

# Barriers Encountered While Accessing Mental Healthcare Among Neurodivergent Persons of Color: A Photovoice Study

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## Abstract

Mental healthcare disparities are well documented, yet the lived realities of individuals navigating both racial and neurodivergent identities remain largely invisible within research and practice. This study addressed that gap by centering the experiences of neurodivergent persons of color (POCs) within therapeutic spaces, offering an intersectional lens that challenges oversimplified approaches to care. The aim was to explore the barriers encountered by neurodivergent POCs while accessing and navigating mental healthcare. Using a qualitative, social constructivist approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and the photovoice method with six neurodivergent POCs undergoing therapy. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Analysis revealed that barriers operate as an interconnected system, in which standardized, symptom-focused frameworks clash with the complexity of lived identities. Participants described identity fragmentation, delayed diagnosis, culturally shaped help-seeking, and misinterpretation of neurodivergent traits, alongside moments in which culturally responsive and neurodivergent-affirming care enabled growth. Visual insight from photovoice helped detail how participants interpreted their own identities and barriers, showing the emotional and cultural dimensions of neurodivergence that are often overlooked in traditional research. By integrating visual and verbal data, this study demonstrates how identity, stigma, and meaning are experienced across personal and institutional settings. The findings call for a fundamental rethinking of mental healthcare as not only accessible but also responsive to the intersecting cultural and neurodivergent identities of service users.

**Keywords:** Cultural Competence; Health Disparities; Intersectionality; Mental Health Equity; Qualitative Research; Stigma; Therapeutic Alliance; Therapeutic Relationships