Language, Identity and the Neurodivergence Dilemma

This reflective piece explores the tensions that can arise between deficit-based language used within systems and the development of positive autistic identity. It draws on personal experience as an autistic person, a parent of neurodivergent children, and a clinical psychologist working within mental health services.

In my different roles as a father to children with various forms of neurodivergence, a psychologist, and as an autistic person myself, I often feel pulled in different directions in terms of the language used to describe autism and autistic experience. The tension between a strengths-based understanding of the qualities a neurodivergent person can bring, and language that is more related to deficits and impairment, is a continuous push and pull within myself and my family. It is a real challenge to move entirely away from deficit-based language. Particularly when so many of the doors you need to open within the systems you navigate as a family, and as an autistic individual, require an understanding that is problem-focused and where medical-model language is still the currency.

This poses a very real dilemma between the practical necessity of navigating these systems and language that allows my sons to develop an identity that incorporates being autistic in a way that speaks of strengths, valuing and embracing their difference. This is also very relevant to my own adjustment following identification: the experience of losing who I always thought I was and reshaping an identity that now includes being autistic. I don't always want to feel like a problem that needs to be solved or accommodated, although there are certainly problems to be solved and support needed at times. Did you feel the tension there? I certainly did as I was writing that sentence.

The space between these seemingly opposing positions feels very important in terms of my family's experience of autism. A pragmatic bridge between them allows autistic people to have the very real challenges of living in a largely neurotypical world understood in a way that enables fulfilment, the realisation of potential and improved wellbeing. At the same time, it creates space for recognising and embracing the strengths autistic people can bring, challenging accepted narratives, stereotypes and myths about what it means to be autistic.

In my professional life I often see a personal microcosm of this tension. As an autistic person, I thrive with predictability and routine, yet I also have a hyper-focused drive to achieve goals to the highest possible standard. This can be an advantage in professional contexts where sustained focus and analytical thinking are valued. It can also become challenging, as the exacting 'all or nothing' standards I hold myself to do not always sit comfortably alongside the competing demands of work, family life and everyday responsibilities.

I often think of it as being wired to spin one plate extremely well, while life increasingly requires me to keep multiple plates spinning at once, perhaps not perfectly, but well enough. Change and complexity can use a great deal of my personal resources. At the same time, I recognise that as an autistic person I bring strengths that can be of real value: a systematising mind, the capacity to recognise patterns and synthesise complex information quickly, the ability to think differently in ways that challenge convention and aid problem-solving, as well as precision and attention to detail. These strengths are most visible, however, when the environment provides the support needed to allow them to flourish.

There is also a growing part of me that sees truth in the idea that autism as a disability is, in many ways, socially constructed. Barriers to living a meaningful and fulfilling life are often created by a society built around neuro-normative assumptions about what a statistically average mind and way of being should look like. From that perspective, society needs to change to become more inclusive, not merely accommodating difference, but embracing it.

At the same time, I believe it is important to remain grounded in the realities many autistic people face in navigating current systems. For many families, including my own, the path forward often involves finding a nuanced and pragmatic balance between these perspectives.

The danger lies at either extreme. An over-emphasis on strengths can sometimes feel invalidating or dismissive of the very real challenges autistic people face. For example, my wife and I have experienced the conflicting emotions of hearing our son’s strengths described in glowing terms in an assessment report, while simultaneously worrying that those strengths might make it harder for his needs to be recognised and supported by other parts of the system.

Conversely, describing autism primarily through deficit and disorder risks binding autistic identity to the idea of being lesser or broken. That is not how I want my children to see themselves or their place in the world.

So how do we find the right line within this space between perspectives? How do we understand what autistic people need, make meaningful adjustments where necessary, and at the same time celebrate the strengths and value that come from neurodivergence?

For me, the answer lies in nuance, in developing language and ways of thinking that allow us to talk simultaneously about support needs and strengths. It means recognising the challenges autistic people can face without reducing them to symptoms or labels, and instead seeing the whole person in front of us.

I certainly don’t have all the answers. But it feels important that we continue walking this line together, clinicians, families, autistic people and wider society - as we try to find better ways of understanding and supporting neurodivergent lives.