

CITIES OF NEURODIVERSITY

Dr Therese Kenna

Department of Geography

University College Cork, Ireland

Conceptualising neurodiversity

More-than autism and more-than sensory.

Multiple and diverse experiences of urban space, linked to a multitude of neurological differences and the intersections of those neurological differences.



Autism friendly shopping is here.

Every Tuesday from 6.30pm to 8.30pm we will reduce noise to create a sensory-friendly shopping experience for those with autism.

Two hours of:

- No in-store announcements or music
- Till scan sounds lowered
- Extra assistance upon request
- Assistance dogs welcome

ALDI

Everyday Amazing.

Neurodiversity and the city

Depictions of cities as complex places in constant flux has been a core part of urban theory.

Lefebvre (1996, p.129) depicted the urban as a place of encounters, a place of 'permanent disequilibrium', 'play' and 'of the unpredictable'.

What does this mean for neurodiversity?

Experiencing the city

I like quiet reading spaces e.g. upstairs in cafes where I can sit undisturbed for long periods of time and read.

(Jamie, late 20s, non-binary, bisexual, diagnosed with ASD, anxiety, ADHD, OCD, SPD and BPD)

Since the pandemic, I also have really appreciated having 'real-time' data on the number of people in different shops, etc. so that I know when to avoid them.

(Lucy, late 20s, female, queer, diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, OCD and Tourette's).

I feel comfortable often in a few specific shops such as sostrene greene or tiger because of the predetermined pathway that everyone has to follow because it makes for a much more familiar experience, as well as Waterstones in particular because it has such soft lighting and minimal noise as well as soft carpets which eliminate stepping noises.

(Ava, early 30s, female, heterosexual, diagnosed with ASD, anxiety, depression, SPD, phobia and SAD)

The barista in the cafe I go to knows my order, and I know a lot of the people who go there frequently, even though I don't speak to them I like seeing the same faces.

(Alex, late 20s, diagnosed with ASD)

I enjoy shopping in the city if I have headphones and already know the layout of the shops I will visit. I avoid busy days and times of day. I do not eat anywhere that does not post their menu online as my sensory needs are quite specific and I need time to read the menu and make a decision before I actually go to the restaurant. I usually have a plan before coming to the city of where I will go and when.

(Riley, 17-21, bisexual, diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia and SPD)

I get the bus from my home county to Cork every Sunday. On the Sunday of Halloween, 2 of my friends invited me to go to a pub in the city after I got off the bus, and they said they'd meet me at the pub. I was already familiar with how busy the city can get on weekends, but it doesn't help when thousands of drunk students and adults alike are wandering the streets at 10pm screaming at the top of their lungs. While on the way to the pub, a group of drunk people around my age caught me off guard when they'd grabbed my shoulder to get me to join them singing. The combination of them singing in my ear and being touched so aggressively made me tear up, but I couldn't have a breakdown in the middle of the street so I'd laughed along and said I'd had to go. I did eventually break down in a quiet alleyway on the way to the pub. I wouldn't blame them for it because of course, they're only having fun and they'd never have assumed I was ASD.

(John, 17-21, male, heterosexual, diagnosed with ASD, ADHD and Tourettes)

Experiencing public transport

I don't understand how transportation works in the city and I'm too afraid to ask, it'll be too much information at once and I'll get overwhelmed and cry (Mary, aged 50-65, female, heterosexual, diagnosed with ASD).

...noise levels on trains, timetable delays, business in station. Being able to buy bus tickets for long journeys by machine in the bus station rather than paying the bus driver directly. It takes most of the stress out of visiting these places. (Riley, aged 17-21, bisexual, diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia and SPD).

I find trying to get my mask and leapcard nerve wracking as I feel everyone is looking at me wanting me to hurry up. (Kate, early 20s, female, bisexual, diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety and dyslexia).

Conclusions

Conceptualising neurodiversity as more-than autism and more-than sensory, and thinking complexly and relationally about neurodiversity will help those in the urban professions like planning, policy, and architecture to design cities of and for neurodiversity.

References

Hall, E. (2020) Accessibility. In Kobayashi, A. (Ed) *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Second Edition), Elsevier.

Hall, E. and Bates, E. (2019) Hatescape? A relational geography of disability hate crime, exclusion and belonging in the city. *Geoforum*, 101, 100-110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.02.024>

Hall, E. and Wilton, R. (2017) Towards and relational geography of disability. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(6), 727-744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516659705>

Kenna, T. (2023) 'Neurodiversity in the city: Exploring the complex geographies of belonging and exclusion in urban space'. *The Geographical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12512>

Kenna, T. (2022) Cities of neurodiversity: New directions for an urban geography of neurodiversity. *Area*, 00, 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12803>