

Culturally Competent Support for Autistic African American College Students

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Riverside Community College District



My Journey

from disability rights advocate

to disability justice (Schalk, 2022)

scholar and champion

Personal and Professional



AI generated image

Personally

Adult nephew – has never had a job
Three children coming up behind him
Hoping for better opportunities for the little ones

Professionally Contribute to Research Gaps

Make sure that most vulnerable
students are not lost in discussions
about *equality and fairness*

Outline for Presentation

- Discussion breaks
- Understanding Autistic students' unique needs, strengths and challenges
- Racism as an historically and currently oppressive and disabling system
- What Postsecondary institutions can do to provide culturally competent support to AA Autistic students.
- Resources to support educators

Solution Oriented Thinking

Make every effort to change the things you do not like.
If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking.
You might find a new solution.

Maya Angelou



Image courtesy Wikimedia commons

Cognitive Typologies: Vocabulary

- **Neuro:** Relating to the nerves or the nervous system and brain's neural network
- **Neurotypical:** The presumed majority neurotype or cognitive typology (Dunne, 2024), most often attributed to a species-typical human (Goodley, 2014) scores within the bell curve of average and suggests *normalcy*
- **Neurodiversity:** Represents the multivarious ways that human brains processes information (Dunne, 2024)
- **Neurodivergent** (emerging, Neurodistinct): A person who identifies with one or more unique cognitive typologies, marginalized neurodiversity (Chowdhury, 2022)

Neuroinclusion: Acceptance and inclusion of all cognitive typologies where people find a sense of belonging without being forced to be like someone else (Dunne, 2024)

Labels: Humans learn by grouping and use labels helps categorize characteristics

Need to avoid stigmatizing the labels

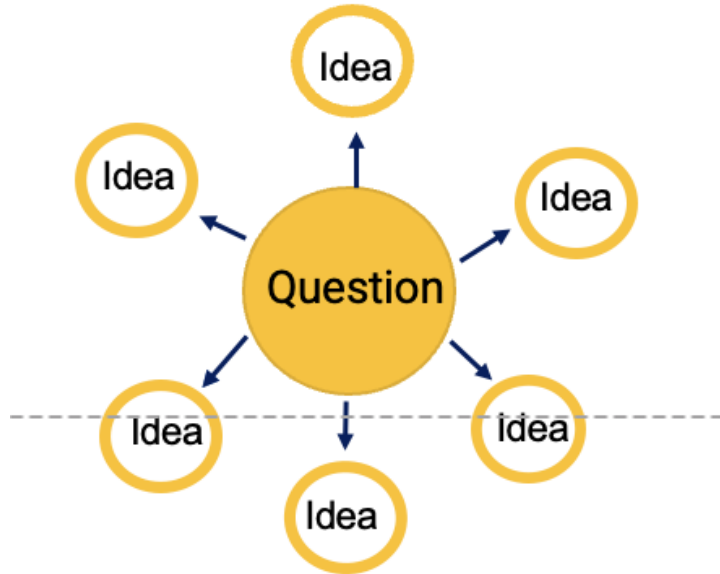


Cognitive Typologies Under the Neurodiverse Umbrella (Dunne, 2024)

Neurodivergent Thinkers

Diverge outward, Horizontal, Creative, Literal, Approaching problems from unique angles
(Dunne, 2024).

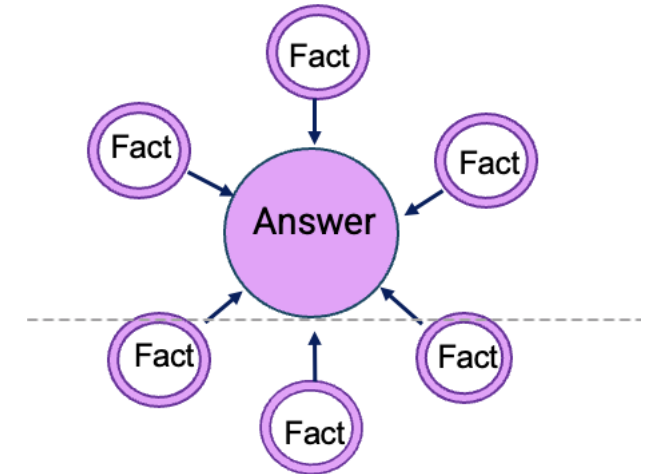
Outside the box



Neurotypical Thinkers

Converge inward, Vertical, Linear, Abstract, Approach problems using expected patterns.

Inside the box



Neurodivergent Spectrum

Intellectual Disabilities
(Adaptive, cognitive delays)
Love learning, honesty, kindness

Autism (Social, sensory)
Concentrating, processing details, memory for facts

Mental Health Challenges (Executive Function, focus, retention)
Depth of thinking, artistic expression

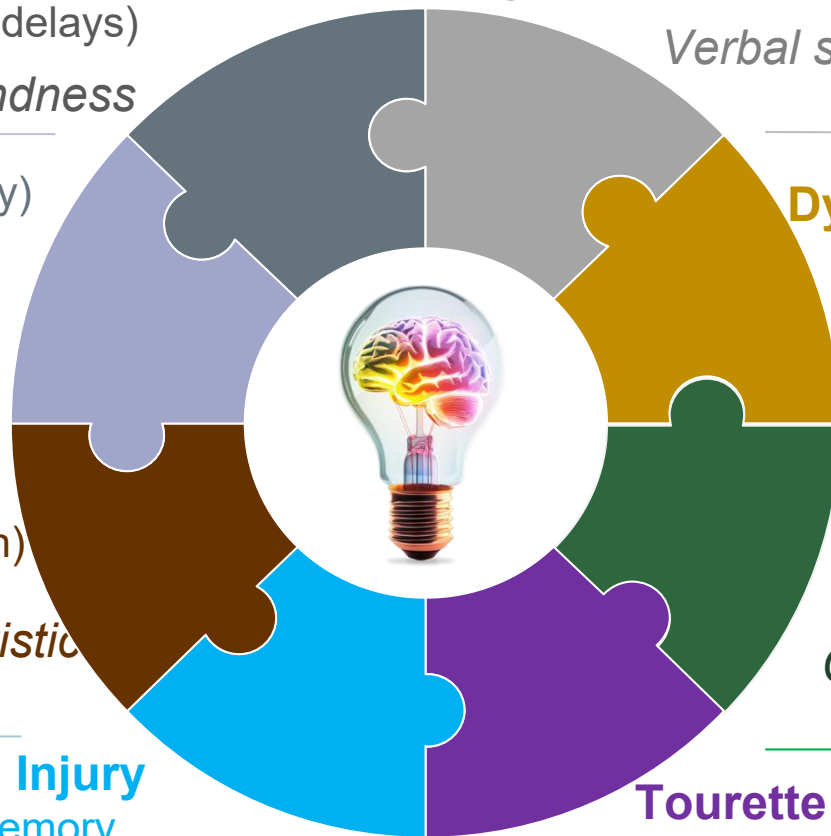
Acquired Brain Injury
(Concentration, memory, connecting prior information)
Adaptability, empathy, resilience.

Dyscalculia (quantitative reasoning)
Verbal skills, innovative thinking, hands on skills

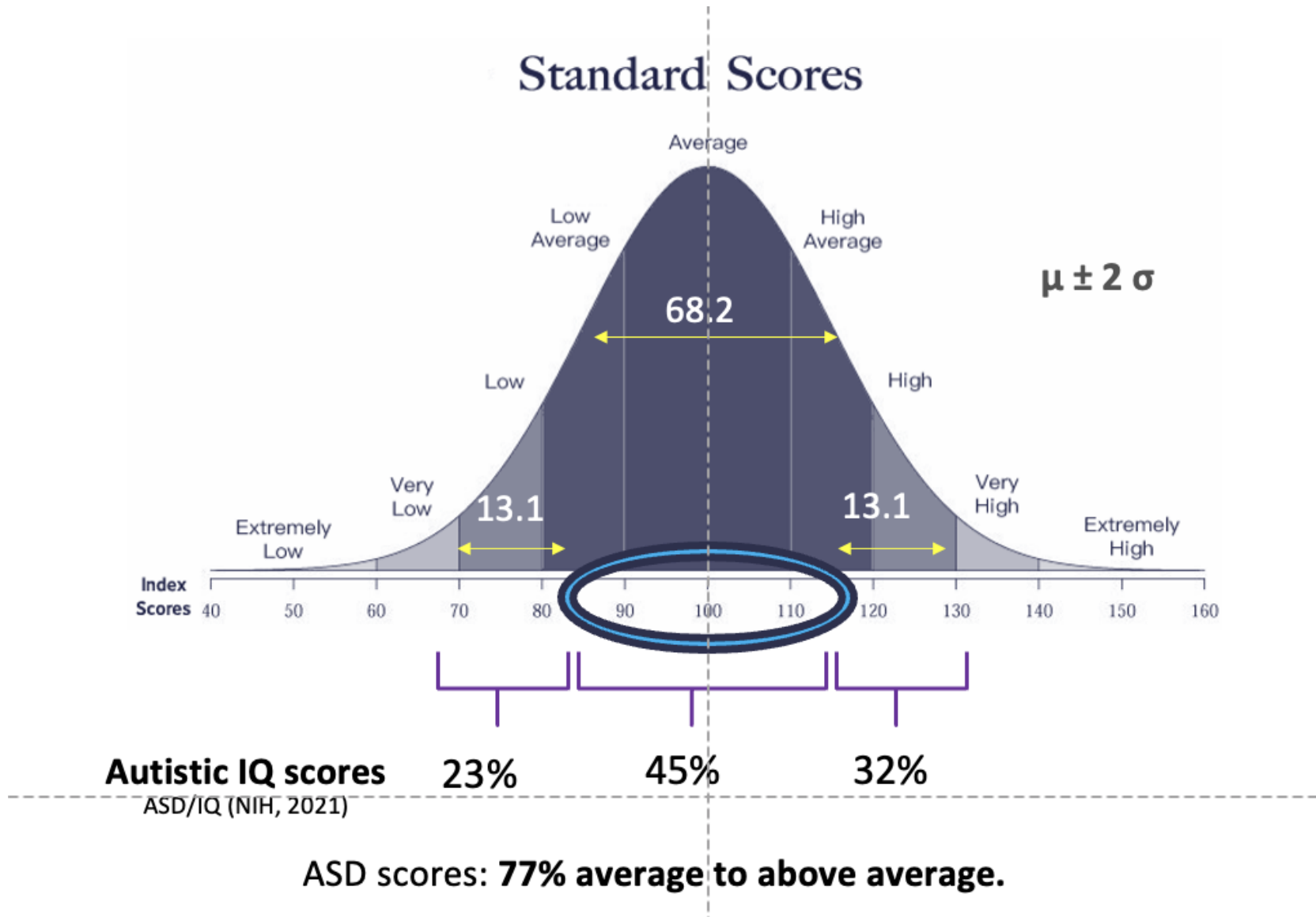
Dyslexia (reading, writing)
Visual, creativity, 3d mechanical skills

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
(Time management organization, planning,)
Creativity, hyper-focus, energy, passion

Tourette Syndrome (sudden, brief movements or sounds)
Observational skills, creativity, cognitive control



Measuring Intellectual Ability



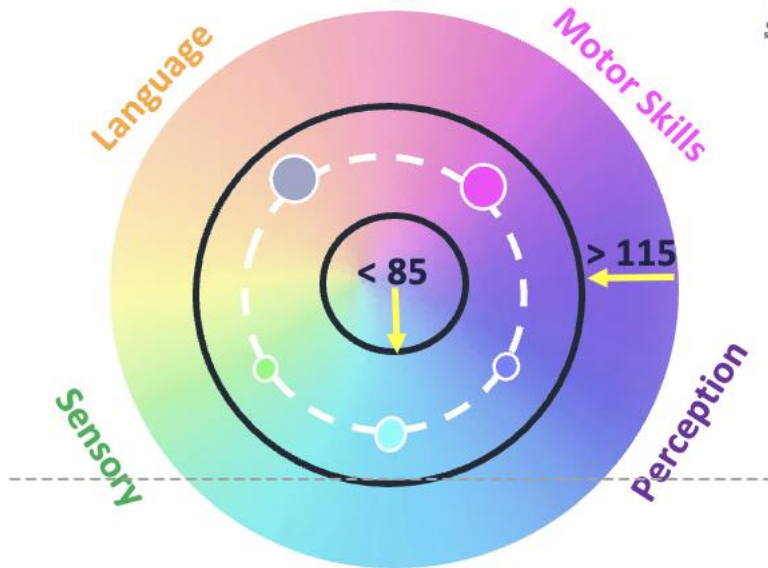
An Emerging Intelligence Perspective

Traditional View
 One Dimensional Spectrum



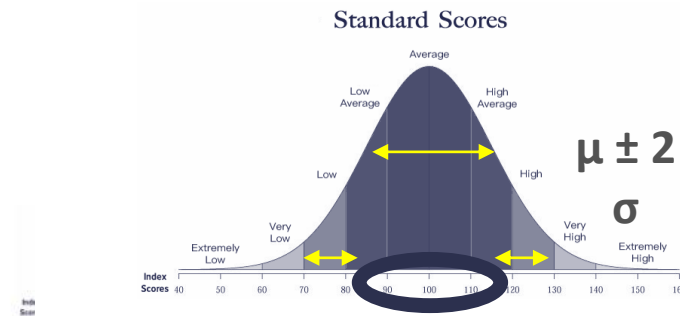
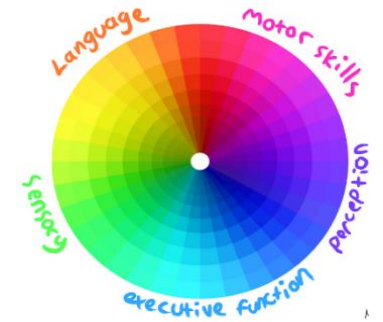
More Autistic Less Autistic

Neurotypical

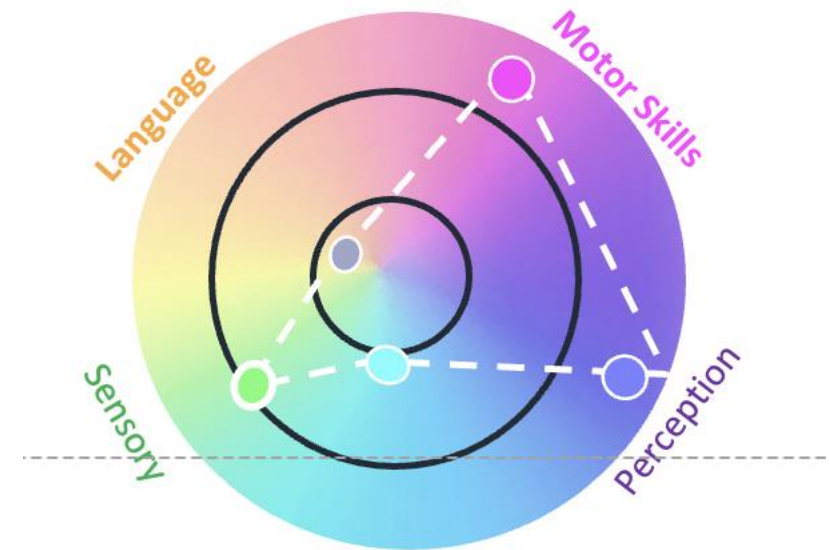


Executive Function

Current Research (Burgess, 2022)
 Two-dimensional spectrum



Neurodivergent



Executive Function



Recommendations for Higher Ed Leaders

Endorsed by the University of California Academic Senate (NIH.gov)

A Different Kind of Support

(NIH.gov)



Photo by [Neil Thomas](#) on [Unsplash](#)

- Rethink standard accommodations
- Disability Cultural centers
- Sensory spaces
- Disability Empowerment Clubs

Double Empathy

(CAN, 2024)



AI generated image using MS Copilot

- Historically, neurodivergent students expected to adapt
- Breakdown of mutual understanding
- Double empathy means all parties adapt (CAN, 2024)

Inclusion (NIH.gov)

(NIH.gov)



Photo by [Matteo Paganelli](#) on [Unsplash](#)

- Equity, inclusion and belonging
- High-touch support
- Campus community education and training



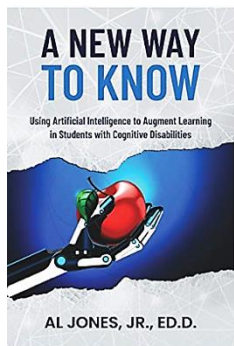
Visualizing Neuroinclusion

- Intentionally rejecting group-think: *Think like an individual about individuals*
- Allows students to engage to the best of their abilities, maximizing strengths
- Support students as they transition
 - Consider a neurodivergent centered college transition program with trained staff
- Artificial Intelligence research for disability support
 - **“A symbiotic relationship between AI and disability support”** (Almufareh, et al., 2024)
 - **AI poised to “revolutionize disability empowerment”** (Almufareh, et al., 2024)

AI as cognitive prosthetic to augment learning and reduce cognitive overload
(Jones, 2020)

Concerns about fairness to other students (Jones, 2020)

Challenging and reframing what it means to know and learn





Thoughts, Comments, Questions?

Solution Oriented Thinking

Every system is exclusively designed to produce the results it gets.
If you want to change the results,
you must change the system.

Paul Batalden



Image courtesy Dartmouth.edu

Race and Disability



Whiteness is connected to standards of normalcy and perfection

Pseudoscience of Phrenology attached imperfection and abnormal to Blackness

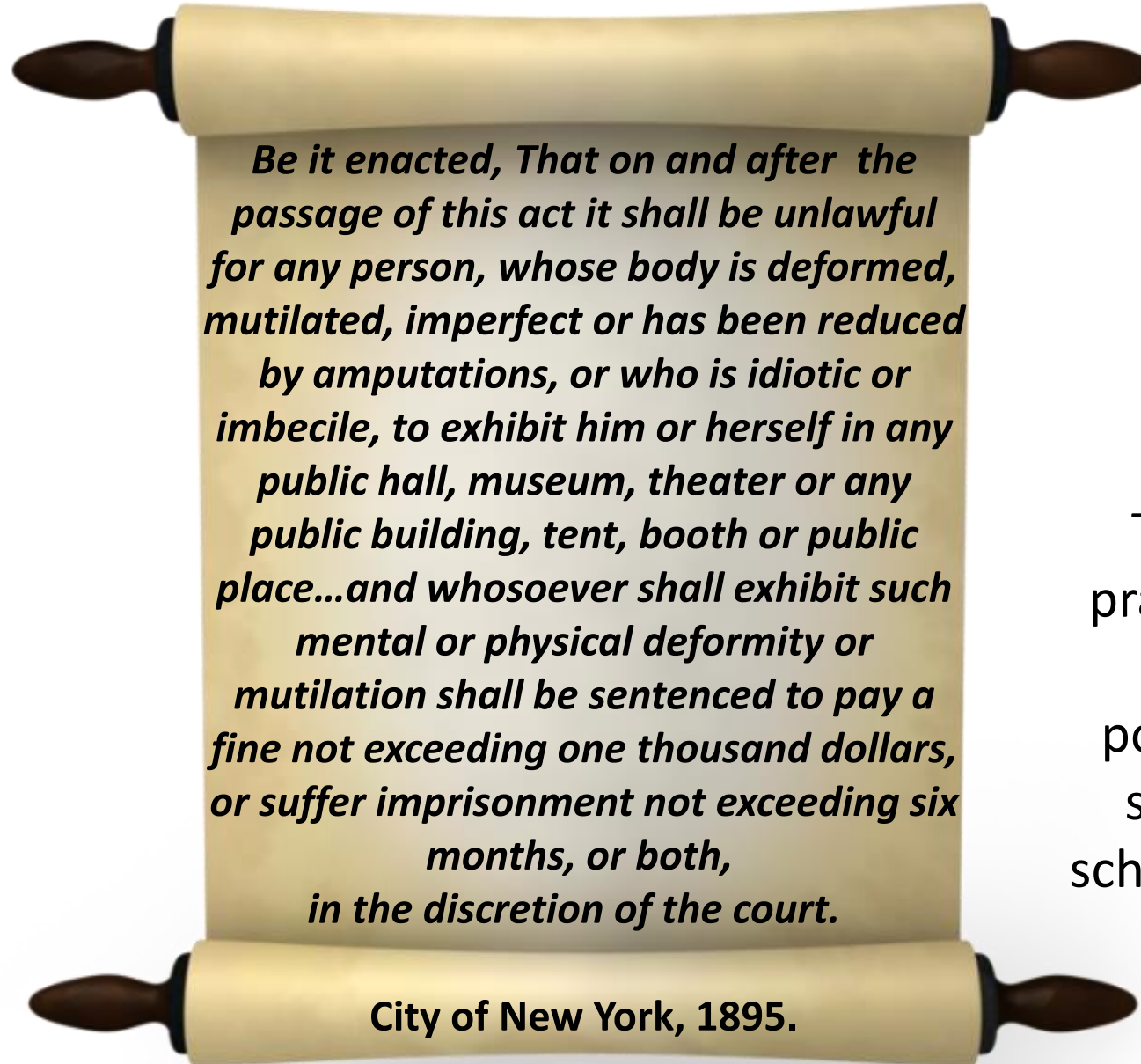
● Intelligence and disability are **not** connected to race, pigment, or melanin.

● Racism impacts students of color in ways similar to disabilities

An Ugly Truth

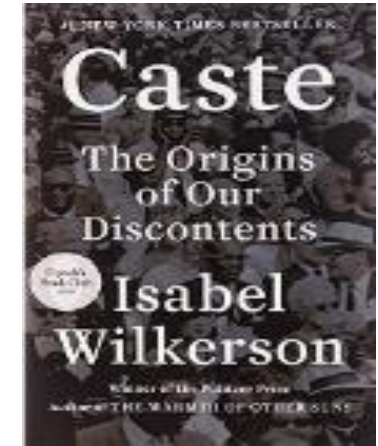


As systems of control, Ugly Laws and Jim Crow disproportionately impacted poor, disabled Black people who were considered unfit to share social spaces with White people



Be it enacted, That on and after the passage of this act it shall be unlawful for any person, whose body is deformed, mutilated, imperfect or has been reduced by amputations, or who is idiotic or imbecile, to exhibit him or herself in any public hall, museum, theater or any public building, tent, booth or public place...and whosoever shall exhibit such mental or physical deformity or mutilation shall be sentenced to pay a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, or suffer imprisonment not exceeding six months, or both, in the discretion of the court.

City of New York, 1895.

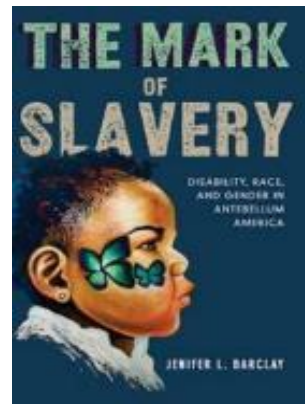
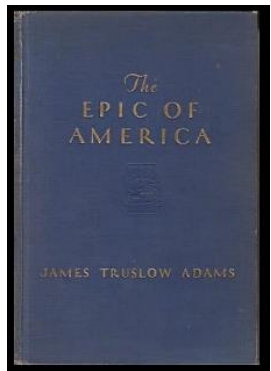


The culturally accepted practice of Othering legally imposed generational poverty, red-lining, forced sterilization, segregated schools, over-incarceration...

Othering and Ableism

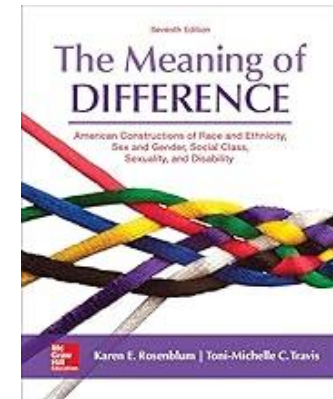
American Dream

Dream of a land in which life should be better, richer, fuller for everyone with opportunity for each
– *According to Ability*



The accepted notion is that wholeness and normalcy are attached to ideas of Whiteness, tethering Blackness to disability and dependence (Barclay, 2021,)

Many White people oppose Affirmative Action because they cannot conceive of Black people being more or even equally intelligent to Whites. (Rosenblum & Travis, 2016)



Othering **infuses ableism** into race, disability, gender, & socio-economic level; reducing the humanity and lessening the importance of those considered to be different from the *norm*
(Bhugra, et al., 2023; Rosenblum & Travis, 2016))

Ableism a dis-abling human predicament that maintains America's Caste and must be overcome

Race and Learning Diversity

My area of expertise

- I know *how* people learn and what interferes with learning
- Cognitive interference is the main reason many disabled students are supported in Higher Ed.
- My Theory: Racism can be experienced as disabling due to cognitive interference it creates especially in the most marginalized racial groups.
- Racism permeates educational systems and structures; impacting learning diversity, equitable instruction, degree completion and access to opportunities.



DSM5: PTSD and Racial Trauma

(ptsd.va.gov; Ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

Racial Trauma

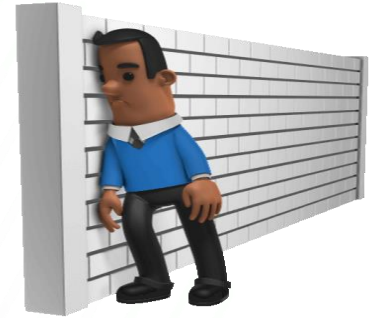
Racial trauma defined as the emotional impact of racism, racial discrimination and race-related stressors.

Resulting from stereotypes, hurtful comments or barriers to advancement of racial discrimination that builds up over time.

Result of a specific incident of racial discrimination or the ongoing, harmful emotional impact

Trauma can be from something that happens directly to them or from witnessing others mistreated because of their race

Impact of racial trauma

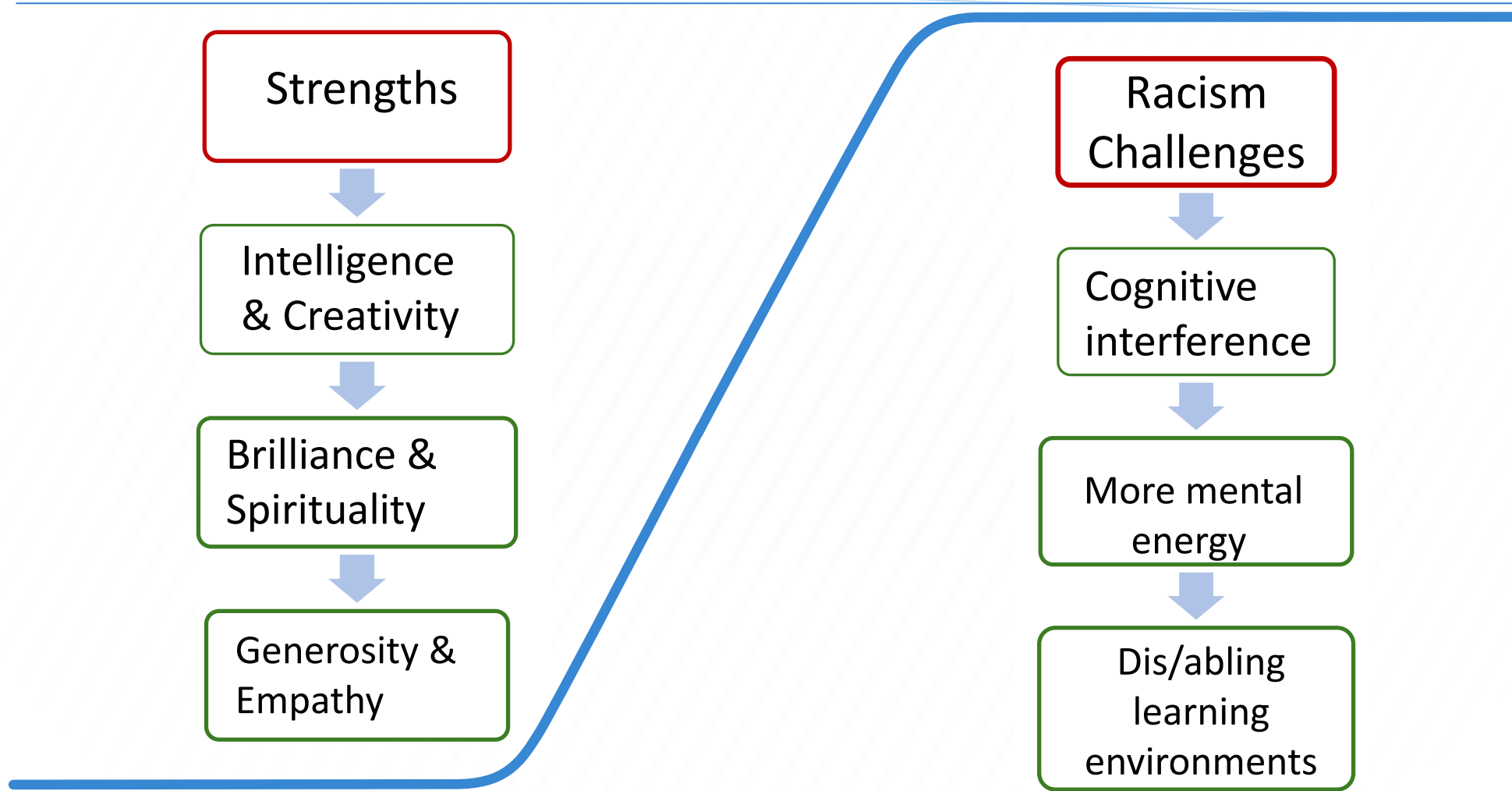


Increased risk of physical and mental health problems including stress, anxiety, depression or PTSD

Relationships with others may be affected as people may worry that others dismiss their concerns about racial trauma

The trauma can impact daily functioning in school, work or at home.

African American Strengths and Challenges



**If you ask a black person, *do you have a disability?*
The answer should be YES because structural racism DIS-ables**

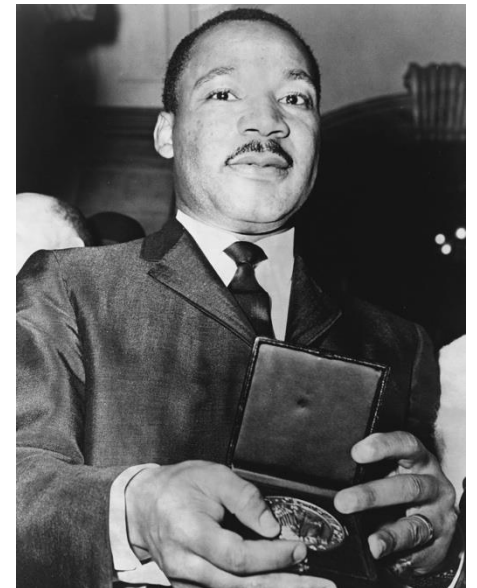


Thoughts, comments, questions?

Solution Oriented Thinking

Social scientists must make it clear that they are prepared to pursue the truth as best they can determine it, even if it brings them into conflict with the political and social establishment.

Martin Luther King Jr.



A Big Problem: Lack of Research

Research on Autism is predominately centered on White, male autistic students
(Brasher et al., 2022; Diemer et al., 2022)

Research fails to address the unique challenges faced by autistic African American students – creating a knowledge gap
(Brasher et al., 2022; Deimer et al., 2022)

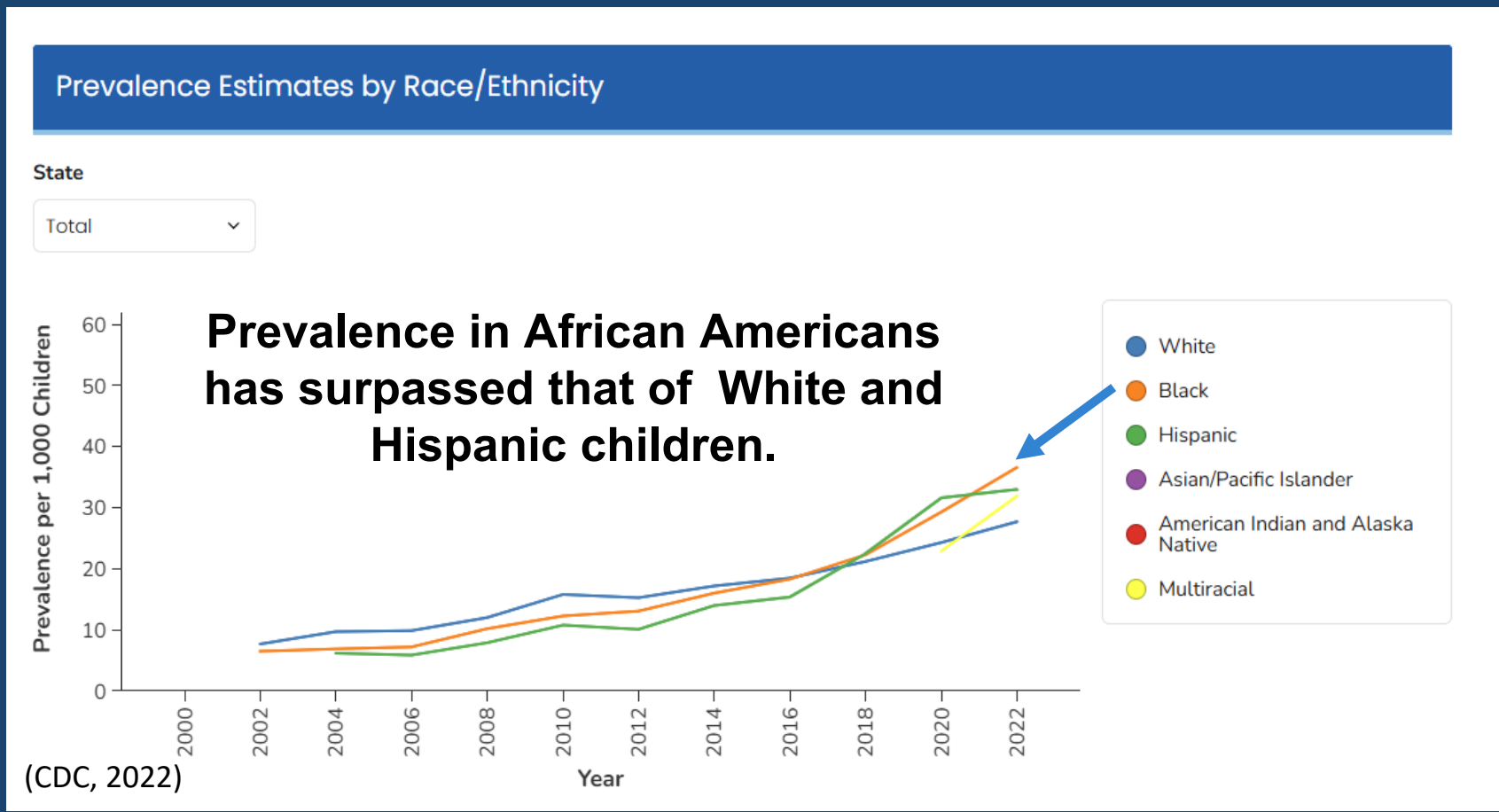
Ignores the nuanced experiences of students already marginalized by race, overlooking the realities shaped by intersectionality of race and neurodivergence

Lack of accurate data means interventions and support will not be culturally competent or effective
(Brasher et al., 2022)



CDC reported 1 in 31 children with ASD in 2022

This current number for black children is thought to be underrepresented due to lack of access to diagnostics



Earlier diagnoses were focused on white boys.

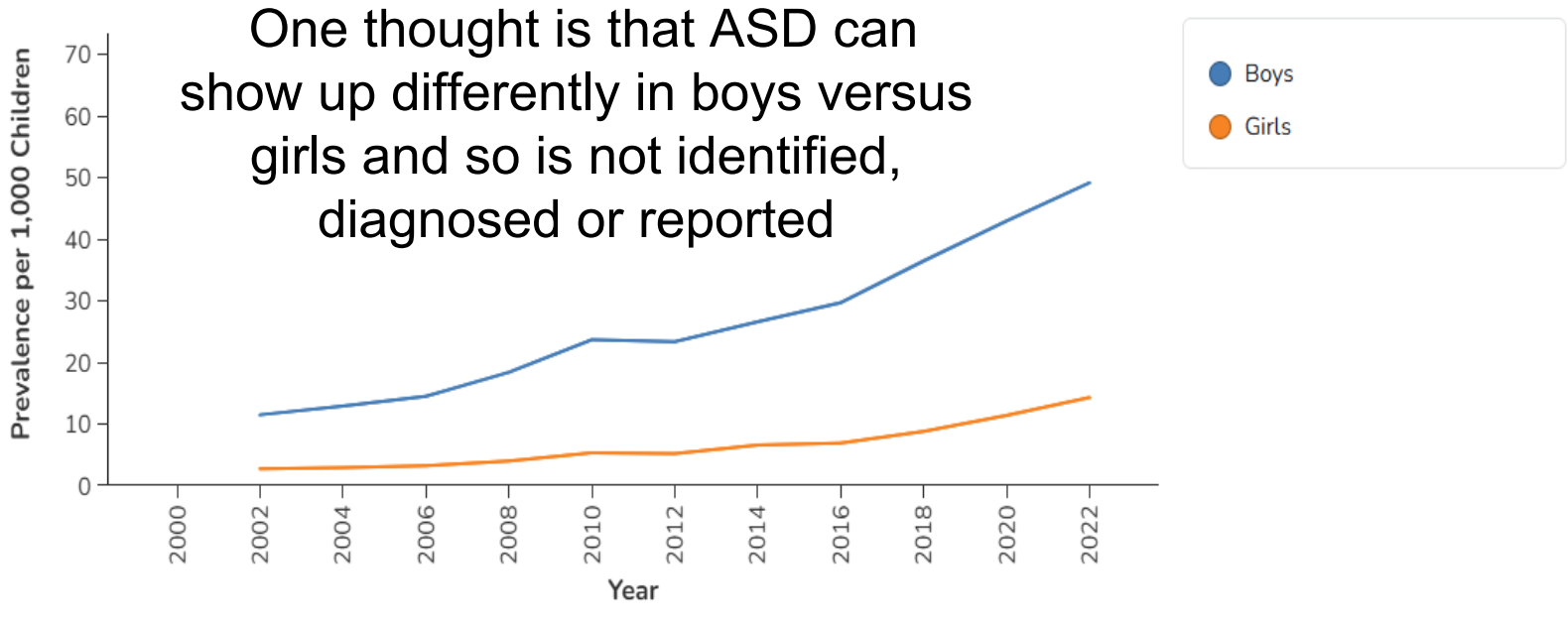
Health disparities are recognized in Black communities overall. It is likely the number of autistic children has always been higher, just ignored in previous data collections.

Prevalence Significantly Higher in Boys Compared to Girls

Prevalence Estimates by Sex

Show ADDM prevalence estimates* for:

Total



(CDC, 2022)

Prevalence is likely inaccurate for girls since most are not diagnosed until later in life

Intervention is not being given as early or as intensely for girls as it is for boys

Missing Narrative: Black Women and Girls



HIDDEN
PERSPECTIVES

Black autistic women and girls (BAWG) are missing in current scientific literature

(Deimer et al., 2022; Lovelace et al., 2021)

Intersectionality of 3 marginalized identities means overlapping discrimination by systems of oppression

(Brasher et al., 2022)

Prevalence of autism is rising in BAWG as it is in all other demographic groups

(CDC, 2020; Lovelace et al., 2021)

Health and education systems perceive BAWG symptoms and behaviors different from white autistic girls

(Jallow, 2025)

What We Know

Significant research showing that people with disabilities have lower employment rates than non-disabled (Drexel University, 2022)

Autistic African Americans have higher unemployment rates than white autistic peers (Gardiner et al., 2015)



Photo by Gift Habeshaw on Unsplash

Estimates of 50-75% of incarcerated individuals have some type of neurodiverse condition or cognitive disability (Davis et al., 2022)

Autism in prison varies between at about 9% in prison (Davis et al., 2022), and between 9% & 18% (Peraire, 2023). At least double the national rate and accounts for over 100,000 nationwide.

Autism likely under-diagnosed

(Ashworth, 2016; Cheely et al., 2012; Smith, 2021)

African Americans are incarcerated disproportionate to their demographic in the US. Black autistic youth have increased risk of negative outcomes during police interactions

(Edwards et al., 2018; Dramer & Remster, 2018)

About Mental Health

Mental health is of special concern for autistic African Americans

The anxiety rate for the autistic population is 68% compared to 18% in the general population (Srinivasan, 2025)



Photo by [Samuel Tsegaye](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Reminiscent of Ugly Laws:

Commuting, shopping, sleeping, breathing, *living* while Black in this country is a risk factor for racial targeting and police violence.

Mental health challenges contribute to the unique barriers that require culturally competent support models

Implicit bias and exposure to microaggressions in education makes it difficult to develop the needed support models

Complex Marginalized Identities

Intersecting identities cannot be separated out

Intersectional Identities mutually inform lived experiences, making being Black and Autistic in America a unique form of oppression

Intersecting Marginalization

Intersection of marginalized identities and multiple systems of power impacts well-being
(Jackson, 2022)

Interplay shapes Identity

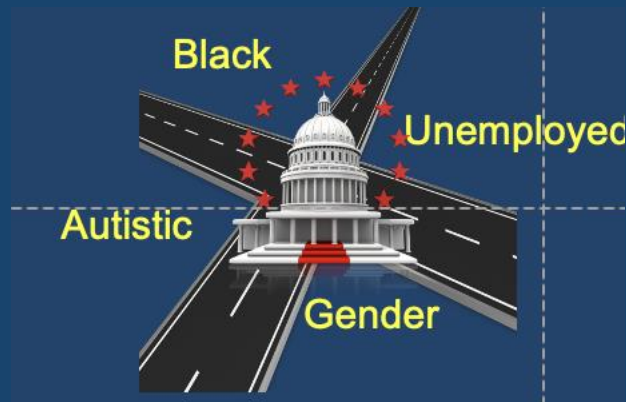
Distinct challenges and forms of oppression but also inherent strengths.

Barriers, Biases, Inequities

Behaviors and traits attributed to autism in white students often becomes punitive in Black autistic students

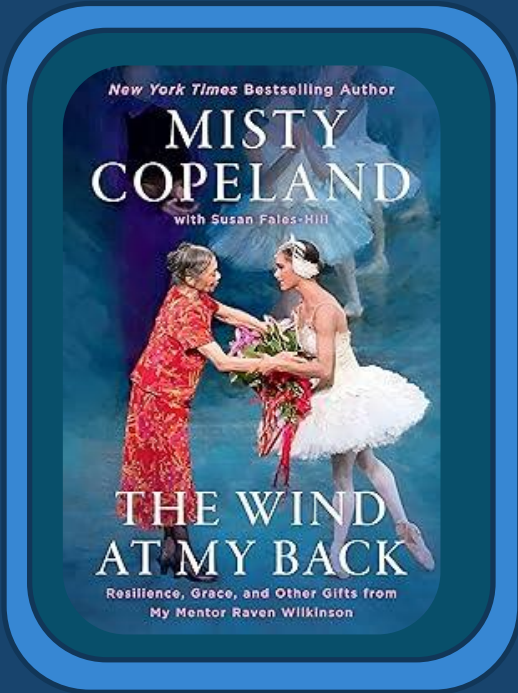
Impacting mental health

Preventing individuals from getting needed support and understanding



Higher Ed can provide life-changing alternatives to unemployment and incarceration for Black autistic adults

To Be a Black, Autistic Human



“To be marginalized from a culture is to be marginalized from citizenship” (Copeland, 2022)

“Stands at the borderline for what Western Culture considers to be fully human [let alone equal citizens.]” (Copeland, 2022),

Begs the question — *Do Black lives really matter in this country?*



Photo by [Cheyenne Doig](#) on [Unsplash](#)

If the answer is yes, what is Higher Education's role in communicating that message?

What happens when Higher Ed is silenced?

Cultural Competence

The ability to genuinely understand, effectively communicate with and meaningfully interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Liu et al, 2020).

Example: eye contact

In some Asian communities, direct eye contact is rude. In some Black communities, lack of eye contact is disrespectful.



Photo by [ManuelTheLensman](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Interpreting behaviors

Implicit bias in autism research impacts how educators perceive and interpret student behaviors



Photo by [Natasha Orwenyo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Research Needed

How to develop culturally responsive pedagogical practices and trauma informed mental health services



Photo by [Zoe VandeWater](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Thoughts, Comments, Questions?

Solution Oriented Thinking

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself;
It is to act with yesterday's logic.

Peter Drucker

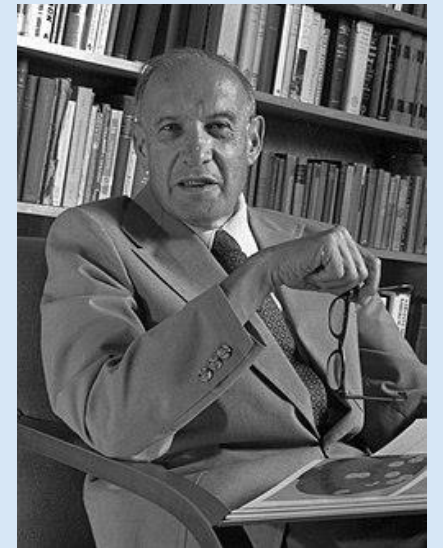


Image courtesy Wikimedia commons

Areas of Intervention

What does culturally competent support in Higher Education look like?

Institutional Commitment

Recruit & retain diverse staff and faculty, mental health practitioners, disability cultural centers.

Faculty/Staff Development

Mandatory cultural competence, anti-bias, ND & trauma informed training, culturally responsive pedagogy & UDL

Student Centered

Disability services outreach, culturally competent mental health services, peer mentoring.
Call out Racism as disabling, destigmatize Blackness

Community Engagement

Networking with families, community leaders, non-profit organizations: FACES, BFAST, Color of Autism



Programs & Initiatives

Successful programs to explore that foster culturally responsive support for autistic BIPOC individuals

UC Berkeley

The Neurodiversity Initiative with intersectional focus. Student led, community-engaged



UCLA

Fielding School of Public Health: Researching Intersection of race, poverty and autism



HBCU Disability Consortium

Not specific to Autism but Identifies culturally responsive services. It is housed in AHEAD.



The Color of Autism

A foundation offering holistic and comprehensive autism support with cultural sensitivity training



“Do not get lost in a sea of despair.
Be hopeful, be optimistic.

Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year,
it is the struggle of a lifetime.

Never, ever be afraid to make some noise
and **get in good trouble, necessary trouble.**”

John Lewis (2018 tweet)



Take-aways?



Photo by [Robin Jonathan Deutsch](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Missing?

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