

Book Review

Title: *The Politics of Neurodiversity: Why Public Policy Matters*

Author: Dana Lee Baker

Paper: Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers

Hardcover: ISBN 978-1-58826-754-2

Cost: \$55.00

Reviewer: Mark F. Romoser, B.A.

Neurodiversity is the notion that neurological differences, like other disabilities, may be seen as differences, not disease. It has become a popular buzzword of late, particularly as it applies to the autism spectrum. Dana Lee Baker of Washington State University-Vancouver attempts to address the policy issues surrounding neurodiversity in this volume.

The book opens with a description of the heated controversy surrounding President Obama's nomination of Ari Ne'eman, an outspoken advocate for neurodiversity and himself an Autistic person, to the National Council on Disability. Unusually for such a relatively low-profile nomination, a Senator placed Ne'eman's nomination on anonymous hold. Bitter opposition to Ne'eman's nomination came from, among others, Autism Speaks, a wealthy and powerful organization that views autism as a "devastating" illness, seeks to find a cure for it, and objects strenuously to Ne'eman's belief that it is perfectly natural to be an Autistic person.

Ultimately, the hold was dropped, Ne'eman's nomination was approved, and the book moves on. After the initial fireworks, it settles into a sober discussion of the tension between four types of advocacy: cause, care, cure and celebration. The author tries so hard to remain neutral that it is difficult for her to address the conflicts between these in any meaningful way. Some measure of the awkwardness of this construct may be gained from her placement of Special Olympics, which is viewed by many self-advocates as patronizing, in the "celebration" category (p. 125).

Baker does, at least, mention aspects of Autistic culture such as Autreat, an annual retreat that has been going on for about the last twenty years. There, "neurotypicals" (people without Autism) are expected to conform to Autistic social norms, rather than *vice versa*. Also, she employs the recent film *Autism: The Musical*, which features a number of Autistic children from across the spectrum, as the starting point for a discussion of inclusion of people considered lower-functioning within the neurodiversity movement.

Baker makes extensive use of her Canadian background to compare and contrast the direction of the neurodiversity movement in Canada versus the U.S. For instance, most U.S. readers will be unfamiliar with the *Auton* case, in which a group of parent advocates sued to force the government of British Columbia to pay for expensive applied behavior analysis (ABA)

treatment – and were opposed by Autistic self-advocates, who felt that Autistic children should not be subjected to such rigorous treatment designed to “cure” them against their will.

Overall, this volume represents the beginning of a much-needed discussion about the issues raised by the emergence of the neurodiversity movement – but by no means is it the last word.

Mark F. Romoser, B.A., Community Advocate, Silicon Valley Independent Living Center, San Jose, CA. He may be contacted at markr@svilc.org