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Understanding divergence: Placing developmental neuroscience in its dynamic context

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19 **Abstract**

20 Neurodevelopment is not merely a process of brain maturation, but an adaptation to
21 constraints unique to each individual and to the environments we co-create. However, our
22 theoretical and methodological toolkits often ignore this reality. There is growing awareness
23 that a shift is needed that allows us to study divergence of brain and behaviour across
24 conventional categorical boundaries. However, we argue that in future our study of divergence
25 must also incorporate the developmental dynamics that capture the emergence of those
26 neurodevelopmental differences. This crucial step will require adjustments in study design and
27 methodology. If our ultimate aim is to incorporate the developmental dynamics that capture
28 how, and ultimately when, divergence takes place then we will need an analytic toolkit equal
29 to these ambitions. We argue that the over reliance on group averages has been a conceptual
30 dead-end with regard to the neurodevelopmental differences. This is in part because any
31 individual differences and developmental dynamics are inevitably lost within the group
32 average. Instead, analytic approaches which are themselves new, or simply newly applied
33 within this context, may allow us to shift our theoretical and methodological frameworks from
34 groups to individuals. Likewise, methods capable of modelling complex dynamic systems may
35 allow us to understand the emergent dynamics only possible at the level of an interacting
36 neural system.

37 **Keywords:** development, systems neuroscience, neurodevelopmental condition, mental
38 health, computational neuroscience

39

40 **Main Text**

41 The mental processes by which we represent the world shape our behaviour, our interactions
42 with each other, and our engagement with our wider environments. Crucially, these cognitive
43 processes, and their underpinning neurobiology, differ widely across individuals. Multiple
44 perspectives, often drawing heavily on evolutionary theory, posit that this variety is not a *bug*,
45 but rather a *feature* of human development (Honegger & de Bivort, 2018; Hiesinger & Hassan,
46 2018). At a societal level some features of this variability are more salient than others because
47 they impact our social interactions, learning, health or wellbeing. On certain measures, and at
48 certain thresholds, divergence from what is considered normative will result in formal clinical
49 recognition, and in some cases intervention. *When does this divergence emerge? How would*
50 *we detect it? What factors drive it? And can (or should) we do anything to address it?* As we
51 outline in the following sections, these foundational questions are incredibly hard to answer
52 because the very differences we are seeking to understand cannot be divorced from their
53 developmental, and indeed dynamic, context.

54 From the outset it should be stressed that we use the term 'divergence' in its most basic
55 statistical sense. Put simply, we use this term as a shorthand for *when trajectories of change*
56 *become different across individuals*. It is important to distinguish our meaning from
57 'neurodivergent', a term now commonly used within the 'neurodiversity paradigm'.
58 Neurodiversity is an important area of scholarship *in its own right*, drawing widely on
59 disciplines including psychology, philosophy, and biology, with far reaching implications for
60 clinical support, education, politics and social justice.

61

62 **1. *The importance of developmental timing***

63 During neurodevelopment the brain undergoes a continual process of adaptation, across
64 multiple levels of analysis and many time scales. Each individual's brain adapts in response
65 to the environment in which it develops, which they themselves have a hand in creating, and

66 according to unique characteristics conferred by their genetic background. This complex
67 process of adaptation starts early, even prenatally, and over time results in diverse trajectories
68 of brain development, cognition, and behaviour. In other words, a continual adaptive ontogeny
69 creates unique individuals, but also makes pinpointing moments of divergence between
70 individuals extremely challenging. Establishing the specific brain mechanisms that drive that
71 divergence is more challenging still.

72 An emergent property of these overlapping adaptive processes is the existence of 'sensitive
73 periods' — epochs of more dramatic positive change during which capacities emerge rapidly.
74 These periods can also be windows of potential vulnerability. For example the period between
75 6 months and 3 years of age has been identified as a sensitive period for the acquisition of
76 oral language (Norrman & Bylund, 2016), and adolescence has been identified as a sensitive
77 period for the development of new social cognitive skills (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2018). The
78 emergence of behavioural, learning and mental health difficulties also has a developmental
79 context. Inattention and hyperactivity tend to first be recognised in early to middle childhood,
80 with the majority of children who experience these externalising difficulties first being identified
81 between the ages of 6 and 10 years (Sayal et al., 2018; Scahill & Schwab-Stone, 2000).
82 Difficulties with literacy and numeracy are often identified when children enter school, typically
83 between ages 5 and 7 years (Bull et al., 2008). In contrast, difficulties with mood and anxiety
84 most commonly first appear during adolescence (Kessler et al., 2010). These rough windows
85 reflect population-level data. In reality, just as individuals are adapting to a unique combination
86 of constraints, so too developmental trajectories vary considerably between individuals. The
87 key point, regardless, is that divergence only really makes sense within its developmental
88 context.

89 Divergence of trajectories in cognitive and brain development is a natural part of human
90 existence and diversity. But our understanding of when *divergence* becomes *difficulty* is
91 currently constrained by diagnostic frameworks that chart a list of symptoms and assign
92 individuals to one or more discrete categories at a particular point in time. In short, we deploy

93 a framework largely inherited from adult psychiatry in which we categorise divergence, which
94 can itself be problematic. Existing diagnostic classification systems, such as the DSM-5
95 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2019) have
96 been widely critiqued (Astle et al., 2021; Astle & Fletcher-Watson, 2020; Happé et al., 2006;
97 Pennington, 2006), with many scholars and practitioners questioning whether they are fit for
98 purpose, in both research and practice. Our aim here is not to provide a detailed overview of
99 the conceptual and methodological shortcomings of the diagnostic orthodoxy. This has
100 already been done (e.g. Astle et al., 2021): these frameworks are thought to be ill equipped to
101 accommodate the high degree of symptom overlap *across* diagnoses, incorporate variability
102 *within* diagnoses, or capture the needs of those with difficulties that do not conform to a
103 diagnostic standard. Furthermore, it is clear from longitudinal population representative data
104 that many individuals migrate between diagnostic criteria across development (Caspi et al.,
105 2020). Our efforts to understand underpinning mechanisms or deliver effective support will
106 inevitably be impeded by ill-fitting criteria.

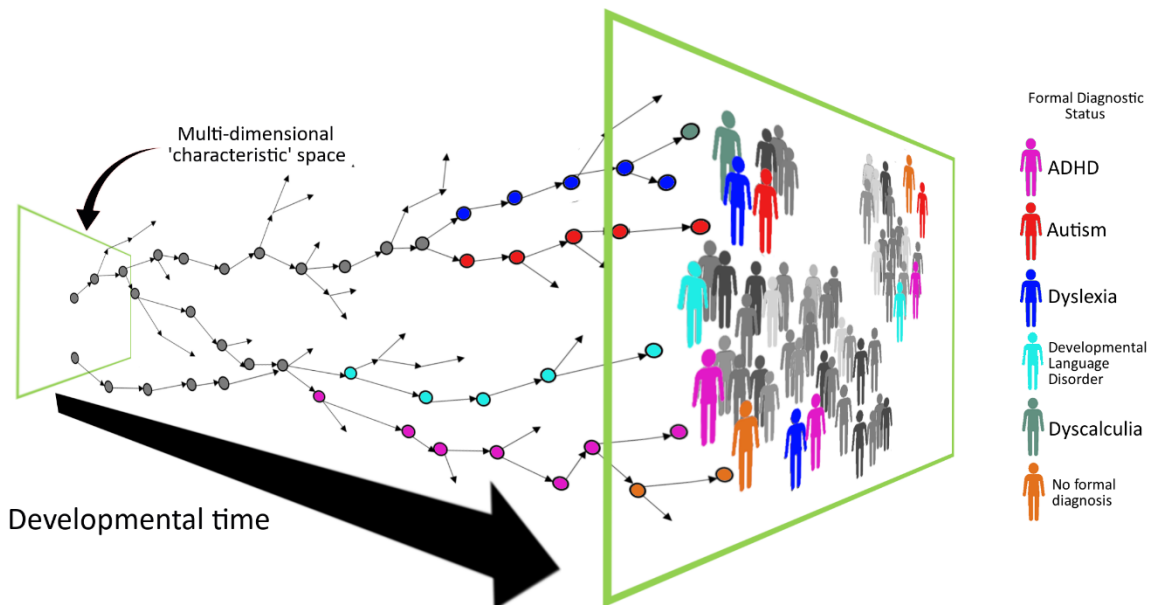
107 The concerns about the existing diagnostic frameworks have led many to call for a shift
108 towards a 'transdiagnostic' framework in which categorical boundaries are relaxed, redrawn,
109 or removed altogether (Coghill & Sonuga-Barke, 2012; Levy & Ebstein, 2009; Sonuga-Barke
110 et al., 2016; Sonuga-Barke & Coghill, 2014). Broadly speaking this alternative framework
111 focuses instead on the variability of particular characteristics within the population rather than
112 on predefined categories and could be helpful when considering preventative, clinical staging
113 models of care (McGorry & Mei, 2021). In research settings, deployment of a transdiagnostic
114 framework means that recruitment strategies are broadened and data-driven methodologies
115 are applied, capturing *dimensions* (Astle et al., 2019) or *clusters* (Astle et al., 2019; Bathelt et
116 al., 2021; Kushki et al., 2019; Siugzdaite et al., 2020) that provide parsimonious accounts of
117 the variability within these more representative cohorts. In some cases these new data-driven
118 accounts can be used to query the utility of existing diagnoses (Bathelt et al., 2018; Kushki et
119 al., 2019), but more commonly they are used to bring fresh insight to the scope and nature of

120 the neurodevelopmental difficulties themselves (Bathelt et al., 2021). A transdiagnostic
121 framework also opens the door for a deeper conceptual shift. Abandoning the supremacy of
122 diagnostic status shifts the emphasis to capturing the profile of an individual, regardless of
123 their formal label. This shift allows us to focus on understanding characteristics that are
124 impactful in daily life, whether they match a diagnostic prototype or not. In some respects, the
125 shift also mirrors similar changes within the neurodiversity movement, which focuses on
126 'differences' rather than 'disorders', and resists the default pathologisation of young people,
127 whilst recognising that some may experience differences that are disabling (Chapman, 2020).

128 The absence of developmental context from the existing diagnostic criteria is particularly
129 troubling. The symptoms are treated as static. In reality the likelihood of any particular set of
130 characteristics being either an enduring or sole defining feature of a person's condition across
131 their entire development is slim (Caspi et al., 2020). We will struggle to identify the drivers of
132 divergence if we group individuals according to their cross-sectional diagnostic status, ignoring
133 their vastly different profiles of strength and difficulty, their differing developmental trajectories,
134 or the developmental context in which their difficulties occur. Likewise, an intervention selected
135 on the basis of a diagnostic label at a single time-point is unlikely to be optimally effective. Put
136 simply, viewing developmental differences through a stationary diagnostic lens may not have
137 served us well. It may not be enough to simply revisit diagnostic boundaries; we also need to
138 map the timing and sequencing of difficulties (Figure1).

139 This paper takes as its backdrop the aspiration of a transdiagnostic approach. This reframing
140 of neurodevelopmental divergence is an incredibly useful lens through which to understand
141 and study the interrelationships between brain and behaviour. However, we argue that efforts
142 to characterise the broad, mixed population of young people encountering
143 neurodevelopmental difficulties using a transdiagnostic approach will fail if that approach does
144 not also incorporate the *developmental dynamics* that capture how difficulties emerge.

145



146

147 **Figure 1:** A schematic depicting some notional multi-dimensional ‘characteristic’ space
 148 (perhaps constructed from symptom data, cognitive tasks, or brain data), projected on a 2D
 149 plane, across which individuals differ regardless of diagnostic status. The image also captures
 150 the progression of developmental time, illustrating that different profiles within that
 151 ‘characteristic’ space do not simply need to be mapped at a single time, but to be understood
 152 within their developmental context.

153

154 **2. Capturing divergence**

155 Better understanding divergence and its origins requires that we first briefly consider how we
 156 would measure it. A crucial first step is recognising that different designs can provide different
 157 ways of capturing that divergence.

158 *2a. Recruitment:* Cross-group comparisons, in which multiple diagnostic groups are recruited,
 159 can provide a simple way of testing whether developmental characteristics span existing
 160 boundaries (Kushki et al., 2019). However, these designs tend to recapitulate the problems of
 161 existing diagnostic frameworks, since they still use the established rubric for the recruitment
 162 and exclusion of participants. Alternative sampling techniques, such as functional recruitment
 163 on the basis of clinical or educational need (Holmes et al., 2019) are likely to yield samples
 164 more representative of neurodivergent young people, because they side-step the various
 165 biases, and exclusion criteria, inherent in the diagnostic system (though may still include
 166 biases that reflect inequalities in the recognition of those needs). In short, the first

167 consideration for capturing divergence is to establish who is studied. Tethering recruitment
168 more closely to the existing categorical criteria will make the findings more directly relevant to
169 the existing diagnoses; looser sample frames will likely achieve samples that are more
170 representative of the real underlying population of young people experiencing difficulties. In
171 reality there is no perfect sampling solution. Truly population representative datasets, such as
172 the Millennium Cohort Study (Connelly & Platt, 2014), clearly offer the best chance of capturing
173 the underlying diverse reality of children experiencing difficulties. However, studies of this
174 scale are often so vast and multi-purpose that it is practically difficult to cram in time-
175 consuming detailed assessments. Moreover, the sub-populations of interest might still be
176 relatively small. The obvious alternative, of targeted recruitment within the clinic, will inevitably
177 introduce multiple biases. The nature and impact of those biases will depend upon the national
178 or local context that dictates who gets a clinic referral. Whatever sampling frame is deployed,
179 it is crucial to acknowledge the potential biases when drawing theoretical conclusions. One
180 particularly promising recruitment framework is a collaborative multi-pronged approach in
181 which participants can be recruited through multiple routes (e.g., in clinics, schools, and
182 community settings; Holmes et al. 2019). This method may allow us to not only minimise
183 biases but also explicitly test for them by contrasting data collected with different recruitment
184 approaches.

185 *2b: Measurement:* Once the sample of interest is identified, the next ingredient for capturing
186 divergence is a set of measures to characterise that sample. Diagnostic studies tend to focus
187 measurement heavily towards the characteristics thought to be most relevant for a particular
188 group: theory of mind (ToM) assessments for studies of autism, phonological awareness
189 assessments for studies of dyslexia, inhibitory control assessments for studies of ADHD, and
190 so on. This selective measurement can itself skew our understanding of the relevant
191 characteristics for defining developmental difficulties. For this reason transdiagnostic studies
192 often cast a wider net, revealing that developmental difficulties are rarely as selective as
193 previously thought.

194 Particularly relevant here are issues of measurement sensitivity and quality. Many well-
195 established tasks from the cognitive neuroscience and experimental psychology traditions
196 have poor psychometric properties, including poor test-retest reliability (Elliott et al., 2020;
197 Enkavi et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2019). This poverty arises because tasks optimised to
198 capture sometimes subtle between-trial effects at a group level do not automatically lend
199 themselves to reliably and sensitively measuring individual differences. Tasks we like as
200 experimentalists, designed to carefully tease apart different component processes, are
201 unlikely to be optimally informative for understanding the differences between individuals.
202 Indeed, experimental tasks are often chosen explicitly to minimise those differences. A related
203 obstacle is the ‘single-shot’ nature of most cognitive performance metrics. In contrast to
204 questionnaire measures, which call upon the respondent to estimate particular characteristics
205 based on multiple exposures over a period of time (e.g., “in the last year, how often...”), task-
206 based neuroimaging or experimental psychology paradigms typically sample behaviour on a
207 single occasion (albeit with multiple trials). This sort of sampling will limit the ability of the
208 metric to capture enduring characteristics of an individual, and increase the effect of stochastic
209 performance-influencing factors. Pezzoli et al. (2023) provide a good overview of the
210 challenges of measurement sensitivity and quality within developmental samples, and outline
211 opportunities to overcome those challenges.

212 *2c. Analysis.* Once we have recruited and measured our samples, the final key ingredient for
213 studying divergence is the toolkit we use to characterise them. If group membership is
214 loosened, or abandoned altogether, then we need methods that go beyond conventional
215 univariate comparisons. To date, transdiagnostic studies have tended to adopt one of two
216 alternative approaches. The first route is to use data reduction methods that identify broad
217 dimensions of difference that characterise the sample. The second route is to use data-driven
218 clustering algorithms to identify subgroups of individuals. This is also essentially a data
219 reduction technique, but it results in a novel data-driven grouping (Archibald et al., 2013;
220 Bathelt et al., 2018; Kernbach et al., 2018).

221 In summary, transdiagnostic frameworks, whilst in their infancy, provide useful ways of
222 capturing the underlying differences between individuals. They require us to rethink
223 recruitment, measurement and analytic tools, relative to the traditional diagnostic forebearer.
224 However, even this transdiagnostic reframing of divergence has rarely placed those
225 differences within a developmental context, in which mechanisms and characteristics *change*
226 *with time*. In turn, this neglect of developmental context makes it difficult to understand how
227 complex profiles of difficulty can emerge over time, as difficulties cascade.

228

229 **3. Hitting a moving target—why does development make it so hard to capture**
230 **divergence?**

231 Measurement sensitivity of a particular task is likely to change dramatically across infancy,
232 childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, the same measure can draw on different processes
233 at different developmental stages. This is a particular example of the ‘task impurity problem’
234 (Hartung et al., 2018). Poor choice of measures can thus give the false appearance of
235 developmental change, or conversely can mask genuine change. To provide an example,
236 Simpson-Kent and colleagues (Simpson-Kent et al., 2020) used a wide battery that could be
237 broadly characterised as capturing both ‘fluid’ and ‘crystallised’ cognitive abilities, in a sample
238 from age 5 to 18 years. Vocabulary assessments are usually labelled as a measure of
239 crystallised performance, because the assessment is designed to tax the participant’s existing
240 word knowledge. However, the authors demonstrated that the inter-individual variability
241 captured by the assessment varies with age. Using SEM-Trees, a method that can partition
242 structural equation models according to the measurement invariance (see Brandmaier et al.,
243 2013), they established that in children under 9 years of age vocabulary predominantly
244 captures variance associated with fluid measures (e.g., spatial working memory, matrix
245 reasoning), and only from 9 years onwards does it predominantly capture variance associated
246 with crystallised measures (e.g., literacy). In short, despite being a standardised validated
247 measure, it appears to tax different aspects of cognition at different points in development.

248 The above example both illustrates the challenge and its potential solution. Capturing multiple
249 measures, and then modelling their interrelationships, can provide insight as to *what* is being
250 measured and how this measurement sensitivity may change across individuals and over time.
251 In the example above, the aspects of cognition being taxed by the task change with age—for
252 younger children the vocabulary measure draws upon fluid reasoning skills.

253 In short, there is a dearth of work validating paradigms to assess individual differences across
254 the lifespan, or across the ability spectrum. There are some solutions, like collecting broader
255 sets of measurements and modelling interrelationships, but even these solutions have their
256 limits—partly due to the construction of current experimental tasks and to the lack of data on
257 the most appropriate ways of measuring particular constructs over development.

258 As highlighted above, age can act as a strong moderating variable, shifting the target of an
259 assessment. Another challenge of capturing divergence in developing populations is that the
260 moderator could be a different aspect of cognition itself. This possibility becomes increasingly
261 important as we try to accurately capture a range of neurodevelopmental profiles. Take as an
262 example verbal working memory—the ability to hold in mind and manipulate phonological
263 information for brief periods of time (Gathercole et al., 2004). Tasks probing this cognitive
264 function could measure something different in children with a phonological awareness difficulty
265 (Holmes et al., 2015). In this example, one cognitive function (phonological awareness) may
266 ‘gatekeep’ another (working memory). If a participant cannot form good phonological
267 representations, then the task may cease to be a good measure of their working memory.

268 This ‘gatekeeping’ phenomena can itself reflect a cognitive system that is self-organising over
269 time. Consider again verbal working memory as an example. Because tasks like this recruit
270 multiple component processes that depend upon one another for task performance, this task
271 interdependence can itself come to shape neurocognitive development. Difficulties in verbal
272 working memory tasks have been implicated across a wide-variety of neurodevelopmental
273 disorders, including ADHD (Holmes, Guy, et al., 2021), autism (Williams et al., 2005) and
274 dyslexia (Majerus & Cowan, 2016). However, because there are multiple cognitive

275 components that contribute to performance, there are different reasons why a child might find
276 this task difficult and we cannot, on the basis of current assessments, be confident that all
277 children present with 'working memory difficulties' because of comparable cognitive
278 challenges. Studies with more inclusive recruitment criteria and a broad battery of cognitive
279 tasks reveal that verbal working memory difficulties are common both in children with a wider
280 executive function difficulty (alongside difficulties in spatial working memory, fluid reasoning
281 etc.), and in children with relatively good executive function skills but poor phonological
282 processing (alongside difficulties in phonological awareness and verbal short-term memory)
283 (Astle et al., 2019). In short, because one cognitive domain might 'gatekeep' another, when
284 this is allowed to play out over development, difficulties can cascade. If enough gatekeeping
285 happens over time, then it constrains the development of other processes, and in turn shapes
286 how the cognitive system organises itself (Karmiloff-Smith, 2009). To use the language of
287 adaptation, difficulties within one aspect of functioning will shape how others develop.

288 This constructivist perspective, in which cognitive processes are interdependent, and this
289 interdependence in turn shapes cognition across development (Karmiloff-Smith, 1994),
290 highlights why development itself poses a substantive challenge to capturing and
291 characterising divergence. Cognitive or behavioural difficulties are unlikely to remain selective
292 across the course of development. For example, early difficulties in hyperactivity may shape
293 emerging pragmatic language skills (Hawkins et al., 2016), which in turn may shape wider
294 social skills and elevate the risk of peer rejection (de Boo & Prins, 2007). Population-level
295 cohorts, provided they have sufficiently rich data, may provide a way of exploring these
296 cascades between different aspects of functioning. These studies could provide invaluable
297 prospective longitudinal data, sometimes since birth, that demonstrate how complex profiles
298 of relative strength and difficulty in late childhood and adolescence could reflect cascading
299 differences over many years. The challenge is to improve our measures and to create
300 longitudinal cohorts that indeed have that breadth of assessment over time.

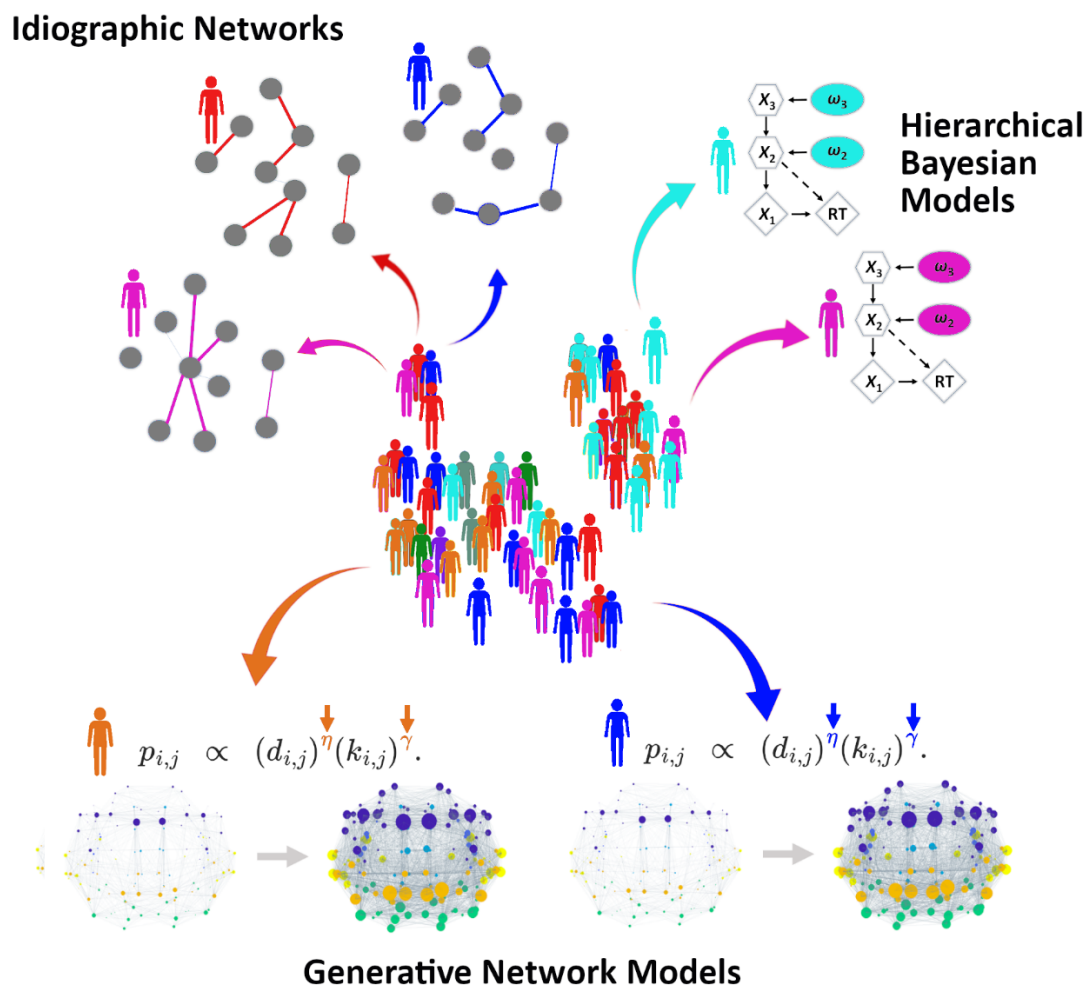
301 The inevitable consequence of this interconnectedness is that difficulties at one particular level
302 can arise from different causal routes at lower levels, a notion commonly termed equifinality
303 (Bishop, 1997; Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996). One of the key demonstrations that makes the
304 case for the transdiagnostic approach—that some common behavioural or cognitive
305 characteristics appear to arise in supposedly distinct diagnostic groups—may itself reflect
306 equifinal developmental mechanisms. Put simply, certain symptoms are common because
307 they can be arrived at via multiple causal routes (Astle et al., 2019). Elsewhere in medicine
308 this mechanistic convergence is commonplace—surface level features, like fever, can have
309 multiple causal antecedents (e.g., viral infection, bacterial infection, heat exhaustion,
310 inflammatory conditions, etc.). In summary, capturing divergence in developing populations is
311 challenging because assessments likely measure different things at different points in time
312 and because one cognitive difficulty might ‘gatekeep’ and shape others.

313 So what is the solution to these challenges posed by developmental biology and cognition to
314 our understanding of individual differences? *It may be that we should consider softening our*
315 *adherence to group-averages.* The majority of our knowledge of development, and indeed
316 divergence, stems from a group-average approach. We typically identify children with a
317 particular diagnostic label, group them and compare groups on a host of measures. A
318 significant difference on a measure is then thought to reflect the underlying ‘core deficit’ that
319 gives rise to the wider diagnostic phenotype. This logic has given rise to the majority of our
320 theoretical accounts of neurodevelopmental divergence, from the theory of mind ‘deficit’
321 account of autism (Baron-Cohen, 1995) to the executive function deficit theory of ADHD
322 (Willcutt et al., 2005). However, this logic has been widely critiqued (Bishop, 1997; Happé et
323 al., 2006; Pennington, 2006). Moreover, these theories have been notoriously difficult to
324 validate empirically. Deficits apparently ‘core’ to a particular condition are often present among
325 other groups, so they are not nearly as distinctive after all; not all individuals with a particular
326 diagnosis have the supposed deficit, so they are not nearly so shared as previously thought;
327 and they typically fail to account for the wide range of differences seen across individuals with

328 the same diagnostic label, so, as explanations go, not so powerful in the end (see Astle &
329 Fletcher-Watson, 2020 for a review). This way of framing divergence—a difference between
330 group means—is at the heart of why these theories have so often proven to be a conceptual
331 dead end. The critique is highly overlapping with that of the diagnostic framework in which
332 those theories are situated. Neither the labels, nor their associated theories, can capture the
333 variability within a category, explain the characteristics that are commonly shared across
334 supposedly distinct categories, or illuminate the co-occurrence of difficulties (see Astle et al.,
335 2021 for a review). Especially crucial for our purposes here, the adherence to group-average
336 approach makes it very difficult to place difficulties within a developmental context, simply
337 because developmental routes into a particular profile are lost within a group average.

338 If our current understanding of divergence is largely informed by group averaging then *what*
339 *are the alternatives?* There are many recent computational advances that could provide an
340 alternative methodological, and in turn conceptual, approach, relative to conventional group
341 comparisons. The first example is Hierarchical Bayesian Modelling (HBM; McGlothlin & Viele,
342 2018). This family of models allows the researcher to separate and estimate parameters at
343 multiple levels, thereby characterising the learning of an individual (Figure 2). For instance, it
344 is possible to model how individuals learn about the likelihood of different stimuli being
345 presented under different conditions. Because the model is fit to the individual, the researcher
346 can in principle disentangle the potential influence of different sources of information in that
347 learning process. The combination of this type of modelling with carefully designed
348 behavioural paradigms, in which those sources of information are varied systematically,
349 provides a formal way of characterising the underlying processes by which individuals
350 integrate information as they perform the task (e.g., Lawson et al., 2017). A full review of the
351 application of HBM is beyond the scope of the current review; moreover, there are likely
352 multiple other methods that would do just as well. The crucial ingredient for our illustrative
353 purposes is that this method provides mechanistic insight into behaviour without recourse to
354 group average performance. A second example methodology is ‘idiographic symptom

355 networks' (Figure 2). These are an extension of the more commonly used tools of group-level
 356 network science, in which nodes correspond to particular measures and the edges between
 357 them correspond to the partial relationships between them (e.g., Dalmaijer et al., 2021).
 358 Network analysis, when applied to the group, provides a way of mapping the interactions
 359 between multiple symptoms simultaneously. The application of graph theory can provide a
 360 way of characterising the organisational properties of that network, such as whether particular
 361 nodes act as hubs, connecting other more disparate symptoms. Where there is sufficiently
 362 rich data available for a given individual, these networks can be computed at the level of an
 363 individual (Fisher et al., 2017; Howe et al., 2020; Lydon-Staley, Leventhal, et al., 2021;
 364 Piccirillo & Rodebaugh, 2019). Put simply, understanding *how* and *when* divergence in
 365 cognition or behaviour emerges may require us to move beyond the group average, and
 366 instead to use methods that allow us to model causes at the level of an individual.



367

368 **Figure 2:** *Methods for moving beyond group averages. This figure depicts three methods that allow us*
369 *to characterise individuals in different ways. First, Idiographic Networks use repeated measures of*
370 *relevant characteristics, such as clinical symptoms, to build network models that capture the*
371 *organisation of, and relationships between, those characteristics at the level of an individual. Second,*
372 *Hierarchical Bayesian models use repeated measures, for instance performance across trials, to build*
373 *a multi-component model that fits the performance of an individual. Careful paradigm design allows the*
374 *researcher to separate different hierarchically nested processes. Third, Generative Network models use*
375 *a simple wiring equation to simulate the formation of a network that is fit to an individual's observed*
376 *connectome. The probability (p) of nodes i and j connecting reflects the trade-off between the costs of*
377 *those connections forming (d) and the topological value that a connection would confer (k). This process*
378 *simulates the formation of complex networks via the iterative addition of individual connections. The*
379 *resulting parameters from the best fit models provide a compressed representation of the economic*
380 *constraints that shape the formation of an individual's connectome.*

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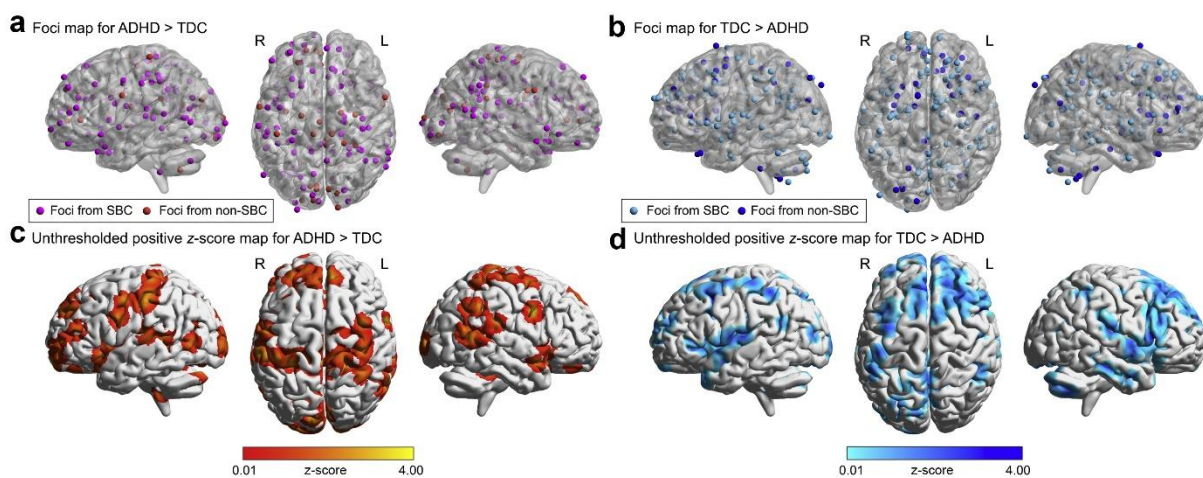
382 **4. Divergent neurobiology: how and when do we detect differences in the brain?**

383 Multiple theoretical perspectives agree that the functional specialisation of particular brain
384 regions or circuits is not deterministic, but instead emerges probabilistically (Fair et al., 2007;
385 Johnson, 2000, 2011; Jones et al., 2021). That is, the functional role of any neural assembly
386 is shaped gradually over developmental time, and in part this shaping depends upon the
387 connectivity of that assembly, in particular its inputs (Gottlieb, 2005, 2007). Likewise, cognitive
388 processes do not simply come 'online' when a neural circuit matures. Instead nascent
389 functional circuits support emerging cognitive processes, and as they are engaged in the
390 service of those processes this repeated co-activity will itself shape future functional
391 specialisation (Johnson, 2011). Put simply, relationships between brain and behaviour are not
392 static. Their adaptive nature means that they will shape one another over development. This
393 theoretical standpoint seems at odds with discoveries of particularly strong relationships
394 between individual brain regions or circuits and particular behaviours of task performance
395 (Kowalczyk et al., 2021). We are not the first to outline the challenge of dynamic brain-
396 behaviour relationships over time (e.g., Karmiloff-Smith, 2010; Lessov-Schlaggar et al., 2016).
397 The field is broadly aware that we tend to rely on individual measures to establish univariate
398 brain-behaviour relationships, when in reality we are assessing a highly interconnected
399 system that is changing dynamically with time, in individuals whose brain-behaviour
400 relationships are also likely changing. Despite this challenge being articulated previously,

401 progress towards redressing it has been slow. Part of the problem is undoubtedly statistical
402 power, to which the solution is shared datasets that afford analyses at scale. However, new
403 larger datasets that have sampled individuals across the population (e.g., ACBD, Karcher &
404 Barch, 2021) or selectively sampled children at neurodevelopmental risk (e.g., CALM, PDN)
405 afford more than just additional power *per se*. A key ingredient to the success of many of these
406 large-scale studies is that they are, in essence, multi-lab endeavours. This collaborative
407 approach allows us to gather samples with greater generalizability, capture different
408 contextual or cultural contexts that might be relevant for dynamic developmental processes,
409 and facilitate sharing of best practice and enhanced reproducibility. This collaborative
410 approach also spreads the recruitment load, something valuable in any project but especially
411 so if the sample is enriched for neurodivergent young people. A larger sample size means that
412 we can run analyses on a training sample while holding out a testing or replication sample.
413 This capacity is important because many contemporary multivariate analytic tools, such as
414 CCA or partial least squares (PLS) risk over-fitting. The ability to test whether relationships
415 between neural measures and behaviour measures generalise to unseen data is crucial for
416 establishing more reliable brain-behaviour relationships.

417 However, the barrier to identifying robust brain-behaviour relationships in developmental
418 samples is not just one of statistical power afforded by a large sample size; our challenge is
419 also conceptual. Just as group-averaging at a behavioural level will inevitably mask
420 developmental trajectories into a profile, the same logical problem applies to the hunt for
421 neural correlates of divergence. For instance, grouping individuals according to diagnostic
422 status and comparing neural characteristics voxel by voxel, in search of the ‘neural seat of
423 [*insert diagnosis*]’, has yielded remarkably inconsistent results. For example, ADHD has been
424 associated with differences in grey matter within the anterior cingulate cortex (Amico et al.,
425 2011), caudate nucleus (Onnink et al., 2014), pallidum (Frodl & Skokauskas, 2012), striatum
426 (Greven et al., 2015), cerebellum (Mackie et al., 2007), prefrontal cortex (Dirlikov et al., 2015),
427 premotor cortex (Mahone et al., 2011), and most parts of the parietal lobe (Shaw et al., 2006).

428 The variety of brain regions identified is itself not problematic; we might expect group
 429 differences to be distributed. More troubling is the difficulty in replicating group average
 430 differences across studies. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of almost 2000 participants found
 431 *no consistent* significant functional connectivity differences between ADHD participants and
 432 controls (Figure 3; Cortese et al., 2021). This inconsistency does not just reflect a lack of
 433 power. As noted earlier, relationships between brain and behaviour measures are non-
 434 stationary. Their adaptive nature means that brain and behaviour will shape one another over
 435 development, and there are likely many neural routes to the same behavioural profile.



436

437 **Figure 3:** Taken with permission from Cortese et al. (2021). Foci with hyperconnectivity in attention-
 438 deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) reported in seed-based connectivity (SBC) studies and non-SBC
 439 studies are shown in purple and red, respectively (a). Foci with hypoconnectivity in ADHD reported in
 440 SBC and non-SBC studies are shown in light blue and dark blue, respectively (b). Unthresholded
 441 positive z-score maps are shown for hyperconnectivity (c) and hypoconnectivity (d). L = left; R = right;
 442 TDC = typically developing controls.

443

444 Possible solutions could be found in the nascent neuro-AI movement. Growing numbers of
 445 researchers are building artificial models inspired by (e.g., Achterberg, Akarca et al. 2023), or
 446 directly implementing (e.g., Suarez et al. 2022), neurobiology. For example, generative
 447 network modelling (GNM) (Betzel et al., 2016; Kaiser & Hilgetag, 2004; Vértes et al., 2012) is
 448 a biophysically grounded computational framework in which the formation of a functional
 449 (Vértes et al., 2012) or structural connectome (Akarca et al., 2021) is simulated for a given
 450 individual (Betzel & Bassett, 2017). Within the generative model connections form

451 probabilistically to reflect the trade-off between the energetic cost of forming that connection
452 and the topological value the connection would yield. This framework allows the researcher to
453 formalise different theoretical accounts of the basis upon which networks form over
454 developmental time, and then to implement, test, and refine those models. Crucially, this
455 simulation can occur at the level of an individual's connectome, meaning that each simulation
456 is unique to that person. This outcome is achieved by individually calibrating the relative trade-
457 off between the components of the generative model (Figure 3). The typical approach is to
458 trade off the relative distance a new connection must span as a measure of 'cost', against the
459 proportion of shared neighbours as the measure of topological 'value'. Whilst the costs are
460 fixed across time, a node's neighbourhood is updated dynamically as connections are added,
461 thereby creating a stochastic computational process (Carozza, Akarca & Astle, 2023). Recent
462 work has used this approach to show that each brain forms a network according to a subtly
463 different economic trade-off (Akarca et al., 2021). These subtle differences cascade and
464 amplify over development to produce the large amount of variability in connectome
465 organisation that we see across children during development. This approach is currently
466 constrained by its relative biological plausibility—whilst it is biophysically embedded, the
467 networks only form one connection at a time. Future changes will need to shift this framework
468 to capture more realistic weighted changes within networks (see Akarca et al., 2023).
469 Nonetheless, the approach provides another example of how we can model and understand
470 developmental processes without recourse to group averaging. Whilst promising, a key barrier
471 to the application and utility of AI-informed methodologies to developmental contexts is simply
472 the difficulties in their operation and interpretability, particularly in those without backgrounds
473 in engineering or computer sciences. The best solution is surely multi-disciplinary teams who
474 speak a common language that allows for the integration of computational expertise with
475 theoretical insight.

476

477 ***5. Divergent systems***

478 While the group average hampers our ability to understand the individual person, the focus on
479 individual brain areas hampers our ability to understand the emergent dynamics only possible
480 from a group of brain areas. Hence, while drilling down from the sample to the single human,
481 we must simultaneously expand upward, from the individual brain region to the circuit and
482 connectome. This expansion mirrors more closely the nature of cognition and behaviour,
483 which together arise from the complex system of the brain-body union. That tighter connection,
484 between method and the nature of the object of study, fosters greater potential for fundamental
485 understanding. But this tighter connection also requires increasingly careful development of
486 practical tools and notional structures, from algorithms to theory. As noted in a previous
487 section, our methodological approach and conceptual framework must go hand-in-hand.

488 The recognition that complex systems like the brain cannot be explained by their separate
489 components has gained momentum over recent years (Bassett & Gazzaniga, 2011; Bullmore
490 et al., 2009). The associated progress in approaching neuroimaging data from the complex
491 systems' perspective has benefited greatly from the near simultaneous development and
492 expansion of network science (Newman, 2010). A relatively young scholarly field of study,
493 network science saw its first formal institutes around the year 2000, and its first undergraduate
494 and graduate degrees about ten years later. Spanning from models and data analytics to
495 conceptual frameworks, network science studies (and formalises the study of) complex
496 systems composed of many interacting parts. Of particular interest are such systems in which
497 the pattern of part-to-part interactions is critically important for the observed function. A
498 counterpoint to reductionist thinking, network science stems from the acknowledgement that
499 the ability to isolate and understand simple units does not imply the ability to start from those
500 units and reconstruct the system. Rather, one must understand how the parts are related, and
501 how those relationships both constrain and support system processes.

502 The approach is particularly relevant to our focus here, as the study of neurodevelopmental
503 differences has historically relied on unit-level models, which have precluded holistic
504 understanding. Specifically, neural correlates of such differences have typically been

505 evaluated through the lens of a long-standing model from adult neuropsychology, in which
506 damage to an established brain unit can result in a specific profile of difficulties (Bishop, 1997).
507 Neurodevelopmental differences do not fit well with this model for two key reasons. First, such
508 differences do not reflect differences in individual brain regions. No single brain area underpins
509 inattention or hyperactivity, or poor working memory (Siugzdaite et al., 2020). In fact, more
510 broadly, the map from unit to difficulty profile (or vice versa) is not one-to-one: several units
511 are implicated in a single difficulty, and a single unit is altered across many difficulties. This
512 many-to-many map between region and profile calls for a connectivity-based approach. Such
513 an approach is well-placed to provide a greater understanding of developmental phenomena
514 like equi- and multifinality. Second, neurodevelopmental differences emerge across time as
515 the system engineers itself (Gottlieb, 2007). They arise on the backdrop of a time-evolving set
516 of interactions between brain regions, between brain and behaviour, and between behaviours.
517 Understanding the provenance of these difficulties, and targeting effective intervention, hence
518 requires an understanding of network dynamics across brain and behaviour.

519 In what follows, we will briefly describe approaches that expand the study of
520 neurodevelopmental differences beyond the model of adult neuropsychology, and in a manner
521 that foregrounds emergence across brain networks and across time.

522 *Emergence across brain networks*

523 Approaches that expand beyond single brain regions to better understand the neural dynamics
524 that accompany neurodevelopmental differences span from descriptive to predictive network
525 approaches. Descriptive network approaches typically use graph metrics to quantitatively map
526 variation in the architecture of connectivity patterns (Rubinov & Sporns, 2010). Such
527 approaches have elucidated links between variation in network topology and variation in
528 cognition and symptomatology (Chu-Shore et al., 2011; Parkes et al., 2020; Zhang et al.,
529 2021). More recently, predictive network approaches have focused on how activity in one or
530 a few brain regions can predictably drive changes in other brain regions. Two key examples
531 include the finite impulse response approach (Blaauw et al., 2017; de Zwart et al., 2005) and

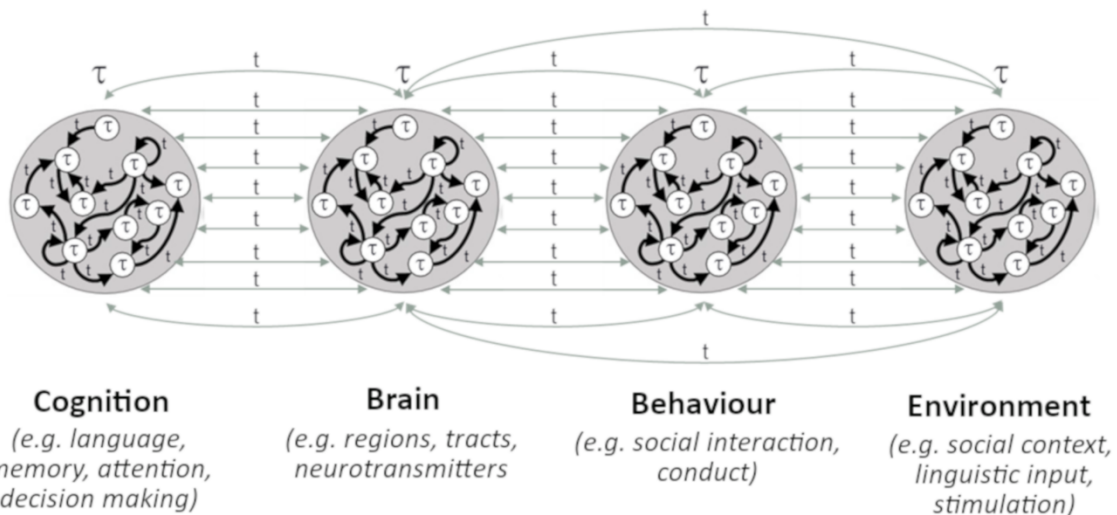
532 network control theory (Lynn & Bassett, 2019). Impulse response analysis uses the pattern of
533 connections between regions to predict the degree to which a change in the activity of region
534 *i* (i.e., an *impulse*) will drive a change in the activity of other regions *j* (i.e., a *response*) (Lydon-
535 Staley, Cornblath, et al., 2021). The approach has proven useful in distinguishing regional
536 influence on task-based fMRI activity in conditions ranging from schizophrenia to 22q11.2ds
537 (Cornblath et al., 2021; Woodward et al., 2015), and in cognitive processes ranging from
538 working memory to emotion discrimination (Goghari et al., 2017; Sanford et al., 2020).
539 Moreover, the approach has also shown extensive utility in predicting activity flow in a second
540 kind of network—state networks, where single states, emotions, behaviours, or symptoms are
541 represented by network nodes and where inferred causal relations between nodes are
542 represented by network edges. In this context, impulse response analysis has been used to
543 pinpoint influential emotions and symptoms, and their temporal dynamics, in depression,
544 anxiety, and tobacco withdrawal (Bos et al., 2018; Lydon-Staley, Leventhal, et al., 2021; Yang
545 et al., 2019).

546 A step beyond impulse response models, network control theory expands the question of
547 interest from “How does a single unit drive change in the system?” to “How can time-varying
548 changes in multiple units predictably drive the system to a desired state?”. Network control
549 theory provides a model, analytic solutions, and associated algorithms to answer this question,
550 and has been quite broadly developed and applied across mechanical, robotic, technological,
551 physical, and biological systems (Cornelius et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2011; Pasqualetti et al.,
552 2014; Ruths & Ruths, 2014). In the context of the brain, network control theory has been used
553 to determine how the development of brain connectivity constrains (and supports) the
554 attainment of an increasingly diverse dynamical repertoire (Tang et al., 2017); how individual
555 differences in that development explain individual differences in executive function (Cui et al.,
556 2020) and positive psychosis spectrum symptoms (Parkes, Moore, Calkins, Cieslak, et al.,
557 2021); and how variations in dopamine and serotonin receptor function (either by natural
558 biology or by drug) alter the ease versus difficulty of reaching particular brain and cognitive

559 states (Braun et al., 2021; Singleton et al., 2021). The approach is absolutely central to the
560 understanding of neurodevelopmental differences, as it provides an explicit formal link
561 between brain network organisation and system function as evinced by dynamical transitions
562 in state with relevance to behaviour.

563 *Emergence across time*

564 To complement the expansion from region to network, we now turn to questions posed by the
565 fact that brain, behaviour, environment, and their interrelations, change over a range of
566 timescales from moments to years. Precisely how do neurodevelopmental differences reflect
567 emergent properties of the system organising itself across developmental time according to
568 different underlying constraints? What tools are available to study these dynamics? One
569 particularly powerful approach is known as *normative modelling*, which maps the typical (or
570 “normative”) developmental trajectory, function, or curve of a brain feature (Marquand et al.,
571 2016), and then measures how single individuals diverge from that curve (Wolfers et al., 2018,
572 2020; Zabihi et al., 2019). The approach has been used to map the heterogeneous
573 phenotypes of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, ADHD, and autism (Wolfers et al., 2018, 2020;
574 Zabihi et al., 2019). In applying this approach to transdiagnostic dimensions of
575 psychopathology, recent work has further shown that modelling features of cortical brain
576 structure as deviations from normative neurodevelopment improves the prediction of
577 psychiatric symptoms in out-of-sample testing (Parkes, Moore, Calkins, Cook, et al., 2021).
578 Importantly, more general deviations can also take the form of acceleration or delay of ‘typical’
579 development, which is itself associated with a variety of factors including socioeconomic status
580 (Tooley et al., 2021).



581

582 **Figure 4:** *The network of networks. A depiction of the interconnectedness both within and across levels*
 583 *of analysis. The principle challenge of studying neurodevelopment, and the differences therein, is to*
 584 *understand how the system organises itself at one particular level, and how deviations within that level*
 585 *can influence, and be influenced by, emerging organisation at different levels.*

586

587 Now, how do we expand beyond a single factor whose normative trajectory can be modelled,
 588 and instead understand how advance, delay, or deviation in one factor might change the
 589 possible trajectories of another factor? Gaining such an understanding is further complicated
 590 by the fact that inter-factor dependencies arise bidirectionally in time (Figure 4). For example,
 591 we know that changes in brain structure can drive changes in brain function, just as changes
 592 in brain function can drive changes in brain structure. Similarly, changes in function can drive
 593 changes in gene expression, just as changes in gene expression can drive changes in
 594 function. Changes in the environment can alter one's experiences—and by extension—neural
 595 representations and adaptations, just as changes in neurodevelopment can alter the way in
 596 which one engages with the environment—and by extension—one's experiences. These
 597 complex bidirectional relationships call for approaches that embrace the time-dependent
 598 nature of interconnections both within and between brain, behaviour, and environment. In the
 599 parlance of network science, the question is one of understanding a dynamic *network of*
 600 *networks*, and expanding impulse response and network control approaches to this fuller
 601 picture.

602 **Conclusion**

603 Understanding divergence and its drivers requires that we place differences within a
604 developmental context. More representative sampling frames and valid assessments are
605 merely the first step towards this goal. The ultimate aim is to incorporate the developmental
606 dynamics that capture how, and ultimately when, divergence takes place. We need an analytic
607 toolkit that is equal to these ambitions. There is greater potential for fundamental advances in
608 our understanding of neurodevelopmental differences with a tighter coupling between our
609 conceptual and methodological frameworks; if our methods are only able to capture simple
610 relationships, at isolated moments in time, then our theories will be similarly constrained.

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