16 On beyond Sheldon Cooper: what do we know about neurodiverse PhD students?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

One of the most popular autistic characters on television is the clearly autistic academic Dr Sheldon Cooper from the Big Bang Theory. At the same time that there is no systematic study of the lived experiences of real neurodiverse PhD students to challenge these kinds of stereotypes. This silence around neurodiversity is curious. The PhD is a small, but notoriously difficult area of education. Over the last thirty years academics have produced a broad literature about policy, curriculum, pedagogy, mental health and employability. Without a deep understanding of how neurodiverse people experience the PhD, we are stuck in a deficit model that assumes that ‘accomodations’ are the only answer, ignoring the radical potentials of (re)designing the PhD around the concept of difference. This paper reviews what we know already and maps out future research directions using concepts from the universal design movement.

Full paper

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), Tourettes and dyslexia. The term has been popularised by advocates who contend that these conditions are not ‘disorders’ or pathologies, merely different ways of being human and have taken up the ‘rainbow infinity’ symbol to represent the rights of this community (Gross, 2016). However, as Armstrong (2015) pointed out, there is no ‘brain in jar’ that can be labelled neurotypical, so trying to exactly define neurodiversity is problematic. The discourse and narratives around neurodiversity and its causes, treatments are extremely complex so it is perhaps not surprising that researchers have yet to explore the experiences of neurodiverse PhD students.

Getting a diagnosis, especially of ADHD, can be difficult, which makes it hard to know how many PhD students could identify as neurodiverse. Doyle (2020) suggests that neurodiverse conditions are characterised by a 'spikey profile' across tests of working memory, processing speed, verbal and visual skills, with so called 'neurotypicals' having a flatter profile. Estimates vary on how many people could be counted as neurodiverse from 8 - 15% (Doyle, 2020), although determining the prevalence can be difficult and depend on factors such as access to healthcare and intersectionality of class and gender. We can, however, safely assume neurodiverse people commence PhD study all the time as not all people who are neurodiverse have impaired cognitive function; in fact, it's likely neurodiverse people experience advantages from their 'wiring', specifically in relation to pattern regognition, creativity and hyper-focus. Since neurodiversity is a hidden condition, people have the choice to disclose, but might fear labelling and consequent career implications, especially in the hyper competitive environments of contemporary academia (Brown, 2020). To date, however, there has been no systemmatic study of the experience of neurodiverse PhD students so it is impossible to measure the numbers and whether they consider their neurodiversity to be an asset, or disabling, or both.

The PhD has what has been called a 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) complete with an 'imagined ideal student' and 'pedagogical inertia'. Doctoral study is designed to foster a professional identity as an academic, always an international profession, which in part explains and its forms are replicated over time and space with only minor variations. Despite sustained critique with respect to form and function over a long period of time (beginning with Dale, 1935), the PhD experience has been slow to change. All PhD students have supervisors (even if they are not all called that), engage in the independent construction of new knowledge and produce some kind of large document at the end. Shulman points out that in addition to common 'surface constructions' like the features I already mentioned, signature pedagogies also have deep structures, or what is 'really being taught'.

When it comes to doctoral education, it can be argued that what is really being taught is how to participate as a scholar/researcher within insitutional constraints which, include cultures that are both hierarchical and classed in nature. To this end, doctoral education tends to be organised around an 'imagined ideal student', which we can most clearly see in policy settings and documents. For instance, the paid stipends or the pay offered to Teaching Assistants is extremely low, assuming the student has access to other sources of support or is independently wealthy; part time stipends are often only offered to carers, assuming that all scholars are able bodied unless 'burdened' with children, disabled partners or elderly parents. Socialising is an integral part of 'getting along' in academia, yet students are assumed to be able to pick up unspoken rules about how to behave. Neurodiverse people challenge the imagined ideal student of doctoral education; if we want to be truly inclusive we must confront the hegemony of these normative assumptions about how to 'do' the PhD.

Without a deep understanding of how neurodiverse people experience the PhD, we are stuck in a deficit model that assumes that ‘accomodations’ to the normative PhD structure are the only answer. Principles from the Universal Design (Rose and Meyer, 2007) can be helpful here. Universal Design (UD) has roots in the accessibility movement in building design where the removal of obstacles for the physically disabled and design of alternatives, such as swapping stairs for ramps, enables fuller participation. UD principles might unlock radical potentials of (re)designing the PhD around the concept of difference - with benefits for neurodiverse and neurotypical PhD students alike.

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