Review of: "[Commentary] Recognising Physical and Mental Health Issues in Neurodivergent Females: Opinion Piece"

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The article deals with a topic that is currently much debated and which interests not only the scientific community, but also all neurodivergent people; all professionals and clinicians working in the field of neurodivergence and finally the families and friends of neurodivergent people. The theme absolutely deserves great attention and it is laudable that the authors have chosen to deal with it. On the one hand, the article denounces the lack of data on the physical and psychological health issues of neurodivergent women, on the other it provides some suggestions for clinicians to recognize them and in turn help patients to recognize them. I find this important because recently I read or listen (for example in informative podcasts) some autobiographical narratives of the neurodivergent condition which instead report a sort of hatred experienced by the neurodivergent person towards anyone who thinks that their condition causes suffering. Instead, I believe it should be said that sometimes autism is associated with clinical and psychological conditions that can bring suffering to the patient and that often these are not even entirely clear to clinicians.

However, I would like to suggest some points for reflection for the authors.

The most interesting part of the article is the one in which a sort of review of the medical anomalies frequently found in autistic women is proposed. A systematization of these studies could perhaps one day lead to the elaboration of more precise diagnoses which avoid the political biases linked to the average social status of the researchers (thus avoiding not only gender biases, but also those of race, culture, wealth of the country in where the diagnosis is made, etc…). This part, being the one on which the authors cite the greatest number of scientific sources, could be made graphically more readable and also (for example through the use of tables presenting the % of cases in which the different symptoms occur and the diagnostic tools used by the clinician to make the diagnosis of autism or any other clinical diagnosis on the patient studied; the number of participants in the study; etc…). Perhaps, with greater attention to the specifics of these data, some useful elements could also emerge for inclusive research.

The position of the authors on the importance they attach to genetic studies on autism is not very clear. At the very end of the article, in fact, the authors refer (but without explaining it in detail) to the story of the Spectrum 10k project, whose main investigator is Simon Baron Cohen.

On the one hand, in fact, the authors say they appreciate the reasons that led the autistic community to ask that this genetic research on autism be suspended for fear that genetic knowledge of the basis of autism would "favor eugenics", “we appreciate the reasons behind the heightened suspicion and sensitivity expressed by many autistic people over the use of gene studies in autism". Shortly before, however, the authors argue that the study of the relationship between genes and the environment is essential to better understand autism. If such an important event is referred to, it is fair to the reader to explain what happened.

The initiatives of autism activist communities around the world sometimes may unintentionally under-represent the will of those neurodivergent individuals experiencing a more serious condition that impairs them in communication and that cannot speak for themselves. Given that two of the researchers claim to experience a condition of neurodivergence, they speak from a privileged point of view because, in addition to knowing neurodivergence from the inside, they also know the scientific aspects of the entire autistic spectrum or other neurodivergence conditions. For this reason, I believe that their point of view is valuable and I think it is right that they explicitly clarify their position.

In my opinion genetic research on autism is a very important enrichment of the knowledge of the problems of autism for both men and women: if in the future there were the possibility of adding genetic factors to behavior analysis to diagnose autism in women (and in men), very probably also the knowledge of the physical and psychological issues linked to the neurodivergent condition will be clearer. If, however, the authors believe that research into the genetics of autism is dangerous because it potentially opens the door to eugenics, they should state so clearly.

It may be that the authors will find it useful the recent paper (2022) published in Nature genetics in open access by Warrier et al. by title "Genetic correlates of phenotypic heterogeneity in autism", (here the access link: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41588-022-01072-5) as this article tries to address through the lens of genetics (among other things) the problem of the representation of autistic samples and makes particular reference also to the question of diagnosis in women.