

# Knowledge of Autism

Subjects: **Others**

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Definitions of autism have been deficit-focused and grounded in a medical perspective.

autism

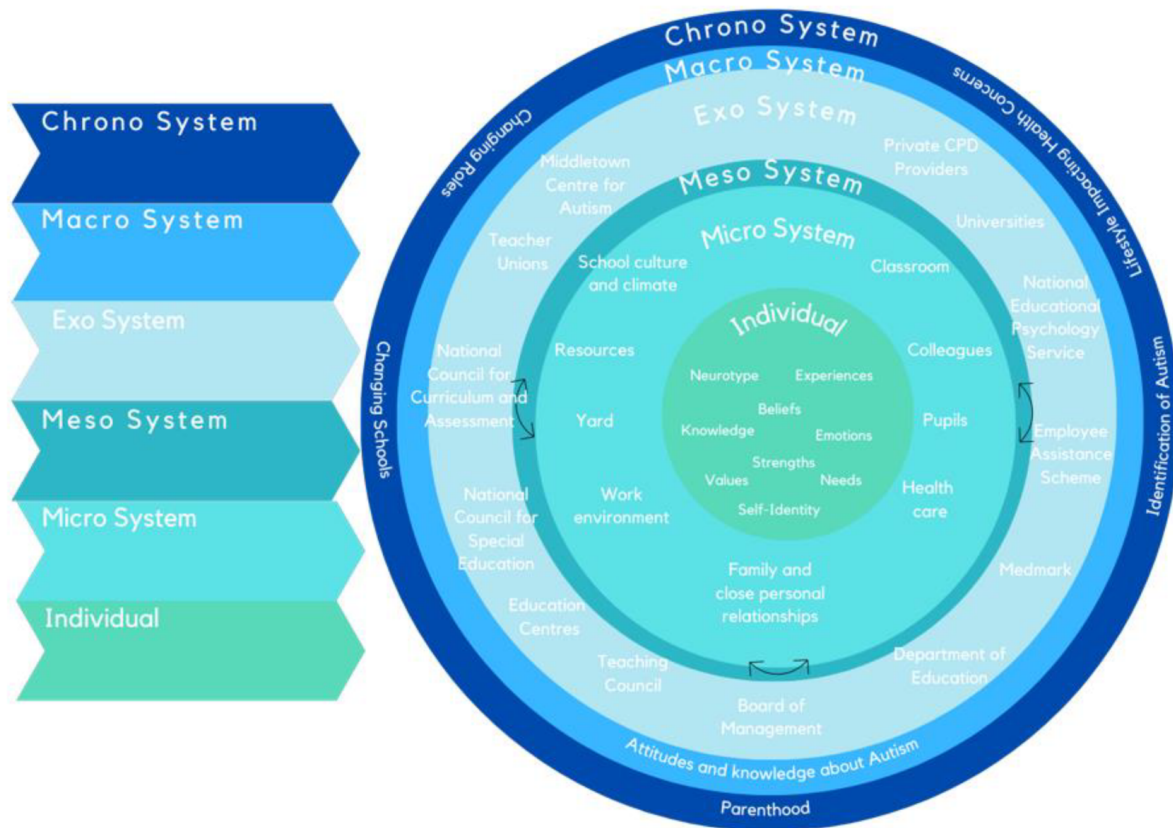
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## 1. Theoretical Frame

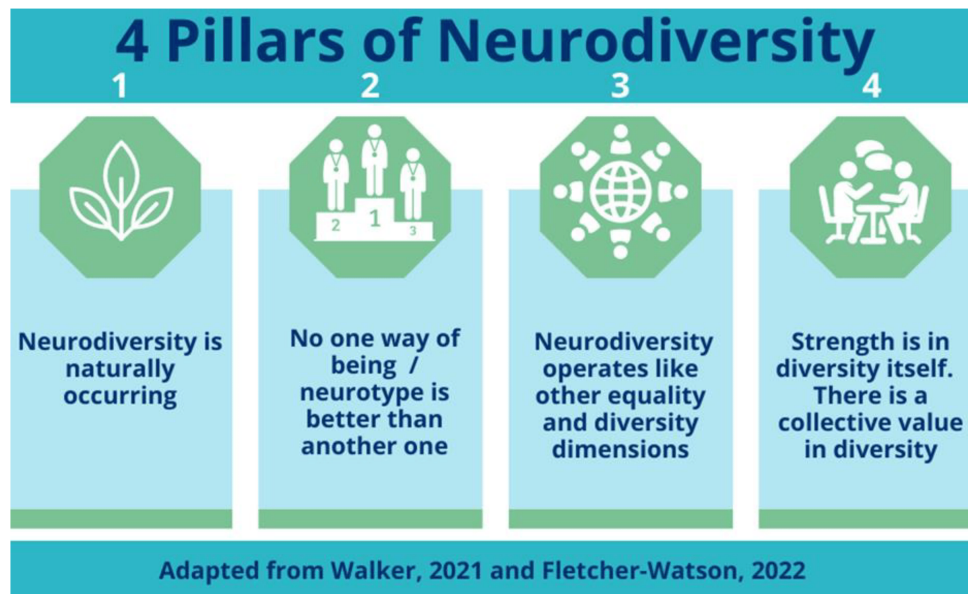
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory <sup>[1][2]</sup> provides an overarching theoretical frame for the current study as its structure allows clear conceptualising of the interplay between the participants and school environments <sup>[3]</sup>. Bronfenbrenner's socio-cultural systems include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (**Figure 1**). These stratified systems allow an exploration of how the different environmental factors influence or interact with teacher wellbeing, thus aligning with an interactionist perspective of Autism underpinning the Neurodiversity paradigm viewpoint <sup>[4][5]</sup>. Increasingly, autism and Autistic researchers are using a neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm to conceptualise autism, leading to a move away from ableist perspectives to research involving meaningful participation from Autistic researchers and stakeholders <sup>[6]</sup>. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's theory is useful as it offers a robust framework for researching teachers who occupy a minority status <sup>[7]</sup>. It also offers a flexible framework for considering Autistic-led theories relevant to this topic, such as monotropism <sup>[8]</sup> and the Double Empathy Problem <sup>[9]</sup>, which have little influence on current Irish educational research or policy.



**Figure 1.** Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994) and Autistic teachers.

## 2. Autism: A Shifting Paradigm

Commonly referenced definitions such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition) [10] describe differences in Autistic people as deficits, and the language referring to autism is pathologising. Increasingly, however, autism and Autistic researchers are using a neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm to conceptualise autism, and this is evident in a move away from ableist perspectives to research involving meaningful participation from Autistic researchers and stakeholders [6]. Autistic researchers [5][9][11][12][13] have recently written about autism, and ableist and medicalised language choices are shifting to respectful and strengths-based language [5]. Walker [14] conceptualises neurodiversity in their Pillars of Neurodiversity Model, and this has been adapted by Fletcher-Watson to include a fourth pillar [15], which is shown in **Figure 2**:



**Figure 2.** Four Pillars of the Neurodiversity Paradigm <sup>[14][15]</sup>.

Increasingly, theories and understanding of autism are being impacted by autistic-led theory and understanding <sup>[8]</sup> <sup>[9]</sup>. Monotropism conceptualises the Autistic experience as being led by a focused attention style, sensory experiences, deep focus, and flow states <sup>[8]</sup> and is widely supported within the Autistic community for providing a resonant authentic description for many Autistic individuals. Murray <sup>[16]</sup> describes monotropism as a tunnel-like funnelling of Autistic attention, cognitive processes, and sensory processing and outlines it as an advantage in a knowledge-orientated profession such as teaching. The phenomenon is linked to flow, a state highly beneficial to wellbeing where the individual loses track of time by engaging in a challenging and enjoyable activity <sup>[9][17]</sup>.

Another highly influential theory that has challenged previous understanding is Milton's' Double Empathy Problem <sup>[9]</sup>. Milton <sup>[9]</sup> challenged previous conceptualisations regarding suggested deficits in the Theory of Mind <sup>[18]</sup> or empathy <sup>[19]</sup>, which accounted for social differences among Autistic individuals relative to the non-autistic population. Milton <sup>[9]</sup> argued that the social exclusion or marginalization of Autistic people could not only be understood as a failure on their part. In his Double Empathy Problem formulation, there was a bi-directional misunderstanding with social engagement that comprised breakdowns in understanding on the part of all communicants, both Autistic and nonautistic (Milton, 2012). These ideas provide a framework for understanding the processes that underpin differences in experiences, preferences, and social presentations. These aspects have previously been pathologised as disorders underpinned by hypothesised deficits or lack of capability.

### **3. Autism and the Social Ecology**

Differences in communication styles or breakdowns in bidirectional communication interactions between Autistic and non-autistic may contribute to feelings of isolation or out-group status. Recently, there is growing awareness in research of the adverse effects of minority stress on the Autism community <sup>[11][20]</sup>. Minority stress as a concept refers to the almost constant stress felt in the social environment by a minority group as a result of othering from

the dominant and established majority group [21][22]. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is increasingly being used as a framework to conceptualise social processes underpinning the Autistic experience of in-group and out-group dynamics [23][24]. There is also emerging evidence of significant negative outcomes for Autistic people owing to this out-group status, with Maitland et al. [23] reporting that non-autistic people can often be poor at interpreting Autistic people, which can lead to misunderstanding, stigma, and even bullying from non-Autistic people towards Autistic individuals.

Perry et al. [24] theorise that masking is a response to stigma and use Social Identity Theory to conceptualise how Autistic individuals assimilate to avoid exclusion. Masking is a complex process where an individual consciously or unconsciously hides their autism [13][25][26][27][28][29][30][31][32]. Unfortunately, masking has been linked to detrimental effects on the wellbeing and mental health of autistic individuals [13][32]. A complex picture emerged regarding the disclosure of Autistic status within workplace contexts, with literature highlighting mixed outcomes reported by Autistic participants and fraught emotional experiences. On the one hand, the literature does contain many positive experiences of disclosure and emphasises key related benefits such as increased acceptance and awareness of autism [27][29][33][34]. On balance, however, Thompson-Hodgett et al.'s [34] scoping review outlines barriers to disclosure including stigma, often stemming from a lack of disability-related knowledge within organisations.

One concerning issue emerges relating to common health difficulties experienced by Autistic individuals. These difficulties are encapsulated in the constellation of burnout, inertia, meltdown, and shutdown (BIMS, [35]). For example, references to BIMS were found in 10 of the 15 contributing chapters in Wood et al. [32]. More broadly, a range of relevant research consistently uncovers evidence of poor health and quality of life outcomes in Autistic individuals [36][37][38]. Sub-themes such as BIMS, minority stress, and masking reoccur strongly across the consulted literature on Autistic teachers, which is indicative of underlying stress and challenge for these individuals. Wood and Happé [32] list post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fatigue, anxiety, and burnout as some of the consequences of masking from Autistic teachers. Autistic burnout is a research priority for many Autistic individuals [39][40][41]. Raymaker et al. [41] posit that Autistic burnout is a separate condition from other types of burnout. This suggests that it is important for Autistic teachers and their support systems, including school leadership to have an awareness of the stressors that can lead to Autistic burnout. Sensory overload, masking, and lack of social support are all identified in the research as being recurrent factors in Autistic burnout [39][41]. Research on health difficulties experienced by Autistic teachers is significant in terms of the study as it indicates that there are significant barriers and challenges for Autistic teachers in our education system. Given Autistic people are a hidden and under-researched minority within the teaching profession and the Irish education system, they can reasonably be described as a hidden minority poorly understood by their colleagues.

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