportional representations of these forms of neurodivergence across the conference flyers.

Table 3. Representations in conference flyers by neurodivergence type

Neurodivergence type	Supporting Quotes
Autism	<p>“Autism Spectrum” (Netwoven, 2016).</p> <p>“Experts will share their best practices, model programs and strategies to hire, train and manage uniquely talented individuals with autism” (Cvent, 2019).</p> <p>“...Autism spectrum” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“For sixteen years AASCEND has promoted a society that includes everyone along the autism spectrum” (AASCEND, 2016).</p> <p>“Autism spectrum disorders” (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019).</p> <p>“or on the second day, focused on autism” (CUNY, 2019).</p> <p>“What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with...Autism” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“These include autism...” (St Martin in the Fields, 2019).</p> <p>“Our Neurodiversity course looks at the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and associated conditions” (DIA, 2018).</p> <p>“Autistic Spectrum Disorder” (ACJRD, 2019).</p> <p>“Austism” (Able Magazine, 2018).</p> <p>“autism, aspergers” (The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018).</p> <p>“Autism” (CUNY, 2020).</p> <p>“austism” (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020).</p> <p>“Autism” (Civil Service Local, 2020).</p> <p>“autism spectrum disorder” (ASID, 2020).</p>

ADHD	<p>“...Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“ADHD is a family affair - how ADHD impacts on the family” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“A conference for...adults with ADHD” (YADDA, 2017).</p> <p>“These include... ADHD” (St Martin in the Fields, 2019).</p> <p>“ADHD” (ACJRD, 2019).</p> <p>“ADHD” (Able Magazine, 2018).</p> <p>“ADHD” (The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018).</p> <p>“ADD” (Netwoven, 2016).</p> <p>“ADHD” (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020).</p> <p>“AHDH” (Civil Service Local, 2020).</p> <p>“attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” (ASID, 2020).</p>
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Dyspraxia	<p>“These differences include those ‘labelled’ with Dyspraxia” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with...Dyspraxia” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“A conference for...adults with Dyspraxia” (YADDA, 2017).</p> <p>“These include... dyspraxia” (St Martin in the Fields, 2019).</p> <p>“Dyspraxia” (Able Magazine, 2018).</p> <p>“dyspraxia” (The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018).</p> <p>“dyspraxia” (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020).</p> <p>“Dyspraxia” (Civil Service Local, 2020).</p>
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Dyscalculia	<p>“What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with... Dyscalculia” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“A conference for...adults with Dyscalculia” (YADDA, 2017)</p>
Dyslexia	<p>“...dyslexia” (Battles, 2016).</p>

	<p>“What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with...Dyslexia” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p> <p>“A conference for...adults with Dyslexia” (YADDA, 2017).</p> <p>“Dyslexia” (Able Magazine, 2018).</p> <p>“Dyslexia” (Netwoven, 2016).</p> <p>“dyslexia” (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020).</p> <p>“dyslexia” (Civil Service Local, 2020).</p> <p>“dyslexia” (ASID, 2020).</p>
Tourette Syndrome	<p>“...Tourette Syndrome” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“These include...and Tourette’s” (St Martin in the Fields, 2019).</p>
Learning disability	<p>“Neurodiverse Gifts of Students with Learning Disabilities” (LDAH, 2014).</p> <p>“...goals of individuals that learn and communicate differently” (Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020).</p>
Specific Language Impairment	<p>“A conference for...adults with SLI” (YADDA, 2017).</p>
Intellectual Disability	<p>“first day, focused on intellectual disability” (CUNY, 2019).</p> <p>“Intellectual Disability” (CUNY, 2020).</p> <p>“Intellectual Disability” (ACJRD, 2019).</p>
Dysgraphia	<p>“What are reasonable adjustments in employment for those with... Dysgraphia” (ADHD Foundation, 2019).</p>
Neurodiversity (catchall reference)	<p>“neurodiversity” (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019).</p> <p>“This conference will explore the wide range of neurodiversity...” (Insight Support Services, 2020).</p> <p>...“exploring neurodiversity” (University of London, 2020).</p> <p>“Neurodiverse Inclusion” (Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, 2020).</p>

Others	<p>“...and other neurological differences (Cvent, 2019).</p> <p>“...and others” (Battles, 2016).</p> <p>“...and more” (The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018).</p> <p>“medical conditions” (Netwoven, 2016).</p> <p>“one of a collection of conditions...” (ASID, 2020).</p>
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Table 4. Conference flyers’ proportional representations by neurodivergence type

Neurodivergence type	% of conference flyers
Autism	72.3
ADHD	50.0
Dyslexia	36.4
Dyspraxia	36.4
Others (catchall reference #2)	22.7
Neurodiversity (catchall reference #1)	18.2
Intellectual disability	13.6
Dyscalculia	9.1
Tourette syndrome	9.1
Learning disability	9.1
SLI	4.5
Dysgraphia	4.5

Table 5. Evidence-based themes supporting the explicit inclusion of OCD in neurodiversity conferences

Theme	Coding Rule	Exemplary Quotes
Intersectionality (with autism)	Evidence describes capacity for OCD and autism intersectionality.	“Co-occurring psychiatric conditions are more common in ASD than other developmental disabilities. For example, Croen et al. [6] found that 54% of adults with ASD also had

a psychiatric condition, including as follows: anxiety (29%), depression (26%), bipolar disorder (11%), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (11%), obsessive-compulsive disorder (8%), and schizophrenia (8%)” (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 103).

“Phenotypically, autism frequently co-occurs with other neurodevelopmental (e.g., ADHD, tic disorders) and psychiatric (e.g., anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychotic disorders) conditions” (Lai et al. 2014 cited in Lombardo et al. 2019, p. 18).

“The report of the psychiatrists diagnosed it as ‘a paranoid form of schizophrenia in which autistiform characteristics are unusually prominent and...an obsessive compulsive personality disorder’” (Lollini, 2018, p. 122).

“autism was also represented as intersecting with other forms of difference such as dual diagnoses (autism and obsessive compulsive disorder or being nonverbal)” (Black et al., 2019, p. 43).

“Types of comorbidities were generally comparable across the ASC and MDD groups, obsessive-compulsive disorder being the only comorbidity that differed significantly between groups” (Lipinski et al. 2019, p. 1156).

“Obsessive-compulsive disorders were also reported although it appeared very difficult to distinguish between these and the ritualistic and stereotyped behaviors of autism (Szatmari et al. 1989)” (Chamak & Bonniau, 2016, p. 1093).

“Depression, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder are reported to be particularly common in younger adults with ASD.14,15” (Foley & Troller, 2015, p. 785).

“Such reports are corroborated by the observation that around a quarter of adults

presenting to specialist services for obsessive compulsive disorder (Wikramanayake et al., 2017) and anorexia nervosa (Westwood et al., 2017) have an undiagnosed ASC” (Mandy et al., 2018, p. 550).

“The author argues that *none* of the statements - including those in bold type - can be taken as supporting a case for a broader autism phenotype, because *all* the behaviours/traits included in this tool can be seen in the neurotypical population, as well as in conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and attachment disorders—all of which can co-exist with autism, and indeed all of which are diagnosed in non-autistic people” (Chown, 2019, p. 53).

“The converse effect can also occur, whereby the symptoms of a mental condition (e.g., rituals associated with obsessive compulsive disorder) are mistakenly interpreted as indicators of ASC” (Mandy et al., 2018, p. 550).

““when ‘autism’ was first defined as ‘autistic disturbances of affective contact’, the core features were considered to be ‘extreme self-isolation’ and ‘obsessive insistence on the preservation of sameness’” (Kanner, 1943; Eisenberg & Kanner, 1956 as cited in Lombardo et al., 2019, p. 5).

Inherency	Evidence supports OCD as a part of neurodiversity	“Thus, so-called psychiatric disabilities and disorders include things falling under the labels: “major depressive disorder” (hereafter “depression”), “schizophrenia,” “obsessive compulsive disorder” (hereafter “OCD”), “generalized anxiety disorder,” “bipolar disorder,” “borderline personality disorder,” “autism spectrum disorder,” and so on. The reason for the controversy is that, although some people believe these mental differences are indeed illnesses/disorders, consistent with DSM-5 and ICD-10 terminology, others believe that they are neither disorders nor pathologies of any sort, but are rather forms of mental and
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neural diversity to be accepted and celebrated” (Hoffman & Hansen, 2017, p. 296).

“Some people with brain differences may or may not choose to identify as neurodiverse, so this categorization is an individual choice not a diagnosis. 3.0 Neurodiverse Conditions other than Autism 3.1 Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) 3.2 Learning Disabilities 3.3 Tourette Syndrome 3.4 Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) 3.5 Other conditions due to neurological differences” (Zolyomi & Tennis, 2017, p. 139).

“Narrative reported conditions were constrained to neurodiversity (obsessive-compulsive disorder)” (Mellifont et al., 2019, p.1196).

The Google Scholar search delivered 170 possibly relevant articles. After employing the inclusion criteria, 14 articles were considered to be relevant. Table 5 reports on thematic analysis produced themes of comorbidity and inherency, their coding rules, and exemplary quotes.

Discussion

Neurodiversity conference flyer themes

This research reveals themes supporting greater inclusion and valuing of neurodivergent persons. Collectively, these themes cover issue-areas of employment, education, social, advocacy, health, and policy. Commencing with employment, this theme was prominent among conference flyers, appearing in well over half (i.e., 63.6%) of those examined in this exploratory study. The theme was reflected across innovative programs, neurodivergence-related work attributes, and workplace accommodations. Prospective conference attendees were invited to learn about how Fortune 500 companies and others are connecting with community, higher education, and state stakeholders to create hiring programs that are more inclusive (Cvent, 2019). Attendees were encouraged to be informed about an autism-specific employment program (i.e., the Autism Job Club) and LinkedIn as a tool for supporting employment (AASCEND, 2016). Delegates of a conference held in England were also given opportunities to be put in touch with “high-profile employers” with examples including Roche and Ford (Able Magazine, 2018). In addition to promoting these kinds of employment programs, measures, and networking opportunities, conferences from the U.S. and England also promoted the potential benefits (e.g., “competitive advantages,” “strengths and abilities”) of hiring neurodivergent persons (Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020; Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020).

The U.S. based Neurodiversity in the Workplace National Conference spoke about hiring programs that are delivering “business results” (Cvent, 2019). The creativity, innovation, and profitability

offered by diverse minds were also explored and promoted (University of London, 2020; The Hobbs Consultancy and Creative Equals, 2018). Further, conference flyers addressed the strategic policy area of job retention. The Supporting Neurodiversity conference covered the topic of “finding workplace support” (YADDA, 2017). Conferences hosted in the U.S. and England included topics of inclusiveness, “diagnosis and disclosure,” as well as reasonable accommodations in the workplace for different types of neurodivergence (ASSCEND, 2016; ADHD Foundation, 2019; Civil Service Local, 2020; ASID, 2020; CUNY, 2020). Accommodating persons with OCD, however, was not included as part of these important conference discussions.

Also prominent among neurodiversity conference flyers was the theme of education (45.5%) (see Table 2). Prospective conference attendees were provided with opportunities to learn about the issues that can be experienced by some neurodivergent students. These challenges within “mainstream education” include a prevalence of “social abuse” (Battles, 2016). Academic success in schools was acknowledged and understanding promoted about “processing differences” in this environment by conferences in Canada and the U.S. (LDAH, 2014; Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020). Conferences also raised topics of transitioning to and from university, mental health, and learning supports in higher education, as well as “life-long learning” (The City of New York, 2019; ADHD Foundation, 2019; YADDA, 2017). Moving beyond education in school and university settings, the “Neurodiversity: How prepared are you to train students with hidden disabilities” conference advised driving instructors to expect contact with many neurodivergent students who will want lessons (DIA, 2018). Delegates from a conference that was hosted in Ireland were also informed about how to work with neurodivergent persons in the criminal justice system (ACJRD, 2019). Events that cover topics concerning neurodiversity and the law need to take care that they do not inadvertently promote harmful stereotypes.

Over one-quarter (27.3%) of neurodiversity conference flyers spoke about social challenges. These issues were raised at micro and macro levels. At the micro level, flyers discussed personal issues including those of independent living and recreation, dating, and the family impacts of ADHD (The City University of New York, 2019; AASCEND, 2016; ADHD Foundation, 2019). At the macro level, flyers spoke to matters of parental support groups and guardianship options as well as full and genuine social participation (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019; ADHD Foundation, 2019; Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, 2020; Adam Morgan Foundation, 2020). In the wake of COVID-19, some of the neurodiversity conferences informing this study were held in virtual (i.e., online, streamed) settings (e.g., Dods Diversity & Inclusion, 2020; ASID, 2020; Spectrum Theatre Ensemble, 2020). Research is needed to examine the possible increase in inclusiveness that virtual conferences might offer to some neurodivergent individuals who may find physical attendance at conferences to be socially challenging and anxiety producing.

Appearing in 13.6% of conference texts was the theme of advocacy. The 2016 Neurodiversity Leaders Conference in San Francisco examined the state of play for autism advocacy (AASCEND, 2016). The Empowering Neurodiversity conference raised the prospect of empowering persons who are “wired differently” to the current rule makers (Battles, 2016). At the same time, conferences need to avoid an ableist assumption that all present rule makers are necessarily neurotypical. Neurodiversity conferences also promoted the sharing of experiences of discrimination (St. Martin in the fields, 2019). In helping to redress these experiences, future studies could examine whether advocacy, when presented as a neurodiversity conference theme, successfully promotes future political collaborations and actions among attendees.

The least proportionally represented themes among neurodiversity conference flyers were those

of health and policy, with each at only 9.1%. The St Louis Neurodiversity Conference included autism-health sessions about nutrition, the benefits of CrossFit, and “animal therapy” (American Institute for Learning and Human Development, 2019). The 2019 National Neurodiversity and Mental Health conference also described opportunities for ADHD screening at schools (ADHD Foundation, 2019). The medical model of disability positions neurodivergence as something that needs to be identified and fixed (i.e., treated). An unqualified promotion of screening programs at schools, risks adding to stigma by suggesting that neurodivergence is necessarily a medical problem that must be identified as opposed to something that is naturally occurring. This example, however, highlights that care should be taken in conferences with a mental health focus to not stigmatise neurodivergence as something that is necessarily broken (i.e., something that *must* be exposed, noted, and repaired).

Neurodiversity conferences that were held in England delivered policy-focused topics. Such examples informed participants about a national autism strategy, together with bridging policy directions across national and local platforms (ADHD Foundation, 2019; YADDA, 2017). As policy efforts are fundamental to identifying and redressing the issues that can accompany lived experience with neurodivergence, other countries would do well to follow this strategic direction.

Types of neurodivergence represented in conference flyers

Autism has received by far the greatest exposure in the neurodiversity conference flyers, appearing in almost three-quarters (72.3%) of those examined by this study. ADHD was prominent, being identified in half (50.0%) of the flyers. Dyslexia and Dyspraxia were also prevalent, each being identified in just over one-third of these promotional texts. Less conspicuous were representations of Intellectual Disability (13.6%). Also less noted were references to Specific Language Impairment, Learning disability, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, and Tourette syndrome.

Explicit references to OCD were not revealed among any of the flyers that were examined. Flyers did, however, apply two catchall phrases in attempts to cover the various kinds of neurodivergence. These terms were “others” and “neurodiversity” (as found in almost one quarter and just less than one-fifth of the flyers respectively). The author recognises the impracticality of including every form of neurodivergence in every neurodiversity conference. Nonetheless, a consistent lack of explicit inclusion of OCD among conferences can be harmful to persons who identify with this particular type of neurodivergence. This inclusivity gap means that opportunities are lost to develop ideas and to inform conference attendees about the practical ways in which to improve the lives of persons with OCD. Attention that is specific to this particular form of neurodivergence is needed to help to: a) redress the discrimination that can be experienced by these individuals; b) improve the recruitment and retainment of persons with OCD in the workforce; and c) advance the genuine social participation of these persons. The needs and rights of people with OCD might therefore be better supported by recognising the conference inclusion shortfalls as revealed by this investigative study. Such recognition might then act as a starting point for the future growth of neurodiversity conferences.

At a national conference level, countries varied markedly in regards to their referencing of neurodivergence. The flyer for the American Neurodiversity in the Workplace National Conference focused on autism, whereas the England based 2019 National Neurodiversity and Mental Health conference explicitly referred to ADHD, Dyspraxia, Autism, Dyslexia, and

Dyscalculia (Cvent, 2019; ADHD Foundation, 2019). This latter example can be considered better practice in the sense that a spotlight was placed on several forms of neurodivergence within the conference promotional material.

Evidence-based justifications for more “OCD inclusive” neurodiversity conferences

It is timely to examine the possible extent to which scholarly articles might offer support for the explicit inclusion of OCD in neurodiversity conference materials. The scholarly literature offers two key justifications for a greater inclusion of OCD within neurodiversity conference promotional texts. The first of these is intersectionality. In this regard, autism commonly “co-occurs” with psychiatric disorders including that of OCD (Lai et al., 2014 as cited in Lombardo et al., 2019). Anxiety, depression, and OCD are reported as especially familiar among young adults with ASD (Lugnegård et al., 2011; Matson & Williams, 2014 as cited in Foley & Trollor, 2015). Approximately 25 percent of adults who access services for OCD and anorexia nervosa also possess an undiagnosed autism spectrum condition (Wikramanayake et al., 2018; Westwood et al., 2017 as cited in Mandy et al., 2018, p.550). Furthermore, autism-OCD intersectionality is reported in the accounts of study subjects as follows, “she was the first person off of AFF that I have told about my AS, my OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder], my depression, or my schizophrenia” (Parsloe, 2017, p.111). Traits and behaviours witnessed in OCD can co-exist in autism (Chown, 2019).

References to “comorbidity” have been critiqued because in many cases it remains unclear as to whether a diagnosis is truly reflective of distinctive medical conditions or actually reflects various manifestations of a single condition (Maj, 2005). Indeed, it can be challenging to differentiate between OCD and autism’s ritualistic behaviours (Szatmari et al., 1989 as cited in Chamak & Bonniau, 2016). Serious clinical issues can ensue as conditions remain unrecognised or alternately are misdiagnosed with other conditions (Asp et al., 2020; Fusar-Poli et al., 2020).

The blurring of autism and OCD is further reinforced via popular media texts. For example, Harry Potter stories depict autism as overlapping with other appearances of difference including that of OCD (Black et al., 2019). Recognising the potential for autism and OCD intersectionality, Mandy et al. (2018) nevertheless caution that OCD rituals can be incorrectly construed as signs of autism spectrum conditions. Neurodiversity conference materials are thus challenged to explicitly recognise that some persons might have autism and OCD while also depicting, respecting, and including both as distinctive types of neurodivergence.

OCD is inherently recognised as a type of neurodivergence. Specifically, neurodiversity is said to include a range of neurocognitive variances of which OCD is considered to be a part thereof (Hughes, 2016 as cited in Mellifont, 2019). Recognising OCD as falling within the scope of the neurodiversity definition is important. On its own, however, this recognition is not sufficient to justify a greater inclusion of OCD focused content in neurodiversity conferences. Stronger justification is found in the previously described opportunities to tackle ableism (i.e., redress the discrimination that can be targeted at persons with OCD), accommodate OCD where needed, and generally help to improve the lives of many of these individuals.

Hoffman and Hansen (2017) note there are some persons who believe that like autism, OCD is a disorder, and yet there are others who will see these as examples of neurodivergence. Nevertheless, this study recognises possibilities for the social and medical models to co-exist. The prospect is raised that some persons, while realising the strengths (i.e., attributes) that can

accompany their neurodivergence, might also acknowledge their medical diagnosis and the associated challenges that may require accommodations. Moving forward, neurodiversity conferences are challenged to better reflect such nuances in terms of the types of neurodivergence that are explicitly included, their prospective attributes (i.e., abilities), as well as possible challenges and support measures (i.e., accommodations).

Limitations

This study is restricted to the searches and the data sources selected. These identified neurodiversity conferences were held in the northern hemisphere, with the vast majority of them taking place in either England or the U.S. Future research could undertake searches which include articles that are published in languages other than English. These studies would identify conferences taking place in locations outside of those mentioned in this article. Future studies might also reveal new conference-related themes. Hence, contributions of this qualitative investigation, while valuable, should nonetheless be treated as introductory. Noting that virtual (i.e., online) conferences were included among the sample of neurodiversity conferences, the author also recognises that this sample was likely constricted in volume due to some conference cancellations following COVID-19.

Conclusion

This exploratory study reveals that neurodiversity conferences cover diverse topics that are central to improving the lives of neurodivergent persons. Issue-areas of employment, education, social, advocacy, health, and policy are each receiving attention. However, such attention is far from evenly distributed. Additionally, this study warns that the policymaking practice that is needed in addressing ableism is currently receiving insufficient attention within neurodiversity conference materials. The study also highlights the consistent failings of conferences to explicitly reference and value OCD as a form of neurodivergence. To be clear, the author is not suggesting that OCD, or any other form of neurodivergence, must necessarily be accounted for in all conferences that are advertised under the neurodiversity banner. What is proposed is that these conferences should reflect diversity to their fullest possible extent. Utilising OCD as an example, this scholarly investigation offers a sound base from which future research can develop. These studies might include searches conducted in languages other than English. They could also focus on differing types of neurodivergence, event formats (e.g., symposiums), and other issues involving conference inclusiveness and intersectionality. It is therefore important that neurodiversity conference organisers remain open to evidence-based ways in which to increase the inclusiveness of their events.

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