Re-presenting Autism: The Construction of ‘NT Syndrome’

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Abstract *Autism is a widely researched area and much emphasis has been placed in research on the differences between the autistic and non-autistic populations. Such research commonly draws on proposed deficits within people with autism in order to explain differences. This paper seeks to present an alternative understanding of differences and draws on writings of people with autism in such a discussion. The construction of ‘Neurologically Typical syndrome’ (NT) will be presented as an inverted construction of diagnosis, which serves to challenge the dominant position of ‘NTs’ and ‘NT traits’ over autistic traits. It will be argued that such an alternative representation of people with and without autism has important implications for our construction of and understanding of autism.*

Since its ‘discovery’ by Kanner in 1943 and Asperger in 1944, autism has become a highly researched area, receiving detailed scrutiny by professionals and academics alike. During this time, several key ideas have become prominent in shaping our understanding of autism. These include the triad of impairments[1] which proposes three key features characteristic of autism—impairments in social development, communication, and the display of rigid and repetitive behaviours. Other important concepts purport to explain the core difficulties faced y such a population. One hypothesis dominant in such understanding is that of Theory of Mind (see, for example, Tager-Flusberg[2]; Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith[3]). All of these understandings and explanations for autism have in common a particular view of the autistic individual, one that in some way constructs the individual as ‘abnormal’ on some measurement. In this paper, I seek to present an alternative construction of autism to this, one that challenges the positioning of people with autism by drawing on understandings of autism that invert dominant constructions of autism and present a syndrome of ‘Neurologically Typical’ (‘NT’) or non-autistic as the deficit. Thus, this paper seeks to position discussions of autism not in terms of neurological deficiency but in terms of neurodiversity and difference.

The ‘triad of impairments’

Until recently, descriptions of autism have largely been reported with reference to Wing’s ‘triad of impairments,’ which has been influential in organising academic and professional conceptualisations of autism. The key features of the triad largely echo the earlier work of Kanner[4] and Asperger[5] and play an important role in shaping contemporary understandings of autism and focussing our gaze on specific characteristics. By highlighting salient characteristics that can be considered evidence of

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[1] 1L Wing, “The Autistic Spectrum,” Lancet, 350(9093) (1997): 1761–1767.

[2] 2H Tager-Flusberg, “A psychological approach to understanding the social and language impairments in autism,” International Review of Psychiatry, 11 (1999): 325–334.

[3] 3S Baron-Cohen, AM Leslie and U Frith, “Does the autistic child have a “theory of mind”?,” Cognition, 21 (1985): 37–46.

[4] L Kanner, “Autistic disturbance of affective contact,” Nervous Child, 2 (1943): 217–250.

[5] H Asperger, “‘Autistic psychopathy’ in childhood,” in Autism and Aspergers Syndrome, ed. and trans. U Frith (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1991) 37–92.

autism, professionals can categorise individuals and identify those as requiring a special focus of attention, as well as develop appropriate interventions with the goal of normalising behaviours.

Impairments in social interaction

Characteristics typically associated with impairment in social interaction with respect to people with autism include an inappropriate use of eye contact and a failure to develop close relationships with others, particularly a failure to develop friendships. This characteristic is often central in discussions about people with autism, and a failure to operate in a social setting is frequently highlighted as a focus of intervention. Moreover, an important goal for many parents is that their children should develop a friendship network.[6] Given the strong emphasis placed on social skills in everyday interactions and practices, such skills are considered to be something that the person with autism should strive to achieve.

Impairments in communication

Communication difficulties are reported to range considerably amongst people with autism.
For example, some people with autism never develop speech, while others do develop speech but experience problems with the pragmatics and social aspects of language.[7] Frith notes that in contrast to communication in face to face settings, written communication can often be highly sophisticated.[8] This sophistication in communication through written means is reflected in postings by people with autism to online discussion groups contributing data to this paper.

Impairments in imagination

Impairments in imagination are typically characterised in academic literature by rigid and repetitive behaviours which may manifest in hand flapping, ritualised behaviours and an overly focussed interest in a particular topic or object. Such characteristics frequently become presented as characteristics specifically of autism, with a ‘normal’ child not expected to engage in such behaviours.

‘Neurodiversity’

There has emerged an alternative representation of autism in more recent writings, as a form of ‘neurodiversity.’ This alternative representation of autism was first coined by Judy Singer and seeks to present autism as a difference rather than a deficit. Such a representation has common links with wider disability literature such as the social model. This model makes the important distinction between an individual’s impairment, in terms of biological impairment, and disability, which is society’s lack of accommodation of the impairment. An individual can therefore be considered ‘disabled’ because of a lack of accommodation of his or her difference within a society. Disability is not seen as an individual attribute but something created through social exchanges and social practices. While the social model of disability was initially conceived of with reference to people with physical impairments, there were later applications of the model to people with intellectual and sensory impairments.[9]

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[6] C Brownlow, The construction of the Autistic Individual: Investigations in Online Discussion Groups (unpublished PhD Thesis, 2007).

[7] SE Folstein, “Autism,” International Review of Psychiatry, 11 (1999): 269–277.

[8] U Frith, Autism: Explaining the Enigma, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

[9] C Barnes and G Mercer, eds., Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1996).

Several writers, such as Hughes and Paterson[10] and Goodley,[11] have questioned the reliance of the model on a biological source of impairment and call for an examination of the construction of 'impairment.' In developing a discursive focus, Rapley argues that what counts as 'impairment' is culturally relative and so, too, are responses to it and asserts that by conceiving of impairment and disability as two separate entities, there is a risk of oversimplifying the issues through the use of dichotomous terms.[12] Therefore, in our conceptions of 'disability,' we should not exclude the ways in which it is a cultural, moral and discursive formation as well as theorising about marginalisation in economic and social terms, as would be the focus of more traditional approaches within the social model of disability.

Such a focus on the constructed nature of impairment has also been developed more recently within some of the autism literature, such as the work of Hacking,[13] Grinker, and Osteen. While not necessarily located specifically within the social model of disability, this new body of work seeks to question the representations of autism and its constructed nature. Grinker, for example, notes that in some cultures, autism still exists without a name, and in such societies, members do not necessarily see as pathological the symptoms that are crafted together to form the diagnosis 'autism.'[14] Such writers call for a more individualistic examination of autism, one that reflects and respects individual differences. However, Osteen reflects on the representations of people with autism, particularly in terms of autistic authors, and notes that such individuals are in a potentially difficult position in trying to represent themselves as not only uniquely autistic but also similar to other non-autistic individuals. Osteen argues that texts by writers with autism may send mixed messages to people with autism in that they have written books and thereby showing an enabling vision of autism, but that the focus of the text should be on their 'recovery' or 'emergence' from autism.[15]

The question of terminology used to refer to people with autism and the notion of autism as a spectrum is one frequently debated within literature, particularly the relationship between autism and Aspergers syndrome.[16],[17] Grinker comments that there are no easy answers concerning the question as to whether the term 'autism' should be more or less inclusive and argues that taking 'autism' as a large category incorporating a range of individuals can be good for advocacy and for increasing awareness. However, Grinker also warns that such large categorisations may lead to masking variations and a loss of individual voices and recognition of needs.

The terminology used throughout this paper draws on writings of people with autism who have contributed to the discussion groups providing data for this research. These groups have used the term 'AS' to refer to the autism spectrum, which includes people with both a diagnosis of autism and Asperger syndrome. The terminology that I have used to refer to the non-autistic population has also

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[10] B Hughes and K Paterson, "The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment," Disability and Society, 12(3) (1997): 325–340.

[11] D Goodley, "'Learning Difficulties,' the Social Model of Disability and Impairment: Challenging Epistemologies," Disability and Society, 16(2) (2001): 207–231.

[12] M Rapley, The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[13] I Hacking, The Social Construction of What? (Cambridge Massachusetts and London England: First Harvard University Press, 1999).

[14] RR Grinker, Unstrange Minds: Remapping the world of autism (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

[15] M Osteen, ed., Autism and Representation (London: Routledge 2008).

[16] E McLaughlin-Cheng, "Asperger syndrome and autism: A literature review and meta-analysis," Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities, 13(4) (1998): 234–245.

[17] B Kugler, "The differentiation between autism and Asperger syndrome," Autism 2(1) (1998): 11–32.

been taken from the writings of people with autism, and such a population is referred to as ‘neurologically typical’ or ‘NT’. Dekker traces the origins of the term ‘NT’ to a self-advocacy organisation run by people with autism called Autism Network International and notes that in order to avoid having to use the term ‘normal’ to refer to people without autism, the founders of Autism Network International coined the new term of neurologically typical to refer to people without neurological conditions such as autism.[18] The use of NT is now commonplace within the autism community online and is a term widely recognised by people with autism, parents and some professionals working within the field of autism.

Methodology

The data contributing to this paper forms part of a larger scale research project examining the construction of autism in online discussion groups. The focus is primarily on online sources through the analysis of web pages and contributions to online asynchronous discussion lists. There is an emerging literature that proposes the positive engagement with internet technologies by people with autism and the possibilities to develop more empowering identities online.[19],[20],[21]

Following approval from a university ethics committee, two online discussion groups that were owned by people with autism and whose key contributors were people with autism were approached and permission sought for the researcher to join the groups as a silent member for a period of three months. Following approval from the list owner, I wrote an introductory post to the group, identifying my position as an NT researcher and requesting permission to join the groups as a silent member. Other than this introductory post and a post to announce the end of my membership, no further postings were made on the lists. Therefore, the data collected reflects ‘natural’ interactions between members on the lists without specific interaction from a researcher posing questions. In order to protect individuals, each contributor was individually contacted to request permission to use quotes from his or her postings as examples in a write up, and all contributors were given the option to be known by a pseudonym. All quotes that appear in this paper are reported verbatim.

In order to examine the negotiated constructions of autism, the posts were analysed using discourse analysis informed by Edley[22] and Potter and Wetherell.[23] The analysis was further developed through the scrutiny of web pages discussing autism from an advocacy perspective. The following discussions present material from two websites. Such websites are typically developed and maintained by individuals identifying themselves as autistic. In this paper, I have referred to them in the same way as any other academic source, reflecting my belief that they contribute important knowledge equal to that of more traditionally recognised ‘experts’ in the field of autism who are typically NTs.

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[18] M Dekker, “On our own terms: Emerging Autistic Culture,” available at: http://autisticculture.com/index.php?page=articles (2000), accessed March 7, 2008.

[19] H Blume, “Autistics are communicating in cyberspace,” available at: http://www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/techcol/063097techcol.html (1997), accessed January 22, 2008.

[20] MJ Ward and RN Meyer, “Self-determination for people with developmental disabilities and autism: Two self-advocates’ perspectives,” Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 14 (1999): 133–140.

[21] C Brownlow and L O’Dell, “Constructing an autistic identity: AS voices online,” Mental Retardation, 44 (5) (2006): 315–321.

[22] N Edley, “Analysing Masculinity: Interpretative Repertoires, Ideological Dilemmas and Subject Positions,” Discourse as Data: A guide for analysis, ed. M Wetherell, S Taylor, and SJ Yates (London: Sage, 2001), 189–228.

[23] J Potter and M Wetherell, Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour (London: Sage, 1987).

Analysis

Repositioning the 'triad of impairments'

Social interaction

While a sense of the importance of social interaction and a desire for emotional closeness without the resources to achieve it was reflected in some postings to the discussion groups by people with autism, the immersing of a person with autism into the social world was not necessarily a goal of all contributors who identified themselves as autistic. For example:

> If you are Adult with Autism Diagnosis you have to have experience with medicine. Applied Behaviour Analysis is a way to bring you completely into the social world and I do not want to go. I want to stay in my world and just visit the social world.
>
> Ronald

Therefore, while social interaction is cited as an issue for both people with autism and parents and professionals, there is some conflict in the implications and interpretations of this, highlighting the complexity of the issue. When considered solely within the professional discourse of academic texts, a failure to interact socially can be highlighted as a fundamental problem requiring professional interventions. The dominant non-autistic, neurologically typical society values social skills, both in a working environment that relies on social networking and with regards to developing a basis for personal friendships. Thus, parents of people with autism and professionals frequently cite social interaction as a suitable point for professional intervention.

However, the discourses of some people with autism challenge such an assertion. While acknowledging that social interaction may be a key issue for people with autism, they resist the construction that it is people with autism who necessarily have to change in order to become more social. The shift in attention for behavioural change is placed on a difference in abilities to operate in a social world for autistic people and a difficulty in operating in a non-social world for non-autistic people. For example:

> When I was a kid the comforting quiet around me was scary to the social ones.
>
> Ronald

The experience of difference with social interaction is considered to be a key feature that defines people with autism, but different discourses surround the understanding and implications of this.

Communication

As previously highlighted, communication in written forms can be highly sophisticated by people with autism. This sophistication in communication through written means is reflected in the postings by people with autism to online discussion lists. The postings reflect interesting and insightful comments, frequently dealing with complex issues which are discussed in sophisticated ways without the need for a reliance on non-verbal cues to guide behaviour.

While acknowledging some of the challenges faced by people with autism with respect to communication, some contributors to the lists rejected the idea that autistic communication is inferior or lacking. This is reflected in contributions to the discussion lists that examine the communicative interactions of neurologically typical individuals and position such exchanges as 'illogical.' For example:

> Humans, even NTs, possess the linguistic ability to express concepts, ideas, and emotions verbally and with clarity, but the NT brain seems incapable of actually doing so. They rely heavily on the animalistic means of body language. It's primitive and unnecessary, I think.

> Further, NTs can't seem to express thoughts completely. They use an irritating form of verbal shorthand, where significant gaps are left to be filled by the listener. It's absurd!
>
> Archie.

This quote questions some common assumptions surrounding the traits of autism and, specifically, impairments in communication and social interaction. Here the much researched 'impairments in social interaction' commonly associated with people with autism are positioned as a consequence of the illogical behaviour of NTs.

While there is a strong focus in professional and academic literature on the inability of people with autism to communicate, there is a competing conceptualisation of people with autism communicating in a more direct manner, where no 'reading between the lines' is necessary. The predominance of a non-autistic society, however, ensures that face to face communication, which uses non-verbal as well as verbal cues, is the benchmark of communicative abilities. Communication online removes the use of non-verbal cues and has been cited by Dekker as highly suited to the communicative styles of people with autism because of their tendency to be direct, to expect literal meanings and not to rely on non-verbal cues to supplement words—all areas that have been highlighted as challenging for non-autistic people interacting online.[24]

Imaginative skills

The position that rigid and focused behaviours should necessarily be considered problematic is also questioned on the discussion lists. Equally, repetitive behaviour is presented as evident amongst the non-autistic population, but this is largely regarded in wider society as unproblematic. For example:

> They often have the pastime of watching TV soap operas with repetitive storylines where they perceive unbelievable storylines but still insisting on watching all the same.
>
> Edward

Thus, challenges are made on the discussion lists to the representation of impairment of imagination as the sole property of people with autism by focussing attention on the repetitive behaviours of people without autism. Such a focus on the 'strange' behaviours of the non-autistic population contributes to the construction of 'NT syndrome.'

The construction of 'NT syndrome'

In focusing more attention on the construction of NT syndrome, the idea of a clinical and critical examination of NTs as a population ripe for study was raised by one of the contributors to the online discussion lists as cited in Brownlow and O'Dell. Edward, for example, presented a summary of what he terms 'NT strangeness.' In his posting, he presented a lengthy and sophisticated reflection on the lifestyles of NTs, which were considered strange by people with autism, as well as a 'beginner's guide' to understanding such strange behaviour. In presenting such a commentary, the critical examination falls on the population of NTs rather than people with autism, challenging the traditionally powerful end of the dualism.

Edward presents his commentary in several key areas singled out as depicting strange behaviour among NTs. At several points in the commentary, autistic traits are implicitly highlighted as being superior to NT ways. For example:

> A good number of them also immense themselves in sports, such as watching people kick a durable rubber sphere around a green grass field towards one of the two "goalposts". They seem to delight in such passive participation even though this does not

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[24] J Suler, "Psychological Dynamics of Online Synchronous Conversations in Text-Driven Chat Environments," available at: www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/psycyber.html (1997), accessed May 17, 2002.

> contribute to their intellectual ability that they can use in other areas.
>
> Edward

Edward is questioning the usefulness of such behaviours, not only identified as strange by him but also as something in which people with autism would not engage having no obvious intellectual purpose. Further reflections on the ‘primitive’ ways of NTs are presented when commenting on social hierarchies. For example:

> NTs often play a game of comparison with each other. They compare their processions, qualifications, status, influence or whatever material items they take a fancy to with each other. Like preening peacocks, these games often end with NTs establishing some kind of “pecking order” where the person with the most of the compared item stays at the top with the second-most person below him or her and so on.
>
> Often, some of these NTs “bluff” their way to a higher level in the social hierarchy via some deceit that comes at considerable cost to themselves...Their logic justifies this because they value their place in the social hierarchy more highly than their own finanical problems. Again, in nature, you can see some of such behaviour with animals wanting to attract more mates to propagate their genes, and thus a study of animal mating behaviour and evolution will greatly aid your survival in NT society.
>
> Edward

The final area depicted as strange by Edward concerns communication and information networks. For example:

> My most amazing discovery lies with the fact that NTs often execute frequent queries (i.e. gossip) over their social network systems that try to discover more data about other nodes and networks.
>
> Like the CIA, they keep a huge mental database and inventory of who does what, who goes where, and everything you can think about a person’s relationships with another... Carrying the CIA analogy further, they often have a rather good ability in providing misinformation, especially if such misinformation can please others. Apparently, some of them do this under perceived duress that the other person will take offense at their words and reduce their relationship strength. This comes at a cost because they have to maintain a [sic] internal database of misinformation which they must look up on demand at very rapid speeds.
>
> Edward

The traditional impairments in communications highlighted by professionals as associated with autism are questioned and inverted in order to present the NT communicative styles as those that are illogical and impaired, serving to challenge professional constructions of autism.

An inverted construction of diagnosis

An important discussion strand featured on the two websites selected for analysis is a challenge to dominant ideas concerning what is normal and abnormal and what behaviour is singled out for a clinical diagnosis. The ideas presented in the websites challenge dominant academic thinking by constructing NT ways as those that should fall under the clinical gaze, and they are presented in a way echoing some traditional literature about autism. For example:

> Definition of NT: “Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterised by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity...Neurotypical individuals often assume that their experience of the world is either the only one, or the only correct one...NT is believed to be genetic in origin. Autopsies have shown the brain of the neurotypical is typically smaller than that of an

> autistic individual and may have overdeveloped areas related to social behaviour."
> How common is it?: "Tragically, as many as 9625 out of every 10,000 individuals may be neurotypical...There is no known cure for Neurotypical Syndrome. However, many NTs have learned to compensate for their disabilities and interact normally with autistic persons."
>
> Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical[25]

Similarly, one website reflects on neurotypicality, parodying the influential triad of impairments to create a syndrome of NT:

> Neurotypicality is a pervasive developmental condition, probably present since birth, in which the affected person sees the world in a very strange manner. It is a puzzle; an enigma that traps those so affected in a lifelong struggle for social status and recognition. Neurotypical individuals almost invariably show a triad of impairments, consisting of inability to think independently of the social group, marked impairment in the ability to think logically or critically, and inability to form special interests (other than in social activity).[26]

The writer of the above text identifies himself as autistic with an 'official' diagnosis, yet he is reflecting, in sophisticated ways, on the concepts of NT and AS, a capacity that would be questioned by traditional theory of mind. The importance of the construction of groups of people as forming distinct clinical populations is reflected upon by Klein in his examination of the construction of autism as a clinical entity and the resonance this has for an individual. For example:

> Can you imagine what it would be like if, every time that one of your own kind was born, the parents of that child typically responded in shock and horror, as if a terrible tragedy had happened? That is typically what happens when a parent finds out that their child is one of my kind... in other words, that the child is autistic...The message here is perfectly clear: Being autistic is like a prison sentence. Being autistic is something so horrible that it should be soft-pedalled, like an inoperable malignant brain tumour.
> It does not end there. These parents, in an attempt to reverse the tragedy that is the birth of one of my kind, immediately begin investigating all sorts of therapies, training programs, nutritional supplements, special diets, and drugs, in the interest of "fixing" their poor, damaged child. Can you imagine what it would be like if expectations of you were so low that it was considered heroic to teach you the most basic of self-care skills?..If a normal kid improves, it is development; if one of my kind improves, it HAS to be the result of some heroic action from a normal person. (Caps in original)

Such a nuanced discussion of NTs and the impacts of diagnostic isolation of people with autism are further investigated in parallels of diagnostic categorisation for the syndrome of NT. For example, the following is a summarised version of the DSN-IV classification of Neurotypic Disorder:

> 'DSN-IV (The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of 'Normal' Disorders)' 666.00 Neurotypic Disorder

The essential features constitute a severe form of Invasive Developmental Disorder, with

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[25] Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical, available at: http://isnt.autistics.org/index.html (1998), accessed March 7, 2008.

[26] F Klein, "Understanding Neurotypicality," available at: http://home.att.net/~ascaris1/neurotypicality.htm (2002), accessed March 7, 2008.

onset in infancy or childhood.

A. Qualitative impairment in independent social interaction
e.g. extreme or abnormal seeking of comfort at times of distress

B. Qualitative impairment in verbal and non-verbal communication and imaginative play

e.g. blatant overuse of all modes of communication, such as communicative babbling, facial expression, gesture, mime, or spoken language. Excessive imaginative irrelevant activity, such as playacting of adult role, fantasy characters, or animals, lack of interest in computers or other logical fulfilling pastimes.

C. Markedly restricted repertoire of activities and interests

e.g. persistent lack of awareness or inability to perceive parts of objects, or has an attachment to unusual objects (e.g. insists on driving around in a BMW, wearing Rolex watches, carrying a cellular phone or briefcase). Unreasonable insistence on sameness in others in precise detail, e.g. insisting that exactly the same social behaviour always be followed when shopping.

D. Onset during infancy or childhood

Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical

The diagnostic identification of NTs is supplemented by advice concerning intervention strategies, which could be adopted for use with NT children in order to make them less NT and more ‘normal.’ It is to this second theme of discussions that my focus will now turn.

Interventions with ‘neurologically typicals’

Several aspects of the websites focused on intervention strategies for use with NT children, designed to reduce the occurrence of NT ways. For example:

> What to do if you suspect your child has NT
> Nowadays due to diagnostic advances, early intervention and carefully tailored behavioural management techniques, there is no reason why your child can not grow into an independent social being, develop a TOOM (Theory of Others Minds), and in time, even develop some special interests and abilities to contribute to society...Rote drills such as Applied Behaviour Analysis with their easily understood regimen of repetitiveness and punishment will do wonders with common NT behaviours such as lying, teasing and faddishness.
> Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical

In addition to such satirical examinations of interventions, there are also comments concerning intervention programmes designed for people with autism. Klein states:

> The biggest problem with most programs designed to assist autistic children is, as far as I can tell, that they were designed by NTs, and for NTs.... They are, after all, the ones that will be paying the considerable bill for these programs, and it is their wishes that are catered to with regard to goals of that program...The goal should be to help the autistic child develop in a way that will make a relatively decent life possible, not to make him into an NT clone. That’s not real; a cat trained to fetch and wag his tail when happy is a trained cat, not a dog.

> Klein further comments that:
> While there are a lot of resources that aim to educate normal people about how autistics think, there really are no resources at all that serve to explain to autistics how normal people think.

This sophisticated analysis on NT behaviours serves to challenge several constructions regarding the (in)abilities of people with autism, making important political statements concerning the positioning of people with autism in an NT-dominated society.

Discussion

The traditionally dominant ‘triad of impairments’ construction of autism can be questioned through alternative constructions of autism presented in the on-line discussions above. The impairments identified in professional and academic literature are questioned and re-framed not as inabilities and impairments but as positive attributes of people with autism, skills in which the non-autistic population are identified as lacking. A re-positioning of autism and neurologically typicals is evident within these arguments.

The two websites singled out here as examples present eloquent and challenging arguments concerning the unusual behaviour of neurologically typicals, which can consequently be marked out for special interest. Such a commentary enables an examination of an alternative construction of autism by examining the traits traditionally associated with autism considered to be impairments in the individual and investigating these by positioning them against the equally impaired portrayal of NT traits, which are generally accepted by wider society as the norm. Such debates raise issues concerning the valuing of diversity and the celebration of neurodiversity—a position in which one half of the dualism is seen as not necessarily better than the other, with both having positive and important contributions. In making such political reframings of the construction of autism, NT characteristics are sometimes presented in a negative manner. However, it is important to move away from the binary categorisations of ‘otherness’ if a rich picture of difference is to be embraced and, instead, move towards a reframing of difference in terms of ‘neurodiversity’.

A position of ‘neurodiversity’ is reflected in the emergence on the internet of a social movement of individuals who identify themselves as ‘different’ from NTs and advocate not only for more understanding and tolerance of autistic differences, but also an understanding of autism as ‘neurodiversity.’ While initially conceived by people with autism, the concept of neurodiversity has been taken up by several other groups in their reframing of deficit and difference, and there has been a call for ‘neurodiversity’ to be recognised and to sit alongside the more familiar categories of gender, class and race.[27] A position drawing on neurodiversity is therefore not about binary opposites and the prioritising of one group of classified individuals over another, but rather about embracing a wide range of neurological makeups, autistic being one of them.

In contrast to this position, traditional approaches to autism typically share a common focus of the person with autism as in some way ‘impaired,’ and therefore requiring professional intervention in order to elicit a change to become more reflective of NT characteristics. Recently, there has been a challenge to deficit driven models of autism,[28] drawing upon the wider disability movement’s alternative view of disability: the social model of disability (see, for example, Oliver[29]). In such debates, disability is re-constructed as a social rather than an individual phenomenon. There has also been discussions concerning the application of the social model of disability specifically to autism, and the guiding gaze of disability studies questions the disabling taken for granted assumptions that NT ways are ‘the norm.’

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[27] J Singer, “Why can´t you be normal for once in your life?’ From a ‘problem with no name’ to the emergence of a new category of difference,” Disability Discourse, ed. M Corker and S French (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), p. 59–67.

[28] H Molloy and LVasil, “The Social Construction of Asperger Syndrome: The pathologising of difference?” Disability and Society, 17 (6) (2002): 659–669.

[29] M Oliver, The Politics of Disablement (Basingstoke: MacMillan 1990).

For example, Billington has provided a fresh examination of therapeutic intervention with people with autism, highlighting the dependence of interventions on the ‘triad of impairments’ and proposing that a rigid adherence to such a triad can reflect in an inability of services to meet the needs of people with autism and their families. Due to the reliance of the models on the impairments of people with autism and not the differences of such a group, the experiences of individuals are largely lost in the therapeutic exchanges.

Billington argues that such individual experiences and accounts can be an important resource for professionals and highlights the need for such voices to be heard and respected within professional discourse and the need for professional practice to focus on the assets rather than deficits of people with autism by engaging in a new way of talking about and conceptualising autism. The onus of change is placed not just upon the person with autism but also on the wider social network, including parents and professionals.[30]

However, in research surrounding autism, NTs are generally accorded a powerful position in guiding the research processes and prioritising areas to be focused upon. My research is in contrast to this, following a model of valuing diversity whereby the skills of people with autism are presented and drawing upon positive constructions of autism rather than prioritising NT characteristics and comparing people with autism against such a benchmark. Indeed, in several parts of the website commentaries, AS characteristics are prioritised over NT characteristics. Such commentaries present important challenges to some academic constructions of autism by questioning some of the perceived competencies of such a labelled group.

The ideas raised here have important implications for possible constructions and understandings of autism. Such eloquent discussion points made by people who identify themselves as autistic pose potential challenges to representations of people with autism as unable to communicate and consider complex arguments that arguably draw on a theory of mind. The benchmark of NT traits as representative of ‘normality’ serves as a reflection of power relations operating within society. Such discussions highlight the need to place a gaze on the dominant majority as well as looking for ‘abnormalities’ within the minority autistic group. In embracing alternative representations of autism, the concept of neurodiversity can be celebrated and constructions of autism as a deficit can be resisted, presenting autism as a difference that is equal to the more dominant NT traits valued in society. This, in turn, raises a range of possibilities for individuals with autism with respect to identity construction and their role and position within their society.

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