

Q&A with Dr. Camilla Pang – April 2021

1. *We are currently focusing on neurodiversity at the Sanger Institute. What has been your own experience of neurodiversity?*

When it comes to the STEM environment, where objective truth and rationality are the heart of validation of voice, it can be hard to contain hysteria, variance, confusion and emotion. You can often feel like an imposter just by existing, and even more so when things need to be explained in a very granular way. However personally, I have been very fortunate to have had supportive work environments and supervisors who saw me for what I was good at and engaged with my quirks as an ancillary learning curve for them. They enabled me and for that I will be forever grateful. It makes a huge difference to have supervision where you are seen for who you are and not what you should be.

Being neurodiverse is a hidden privilege which unfortunately is treated as a handicap disempowering those who are a different shape. Neurodiversity is a hidden 'disorder', though ironically the attitudes towards it disables people more than the variance itself.

2. *When did you find out about your neurodiversity?*

I found out I was Autistic at the age of 8 thanks to my parents in organising a diagnosis. I also found out that I had ADHD at 26, when I found it painfully hard to focus at a desk in a 9 to 5 job unless I had a few panic attacks the morning before. It is quite interesting to live with both since having ADHD is like having a brain that spins outwards because it is understimulated, and being Autistic is very inward, intricate and detailed, where you are easily overwhelmed and often have a hard time assembling yourself as a functioning human. Not to mention when the anxiety in both converges, it can be hard to act and move.

3. *What impact would you say your neurodiversity has had for you?*

I am Autistic and have ADHD and GAD (Generalised disorder), so it is safe to say I go through the emotional extremes on a 30 minute basis, constantly at a pull between boredom and intense focus, happiness and sadness, under stimulation and sensory anxiety. Imagine this entwined with the constant endeavour to prove that I can function like everyone else to take my place in the world. To embody this can be both a dream and nightmare simultaneously. To live in resonance with both and if anything channel their energy and variance has been the work of my life. So regardless of how my imposter syndrome may manifest, the fact that I am here typing this is an incredible testament to my innate self reliance which I have built from the ground up. I am very proud of this.

4. *How did your award winning book, *Explaining Humans come about?**

When I was a child collecting post-its, leaves, various objects from around the house, I had no idea that this was the start of an assembly that would later result in my book. I didn't write it knowingly, but fell into it as the process evolved. I would copy bits of notes from science books and construct a map of how to navigate different behaviours, understand norms, and build a manual to live in a world that was not designed for me. After writing this narrative, which I embedded into my PhD thesis, I then got the bittersweet feedback that as much as this was science, this wasn't my thesis. I used my thesis as a socially acceptable way of disguising the experiment of my life, which despite the overarching scope of cancer research, it didn't quite cover this evolution. I couldn't chuck it, so I separated it and upon later realising it could be of use to people, and the fact that I often get frustrated of how science never gets any light, I thought this was enough to make something from it.

5. *What are the main messages people should take from the book?*

Along with locking horns with whatever chapter you felt like that day - the variable nature of the human personality, the energy levels throughout the day, or how to handle fear when you can't see a way out - to me the main message is to experiment and give life a good go. You will find a way that will make sense to you and if it looks weird then so what? Come join me and let's dance.

6. *Are there any technology tools or approaches that you find helpful?*

Post-it notes. They are the lego to my thoughts, be it book writing, dentist appointments, or a reminder to ring a friend. Everything is a litany of post-its. I don't mind the computer, but I feel that sometimes technology tends to decide too much for you, be it your thoughts, decisions or preferences. I like to have autonomy in what I do, even if it is a tad paleolithic and painstaking, I know I have control in where it flies off to. It's sustainable and also, it can fit in your pocket wherever you go.

7. *What do you see as the strengths of neurodiversity within an organisation and society in general?*

This is my least favourite question, because it is as if I am advertising strengths and superpowers which neurotypicals can exploit so that people who are neurodivergent suddenly hold value. This isn't what I advocate for and I want to make that clear. I am not here to trivialise mental health but to highlight that when someone is enabled, by altering an environment so they can be themselves, wonderful things can happen. For me, the fact that I can communicate this clearly in a social and sensory communication disorder and be able to impose self reflection is marvellous. I see links between things that are often out of place and I take pride in that, where I could easily discriminate myself against it. So this superpower is more of an attitude you need to have to be able to know that differences, however displaced you consider it to be, is actually a great potential to make change. So the short answer to your question: Strength of character, honesty, and our resolution of thought, and the ability to empathise and enable people in a world not designed for them.

Currently, the answer to this question is at the mercy of the system/institutions enabling people in the workplace or prospective employees in education.

There is a lot to be said for the education system. And so programmes investing in alternative methods so people can act, work, and develop their skills will develop the autonomy and equivalency needed to bring out neurodivergent potential.

Neurotypicals have this by default since they have the privilege of the world being handed to them. We need to bridge this gap so everyone is considered from a place of equality through enablement.

8. *What advice would you give to allies on ways to best support someone who is neurodiverse?*

Allyship is one of the main actionables a person can do to amplify the voices of those which are silenced, to create attention and shine a light on those with an opinion in a meeting for example if someone talks over them. This is actually a thing called shine theory, and I like to think of this as a choir that harmonises the signal to include people in the room proactively. So diversity in the room is one thing, but actions like allyship help create the inclusion for them to be heard and not spoken for.

If I am having trouble articulating a point because I have forgotten how to assemble my words (which happens often when I have a lot to say), perhaps echoing and elaborating off what I am saying, and creating space and time in the room for me to complete my sentence. It's all about preventing the bulldozing of something that is quite fragile in nature, the human voice.

For example, personally I can't stand alarms/sirens, or the smell of smoke, or small rooms with my back to the middle of the room. I may be trying to stand in line and make light of it, but inside I am screaming, crying, and trying to keep it together. This takes so much energy and restraint you won't be able to focus much after. So to have someone walk with me and perhaps put their hand on my shoulder when walking to the fire exit (if they don't smell and I know them well) is a good move. It makes me feel less alone, seen, and that I need some support. To stand with me far from the sound and be calm and suggest a plan to get a cup of tea afterwards in a separate building is also really effective as it separates me from the terror, and changes the context of the situation. Thankfully, I had this allyship during both my bachelors and PhD by many people. They all were there for me and at no time was I made to feel pitied or as if I were an inconvenience. They didn't over intellectualize it, they just rolled with it.

Those acts mean the world.