



# The social history of neurodivergence

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a quick-reference resource

# The social history of neurodivergence

## Why is this important?

For over 150 years, research on neurodivergence was largely negative, shaping societal assumptions about what it means to be neurodivergent. However, in the past 50 years, there has been a significant shift in research outcomes, leading to a more positive and inclusive understanding.

This shift explains the rise of neurodiversity initiatives in today's workplace—not because neurodivergence is new or a media trend, but because we are finally catching up as a society with decades of more modern research.

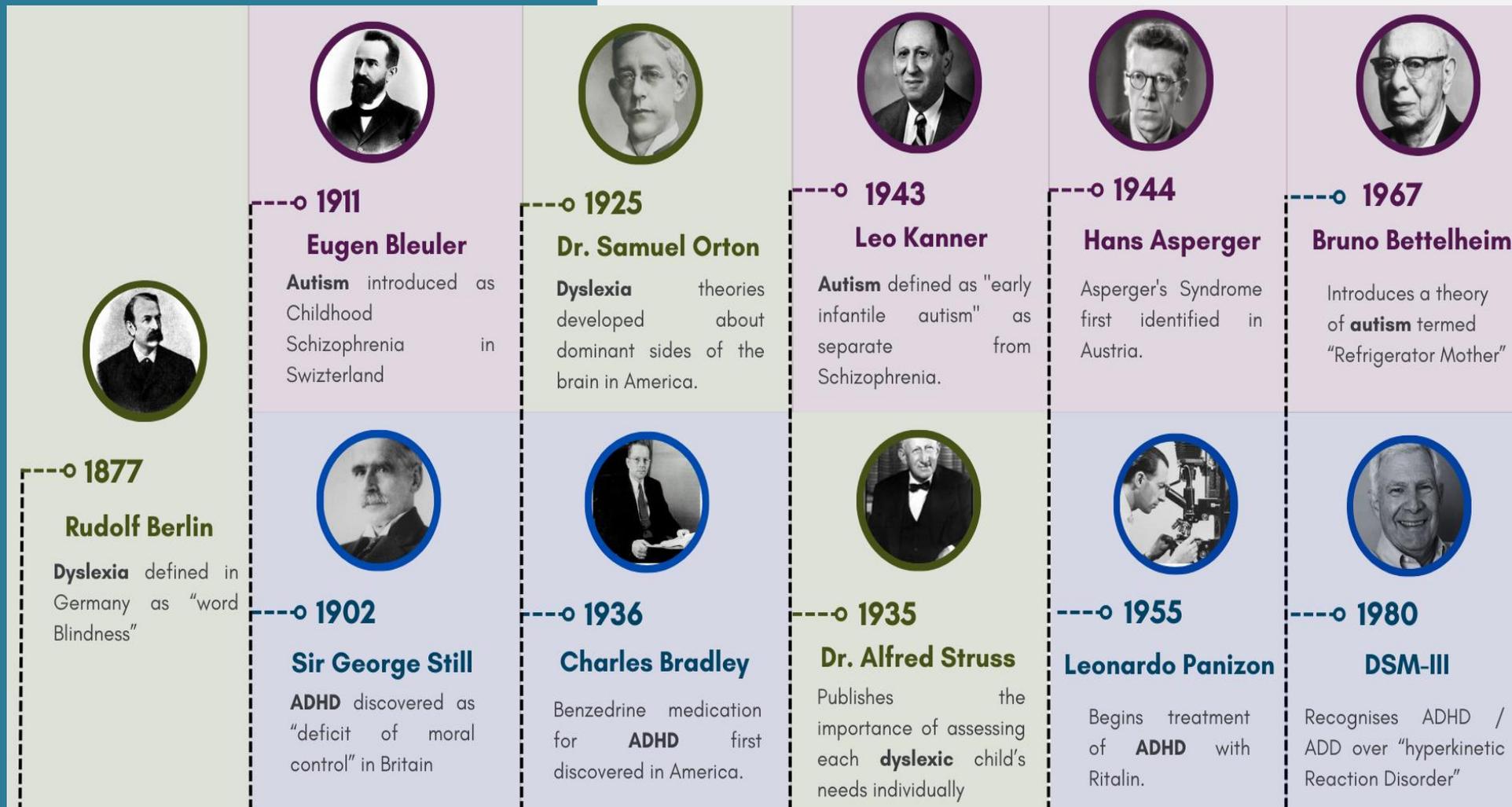
## What has been shaped by historical research?

- **Male-Centric Focus:** Historical research on neurodivergence focused primarily on white males, leading to the underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis of women and girls, whose different presentations were often misunderstood. These practices disproportionately impacted marginalised groups (e.g., people of colour, women, or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds), building on existing inequalities.
- **Ethics:** Ethical considerations were often ignored, leading to unethical practices such as forced sterilisations, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and long-term institutionalisation without consent.
- **Harmful Stereotypes:** Historical research led to media portrayals that reinforced harmful stereotypes, depicting neurodivergent individuals as dangerous or incompetent, which fuelled stigma, infantilisation and misunderstanding.

# Modern research and the Impact

- **Shaping the Workplace:** Modern research promotes neurodiversity hiring, workplace accommodations, and the recognition of neurodivergent contributions.
- **Better Representation:** Current research refines diagnostic criteria to better include the presentation of neurodivergence in women and girls, people of colour and those gender non-conforming.
- **Informed Advocacy:** Modern research strengthens disability rights, supporting laws that protect neurodivergent individuals in education, employment, and healthcare.
- **Counteracting Historical Bias:** Researchers challenge harmful stereotypes by educating the public and highlighting the strengths of neurodivergent individuals.
- **Supportive Approaches:** These therapies focus on supporting, rather than "curing," neurodivergent individuals, respecting their unique needs and identities.

# Timeline



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o 1979

**Wing & Gould**

**Autism** refined as a spectrum



o 1997

**Judy Singer**

**Neurodiversity** as a term is coined by Australian sociologist.



o 1993

**Dr. Russell Barkley**

The ADHD Report is published for up to date research about **ADHD**



o 2006

**Ari Nee-man**

**Autistic** self advocacy network is set up (ASAN)



o 2008

**Cheryl Sensenbrenner**

ADAAA adds **dyslexia** as something that cannot discriminate against.



o 2009

**Cheryl Gillian**

The **Autism** Act is passed in UK.



o 2007

**Dr. Terry Brugha**

**Autism** is recognised in adults.



o 2012

**Damien Milton**

Coins the Double Empathy Problem about **autism** and communication



o 2015

**Dr. Russell Barkley**

Recognises **ADHD** in adults.

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