Equality in diversity seems to be a noble concept, declared by many as a moral value. Unfortunately, it is inevitable that both history and the pragmatics of the present day clearly show that this theoretical assumption remains in the realm of wishful thinking. In reality, a culture of diversity is extremely difficult to implement in micro- and macro-social contexts. Minority groups in various dimensions experience misunderstanding, exclusion and discrimination (direct, veiled or nuanced) from the dominant social majority.

Among the dimensions of social diversity is neurodiversity, “a concept that regards differences in behaviour and brain function as part of the normal variation of the human population” (Fung, 2021, p. xv). Shaw and colleagues (2021), representatives of Autistic Doctors International, emphasise that neurodiversity challenges the medical model to reframe our stereotypical view of neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, etc., away from one of disorder and towards one of difference and diversity. They note that „the debate between a medical view on neurodevelopmental conditions (ontologically grounded in positivism) and a social view (more closely aligned with constructivism) is a longstanding issue in the academic literature and wider societal discourse”(p. 654). The neurodiversity movement, as a a social view, has been growing in popularity and influence since it was first proposed by the autistic activist Judy Singer in 1998 (Shaw et al., 2021). It has had a strongly positive
impact on clinical and research directions in neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism. Interventions and support have increasingly adopting approaches and goals more in line with the neurodiversity framework (den Houting, 2019).

There are also statements by clinicians attempting to integrate a biomedical approach into the neurodiversity paradigm: rather than a complete reliance on disorder-based concepts and related treatment approaches, they see many advantages of incorporating the concept of neurodiversity alongside mainstream research and clinical practice. From their perspective, there is no contradiction between traditional approaches that look to give neurodivergent individuals additional resources through clinical treatment, and neurodiverse approaches that look to adapt environments and transform neurotypical attitudes: both approaches are beneficial and together will improve the lives of neurodivergent people (Sonuga-Barke & Thapar, 2021).

The medical, disfunction-oriented paradigm in relation to neurodivergent individuals correlates directly with the educational system at all levels. Children perceived as “dysfunctional” are usually patronised by both teachers and peers. They are expected to adapt to the standards of the “normal” majority through efforts to reduce symptoms of dysfunction. In such a system there is no space for enhancing and developing strengths and talents, which tend to be overlooked or underestimated. “Defective” children (or individuals in general) are not expected to be successful according to majority criteria. This social perception inevitably influences the self-esteem, sense of empowerment, self-efficacy and consequently the life decisions related to the professional path of neurodivergent individuals.

Education and individual development must be looked at from a whole lifeline perspective. Neurodivergent children, permanently undervalued and excluded in school education, enter adulthood traumatised. It is out of such traumas that the grassroots movement of neurodivergent self-advocates grew, creating a community demanding self-determination and the right to speak on their own behalf. Their voice began to be heard publicly in the 1990s, mainly in English-speaking world regions.

To the longstanding determination of neurodivergent self-advocates, we owe the current opportunity to read contemporary sophisticated and nuanced analyses of various shades of neurodiversity, written from the perspective of and at the crossroads between sociology, critical psychology, medical humanities, critical disability studies, critical autism studies, critical race studies, and critical queer studies (Rosqvist, Chown, & Stenning, 2020), as well as designed to integrate and built upon existing theories of positive psychology, positive psychiatry, multiple intelligences and developmental psychology, and to apply them to divide strengths-based assessments and interventions for neurodivergent individuals (Fung, 2021).
In countries where the neurodiversity movement has grown dynamically and its ideas penetrated the public awareness, there also have consequently been significant changes in the education sector (at least declaratively) towards adequate support for neurodivergent pupils (Armstrong, 2012; Griffiths, 2020; Hendrickx, 2010; Murray & Rizga, 2020; OECD, 2017; Pollak, 2009; Silberman, 2015; Sparks, 2021). The neurodiversity movement has struggled to break through into mainstream discourse, strenuously clinging to the medical paradigm. It has been extremely difficult to break the long-standing firmly established patterns and pathways. This has been a long and challenging journey described in the reviewed volume.

The book has emerged from a postdoctoral research fellowship within sociology at the University of Exeter, U.K., as part of the project “Exploring Diagnosis: Autism and the Neurodiversity Movement”, including academic engagement with the movement as well as critical analysis of its position. The following chapters document the key actions of leading autistic activists in the neurodiversity movement since the 1990s, in their own words.

Steven K. Kapp, the initiator and editor of this publication is both an autism scholar and an autistic neurodiversity activist.

The book contains 19 chapters by 21 authors organized into parts about the forming of the autistic community and neurodiversity movement, progress in their influence on the broader field, and their possible threshold of the advocacy establishment. This is followed by a description of some critiques of the movement, and the editor’s conclusion.

The volume is rooted in the concept of standpoint epistemology. A standpoint position claims that authority over knowledge is created through direct experience of a condition or situation, which is related to the idea of lay expertise. Thus, the book values the experience of autistic people as a source of knowledge about their own plight.

The authors of the chapters are mostly autistic, ranging from those diagnosed in the old nomenclature as having Asperger’s Syndrome, to those offensively described as “low-functioning”, including even one non-speaker, M. Baggs (2020, pp. 77–86) (the chapter written by this person captivated me with its remarkable poetic language and multi-layered narrative).

Their reports are both compelling and deeply touching. They are stories of suffering, from an early age, which eventually transcended into rebellion. Despite diverse personal and environmental circumstances, dramatic themes of discrimination and exclusion recur like echoes in these accounts. The statement by L.A. Tisoncik (2020) sounds representative of most of the authors speaking in this volume:
Autistic persons are disadvantaged almost from the moment of birth. Our power to determine the direction of our lives is taken by presumptions about cognition and perception that simultaneously ignore our abilities and make unreasonable demands upon our disabilities. We are rejected by our peers, whose bullying is not merely tolerated, but encouraged, by adults, who themselves may join in the bullying. We are often rejected by our families [...]. We are placed into schools and institutions whose very purpose is to wipe us of our identity, and whose every “treatment” and “care” is an act of violence against who we are. If we do find work, we are target number one for workplace bullying, and for being fired for autistic traits, regardless of our performance. [...] We are more likely to be the victims of violence [...]. Above all we are isolated from society at every stage as the odd, the weird, the other. But no matter the exact life path we find ourselves on, oppression comes down to others holding or aspiring to hold undue power over us. Oppression is always the same story, and the same struggle, of the powerless against the powerful. (p. 70)

The chapters describe in detail the formation of the global community of neurodivergent autistic self-advocates (mainly through online forums and thematic groups), which became the basis for their social, educational, intervention and political initiatives.

Over the past 30 years, neurodiversity activists have carried out various actions against institutional abuse overmedication and neuroleptic abuse, schoolyard violence, pathologization, stigma, prejudice, pejorative labeling, and social rejection.

Another issues have been abusive “treatments” and interventions, e.g., applied behavioral analysis (ABA) (sadly still very popular), the goal of which is to turn an autistic child behaviorally into a non-autistic one (many adults mentioned in this volume, who experienced ABA as children, describe it as PTSD-inducing). Instead, there is a need for more people to understand and work with autistic children’s unique set of intellectual, visual, sensory, auditory, communication, and motor processing abilities.

The activists have allied against harmful actions of organisations usurping the right to speak publicly on behalf of autistic people, while actually stigmatizing and humiliating them by creating a public image of autism as a disaster devastating individuals and families, e.g., Autism Speaks. Autism self-advocates have seen mainstream autism research as stigmatizing, offensive, useless if not downright harmful and unethical. In response, Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has been developed in order to encourage the inclusion of people on the autism spectrum in matters which directly affect them, to include them as equal partners in research about the autism spectrum, to answer research questions that are considered relevant by the autistic community, and to use research findings to effect positive change for people on the spectrum.
As S.K. Kapp (2020) states, over the past years the autism rights branch of the neurodiversity movement has progressed from the fringe to the edge of the establishment. Autistic activists advised the revision of their own diagnosis in the DSM-5, and became a party in discussions with world top politicians. As it has matured from a mainly socio-cultural scope to an active part of a cross-disability rights coalition, the neurodiversity movement has shifted increasing focus toward not only what it opposes, but also what it supports. Autistic community and neurodiversity movement leaders, especially the contributors to this book, have driven this shift toward inclusion of neurodivergent people and their goals.

By way of conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the book is undoubtedly an invaluable historical testimony, useful for advanced researchers and archivists of the field both in countries where the events and actions described here took place and where the process of empowerment of neurodivergent people is in its infancy.

As a critical remark, I would mention that it is regrettable that only the autistic branch of the neurodiversity movement has been given a voice; certainly, the specific contributions of other neurodivergent populations would significantly enrich the landscape of the field. However, this was a conscious and deliberate narrowing of the field by the editor of the volume, to which he has every right.

For sceptics of the “lay expertise” approach, who insist on scientific justification for the concept of neurodiversity, this book will remain an anecdotal document of archival value which, however, when supplemented by the scholarly discourse of the academic and clinical professionals (e.g., Fung, 2021; Rosqvist, Chown, & Stenning, 2020; Sonuga-Barke & Thapar, 2021), together form a strong voice for change that cannot be ignored or trivialised.

In the face of first-person testimony, one can only respectfully appreciate the intimate, emotional and often dramatic narration; it seems inappropriate to comment critically on either the style or the content of these statements. One can conclude that these are literally, as the subtitle of this book announces, “stories from the frontline”. On the other hand, it is foreseeable that the reader may feel a certain confusion in view of the variety of detailed opinions of the characters speaking here, the vagueness of definitions, assumptions and detailed objectives. Fortunately, G. Russel and S. K. Kapp (2020), in the final concluding chapters, point out the potential objections and try to address them, which in a way brings order to the whole volume.

G. Russel notes that the neurodiversity movement has been criticised by both parents and researchers for being unrepresentative and divisive. Firstly, the movement has been accused of failing to represent all people who are “neurodivergent”
and, in particular, who are more impaired on the autism spectrum (a complaint raised by some clinicians, autistic people, and parents). In response, S.K. Kapp states that while the autism rights movement has welcomed autistic people regardless of support needs from the very beginning, the fluidity and complexity of autistic people’s support needs make classifying them by functioning levels or labels inaccurate. Moreover, Kapp quotes his own research (Kapp, 2018) indicating that while autistic people with higher support needs undoubtedly face greater risks of denial of basic rights such as autonomy and inclusion, at the same time autistic individuals with subtler manifestations of autism and higher cognitive abilities experience more peer bullying, distress, internalized ableism, and exclusion from services.

Furthermore, Russel draws attention to some conceptual and definitional confusion. Throughout this collection, contributors use the terms “neurotypical” and “neurodivergent” to denote two distinct groups. These terms can be divisive, fostering an “us” and “them” mentality and a dichotomous view of the world where you are either “in” or “out” (Runswick-Cole, 2014).

Another issue is the problem of definition of the category. It is not always clear from accounts in the book who is neurodivergent, and who is not, which is a crucial issue. Russel wonders whether neurodiversity movement include just people with autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions like dyspraxia and ADHD, or does it further include people with depression, schizophrenia, Tourette’s, etc.? The problem of the boundaries around who is “in” and who is “out” is currently not transparent or well-defined from the activists’ perspective.

Essentially, Russel and Kapp, in their final discussion, anticipated the comments of potential reviewers by pointing out potential controversies and inaccuracies, which can certainly be agreed with.

In his concluding reflections, Kapp states that the neurodiversity movement has made great progress and has begun to make inroads into politics, but until it comes together as a broader coalition in more regions of the world, its impact may be limited. From his perspective (which I personally share), future scholarly and activist work should shed light on the current status of the movement beyond its origins (beyond autism and beyond English-speaking countries), and identify updated pathways to help neurodivergent people receive the support and respect they deserve and need.

Overall, this collection is undoubtedly an invaluable source of inspiration for pioneering self-advocates (as a model manual of the process) as well as for academics, educators and social activists interested in the topic, especially in countries
where the biomedical model is still dominant and the concept of neurodiversity penetrates slowly and with difficulty into public awareness.

For teachers, educators and the decision-making educational establishment, this volume can be both a warning, a valuable lesson and an inspiring invitation to implement a culture of neurodiversity and strength-based pedagogical approaches at all levels of education – in mainstream schools, in the special education system, as well as in all public activities around education that can be the seeds of a change in social attitudes towards the acceptance and appreciation of neurodiversity.

References


