

Neurodivergence is also an LGBTQ+ topic

Making space for “neuroqueering” in the outdoors

TARAH LOY-ASHE

ABSTRACT

Recently, the field of research exploring the links between neurodivergence and the LGBTQ+ community has grown. Many queer adults who were not diagnosed as children are just now receiving neurodivergent diagnoses. Nick Walker coined the term “neuroqueer” in 2015 to describe the intersection of being both neurodivergent and queer. “Neuroqueering” refers to the embodying and expressing of one’s neurodivergence in ways that also queer one’s performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or other aspects of one’s identity (Walker 2021). Considering the increase of queer representation in the outdoors, it is necessary to also address neuroqueering and its implications for the outdoor community. This conceptual article will address the connection between neurodivergence and the LGBTQ+ community, implications for the queer outdoors, and ways to include neuroqueer recreationalists and outdoor advocates in efforts to make the outdoors more equitable.

Discrimination against the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning) population has been a persistent issue in recreational settings. Historically, LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as those identifying as neurodivergent, have faced challenges in fully participating in social and recreation activities (Lhant 2022). This includes being excluded or made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe in outdoor spaces, as well as facing bias and prejudice in decision-making and policies related to access to public lands and resources. In addition, some LGBTQ+ individuals feel they have not been reflected in outdoor culture, despite the community having been involved in outdoor recreation for decades (Winters 2020).

As advocates and organizations work to support the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals to claim space in the outdoors, it is important to acknowledge various intersections of queer identities that can impact those outdoor experiences. Lack of physical and social activity opportunities contributes to health disparities across LGBTQ+ persons (Hall et al. 2020). Studies show that discrimination can have a profound impact on the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of impacted individuals, thus creating barriers to accessing the health benefits of recreation and physical activity (George and Stokes 2018).

QUEER REPRESENTATION

Because the outdoors is a space that has traditionally been viewed as a place for physical and mental recreation, it is an ideal location for challenging traditional norms. Queer representation in the outdoor recreation industry has been limited in the past, but there has been a recent push for increased representation and inclusivity (DeWeese 2018). Some outdoor organizations have started initiatives to create safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, while others have taken steps to promote LGBTQ+ visibility and representation through marketing and advertising campaigns (Lundin and Bombaci 2022). Additionally, there have been efforts to diversify outdoor media, such as magazines and online content, to include more stories and voices from the LGBTQ+ community. Despite these efforts, there is a continued need for diverse intersectional

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representation and inclusivity in the outdoor recreation industry, as LGBTQ+ individuals may identify with various identities, which could impact the challenges of, and barriers to, participating in outdoor activities.

NEURODIVERGENCE

“Neurodivergence” refers to a difference in the structure or function of the brain that affects how a person experiences and interacts with the world (Komarow and Hector 2020). This term is often used to describe individuals with conditions such as autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), dyslexia, and other neurological differences that may impact communication, learning, and socialization. Neurodivergence is seen as a diverse condition of neurological wiring rather than a disorder or disability, and is recognized as a natural aspect of human diversity.

The exact prevalence of neurodivergent individuals is difficult to determine due to the wide range of conditions that falls under the neurodiversity umbrella. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that approximately 1.8% of children in the US are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), while about 9.4% have been diagnosed with ADHD (International Dyslexia Association). It is also estimated that 15–20% of the

population has some degree of dyslexia (International Dyslexia Association). It’s important to note that neurodivergent individuals may not always receive a formal diagnosis, and that neurodiversity is a concept that embraces a wide range of neurocognitive differences. These estimates provide a general idea of the prevalence of younger neurodivergent individuals, but the actual number may be higher, especially when considering adult rates of diagnosis.

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NEURODIVERGENCE AND THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Neurodivergence and its intersection with the LGBTQ+ community, which includes gender-diverse individuals, is a growing area of research and exploration, as many queer adults are just now receiving neurodivergent diagnoses. “Gender diverse” as an umbrella term to describe people whose gender identities—such as transgender, nonbinary or gender-queer—differ from the sex they were assigned at birth. Studies show that gender-diverse people are more likely to report autism traits and are five times as likely to suspect they have undiagnosed autism as cisgender people are (Walsh et al 2018). Warrier and colleagues, who conducted the largest study yet to examine the connection between autism and gender and sexual minorities, found that people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are three to six times as likely to be autistic as cisgender people (2020). Gender-diverse people also report, on average, more traits associated with autism, such as sensory difficulties, enhanced pattern-recognition skills, and lower levels of empathy and being able to accurately understand and respond to another person’s emotional state (Warrier et al. 2020).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept that describes how different aspects of a person’s identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, and ability, interact and overlap to shape their experiences and challenges (MacDonald et al. 2021). Intersectionality recognizes that individuals cannot be understood by looking at just one aspect of their identity, but rather, it is the combination of multiple identities that creates a unique personality. Understanding intersectionality is important for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, as it highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the interconnected challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized communities. By considering the intersecting identities of individuals, organizations can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable spaces that better serve the needs of all members of society.

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Minority Stress

Minority stress theory is a psychological framework that explains the negative health outcomes experienced by members of minority groups (Tan et al. 2020), such as those identifying as neuroqueer. The theory posits that minority individuals face unique and persistent stressors, such as discrimination, prejudice, and stigma, that can lead to negative health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular disease, through the activation of physiological and psychological stress responses (Millar and Brooks 2022). Identifying as neuroqueer can intensify such stress and impact one's mental health (George and Stokes 2018; Hall et al. 2020). A study conducted by the Trevor Project found suicide rates to be significantly higher among autistic LGBTQ+ youth than non-autistic youth (Lhant 2022).

The minority stress model also includes protective factors, such as social support and coping strategies, that can help to mitigate the negative health effects of minority stress (Tan et al. 2020). For example, personal accounts from neurodivergent people suggest that engaging in physical activity, such as camping and hiking, can help to reduce stress and improve overall health (Enright 2022).

THE QUEER OUTDOORS

Outdoor recreation has a long history, dating back to ancient civilizations that engaged in hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities for leisure. During the 19th century, the idea of “taking to the woods” as a form of recreation gained popularity, leading to the development of camping and hiking as leisure activities (Young 2017). The creation of national parks in the US, such as Yellowstone in 1872, further popularized outdoor recreation and conservation efforts. During the 20th century, advances in technology and transportation made outdoor recreation more accessible to the general population. Today, outdoor recreation is a multi-billion dollar industry, encompassing a wide range of activities, from camping and hiking to rock climbing and water sports.

The outdoors is often seen as a space for conventional, heteronormative activities and lifestyles. “Queering the outdoors” refers to LGBTQ+ people creating their own narrative as they pursue outdoor recreation and other nature-related activities (Padgett 2021). This involves challenging traditional norms. The term recognizes the need for inclusive and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals in outdoor and nature-related activities. Historically, the LGBTQ+ community has been the target of hate and violence, which has impacted its use of outdoor space (Bell and Perry 2015). Queer Outdoors groups and organizations provide opportunities for members of the LGBTQ+ community to connect and participate in outdoor activities, such as camping, hiking, and paddling, while also promoting representation, visibility, and inclusivity in the outdoor recreation industry.

CREATING EQUITABLE OUTDOOR SPACES

Neurodivergent individuals often face unique challenges in the outdoors, such as sensory overload or difficulty navigating unfamiliar environments. These experiences can be further compounded for neuroqueer individuals, who may also experience discrimination based on their LGBTQ+ identity. This is why it is important for the outdoor community to take the intersection of neurodivergence and queerness into consideration when trying to make the outdoors more inclusive and equitable.

There are several ways to include neuroqueer individuals in efforts to make the outdoors more accessible. One way is to ensure that information about accessibility and accommodations are widely available and easy to understand. This can include providing sensory-friendly accommodations, such as quiet spaces for individuals with sensory sensitivities, or providing information about accessible trails and campsites. Additionally, the outdoor community can provide training and support for neuroqueer individuals to develop the skills and confidence needed to participate in outdoor activities.

Another way to make space for neuroqueering in the outdoors is to support and amplify the voices of neuroqueer individuals. This can include creating safe spaces for neuroqueer individuals to share their experiences and

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perspectives, as well as supporting neuroqueer-led initiatives and organizations. Additionally, it is important to recognize and celebrate neuroqueer individuals as leaders and advocates in the outdoor community, and to actively seek out their perspectives and experiences when making decisions and policy changes that impact the community. Examples of neuroqueer initiatives include:

By making space for neuroqueer individuals in the outdoors, the community can work to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for everyone.

- Accessibility: Making outdoor spaces, trails, and facilities accessible to individuals with disabilities, through efforts such as the creation of accessible campsites, trails, and picnic areas.
- Diversifying the workforce: Encouraging diversity and inclusivity in the outdoor industry by promoting hiring practices that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Outreach and education: Targeting neuroqueer, disabled, and LGBTQ+ communities to raise awareness of outdoor recreation opportunities and promote participation. Acknowledge that neurodiversity is a valid identity and not only a form of self-expression. Embrace the rainbow infinity symbol, which is preferable to the stigmatizing puzzle piece symbol.
- Outdoor programming: Providing opportunities for neuroqueer individuals to experience the outdoors through programs that cater to a variety of interests and abilities while being sensitive to sensory stimulation needs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, neurodivergence is also an LGBTQ+ topic, and it is necessary to address neuroqueering and its implications for the outdoor community. By making space for neuroqueer individuals in the outdoors, the community can work to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for everyone, regardless of neurodivergence or LGBTQ+ identity. The outdoor community should prioritize neurodiversity in its efforts to make the outdoors more accessible, by providing sensory-friendly accommodations, supporting neuroqueer voices, and recognizing neuroqueer individuals as leaders and advocates. These efforts aim to break down barriers to accessing the outdoors and to create a more inclusive and equitable outdoor community for all.

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