

New journals seek to fill neurodiversity gap

The two journals, although differing in initial support, both realized the need for a publication focused exclusively on the neurodiverse experience.

8 March 2023 | by Brady Huggett

Interview with Punit Shah, *Neurodiversity*

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

Brady Huggett: I'm Brady Huggett, enterprise editor at *Spectrum*. This is an interview with an editor of a new journal that will operate in the autism research space. It's called *Neurodiversity*, and the editor's name is Punit Shah. This interview was conducted February 15, 2023 and is part of an article titled "New journals seek to fill neurodiversity gap," which can be found on *Spectrum's* website. OK, that's all you need, here we go.

OK, we started. The first question, and probably the easiest question, is maybe just give us some of your background.

Punit Shah: OK, sure. So I'm primarily interested in autism and ADHD in adulthood. I'm an autism expert. And over the course of the past few years, as the neurodiversity paradigm has become more and more prominent, I was invited to have got involved in the formation of the journal, along with a whole series of people that Sage, and other members of the editorial board, who sort of came together to bring this together.

BH: Well, OK. So let's talk about that. How did this — what was the impetus for starting this journal? How did you become involved in it?

PS: So I think the impetus, very much, has come from Sage and various people they've been talking to. So the sort of founders, actually, if you like, were a couple of academics here in the U.K. and in Ireland. So it's actually Etain Quigley and Bláinad Gavin, academics in Ireland, that sort of originally approached Sage with the idea of a specialist journal in neurodiversity. So, I'm involved in reviewing for and being involved in many autism journals, and I got to speaking with Sage, given my other editorial experience for journals like *Cortex*. I've helped, sort of, launch another open-science journal. It was sort of the combination of my background as an expert on neurodevelopmental conditions, alongside my editorial experience, that came together to, I guess, put me in a position to be invited to take on this role.

BH: The two founders sort of had the idea; they went to Sage, and Sage said, "Yeah, there's a space for that. That would be a good journal idea." And that's how it started?

PS: Yeah, I think Sage has been brilliant. I think they're very open to new and interesting ideas. I think they are people that are keen to have this journal take off. I think Sage, and particularly Kerry Barner at Sage, who's been overseeing the journal *Autism* over the past decade — which, of course has become incredibly popular and a very strong journal in the field — sort of went with the idea, developed the idea, crafted the idea. And has then worked with me to craft an editorial board to take this forward more formally.

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BH: Yeah, exactly. That was my next question. So how did you go about finding the people to be on your board? And, you know, getting the idea of what this journal would look like?

PS: Yeah, I think we started amongst a team of, a core team of founders working with me, working with Sage. And also, an important point is that it involved people that are sort of non-academics. There's a new Institute of Neurodiversity. So we also have non-academic founding board members, if you like. So it was through that discussion, after, you know, after developing the sort of bare-bones structure of what the journal would look like, what the grand, broad aims are, we thought about how we would go about selecting members of the editorial board. So some of the core guiding principles, if you like, for how we went about this might differ to traditional processes of forming an editorial board. We were quite keen on, sort of, embodying and embracing the point of the journal, embracing neurodiversity. So we went about ensuring the editorial board had representation of a range of scholars and academics that have expertise on neurodevelopmental conditions, in neurodiversity, as broadly defined as we could do that in terms of their academic expertise. But also their expertise by experience, so to speak.

BH: Lived experience, right?

PS: Yeah, we have a large percentage of our editorial board who have lived experience or expertise by experience, that will be informing — that have informed and will be informing — the journal as we progress.

BH: Well, that, I think, seems to maybe set this journal apart, right? And then maybe that's the point: to form a different kind of editorial board, which will shape a different kind of journal.

PS: Yes, exactly. It's, in my view at least, to have the best of both worlds. So having a really strong, rich editorial board that has some of the leading experts in our field, who also, many of them, happen to have lived experience. And then we've got junior scholars and people with lived experience that don't have that sort of pedigree, or history of being academics, but that can bring something new to it. And I do think that the combination of that does set it apart from, not just journals in the field of autism and neurodiversity, but journals more generally in psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience.

BH: I should say, there's two editors, right? Joni [Holmes] is also an editor.

PS: Yeah. So Joni will also be a co-editor-in-chief of the journal, and that decision was also important. Whereas I'm an expert mainly in neurodiversity in neurodevelopmental conditions in adulthood — something that I think has been overlooked — Joni is a brilliant sort of classical developmental, experimental and cognitive psychologist

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with interest in neurodevelopment and neurodiversity. So I think as editors-in-chief, we sort of bring these complementary expertise of neurodiversity across the lifespan.

BH: Yep. I also want to talk about the kinds of content that the journal will publish. I mean, there is — I think there's going to be arts, humanities, there is a medical aspect, employment. I mean, it's a wide range of topics. So how did you settle on those?

PS: So I think the first thing to say is that I don't think these matters are completely settled, then we don't want it to be — we don't want any hard lines or a rigid set of structures of exactly what we're going to cover. I think this will be organic, in terms of drawing on the neurodiversity community, and the audience and neurodivergent people have all informed this. I think we've to start off with, and kept the remit as broad and as inclusive as possible to encourage submissions from the arts and humanities as well as the traditional biomedical sciences. And that's important, because, you know, at the moment, I see quite big disparities, arguably schisms between these different approaches to understanding neurodiversity. And by having this inclusive, broad remit will hopefully allow us, as the editorial board and as a journal as it develops, to try and bridge some of those gaps. So our agreement was that, you know, we've settled on it being as broad as possible. And that's reflected in our editorial board. But exactly how this journal evolves over time, I think will be, will be fascinating — a challenge, but fascinating, for sure.

BH: So it's almost — it's not as if you've laid out: These are the categories. But what you've said is, "We are open to all these things," and probably more, right? "If you have something that you think might fit this journal, let us know."

PS: Yeah, exactly. And I think one thing I've learned from working, being an associate editor at journals like *Cortex*, with the history, is, concepts like neurodiversity, even autism, are always evolving with time. And I think that the hallmark of a good journal and a good editor is to be not just responsive to those things but to preempt the fact that we've got a new concept like neurodiversity. Which can be contentious, can be divisive, but also brilliant, and really bring together a community. I think, appreciating that nuance and the opportunities there are, has to be, in my perspective, reflective of a journal that's responsive and plans to evolve the content type, evolve with the different sort of contributions that we might receive. And I think we've got an editorial board and a great support from Sage and others to really support that endeavor.

BH: Yeah, as you said, there will be content in there that is focused on the medical model of autism. But beyond that, it's going to have a social model too. And that's all folded in there together.

PS: It's going to be folded; we're open to those contributions. And I think, us as editors, we're going to be trying to steer and temper, for example, the traditional biomedical approaches to neurodevelopmental conditions with,

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you know, some of the nuances and sensitivities I think people are keen to see. And likewise, I think we see really brilliant research more in the arts and humanities with a more social, cultural model of autism that could perhaps benefit from some of the experimental approaches, some of the classical bigger-data, quantitative approaches that we find in the biomedical model of understanding neurodiversity. So it's bridging those gaps at the conceptual and methodological levels of explanation that I think we're going to see the progress that we need to see, with respect to neurodevelopment, neurodiversity and neurodevelopmental conditions.

BH: So let me ask a couple questions about, like, how this journal is going to work. I know it's open access, number one.

PS: Yeah. It's an open-access journal, yep.

BH: Let's talk through that. I think that probably means there's a charge per article. How will the journal actually subsist, I think is my question.

PS: Yeah. So it's a good question. So we're launching as an open-access journal. I think that's, first of all, the way in which most journals are heading towards, in one form or another. So Sage, when launching new journals, are looking to make them open access. For the first year or so at least, because the journal has sponsorship from the Institute of Neurodiversity, inclusion in commercial partners, the current model is hoping for that those commercial partners and other providers to offer sponsorship to make the journal as accessible as possible to academics and scholars. Long term, how we move forward with that I think it's an open question and will, of course, be interesting and a challenge. But we're committed really to open access following the broader agenda in scientific and scholarly publishing to ensure that the work is as accessible as possible to as wide a range of people as possible.

BH: I think the APC charge is waived right now, as the journal launches.

PS: Yeah. Brilliant. Yeah, exactly. So I'm glad you raised the APC charge. For the first few months, hopefully the first year, for as long as we can, we're going to be waiving APC charges. So for anyone listening to this, I think it's a great time to engage with the journal and submit your papers. We're really keen to launch the journal with a strong set of contributions. So yeah, the APC charge, the APCs will be waived for the foreseeable future. But do get in there early if you're keen to submit.

BH: You're based in the U.K., but both editors are based in the U.K.?

PS: Yes. So the editors, the two editors, us as co-editor-in-chiefs, are based in the U.K. But the editorial board is very much international in scope. So we've been keen to sort of balance those things, yes.

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BH: Yeah. And you're trying to get submissions from all over the world?

PS: Absolutely. Yeah, very open to and very keen to have submissions from all over the world. Again, that's reflected in our very diverse editorial board from, you know — certainly not across every country possible, but we've had a really strong and positive response from Australia, Europe, the U.S., India, the low-middle-income countries. So we've got some work to do, and we'll grow our editorial board with time, but it's very much an international journal, that's for sure.

BH: What can you tell me about the Institute of Neurodiversity? How are they a partner on this journal?

PS: OK, so yeah, the Institute of Neurodiversity is a partner with the journal financially, in terms of providing sponsorship to the journal — for example, with regard to the article-processing charges. And also a partner in the sense that we want the journal to be relevant and to have impact in non-academic spheres. So the Institute of Neurodiversity works with a large range of corporate organizations, some world leaders in business in the commercial world. So we're a partnership financially, but also at the level of trying to ensure, to some extent, that the work that we're doing, the work that we're publishing in the journal, has real-world impact in the world of commercial organizations and the various clients that they're supporting. We've had a sort of soft launch at the moment. So we've just launched the, what we call the corporate site, which has a sort of cover page, and I can provide the link to you for that. And we've also just launched the submission site as well. So we're now actually open for submissions. We've got some rudimentary information about submission guidelines, about the content types. And we're very much open to submissions, starting now. And it will be sort of launching a harder launch, or more formally, in the second half of this year, once we've got some content, once Joni and I and other members of the editorial board have worked in our editorials. But the infrastructure is already starting to shape up.

BH: You mentioned the journal *Autism*, but are there other journals out there that you see as competitors? Or do you think this is kind of a, like, a wide-open space that you're stepping into?

PS: I think, as far as I see, it's this wide-open space, at least at the international level. There are various journals, including the journal *Cortex*, where, for example, I'm leading a special issue on neurodevelopment and neurodiversity. So there are special issues out there, that are part of other journals.

BH: Yeah.

PS: But to my knowledge, we're going to be the first, the world's first journal of, sort of, neurodiversity and very much straying into the territory and filling what I think is a desperate gap in the world of neurodiversity and scholarly approaches to neurodiversity.

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BH: So I've just one more question for you, I think. Have you given thought to what, you know, what success would look like? After launch, a year or two in, when you would think, "OK, now this journal is a success for us." What would that be?

PS: That's a really, really good question. For me, personally — I can't speak on behalf of all the editorial board or Sage, but for me — I think success would look like having a journal with a diverse range of contributions. And a response to the journal that is not just tolerant but respectful of diverging viewpoints, and even dissenting viewpoints, and even potentially controversial viewpoints, on neurodiversity. I think that's — in the vacuum of not having a good journal and a strong editorial board that are able to tackle some of the challenges and opportunities of what neurodiversity means — there's limited progress that we're making. So I think the journal, in a year's time, if we get that diversity of submissions, if we have a response to the journal that's respectful of those diverse points, I think that would be — it might sound a bit, maybe, that we're not aiming for much. But that's one of the biggest challenges we have in this field. So that's what I think. If we can have, within a year's time, if we haven't caused controversy to the point that it's divisive and not conducive to progress, then I think that would be a good success, in my personal opinion.

BH: Yeah, when a journal, when a journal is doing well, it basically establishes a sense of community. Right? And that sounds like that's what you're going for here?

PS: Yeah, exactly. I think we're looking for a community, and to foster a community that is willing to engage with one another on a necessarily nuanced and complex and beautiful topic. So it's a community that I think is unlike many other communities, because there's so much heterogeneity and diverse viewpoints. It's a community which, in some ways, has its strength in heterogeneity and complexity. But that can also be the challenge. And I think bringing that community together in a way in which is conducive to progress, rather than upset and just focusing on the challenges that come with setting up communities and working on developing community ideas and shared understanding of things, is going to be the challenge. But also the immense opportunity we have with this journal. It's a new journal. It's a new editorial board, and we're trying to do things in a new way. You know, we're going to get some things really right, I hope, and I'm sure we're going to make what some people are going to perceive as being mistakes. And I think it's important, hopefully, for people to get on board for that agenda. You know, neurodiversity is a relatively new concept. It's a concept that offers great promise, but there are pitfalls in how we aim to understand it. So I hope people can be understanding of those nuances and be open to contributing constructively to the evolution of the journal, which I'm really excited by, and I hope other people get on board and are equally excited about that.

BH: That's well said. I think that's it. So, just, thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

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PS: Cool. Thank you. Thanks for inviting me to do this.

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