

## **Pulling the Rug Out From Under (Neuro)Divergence in the Divergent Universe**

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### **Abstract**

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series explicitly portrays neurological diversity, along with questions of identity, family, class, choice, values, and power. It is often considered an empowering narrative for people who do not fit in, a common experience among the teen readers who are the intended audience of most young adult literature. However, it is not clear that this narrative truly supports neurodivergent people, despite neurogenetic differences being the explicit form of diversity the series' events hinge upon. This article critically examines the portrayal of neurological difference in Roth's universe through the neurodiversity paradigm, and finds that neurotypicality is significantly privileged by the narrative.

### **Keywords**

Neurodiversity; young adult literature; Veronica Roth; representation; autism

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## Introduction

Years after Veronica Roth's first novel, *Divergent*, hit the shelves in 2011, the series still garners attention. It has attracted consideration from other young adult authors due to its varied themes (Wilson, 2014). Questions of identity, family, class, choice, values, and power appear throughout the series set in a dystopian environment where the “truth” constantly changes and, as the protagonist, Tris, points out, “The truth has a way of changing a person's plans” (Roth, 2012, p. 32).

What is the truth about Divergence? How does the narrative of Divergence, a difference in genetic make-up and neurological wiring found within some residents of Roth's dystopian Chicago, relate to narratives around real-life neurological differences? How does Roth's depiction of Divergence prove enabling or dis-enabling for neurodivergent readers? That is, how does the representation of Divergence affect readers who themselves experience cognitive or neurological differences from our world's norm?

To examine neurodiversity narratives within the city and how they may affect real-life neurodivergent readers, we must be clear on what is meant by neurodiversity. While the fact of neurodiversity is shown throughout the series, I consider the neurodiversity and pathology *paradigms*. Nick Walker articulates the neurodiversity paradigm as follows:

1. Neurodiversity – the diversity of brains and minds – is a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human diversity. There is no “normal” style of human brain or human mind, any more than there is one “normal” race, ethnicity, gender, or culture.
2. All of the diversity dynamics (e.g. dynamics of power, privilege, and marginalization) that manifest in society in relation to other forms of human diversity (e.g. racial, cultural, sexual orientation, and gender diversity) also

manifest in relation to neurodiversity. (Walker, 2012, p. 228)

Walker's description of the pathology paradigm does not line up precisely with how it would function in the dystopian Chicago where *Divergent*, *Insurgent*, and parts of *Allegiant* take place because there are five ways to be normal in Roth's Chicago, one for each faction, instead of a single way for everyone. Instead, I would articulate a pathology paradigm for Roth's dystopian Chicago as follows:

1. There are five 'right,' 'normal,' or 'healthy' ways for human brains and human minds to be configured and to function (or five relatively narrow 'normal' ranges into which the configuration and functioning of human brains and minds ought to fall.). These five ways of being correspond to the five factions.
2. If your neurological configuration and functioning (and, as a result, your ways of thinking and behaving) diverge substantially from your faction's dominant standard of 'normal,' then there is 'Something Wrong With You.'

In the remainder of this article, I will examine how these paradigms are shown (or not shown) in Roth's world, and how these messages may affect neurodivergent people in our world.

### **Divergence in the City**

In order to examine the representation of Divergence, we must understand what it is within the world of Roth's creation. Within dystopian Chicago, there are five factions, each with their own values: Abnegation values selflessness, Amity peace and love, Candor honesty, Dauntless bravery, and Erudite intelligence and the pursuit of knowledge. Citizens take an aptitude test at age 16, typically revealing aptitude for a

single faction, shortly before choosing a faction to serve for life. A Divergent person, however, displays equal aptitude for multiple factions (Roth, 2011, p. 22).

Divergence, or mixed aptitude, is explicitly a difference in how people's minds work, so it is explicit in-world neurodivergence. As a variation in mental configurations, Divergence is an example of literal and explicit neurodiversity-as-fact. Tris, the primary protagonist throughout the series, is Divergent, showing equal aptitude for three factions: Abnegation, Dauntless, and Erudite (Roth, 2011, p. 22). Her multiple aptitudes give her a choice between factions, which may fit her equally well, or equally poorly, forcing her to consider factors besides aptitude alone. She isn't interested in Erudite, but is torn between her family in Abnegation, where she struggles to be selfless and falls short, and Dauntless, where she does not know what to expect besides bravery and a home that is neither Abnegation nor Erudite. While a Divergent person could choose a faction they are not naturally inclined towards, they *can* avoid one particular faction and be successful in another faction they have aptitude for—at least in theory.

For the major Divergent characters in the series, this theory plays out. Both Tris, the primary protagonist, and Four, an Abnegation-born Dauntless originally known as Tobias Eaton, ranked first in their initiate classes. Part of their success depends on a Divergent trait: when in a simulation, they know that what they are experiencing is not real (Roth, 2011, p. 257), which helps them calm themselves in simulations of their fears during Dauntless initiation. Uriah, a Dauntless-born who we later learn is also Divergent (Roth, 2012, p. 180), ranks second only to Tris in initiation (Roth, 2011, p. 413). Marcus Eaton, Four's abusive father, is an important member of dystopian Chicago's government who is also revealed to be Divergent (Roth, 2012, p. 219). Tris's mother,

Natalie Prior, was, again, *Divergent* (Roth, 2013, p. 153). These characters provide evidence that *Divergent* people can succeed in their chosen factions.

However, the reader is also told that the factionless, who either failed to complete initiation into their chosen factions (Roth, 2011, p. 25) or later leave, have the highest rates of Divergence. After all “those who can't confine themselves to a particular way of thinking would be most likely to leave a faction or fail its initiation” (Roth, 2012, p. 108). This parallels real-world neurodivergent experiences of exclusion and decisions not to try to fit in. As no specific factionless characters are stated to be *Divergent*, it difficult to say what, if anything, about the factionless *Divergent* differs from the successful Abnegation and Dauntless *Divergent* readers meet. Success may depend on faction choice and luck: no one fails Abnegation initiation, and Divergence provides an advantage in Dauntless initiation. Divergence is, however, also dangerous in Dauntless, as their leadership are co-operating with attempts to eliminate *Divergents*, and it is presumably unsafe in Erudite as well, where these attempts originate.

Given that Divergence is most common among the factionless, a clearly marginalized group within dystopian Chicago, and that the Erudite explicitly planned to eliminate “*Divergent* rebels” along with the two groups with the highest rates of Divergence, Abnegation and the factionless, it makes sense to consider Divergence as a powerful, but marginalized, identity. As *Divergent* characters have extra abilities *and* are marginalized because of them, this portrayal does fall under the trope of the oppressed mages, where people are marginalized for effectively supernatural abilities. This sort of oppression doesn't make *sense*, because oppressing the people with extra powers is hard, and it's going to be harder to make this work as a parallel for real-world

marginalization due to the issues with this trope (Ashkenazi, 2019). Divergence is shown with explicit advantages, but even the apparent advantages of neurodivergence aren't normally recognized as such. If autistic people are less likely to tailgate, this is interpreted as possibly relating to atypical spatial awareness and depth perception affecting judgement (Chee et al., 2017), connecting even an improvement in one skill to deficits. Readers may well notice this difference between the reality of being neurodivergent in our world and those who are oppressed for their extra abilities (Ashkenazi, 2019) in *Divergent*.

### **Neurodiversity and Pathology in the City**

In Roth's Chicago, there is not a *single* type of normal human mind. There are five types, one for each faction. This system allows for and values diversity, within limits. Marcus's statement at the choosing ceremony, "that every man has the right to choose his own way in this world" (Roth, 2011, p. 41-42) supports this idea. While there is tension between factions, which eventually erupts into full-blown war and revolution, readers are initially told the factions have lived in largely segregated peace for generations. (This claim is, however, contradicted in *Allegiant*). Even though the faction leaders have difficulty understanding the other factions, they traditionally recognize their value, and speak to the value of both the faction system and the other factions (Roth, 2011, p. 41-44; 2016, p. 27-28).

However, this is not the true spirit of neurodiversity: people in this world do not truly get to choose their *own* way, but rather one of five dominant and predetermined paths (Roth, 2011, p. 41). A person who could fit in multiple factions equally well (and perhaps equally poorly, as Tris discovers in *Abnegation*) is Divergent, and thus both

dangerous and endangered. Erudite leadership actively tries to kill Divergents, emphatically *not* valuing mental differences. This parallels reality: people are killed or permitted to die through neglect because they are disabled (Gross, 2012).

That is, the city uses a version of the pathology paradigm. In dystopian Chicago's pathology paradigm, age is relevant to handling the 'Something Wrong' of not fitting your faction. In public places, children are expected to fit into the norms of their faction of origin, which "dictate even idle behavior and supersede individual preference" (Roth, 2011, p. 9). However, children are allowed some deviance: Tris and her brother, both raised in Abnegation with neither aptitude nor inclination for Candor, play Candor as children (Roth, 2013, p. 444), much like children in our world play house or doctor. They can try on a mask of another faction's virtue in the privacy of their own home, as a game. The repercussions of unacceptable deviance are also limited in childhood: children may face reprimand, (Roth, 2011, p. 2, 10, 34-35) but they don't become permanently factionless – not when even children born factionless can choose a faction at sixteen (Roth, 2013, bonus materials p. 22).

After faction-choice at sixteen, however, the consequences of failing to fit, of there *still* being 'Something Wrong With You,' become more severe. People may fail to complete initiation and thus become factionless or leave later. Even for the Divergent, there are five good choices: as one author describing the universe puts it, "you can be Candor, Amity, Abnegation, Erudite, Dauntless, or screwed" (Clement-Moore, 2014, p. 8). Passing for a normal faction member is obligatory. During initiation, however, Divergent Dauntless may be identified by their instructors when they recognize fear simulations as simulations, at which point they may be killed. Attempts to eliminate

Divergence parallel real-world attempts to eliminate neurodivergence and force people to pass for neurotypical (Vivian, 2012; McLaren, 2014).

Tris understands this risk well before she understands what her differences mean. Those who mention Divergence to her emphasize the danger and the need to hide – Tori, the volunteer who administers Tris's aptitude test notes the danger after the test (Roth, 2011, p. 22-23) and when asked about it later (Roth, 2011, p. 257-260). Tris' mother warns her not to even *mention* Divergence (Roth, 2011, p. 186-187), and Four warns Tris in initiation (Roth, 2011, p. 255). Four is similarly taught to hide his “simulation awareness” before he understands its meaning (Roth, 2016, p. 3, 95). This parallels the standard of teaching neurodivergent people to hide our natures in favor of emulating neurotypicality (Vivian, 2012; McLaren, 2014).

But why are Divergent people hunted down? Divergent minds “move in a dozen different directions,” and “can't be confined to one way of thinking” (Roth, 2011, p. 442), which threatens faction leadership because Divergent people are harder to control and predict. Factions condition their members to behave in certain (neuronormative) ways and, as Four points out, it's *not* just about behavior. Thought patterns matter. Even as selflessness and bravery frequently lead to similar actions, there are times where their results are *not* the same. He asks, “What happens when your Abnegation-wired brain tells you to do something else, something they don't want?” (Roth, 2011, p. 312)

A mind that consistently follows Abnegation patterns is predictable. A mind that consistently follows Dauntless patterns is predictable. A person who mixes the two is only predictable when the two patterns converge. To a faction that values knowledge, including knowledge of how people will act, Divergent unpredictability may be

threatening. This is particularly true if they would use this knowledge for control.

Erudite, therefore, begins to hunt the Divergent. This, too, has parallels to real-life neurodivergence, in that neurodivergent people are often considered unpredictable and irrational, requiring control (McLaren, 2014).

Ultimately, faction leaders seek to eliminate Divergence, showing the power relations Walker (2012) claims are visible using the neurodiversity paradigm to understand mental differences. Even so, Divergence is shown to have benefits: Tris is complimented for being “Erudite smart” during Dauntless initiation (Roth, 2011, p. 155), where her simulation awareness also allows her to calm herself and manipulate or end fear simulations (Roth, 2011, p. 234-235, 254). When the Erudite use a simulation to control the Dauntless in an attack on Abnegation, Tris's faction of origin, Divergent simulation awareness provides immunity (Roth, 2011, p. 419). This eventually allows Tris and Four to end the attack, though not before many Abnegation are killed and the Dauntless are torn apart.

While the factions are clearly *not* using a neurodiversity paradigm, the narrative seems to view Divergence through something similar to the neurodiversity paradigm in the first two novels. Power differentials are shown, and Divergent characters are valued. In valuing a clearly marginalized neurological make-up, which Tris and Four share, the first two novels can empower neurodivergent readers.

Or can they? The *factionless*, not the members of any one faction, are most likely to be Divergent. Perhaps what we are shown is less consistently a valuing of all kinds of minds, but an extension of “acceptable” neurological make-ups to include Divergent people who do well in their factions, who can effectively hide their divergence and

conform to their faction's ideology at personal cost (Roth, 2013, p. 20), just as many autistic people are expected to do, again at a cost (Cassidy et. al, 2018). The factionless, including those Divergent who either cannot mask their Divergence or choose not to, are viewed with pity or fear, as a threat of what happens to people who choose the wrong faction and cannot remain there, throughout the series. Even the factionless use this narrative: "I'm not anyone ... I'm nobody. That's what being factionless is" (Roth, 2016, p. 12), a factionless man says. We do not know if this man, who also states his desire *not* to conform to a faction's way of being (Roth, 2016, p. 13) is Divergent – we are not specifically told about *any* Divergent factionless – but his statement matches the sentiment one would expect from a Divergent person who did not fit the faction he attempted to join.

Reading a narrative focused on factioned Divergent even as Divergence is most common among the oppressed factionless, we can find problems similar to those in the neurodiversity movement and in broader disability rights movements. Despite being composed of people with a variety of abilities and support needs, and despite arguing for the value and rights of people who need a lot of support, the neurodiversity movement is frequently portrayed as being about "high functioning" autistic people, who can "pass" for neurotypical and fit into mainstream society with minimal accommodations (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013). Fitting in, however, comes at a cost, and part of that cost is a high suicide rate among autistic people, especially those considered "high functioning" (Hirvikoski, et. al, 2016) and those who hide their autism (Cassidy et. al, 2018).

Just as outside representations of the neurodiversity movement tend to focus on

those who are economically stable, educated, white, male, as well as on the potential economic value of “high functioning” autism, the *Divergent* series focuses on Divergent people who can fit into their chosen faction. Either Tris or Four is consistently the point of view character. They are both considered Divergent within the city and ranked first in their Dauntless initiate class. Ranking first in Dauntless initiation and having the first pick of jobs while also fearing for one's life if discovered is a real problem. Note the part about “fearing for one's life.”

However, when the value of Divergence is shown with a focus on characters like Tris and Four, it could be criticized for merely shifting notions of acceptability to include Divergent people who remain in their factions of choice and “pass” for typical, or even exemplary, faction members. This parallels criticism of the neurodiversity movement for focusing on autistic people who can “pass,” a focus often chosen by outside writers. Would factionless Divergents tell the same story Roth shows through Tris and Four's eyes?

Considering the significant (but never explicitly shown) factionless Divergent population, a factionless uprising could be read as an uprising significantly by and for Divergent people, who do not fit in the faction system, to change a system where they do not fit. Unfortunately, the actual factionless rebellion is not shown as a marginalized group gaining equality, but as a transition “from one tyrant to another” (Roth, 2013, p. 13). Rather than liberating people from the faction system, which “gave [them] the illusion of choice without actually giving [them] a choice,” the factionless order says, “Go make choices. But make sure they aren't factions or I'll grind you to bits!” (Roth, 2013, p. 464). Rather than embracing a diversity paradigm, the factionless rebellion redefined

acceptable mental configurations and associated behaviors. Instead of truly honoring diversity, and instead of five “right,” “normal,” or “healthy” ways for human brains and human minds to be configured and to function corresponding to the factions, there is now one way – the factionless way. Thinking and behaving consistently as a member of any one faction becomes a sign of “Something Wrong With You,” and, predictably, there is resistance against this factionless order.

### **Purity and Damage: Divergence Beyond the Fence**

This resistance takes the form of the Allegiant, who aim to restore the faction system and leave the city (Roth, 2013, p. 20). The factionless leadership, who enforce factionless as the new single “right” way to be, therefore aim to control or eliminate Allegiant members who largely fit in with faction-aligned ways of being. Tobias, who has returned to his old name following the fall of the faction system, recognizes the factionless takeover has made everyone factionless rather than properly liberating them, recognizes that he must warn the Allegiant and leave the city himself. Thus, despite having no desire to return to the faction system that forced him to evaluate whether or not his every thought and choice fit a narrow faction ideology (Roth, 2013, p. 20), Tobias joins the Allegiant plan to send some people beyond the city (Roth, 2013, p. 62-64).

Once outside the city, the rug is pulled out from under everyone, characters and readers alike. Very little of what we “knew” in the city is true. The city was founded by a Bureau of Genetic Welfare to heal “genetic damage” caused by an attempt at genetic engineering and the Divergent, rather than being marginalized but powerful as they were in the city, are those the Bureau considers sufficiently healed from this damage

(Roth, 2013, p. 126). Faction thinking, and its flaws, resulted from attempts to genetically eliminate fear, low intelligence, dishonesty, aggression, and selfishness, losing compassion, motivation, or self-preservation in the process. Fitting properly with a faction, or *not* being Divergent, is taken as a sign of this “genetic damage.”

From the perspective of the Bureau and those outside the city, it is not the Divergent who are neurodivergent. It is the people whose neurological and mental configurations permit them to fit within a single faction who are neurodivergent, considered “damaged” in one of five different ways corresponding to the five factions. The Bureau of Genetic Welfare is explicit in its use of a pathology paradigm, the inverse of the city’s pathology paradigm and similar to that of our own world. To them, there is one narrow range of “right,” “normal,” or “healthy” human neurological and mental function, and that range matches the way “genetically pure,” “genetically healed,” or “Divergent” minds work, with those three labels conferring the same privileged status. Instead of five privileged ways of being, from which people must choose at age sixteen, there are five primary ways of there being “Something Wrong With You” and requiring behavioral modification from a faction (Roth, 2013, p. 125).

Outside Roth's Chicago, we see separation between the “genetically pure,” often called GPs for short, and the “genetically damaged,” often called GDs. At the Bureau, uniform colors are differentiated by job: scientists wear dark blue, while support staff wear green (Roth, 2013, p. 149). This seems innocuous enough, until Nita, a GD who works as support staff, points out that it's more than a job – nearly all the support workers are GDs, while all the scientists and researchers are GPs (Roth, 2013, p. 195).

While the division could appear to be based on experience, as the researchers

are the descendants of prior researchers and raised to the job, there is no opportunity for GD support workers to show their abilities and rise. Therefore, there are no GDs researching their genetic differences. Disability rights groups often demand, “Nothing about us, without us,” arguing that conversations about disability must include disabled perspectives (Richards, 2008). While there is some history of GD input with people broadly demanding a solution to genetic damage (Roth, 2013, p. 124), this input has not continued, and it may never have extended to the realm of research design and implementation, and may have depended largely on the framing of these genetic differences as unambiguously being forms of *damage* in the first place.

The separation between GD and GP extends beyond the Bureau: while all are legally equal, the “damaged” face higher rates of poverty, are more likely to be convicted of any crimes they are charged with, and have trouble getting hired for good jobs (Roth, 2013, p. 243). Mixed relationships are discouraged, because GPs are expected to find “optimal” partners in a classically eugenic attempt to produce “superior offspring” (Roth, 2013, p. 427). This isn’t quite the common and eugenicist expectation that disabled people shouldn’t reproduce at all and therefore shouldn’t even *have* relationships (Knoepfler, 1982), but it’s still eugenics. Or, if a GP kills a GD, the *worst* charge they are likely to face (note this is a charge, not a conviction) is manslaughter (Roth, 2013, p. 248). There is, again, a real-world pattern of killing disabled people, which interacts with cure/kill narratives in fiction (Loftis, 2016). Because the city “experiments”, including the dystopian Chicago Tris and Tobias come from, are the Bureau's chosen method to fight genetic damage, the Bureau is extremely committed to them. They treat their experiments as more important than GD lives, viewing the

primarily GD citizens of these cities as carriers for genetic material rather than people whose memories and lives are worth trying to save for their own sake. “They're *damaged*, after all” (Roth, 2013, p. 378-379).

Thus, we see the reality that you cannot fight “genetic damage” without fighting “genetically damaged” *people*. Outside the city, GDs are subject to unfair treatment by law enforcement and extreme poverty. Their living conditions are bad enough that they willingly enter experiments such as the one in Chicago, to give up their lives and memories, then join a faction that exists as a “behavioral modification” portion of a plan to maintain control while undoing genetic changes over generations (Roth, 2013, p. 125). This parallels the common idea among autistic advocates and in line with the neurodiversity paradigm, that you can't fight autism without fighting autistic *people*. The argument is that you cannot separate a person from the way their mind works (Kapp et. al., 59), and so a fight against someone's wiring must be a fight against them. Enforced from outside and based on the idea that there is “Something Wrong,” this fight is pathologizing and does not prove helpful to GDs in the world of Roth's creation any more than it does for real disabled people.

Despite the reality of GD marginalization, a GP researcher claims that “The dynamic is different here – everyone does what they can to support the mission. Everyone is valued and important” (Roth, 2013, p. 149). She doesn't notice the privilege she gets from being a GP (their neurotypicals, including most people the residents of dystopian Chicago would call Divergent) or the ways that GDs (their neurodivergent people, who could fit in a single faction) are treated as second-class citizens, even within the Bureau.

Later, this same researcher unintentionally shows the unscientific nature of the Bureau's belief in genetic damage as the problem. When presented with the information that Marcus, Tobias's abusive father, is Divergent, or GP, she does not change her theory that violence comes from genetic damage. Instead, she claims, "A man surrounded by genetic damage cannot help but mimic it in his own behavior" (Roth, 2013, p. 216). Rather than rejecting unsupported hypotheses, she shows the Bureau's beliefs to be independent of experimental results and therefore unscientific (Barnes, 2014). At the same time that everyone is supposedly valued, the Bureau holds firmly to the idea that there is "Something Wrong" with GDs, and that this damage, not their treatment as second-class citizens, causes the violence in their lives.

Even some readers believe genetic damage is the problem:

Genetic damage is not an opinion; you can see it at work in the factions. If the damage was just a made-up thing, everyone would be Divergent. Kids would grow up in Abnegation and be like, "Why the EFF can't I look at myself in the mirror?" as Tris is almost scolded for doing on page one of the series. A Candor man might suddenly want to add a few shades to his wardrobe, or to stop blurting out the truth like some kind of insane person. (Krokos, 2014, p. 176)

This is another young adult author. He's a more sophisticated reader than we can expect most to be, simply because writing and thinking about the symbolism involved in writing is his literal job. (This is not a statement about teen readers as compared to adult readers. This is a statement about what happens when carefully considering symbolism is part of your job). Even he does not distinguish between the reality of genetic differences and the arbitrariness of deciding which ones are "damage," despite the protagonist explicitly making the distinction. Tris tells us:

I'm not saying your genes aren't different ... I'm just saying that doesn't mean one set is damaged and one set isn't. The genes for blue eyes and brown eyes are

different too, but are blue eyes 'damaged'? It's like they just arbitrarily decided that one kind of DNA was bad and the other was good. (Roth, 2013, p. 256)

Tris's statement here is, at its core, one about neurodiversity, both the fact that differences are real and the arbitrariness of the pathology paradigm in its choice of one (or a few) correct ways of being. They were real even before genetic engineering became widespread in the *Divergent* universe, and they're real in our world. Noticing and building on genetic differences is the idea behind genetic manipulations, after all. Scientists seek genes that correlate with traits they have already decided are desirable, or undesirable. Finding these correlations requires that some people have those genes and others don't, so genetic differences *can't* be new. However, deciding which traits are good and which are bad, or deciding which kinds of DNA are good and which are bad, is based in something other than science. Instead, it's a bit arbitrary. Selecting one way of being as the "right" way and the rest to be a sign of damage, or "Something Wrong With You," is rooted in a pathology paradigm. Pointing out how the choice is arbitrary and arguing that all these ways of being are OK, that "Maybe it's not so important to escape [faction thinking]" (Roth, 2013, p. 257) aligns with the neurodiversity paradigm. Not wanting to be forced into a given way of thinking differs from believing no one else can function in that way, after all – demanding others abandon faction-thinking inverts "acceptable" ways of being rather than valuing existing diversity.

Tris does not provide the only support for the idea that this separation of GP and GD into distinct classes is wrong. Another GP researcher at the Bureau points out holes in the idea that Marcus behaves as he does due to being surrounded by genetic damage (Roth, 2013, p. 217). This is a dystopian series, after all, and the Bureau of

Genetic Welfare is one more layer of dystopian government for the series protagonists to unveil and change.

And GDs do organize, for all the Bureau wishes they wouldn't. A member of one such organization notes: "The Bureau doesn't want us to organize. If we believe we're not 'damaged,' then we're saying that everything they're doing – the experiments, the genetic alterations, all of it – is a waste of time. And no one wants to hear that their life's work is a sham" (Roth, 2013, p. 237).

The same thing occurs when autistic people organize: lip service may be paid to the idea of self-advocacy, but the reactions of autism-themed establishments to organized autistic networks range from encouragement without backup to active sabotage (Sinclair, 2012, p.32). Similar opposition ranging from neglect and broken promises to subterfuge have been used against people with a wide variety of disabilities, and against disempowered people more generally – autistic advocacy is by no means unique here (Sinclair, 2012, 34). 'Helping' professionals in our world do not want to believe the effect of their life's work lies somewhere between working less than usefully towards the wrong goal and actively harming the populations they serve any more than the Bureau does. Both work against organized advocacy by the people they claim to serve to avoid hearing how they are failing or causing further harm.

When the Bureau plans to return a semblance of order to the city "experiment" of Chicago wiping the memories of everyone there, those affiliated with GD organizations are forced to act. In service to the ideas that 1) Genetic differences are *not* genetic damage – "There is no 'normal' style of human brain or human mind" (Walker, 2012, p. 228) – and 2) it's wrong to treat certain lives as lesser based on those genetic

differences, they plan to erase the Bureau workers' memories before the Bureau can erase the memories of everyone in the city.

This plan is not portrayed as entirely ethical – it is, after all, still taking away people's identities. The plan is, however, shown as the best way to protect the lives of innocents on short notice (Roth, 2013, p. 388), and one can argue that this theft of identity is at least in self-defence. It also has the advantage that the Bureau can then be re-taught in a way that values genetic diversity (Roth, 2013, p. 495) and neurological diversity with it. They can then (hopefully) create a society where genetic diversity and the related diversity of human brains and minds is considered “a natural, healthy, and valuable form of human diversity” (Walker, 2012, p. 228).

The plan even seems to work: The Allegiant leader convinces the government to make Chicago a metropolitan area where the re-educated Bureau keeps order. It therefore becomes “the only metropolitan area in the country governed by people who don't believe in genetic damage” (Roth, 2013, p. 504). Note that this isn't a disbelief in genetic *differences*, which clearly exist. It's the position that these differences are not damage. Two and a half years after major conflicts end, Tobias lives this Chicago, which has no factions, and calls life ordinary. Everyone who survived has moved on, finding jobs that mostly correspond with their old faction's inclinations while maintaining friendships across sometimes recognizable but no longer limiting faction lines. This new city certainly seems to value neurodiversity.

### **Purity and Damage: Reconsidering Divergence in the City**

Learning that the factions are a behavioral modification program to control people with so-called genetic damage requires readers to reconsider the portrayal of

Divergence in the city. Recall that the pathology paradigm is dominant in our own world, and that most readers will therefore be coming from a pathologizing view of neurodivergence, *not* of neurotypicality. Even though no inherent disadvantages of Divergence are shown, with the primary issues being a risk of factionlessness in an oppressive faction system and the desire of Erudite to eliminate Divergent people whose abilities threaten their order, Divergence is pathologized in the city. Smith's interpretation of the perspective change helps illustrate the problem:

After escaping the city, Tris finds out that her divergence is not actually a disability, but a sign that she is genetically pure, as opposed to genetically damaged, and her existence shows that the experiment that is her city is starting to “work” (Allegiant 178). By not truly fitting any faction, she is actually the hero. This act of lifting Tris up to a hero's status for her lack of ability to fit into any faction encourages a more positive view of those who don't neatly fit society's other molds. Throughout the series, Tris struggles to act Dauntless while her other identities and the corresponding thoughts and feelings come to the surface. (Smith, 2014, p. 12)

Tris' marginalized status as Divergent was viewed as a neurological disability. Then she found out she wasn't disabled after all. She wasn't told it was okay to have a neurological disability, as someone using the neurodiversity paradigm would claim, but that her difference wasn't really a disability. Her difference was a sign that the eugenic goals behind her city's establishment were succeeding. Instead, it was her friends, who could fit into a faction and had difficulty *not* doing so, who were really disabled. Throughout the first two books, the value of being Divergent was shown. However, it is the discovery that she is genetically pure that makes Tris a hero for not fitting in, under Smith's reading. It's heroic to be neurotypical in a dystopian society that has reversed the roles and marginalized the people we would consider neurotypical, forgetting that their whole existence was intended to *create* neurotypicality.

Making Tris a hero while her way of being was considered wrong and dangerous empowered neurodivergent people. Making her a hero because she is neurotypical does not. To see if the narrative prior to leaving the city really matches with a neurodiversity paradigm and empowers neurodivergent people, we must now examine its treatment of minds that are *not* Divergent.

In *Allegiant*, Tris repeatedly learns that Divergence doesn't mean what she thought it did, and it isn't as important as she thought it was. She is told it means genetic "healing" (Roth, 2013, p. 126), that simulation awareness is a marker for Divergence but not how those outside the city define Divergence (Roth, 2013, p. 171). It is therefore possible to have "the appearance of a Divergent without actually being one" (Roth, 2013, p. 176), as is the case for Tobias. This revelation, combined with her experiences with Tobias, show Tris that being Divergent *can't* be as important as she previously believed. Tobias, who has taken issue with the faction system, realizes that the problem with the factions is not community, nor is it the people who naturally think in patterns that match well with those factions, but the lack of other options – the faction system provides only an illusion of choice (Roth, 2013, p. 463-464).

These retrospective realizations are not the same as valuing neurodivergent ways of being in the moment, however. In a way, the very *existence* of the city experiments depends on the belief that GDs need fixing, that they are truly damaged (Roth, 2013, p. 350). The entire faction system is behavioral modification meant to control those with "damaged" genes (Roth, 2013, p. 126).

There is similarly minimal evidence that people in Roth's Chicago truly value neurological diversity. Faction members may or may not recognize the need for other

factions, depending on current tensions and personal inclination. Abnegation and Erudite share a mutual dislike (Roth, 2011, p. 6, 81). An Erudite-born Dauntless says “Eloquence is for Erudite” (Roth, 2011, p. 411) to get a laugh from a Dauntless crowd. Tris's father considers the Dauntless “hellions” (Roth, 2011, p. 7). Candor and Abnegation avoid each other, and Candor explains their issues with Amity by saying “Those who seek peace above all else ... will always deceive to keep the water calm” (Roth, 2011, p. 81).

Even the city's governance becomes a concern. The city is governed by Abnegation, as the faction that promotes selflessness. However, Abnegation is also the faction with the highest Divergent population. That is, it's the most neurotypical faction, and it is made responsible for governing the other factions, which have fewer neurotypical members, as well as the factionless, where mental disability (likely related to their living conditions) is common. Even within a city of neurodivergent people, must the most neurotypical still be in control and be presumed most fit to govern?

The tensions between factions, where they tear each other down rather than building themselves up (Roth, 2011, p. 405) are not the whole of the issue. Divergent people are shown as having strictly *more* abilities than those who are not Divergent. The pathology thinking in this portrayal becomes clearer with the knowledge that Divergent really means neurotypical.

Simulation awareness is considered dangerous to show because Erudite leadership prefers citizens who can be controlled by simulations. Other than being hated for its power, simulation awareness provides only advantages. Divergence seems to provide resistance to other faction tools, as well. Even though we are told that

Divergent people generally can't resist truth serum (Roth, 2013, p. 8) and that even GPs can't resist death serum (Roth, 2013, p. 375), Tris does both, and these abilities are read as resulting from her Divergence (Norris, 2014).

Cognitive differences, again, are shown to favor the Divergent, or rather, the neurotypical. The statement that Divergent minds move in a dozen different directions, while most people can “find a pattern of thought that works and stay that way” (Roth, 2011, p. 442) essentially says that neurotypical people are less affected by the behavioral modification used to keep neurodivergent people under control while trying to “fix” them.

Then theory of mind appears. In our world, people are said to have a theory of mind if they can infer the mental states of others – and their own. Despite challenges to the concept and evaluation of theory of mind (Emma et al., 2013; Harvey, 2016), autistic people are broadly assumed to lack this ability (Yergeau and Huebner, 2017; Yergeau, 2013). Divergent (neurotypical) Tris can guess that in a one-hundred-story building with Dauntless, they must be going to the top floor, while a Dauntless-born, Dauntless-minded (neurodivergent) initiate cannot (Roth, 2011, p. 216). How does a Dauntless-born initiate fail to recognize the tendencies of their own faction? Non-Divergent faction members similarly say they can't predict how members of other factions would act. Tris, however, can, and this ability is called a sort of “Divergent magic” (Roth, 2012, p. 234-237). Neurotypical Tris gets to have a theory of mind. Neurodivergent Dauntless members do not. That is, having a theory of mind is Divergent (neurotypical) magic, just as it's treated in our world (Yergeau and Huebner, 2017), but without the difficulties real-world neurotypicals experience in predicting the thoughts of neurodivergent people

(Milton, 2012).

The series sometimes shows the value of genetic and neurological variation, but it is inconsistent. The series heavily builds Divergent abilities over non-Divergent abilities, only to show that these are in fact *neurotypical* abilities. Divergents can't properly empower real-world neurodivergent readers because *Allegiant* reveals they're actually neurotypical, making this both an 'oppressed mages' type of situation (Ashkenazi, 2019) *and* an attempt at a reversal parallel. It doesn't work. Faction members can't serve this purpose either because the only advantages of fitting in a faction appear to be limited to life under the faction system, and they can still be read as being really and truly *damaged* (Krokos, 2014). A powerful neurodivergent identification with the Divergent is taken away, and the portrayal of faction members does not allow them to replace the Divergent as an empowering narrative for neurodivergent readers. No such narrative remains.

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