

December 2024

## Outside of the Norm: On Blackness and Neurodivergence in the Workplace


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### Recommended Citation

Abdulle, Safia (2024) "Outside of the Norm: On Blackness and Neurodivergence in the Workplace," *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: [10.9707/2833-1508.1195](https://doi.org/10.9707/2833-1508.1195)

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ought/vol6/iss1/5>

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# Outside of the Norm: On Blackness and Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Safia Abdulle

In my view, neurotypicality permeates and rules the dominant, traditional workplace. To be neurotypical is synonymous with being a “productive” and “valuable” member of society. In a society—particularly speaking within the context of Western society—which is enthralled with work (and consequently enthralled with productivity), to be productive is to be normal, and to be normal is to be neurotypical. As indicated by Devlin and Pothier (2006), “productivity is essential to personhood” (p. 2). Moreover, these concepts of productivity can be understood to derive from the pressures of the capitalist, colonial societies we live in—pressures which have become situated as norms. As such, the neoliberal, capitalist foundations of Western society are essentially incompatible with disability or difference, further categorizing the “normal” person as the individual who is able-bodied, neurotypical, and able to work. As I reflect on just how complex the interplay between these concepts and topics are, I felt it asinine to encapsulate how neurotypicality dominates workspaces without simultaneously identifying how Whiteness permeates the workplace as well. In this article, I reflect on the complex interplay between race, neurodivergence, and work, specifically exemplifying how neurotypicality permeates our society, and how those who diverge are consistently situated outside of the norm.

## How Does Neurotypicality Dominate the Workplace? Establishing the “Norm”

Neurodiversity, simply stated, is a term which states that all human brains have neurocognitive variations and thus, all function differently (Kapp, 2020; Singer, 1999; Walker, 2023). The term neurodivergence specifically describes individuals whose minds deviate from the expected neurocognitive make-up society has deemed as “normal” (Rosqvist et al., 2020) and can describe individuals diagnosed with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and many others. The norms of neurotypicality which dominate the workplace are maintained and ingrained societally. I conceptualize the ways in which neurotypicality is taught to those of us who deviate neurocognitively as more or less a social

order. I see this neurotypical social order as the often-unspoken ways in which society, namely here Western societies, operate to maintain the status quo—the social and behavioral blueprints we are taught to follow from a young age which creates the categorizations of “normal” and “valuable” in our society. These social behaviors might include, for instance, maintaining eye contact with others, being able to use vocal communication, maintaining a particular gait or body language, or the ability to sit still for prolonged periods of time. From infancy, children and families in Western society are inundated with information around what it means to be “normal,” and from consciousness, individuals arguably begin to internalize the ways in which their behaviors, their bodies, and their minds fit (or do not fit) this socially prescribed blueprint of normal (Foucault 1965; Foucault 1977).

Medical, educational, and political institutions advise families on developmental milestones that children should be reaching at specific ages. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society (2024), for instance, a child’s expected developmental milestones span an array of areas, including a child’s motor, language, social and cognitive growth. I further reflect on my current home (Ontario, Canada) and recognize that the Government of Ontario (2024a) provides detailed lists on their web page for parents and guardians to utilize to track the developmental progress of their children, including at what age children should be able to respond to and produce vocal language or even when children should “enjoy being around others” or play social games with others. Being able to demonstrate these milestones at their prescribed developmental age indicates that a child can be deemed “healthy” and moreover, can be deemed a normal, valuable, or productive part of society (Foucault, 1965; Walmsley, 2019).

The U.S.’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024), echoes this further, stating that “a missed milestone could be a sign of a problem,” arguably indicating that neurologically or developmentally disabled individuals exist in bodies that create problems for society. These notions of productivity and “problem-hood” are echoed in educational curricula which indicate that children and youth attend educational institutions to learn skills and develop into “informed, productive, and responsible citizens” (Government of Ontario, 2024b). Here, the foundations of a neurotypical workplace and society are laid through the establishment of the “norm”—children must reach predetermined developmental milestones (aka: “typical”

neurological development) in order to be considered normal, healthy, productive and valuable.

As a result, I believe, individuals begin to internalize these developmental milestones and social norms, questioning how their bodies and behaviors fit (or do not fit) this socially prescribed blueprint of normal. Through the establishment of the norm (i.e., being neurotypical), children in many contexts are taught how to exist to be considered normal or typical. Children are taught how to communicate and behave verbally, and non-verbally, in ways that would be understood by others (Government of Ontario, 2024a; Government of Ontario, 2024b). This is not limited to academic curricula on English language development for instance, but also speaks to the social behaviors that are reinforced from an early age. Children are literally evaluated on how they behave, regulate their behaviors, and interact with peers—essentially, what is deemed “socially acceptable.” As evident in Ontario’s elementary report card structure, children are graded on their ability to “manage [their] own behavior”; “follow a plan”; “manage [their] time”; “respond positively to [others]”; and “build healthy peer-to-peer relationships” (Ministry of Education, 2023). These structures are reinforced in the home, in schools, in the media, and more; individuals are being taught how they ‘should’ behave if they desire to be successful, liked, accepted, and climb social hierarchies effectively. Echoing Foucault’s 1977 analyses, disciplinary power in this way exists covertly; Western society is structured in ways that mass produce certain types of individuals. Society is created around these disciplinary structures in ways that become common sense or a way of life. In this respect, this neurotypical social order disciplines—it over-surveils and regulates children’s development and behaviors through medical, educational, social, and political institutions. As such, children begin to regulate themselves through the social norms they are disciplined to follow.

## **When People “Diverge”**

It is important to state that these developmental milestones and social rules were created for, and come second-nature to, those children and individuals who exist with the predominant neurocognitive make-up that society deemed as “neurotypical” and “normal.” As highlighted by Foucault (1965; 1977), by virtue of the categorization of normal, the existence of abnormal

comes to be. This coded language of “normal” and “abnormal” reinforces the idea that those individuals who exist as neurodivergent or developmentally disabled are abnormal and therefore, should change to fit society’s normative standards. Those individuals who do not follow these social rules from a young age (whether disabled or non-disabled) are ostracized, bullied and/or isolated from their peers—deemed “abnormal.” As highlighted above, when children are graded on their social behaviors, those students who fail to showcase social skills are given poor grades and can be socially ostracized (Lindsay & McPherson 2012; Robinson et al. 2020). Even more, as indicated by Lindsay and McPherson (2012), teacher grades and perceptions can adversely impact disabled children’s experiences of exclusion, as they reported that “teachers’ attitudes . . . affected how children experienced inclusion or exclusion within the school setting” (p. 104). Neurodivergent youth are penalized by these norms; for instance, in societies where eye contact is expected as a social norm, autistic people who find it painful to maintain eye contact are “disabled both socially and professionally” (Price, 2022, p. 231). It becomes clear that institutions continue to reinforce these social norms; the more normal you are, and the more you can follow social rules and norms, the more you will climb social hierarchies and be able to maintain higher social standing in education and eventually, in the workplace.

In this way, being neurotypical is equated with being “normal” and “healthy.” Health and normalcy then become conflated with productivity and value. As blatantly indicated by Government of Ontario (2024b), reaching developmental milestones in education (a.k.a fitting the norms prescribed by neurotypical social order) allows you to become an “informed, productive and responsible citizen.” In contrast, since missing these milestones is said to potentially indicate “a problem” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024), failure to reach these developmental milestones results in the pathologization of your existence. Devlin and Pothier (2006) echo these notions in their writings on critical disability theory, stating that society’s approach to disability “conceptualizes disability as misfortune, privileges ‘normalcy’ over the ‘abnormal’ . . . and [presumes] that productivity is essential to personhood” (p. 2). Further argued by Devlin and Pothier (2006), much of social functioning in Western society revolves around the production of capital and an individual’s labor—around work. It is evident through the workings of our capitalist society that individuals are categorized as valuable from a young age through their skills and potential

for labor; individuals who are productive and can contribute their labor to society are deemed as valuable—the personification of value as productivity.

Furthermore, society’s conceptualization of disability recognizes disability as inherently bad, pitiable, abnormal, and importantly, unable to work—immediately valuing those who are “normal” over those who are disabled (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 2). In this way, a “valuable” individual is arguably one who can be disciplined to contribute to society in the ways it is pre-structured to function. Even more, as brilliantly asserted by Legault et al. (2021), neurodivergence can be understood as an epistemic and cognitive marginalization. They argue that since the epistemically dominant group (neurotypical people) hold the dominant cognitive profile which establishes the norms, those who deviate from the cognitive norm (neurodivergent people) are marginalized, because they do not have the epistemic power and cognitive privilege to access the resources that neurotypical people can. Simply put, some of the “deficits” associated with neurodivergence (e.g., lack of social cues) might be maintained because neurodivergent people do not have equal access to epistemic resources that come naturally to those that fit the cognitive norm (e.g., neurotypical communication styles like eye contact or coded language). This epistemic and cognitive marginalization permeates and dominates the workplace; the ontological realities of neurodivergence remain at odds with neurotypicality and the dominant, traditional workplace, creating a perpetual existence for neurodivergent people as situated outside of access to the norm.

Overall, then, the inherent assumptions about disabled bodies and minds are reinforced throughout society. Social norms disseminate coded information and reinforce these ideas of normalcy through the application of neurotypical norms, inadvertently yet purposefully marginalizing disabled, neurodivergent individuals.

## **What Does Race Have to Do with It?**

Historically and presently, the existence of Blackness (and Black people) has been constructed as a problem (Coles & Powell, 2020; Du Bois, 1903 [2004]; Dumas, 2016). W. E. B. Du Bois once proclaimed that the history of “the American Negro” is a history of “strife” (Du Bois, 1903[2004], p. 9). Almost 120 years later, there is still much truth to this statement..

Historical and present-day accounts of racism showcase how Black bodies have been disciplined and punished for their existence, resulting in harmful consequences against Black bodies, including social exclusion, criminalization, dehumanization, and violence (Annamma, 2017; Apena, 2007; Coles & Powell, 2020; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Dumas, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Skiba & Williams, 2014; Welch & Payne, 2010; Wilt, 2021). In Western society, Black individuals have historically, and presently, been associated with images of criminality, delinquency, and aggression (Apena, 2007; Coles & Powell, 2020; Gibson et al., 2014; Goff et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2002).

Blackness, within the workplace specifically, has consistently been viewed as problematic. From the problematization of Black people's hair to the pathologization of Black people's behaviors as dangerous or deviant, to be Black in the workplace has often been synonymous with trouble. Even within the context of the neurodiversity movement, as a result of the complex manifestations of racism and ableism—as I see it, anti-Black ableism—Black and racialized neurodivergent individuals have been left at the margins (Price, 2022; Udonsi, 2022; Mandell et al., 2007; Mandell et al., 2002; Mandell et al., 2009). Dominant literature on neurodiversity and Blackness—specifically the conceptualization of Black youth and neurodivergence—showcases an emergent gap in the intersections between the two concepts. Neurodiversity research has largely overlooked Black individuals by focusing on non-marginalized (primarily White male) bodies, thereby facilitating a narrow societal understanding of neurodivergence—one that discounts identities such as race (Davis et al., 2022; Rosqvist et al., 2020). This failure to recognize the presentation of neurodivergence in Black bodies can lead to dangerous outcomes from a young age. Studies have indicated that, for children meeting the criteria for a neurodivergent diagnosis such as Autism or ADHD, Black and racialized children were up to five times more likely to receive an incorrect diagnosis of a pathologizing disorder (such as conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder) when compared to their White peers (Cameron & Guterman, 2007; Fadus et al., 2020; Mandell et al., 2007; Mandell et al., 2002; Mandell et al., 2009). These disparities can lead to dangerous outcomes for Black neurodivergent youth including dehumanization, criminalization, and increased risks of violence (Coles & Powell, 2020; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Skiba & Williams, 2014). Within multiple contexts, to be Black is to diverge.

## Masking: Surviving a Neurotypical Society at Work

Returning to the topic of work, I reflect on what it means to exist within the workplace as neurodivergent, as Black, and specifically, as Black and neurodivergent. To diverge from societally expected norms is, as established above, to be abnormal, unhealthy, unproductive, or even dangerous. As such, cognitively marginalized individuals must often use masking strategies to conceal themselves and assimilate to the norms expected of us.

Many neurodivergent individuals utilize masking to hide their neurodivergent traits and to survive in a neurotypical society. Masking allows for the concealing of “characteristics that may be socially constructed as indicative of [neurodivergent individuals] otherness” (Rosqvist et al., 2020, p. 146). These masking behaviors could include, pretending to understand social interactions, not asking for help when it is needed, blocking self stimulatory behaviors, and more. “We internalize many of the values of the ableist society we’re living in” (Price 2022, p. 105). Neurodivergent individuals, accordingly, might camouflage by hiding traits and behaviors to avoid being spotted as a disabled individual, and often will identify strategies to over-compensate for challenges related to disability. At work, “Autistic and neurodivergent employees in various contexts have discussed situations in which, in order to fit in, they have felt it necessary to mask characteristics that may be socially constructed as indicative of their otherness” (Martin, p. 146; see also Patton, 2019). The goal of masking in this way is to maintain the appearance of being non-disabled, highly independent, and/or functional (Price, 2022). Masking is a technique which many neurodivergent individuals have felt is socially necessary to fit in, and at the least, to not be marginalized as a result of their neurodivergent behaviors (Rosqvist et al., 2020).

Black neurodivergent people, however, have a complicated relationship with masking—we navigate various social contexts due to our intersectional identities. Social rules and norms are not the same for Black and non-Black neurodivergent people. In this way, masking can sometimes lead to more social ostracization as individuals attempt to navigate social and cultural norms in different social contexts, related to both race and disability (Price, 2022) leading to more work and energy to figure out how best to fit in and survive. Crucially, masking behaviors are recognized to “at best cause unnecessary pressure [to neurodivergent people] and at worst can impact

extremely negatively on wellbeing and mental health” (Rosqvist et al. 2020, p. 146). Masking often leads to “problematic coping strategies” including substance use, disordered eating behaviors, fawning as a threat-based response, people-pleasing behaviors, extreme rigidity, social detachment and/or dissociation (Price, 2022, p. 111). Learning to suppress internal pain and discomfort becomes a coping mechanism that is taught as a part of survival in life (Price, 2022). As a result, it should be emphasized that neurodivergent Black people utilize techniques that risk harming themselves to avoid the risks of social punishment associated with living authentically.

## Call to Action

In my view, the typical, dominant workplace arises directly as a result of the neurotypical norms that permeate society. As such, overarchingly, typical workplaces do not engage with divergent perspectives—both neurodivergent and racially divergent perspectives. Rather, these typical workplaces, and furthermore typical societies, facilitate the marginalization of racialized, disabled, and otherwise othered bodies. Radical reimagining of the cognitive and epistemic natures of our society are needed in order to fully and appropriately—not performatively—support the needs of all individuals existing within the workplace. These types of “radical alternative futures” might seem unrealistic or impossible (Acevedo & Nusbaum, 2021, p. 15). However, imagining societies that exist outside of the realms created by societal norms and structures is arguably the only way for racialized and/or disabled people to be free. Existing authentically, and in excess of what is expected of us—that is, having “emotions that are too large, passions that are too childish and not profitable, habits that are too repetitive, and bodies and minds that require assistance” (Price, 2022, p. 233)—challenges the narrowly prescribed definitions of normal and healthy. Societies, and consequently workplaces, with more acceptance, more flexible norms, and less stigma can begin to challenge these normative definitions.

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