

Neurosplaining

When Neurotypical Arrogance Dismisses Neurodivergent Expertise

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Abstract

This paper introduces and defines the term neurosplaining – a phenomenon in which neurotypical individuals condescendingly explain neurodivergent experiences to neurodivergent people, often disregarding the lived expertise of those with firsthand knowledge. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from disability justice, epistemic injustice, and the neurodiversity paradigm, this paper examines how neurosplaining constitutes both a form of testimonial injustice and a violation of the "nothing about us without us" principle central to disability rights. Through explicit examples and comparison to analogous discriminatory communication patterns (particularly mansplaining), the paper demonstrates how neurosplaining perpetuates systemic oppression, erodes neurodivergent agency, and reinforces ableist power structures. The paper concludes by situating neurosplaining within broader frameworks of epistemic violence and calling for recognition of neurodivergent people as the primary authorities on their own experiences.

Keywords: neurosplaining, epistemic injustice, neurodiversity, disability justice, testimonial injustice, ableism, double empathy problem

Introduction

Language shapes how we understand and navigate systems of power. The coinage of "mansplaining" in 2008 provided a linguistic tool to identify a specific gendered pattern of condescension: men explaining things to women in ways that dismiss women's expertise (Solnit, 2008). The term's rapid adoption into common usage demonstrates the power of naming previously unrecognized forms of discrimination. This paper introduces neurosplaining as a parallel concept addressing a distinct but related pattern of epistemic injustice: neurotypical individuals explaining neurodivergent experiences – including pathology and treatment as well as inaccurate and inauthentic comradery – to neurodivergent people in condescending, medicalized, or deficit-focused ways that disregard neurodivergent experience and expertise.

Neurosplaining represents more than simple miscommunication. It constitutes a systematic form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) that undermines neurodivergent people's capacity as knowers and perpetuates the marginalization inherent in what Charlton (1998) termed the violation of "nothing about us without us." This phenomenon is particularly insidious because it operates under the guise of expertise and helpfulness while actually reinforcing ableist hierarchies that position neurotypical ways of knowing as inherently superior.

Defining Neurosplaining

Core Definition

Neurosplaining (noun): The act of a neurotypical person explaining neurodivergent experiences, behaviors, needs, or perspectives to a neurodivergent person in a condescending, oversimplified, medicalized, or patronizing manner that disregards the neurodivergent person's lived experience, expertise and firsthand knowledge.

Neurosplain (verb): To explain neurodivergent experiences, behaviors, needs, or perspectives to a neurodivergent person as a neurotypical individual in a manner that assumes neurotypical superiority of understanding, often employing deficit-based frameworks or medical model language that the neurodivergent person has not endorsed.

Key Characteristics

Neurosplaining differs from ordinary explanation and information-sharing in several critical ways:

1. **Directional Power Asymmetry:** A neurotypical person explains to a neurodivergent person, leveraging normative social power

2. Dismissal of Lived Experience: The neurodivergent person's firsthand knowledge is treated as less valid than second-hand clinical or theoretical knowledge.
3. Medicalized framing: Often employs pathology-paradigm language (Botha et al., 2024; Chapman, 2023) that frames neurodivergence as a deficit rather than a difference.
4. Unsolicited Expertise: The explanation is offered without request and often contra to the neurodivergent person's own self-understanding.
5. Condescension: Delivered in a tone or manner suggesting the neurodivergent person lacks capacity to understand their own experience.
6. Inaccurate and Inauthentic Comradery: A neurotypical attempts to relate to a neurodivergent's experience by comparing it their own "similar" experience, when it is not similar or honest, in an attempt to gain a neurodivergent person's trust.

Theoretical Framework: Epistemic Injustice and Disability Justice

Epistemic Injustice

Fricker's (2007) framework of epistemic injustice provides essential grounding for understanding neurospaining. Epistemic injustice occurs when someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower. Fricker identifies two primary forms:

Testimonial injustice occurs when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker, 2007). Neurospaining constitutes testimonial injustice when neurotypical individuals dismiss or devalue neurodivergent testimony about neurodivergent experience due to ableist prejudice that positions neurodivergent people as inherently less credible knowers.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when "a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker, 2007).

Neurospaining perpetuates hermeneutical injustice by privileging neurotypical interpretive frameworks while marginalizing neurodivergent-created knowledge and terminology.

Kidd and Carel (2017) demonstrate that people with chronic illness and disability are particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice in healthcare settings, where professional authority often overrides patient expertise about their own bodies and experiences. This dynamic extends beyond clinical contexts into everyday social interactions where neurodivergent people navigate systems designed by and for neurotypical people.

"Nothing About Us Without Us"

The disability rights principle "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998) articulates the fundamental requirement that disabled people must be centered in decisions, policies, and knowledge production affecting their lives. Charlton's work documents how disability oppression operates through degradation, dependency, and powerlessness – conditions perpetuated when non-disabled people claim authority over disabled experiences.

Neurospaining directly violates this principle by positioning neurotypical people as authorities on neurodivergent experience. As disability studies scholars note, epistemic exclusion from knowledge production about one's own community constitutes a form of oppression that maintains marginalization (Dotson, 2012).

The Neurodiversity Paradigm and Double Empathy

The neurodiversity paradigm, developed collectively by neurodivergent scholars and activists (Botha et al., 2024), challenges the pathology paradigm that frames neurological difference as an inherent deficit. Walker (2021) articulates the neurodiversity paradigm as recognizing that:

- Neurodiversity is a natural form of human diversity.
- There is no "normal" or "right" style of neurocognitive functioning.
- The social dynamics around neurodivergent people are shaped by power imbalances, not by inherent deficits.

Milton's (2012) theory of the "double empathy problem" demonstrates that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people stem from bidirectional differences rather than unilateral autistic deficits. Research consistently shows that autistic people communicate effectively with other autistic people (Crompton et al., 2020; Cheang et al., 2025), and that neurotypical people struggle to accurately interpret autistic experience - challenging assumptions about who lacks "social understanding" (Cheang et al., 2025).

Neurospaining perpetuates the pathology paradigm by positioning neurotypical understanding as correct and neurodivergent self-knowledge as suspect. This directly contradicts empirical evidence that neurotypical people demonstrate poor epistemic accuracy when interpreting neurodivergent experience (Cheang et al., 2025).

Why Neurosplaining Is Harmful

Erosion of Epistemic Agency

Neurosplaining undermines neurodivergent people's status as epistemic agents – knowers with valid authority over their own experiences. When neurodivergent self-knowledge is systematically dismissed in favor of neurotypical interpretation, it creates what Dotson (2011) terms "testimonial smothering": neurodivergent people learn to suppress their own testimony, anticipating it will be dismissed or overridden.

Research on epistemic injustice in healthcare demonstrates that when patients' self-knowledge is devalued, it leads to misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment, and psychological harm including loss of epistemic confidence (Carel & Kidd, 2014). For neurodivergent people, this harm is compounded across multiple life domains – education, employment, healthcare, legal systems - where neurosplaining reinforces their marginalization.

Perpetuation of Ableist Power Structures

Neurosplaining maintains the structural inequity that positions neurotypical people as arbiters of neurodivergent experience. This hierarchy is not natural or neutral but is socially constructed and maintained through practices that grant epistemic authority to dominant groups (Anderson, 2012).

Nair et al. (2024) critique how northern, white-dominated neurodiversity frameworks have marginalized other epistemologies, demonstrating how power operates even within progressive disability movements. Neurosplaining operates similarly – by asserting neurotypical interpretive superiority, it prevents neurodivergent people from contributing to collective understanding on their own terms.

Psychological and Practical Harm

For the recipient, neurosplaining produces multiple forms of harm:

1. Primary epistemic harm: Exclusion from the pooling of knowledge; being wronged as a knower (Fricker, 2007)
2. Secondary practical harm: Barriers to accessing appropriate accommodations, services, or understanding when one's own testimony about needs is dismissed.
3. Secondary psychological harm: Loss of epistemic confidence; internalized doubt about one's own perceptions and needs; increased masking or suppression of authentic self-expression (Hess, 2024)

4. Cumulative trauma: Repeated experiences of having one's reality denied create what many neurodivergent people describe as profound alienation and psychological distress (Milton, 2012)

The Experience of Being Neurosplained To

Neurodivergent accounts consistently describe neurosplaining experiences as:

- Invalidating: One's lived reality is treated as less authoritative than external observation
- Infantilizing: Being treated as unable to understand one's own experience
- Silencing: Attempts to self-advocate are overridden by neurotypical "expertise"
- Alienating: Creates distance from one's own self-knowledge and community
- Exhausting: Requires constant self-advocacy and justification of one's own experience

Milton (2012) describes neurotypical attempts at empathy toward autistic people as "often wildly inaccurate in its measure" and "felt as invasive, imposing and threatening by an autistic person, especially when protestations to the contrary are ignored" (p. 884). This captures the core harm of neurosplaining: not merely being misunderstood, but having that misunderstanding asserted as superior to one's own self-understanding.

Explicit Examples of Neurosplaining

Clinical & Medical Contexts

Example 1: A neurodivergent adult explains they are uncomfortable with physical contact and refuses to shake hands when meeting people. A neurotypical therapist responds: "That's just your neurodivergence making you think that physical contact is uncomfortable. We need to work on building your tolerance for it."

Analysis: The therapist dismisses the neurodivergent person's self-knowledge and reframes their needs as a deficit requiring correction. This imposes neurotypical norms while pathologizing neurodivergent norms.

Example 2: A neurodivergent describes their experience of hyperfocus as deeply engaging and satisfying. A neurotypical clinician responds: "That isn't true focus, it's actually a symptom of your executive dysfunction. Real focus involves being able to redirect attention when needed."

Analysis: The clinician reinterprets the neurodivergent's positive self-description through a deficit framework, asserting clinical terminology over lived experience.

Educational Contexts

Example 1: A neurodivergent student requests to present their speech in a video rather than in front of the class, explaining that in-person presentations create overwhelming anxiety and causes panic attacks. A neurotypical teacher responds: "Part of education is learning to do things that make you uncomfortable. Public speaking is an essential life skill everyone needs to develop."

Analysis: The teacher treats the neurodivergent student's reasonable accommodation request as avoidance rather than a legitimate health concern.

Example 2: A neurodivergent student leaves halfway through the class due to sensory overload from the classrooms harsh lighting. A neurotypical educator says: "The lights are not that bright and don't seem to bother anyone else. Sensory overload is not a valid excuse to leave without permission."

Analysis: The educator asserts a narrow, neurotypical definition of "bright" that invalidates the student's sensory experience.

Social & Interpersonal Contexts

Example 1: A neurodivergent person explains that they don't try new restaurants on a whim because they don't know if it has any of their safe foods on the menu. A neurotypical friend responds: "You can't eat the same things all the time. I am sure there is something on the menu you'll like."

Analysis: The friend dismisses the neurodivergent's needs and assumes they are optional.

Example 2: A neurodivergent explains that they organize their home visibly, so they don't forget what they have on hand. A neurotypical family member says: "This is just clutter. You would feel so much better if you put things away properly like I do."

Analysis: The family member asserts their organizational system as objectively superior and the neurodivergent person's self-designed accommodation as harmful.

Workplace Contexts

Example 1: A neurodivergent employee requests written agendas before meetings and time to process before responding to questions. A neurotypical manager responds: "In the real world, you need to be able to think on your feet. These accommodations are coddling you. What you really need is practice being more spontaneous."

Analysis: The manager dismisses accommodation requests as unnecessary coddling and asserts neurotypical work styles as the "real world" standard.

Advocacy & Self-Determination Contexts

Example 1: A neurodivergent person is listening to background music while reading because it helps them focus. A neurotypical friend keeps turning the music off stating that it will impact the neurodivergent friend's comprehension.

Analysis: The neurotypical person overrides the neurodivergent's wants and needs rather than respecting their friend's self-determination.

Example 2: A neurodivergent advocate argues for understanding neurodivergence as a neurological difference rather than a disorder. A neurotypical parent responds: "As someone who actually deals with the real-world challenges of raising a neurodivergent child, I can tell you it IS a disorder. You clearly have a mild case if you can romanticize it like that."

Analysis: The parent asserts their second-hand knowledge as superior to the advocate's lived experience and dismisses the advocate's perspective by speculating about their "severity."

Comparison to Mansplaining and Related Terms

The "-splaining" Linguistic Pattern

The term "mansplaining" emerged in 2008 (though not coined by Solnit herself) following Rebecca Solnit's essay "Men Explain Things to Me" (Merriam-Webster, 2022; Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). It quickly entered common usage because it named a recognizable pattern: men explaining things to women in condescending ways that assume women's inferior knowledge, even when women possess greater expertise.

The "-splain" suffix has since been productively applied to other power-asymmetric explanation patterns: "whitesplaining" (white people explaining racism to people of color), "straightsplaining" (straight people explaining LGBTQ+ experience to LGBTQ+ people), etc. These terms share core characteristics:

- Direction from dominant to marginalized group.
- Dismissal of marginalized group's expertise about their own experience.
- Assumption of superior understanding based on dominant group membership.

- Often delivered with condescension or patronization.

Neuroplaining as Disability-Specific Form

Neuroplaining follows this established pattern but addresses the specific power dynamic between neurotypical and neurodivergent people. Like mansplaining, it involves:

- Power asymmetry: Neurotypical people hold systemic power in determining what counts as "normal" or "functional" cognition.
- Assumed authority: Neurotypical people often assume their way of experiencing the world is correct/standard.
- Dismissal of expertise: Neurodivergent self-knowledge is devalued relative to neurotypical observation or clinical knowledge.
- Condescension: Often delivered in infantilizing or patronizing ways

Distinctive Features of Neuroplaining

However, neuroplaining has unique dimensions stemming from disability-specific oppression:

- Medicalization: Unlike mansplaining, neuroplaining frequently invokes medical/clinical authority to override self-knowledge ("that's just your symptoms talking")
- Deficit framing: Neurotypical interpretations often reframe neurodivergent preferences or needs as inherent deficits requiring correction.
- Access dimension: Neuroplaining often directly impedes access to accommodations when neurotypical people dismiss neurodivergent testimony about their own needs.
- Internalized oppression: Due to pervasive ableism, neurodivergent people may internalize neuroplaining narratives, leading to self-doubt about their own experience.

Neuroplaining and Systemic Oppression

Intersection with Ableism

Campbell (2009) defines ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" (p. 5). Neuroplaining perpetuates ableism by:

1. Positioning neurotypical cognition as the standard against which neurodivergent experience is measured and found wanting.

2. Treating neurodivergent self-knowledge as suspect due to the "impairment" of neurodivergence itself
3. Maintaining the fiction that neurotypical people have neutral, objective knowledge about neurodivergent experience.

Intersectional Dimensions

Neurospaining does not operate in isolation. Its harm is compounded for neurodivergent people with multiple marginalized identities:

1. Neurodivergent people of color experience neurospaining intersecting with racism (Nair et al., 2024)
2. Neurodivergent women face neurospaining compounded by sexism and gendered dismissal of pain/distress.
3. Late-diagnosed adults often face neurospaining that dismisses their self-knowledge because they "don't look autistic" or "functioned fine before."

Neurospaining in Institutional Contexts

Institutions amplify neurospaining's harm when neurotypical assumptions are embedded in policy and practice:

- Education: Curriculum and pedagogy designed around neurotypical learning; neurodivergent testimony about learning needs dismissed as excuses
- Healthcare: Clinical training emphasizes external observation over patient testimony; neurodivergent people's descriptions of their symptoms/needs treated as unreliable
- Legal systems: Neurodivergent testimony devalued in court; behaviors interpreted through neurotypical frameworks without neurodivergent input (Gibbs, 2025)
- Employment: Workplace norms assume neurotypical communication and organization; requests for different approaches treated as deficits rather than differences
- Toward Epistemic Justice: Alternatives to Neurospaining

Centering Neurodivergent Expertise

The antidote to neurospaining is recognizing neurodivergent people as the primary experts on neurodivergent experience. This requires:

- Epistemic humility: Neurotypical people acknowledging the limits of their understanding of neurodivergent experience.
- Testimonial justice: According appropriate credibility to neurodivergent testimony about neurodivergent experience

- Participatory knowledge production: Including neurodivergent people meaningfully in research, policy, education, and service design affecting neurodivergent lives (Charlton, 1998; Phan et al., 2025)

Neurodiversity-Affirming Approaches

The neurodiversity movement provides frameworks for non-oppressive engagement:

- Presuming competence: Assuming neurodivergent people are capable knowers rather than defaulting to doubt.
- Respecting self-knowledge: Taking neurodivergent people's testimony about their own experiences, needs, and preferences as authoritative.
- Difference not deficit: Approaching neurodivergent ways of being as different rather than inherently inferior to neurotypical ways.
- Accommodating rather than normalizing: Providing access and support rather than demanding conformity to neurotypical standards

Practical Guidelines

For neurotypical people seeking to avoid neuroplaining:

- Listen first: Before offering explanations, listen to what neurodivergent people say about their own experience.
- Check assumptions: Examine whether you're applying neurotypical standards as universal.
- Defer to expertise: Recognize that neurodivergent people are experts on neurodivergent experience.
- Ask, don't tell: If genuinely uncertain, ask questions rather than making assumptions
- Respect autonomy: Honor neurodivergent people's choices about their own lives and identities.
- Learn from community: Engage with neurodivergent scholarship, writing, and advocacy to build understanding.

Conclusion

Neuroplaining names a pervasive but previously under-recognized pattern of epistemic injustice: neurotypical people explaining neurodivergent experiences to neurodivergent people in ways that dismiss neurodivergent expertise. This phenomenon constitutes a form of testimonial injustice that

perpetuates ableist power structures, undermines neurodivergent epistemic agency, and causes significant psychological and practical harm.

By naming neurosplaining, we create a tool for identifying and resisting this pattern of oppression. Like "mansplaining" before it, "neurosplaining" provides language for calling out a dynamic that many neurodivergent people have experienced but lacked words to name. This naming is itself an act of hermeneutical resistance – neurodivergent people creating interpretive resources to make sense of our own experiences.

The path toward epistemic justice requires centering neurodivergent voices in all domains affecting neurodivergent lives. "Nothing about us without us" is not merely aspirational – it is the ethical foundation for any engagement with neurodivergent communities. Neurotypical people must learn to recognize the limits of their understanding and to accord appropriate credibility to neurodivergent self-knowledge.

Neurosplaining will persist as long as ableist hierarchies position neurotypical cognition as the standard. Dismantling neurosplaining requires broader cultural transformation toward genuinely accepting neurodiversity as natural human variation – recognizing that different ways of experiencing, knowing, and being in the world are not deficits requiring correction but differences deserving respect.

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Author Note

This paper introduces the term "neurosplaining," coined by the author in 2026 to describe a previously unnamed pattern of epistemic injustice affecting neurodivergent communities. The author is a neurodivergent (AuDHD) researcher and advocate with lived expertise in navigating neurotypical systems and institutions.

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