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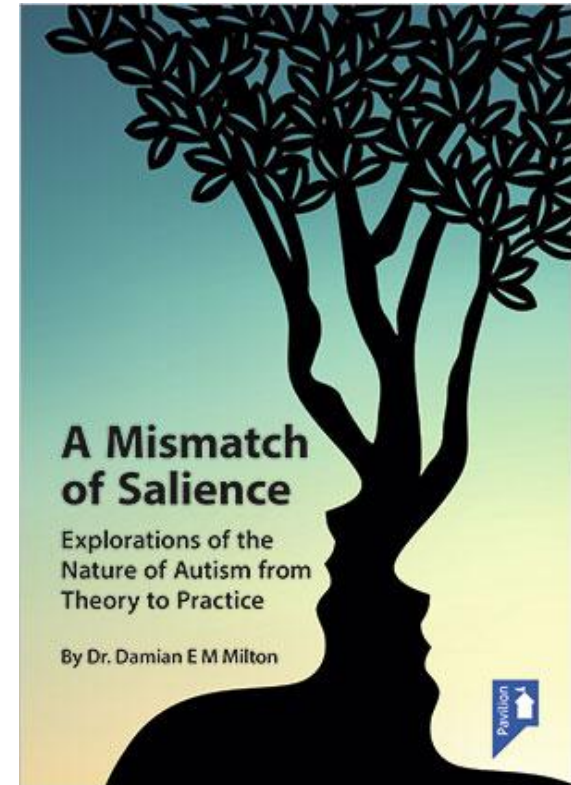
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# Autism, counselling theory and the double empathy problem

*Dr. Damian E M Milton*



- *Socrates: ...Can you point out any compelling rhetorical reason why he should have put his arguments together in the order that he has?*
- *Phaedrus: You do me too much honour if you suppose that I am capable of divining his motives so exactly. (Plato, 1973: 78).*

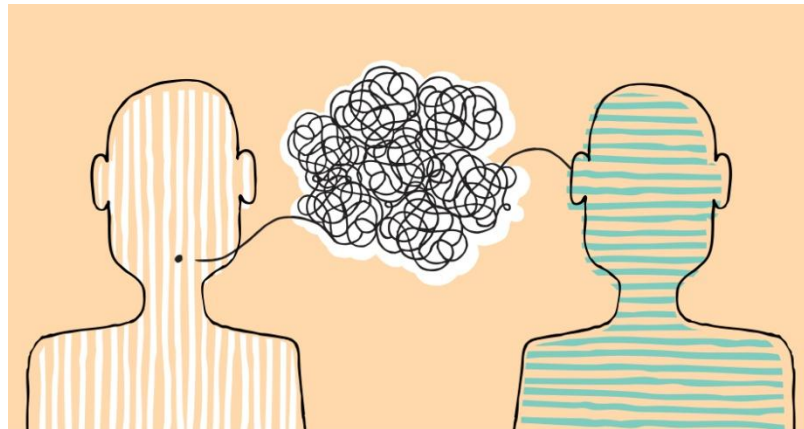
# Introduction

- The diagnostic criteria for autism and the idea of impaired social understanding.
- An exploration of the double empathy problem in theory and research.
- The use of Personal Construct Theory (PCT) in work with autistic people.

- *The autist is only himself...and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly. (Asperger, 1991: 38).*

# Theory of mind

- The ability to empathise with others and imagine their thoughts and feelings, in order to comprehend and predict the behaviour of others (also called 'mind-reading' and 'mentalising').



# Mutual incomprehension

- *“95% of people don’t understand me”.*
- *“Friends are overwhelming”.*
- *“Adults never leave me alone”.*
- *“Adults don’t stop bullying me”.*
  
- Quotes taken from Jones et al. (2012).

# The 'double empathy problem'

- A case of mutual incomprehension?
- Breakdown in interaction between autistic and non-autistic people as not solely located in the mind of the autistic person. The theory of the double empathy problem sees it as largely due to the differing perspectives of those attempting to interact with one another (Milton, 2012a; 2014; Milton et al. 2018; Chown, 2014).
- Theory of autistic mind can often leave a great deal to be desired.
- Fork handles!



# Assumptions of social relationality

- The subtext of a social situation is actively created by people in context.
- The theory of mind concept utilised in psychological models of human interaction, refers to the ability an individual has to assume understandings of the mental states and motives of other people.
- When such ‘empathy’ is applied toward an autistic person however, it is often wildly inaccurate in its measure.

- Such attempts are often felt as invasive, imposing and threatening by an autistic person, especially when protestations to the contrary are ignored by the person doing the 'empathising'.
- Beardon and Edmonds (2007) found that 83% of autistic adults they surveyed identified one of their greatest challenges as being a lack of understanding and recognition of their differing needs from other people.

# Ethnomethodology and autism

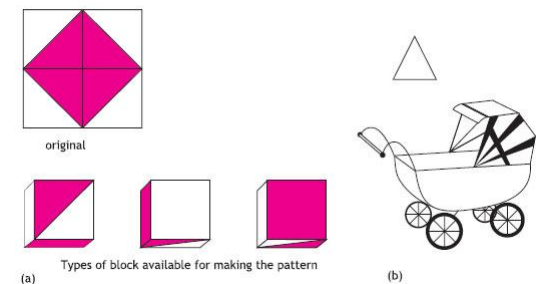
- *It is argued here that 'empathy' is a convenient illusion, and the phenomenon that people speak of when referring to it has more to do with language and a sense of 'shared' cultural meanings/symbols (or their 'ethno'). (Milton, 2011b).*

# Dyspathy

- Cameron (2012) uses the term 'dyspathy' to highlight how empathy is often blocked or resisted by people.
- Such research supports the earlier social psychological theories of Tajfel (1981), which found that people felt increasing emotional connection to those deemed within their social 'in-group', whilst stereotyping 'outsiders'.
- *If we were to be continually tuning into other people's emotions, we would be perpetually anxious or exhilarated, and very quickly exhausted. We must therefore have very efficient inhibitory mechanisms that screen out most of the emotional empathy being carried out by our brains, without us even noticing. (Cameron, 2012).*

# An 'interest model' of autism

- Autism and monotropism (Murray et al. 2005; Lawson, 2010).
- Attention as a scarce resource.
- Monotropic attention strategies and the 'attention tunnel'.
- Monotropism, repetitive behaviour and interests, and 'flow states'.



# Embodiment and socialisation

- The acquisition of knowledge and expertise.
- Expertise as functional competence.
- Embodied experience (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi, cited in Collins and Evans, 2007).
- Collins and Evans (2007) – the primary site of the acquisition of knowledge and expertise is social, thus the mastering of a skill requires more than the embodiment of it, but the socialisation of people into relevant social practices.

# The sociality of an 'outsider'

- With autistic people, especially those who acquire verbal articulacy, one often finds the sociality of an 'outsider' (Becker, 1963).
- Also, it is often said that one of the most defining features of autism is a 'spiky' cognitive profile (Milton, 2012b) that can lead to extreme strengths in areas of interest, but also potentially a widening of perspective and sociality, particularly in later years of development.
- Such a sociality is then stigmatised (Milton, 2011) rather than being seen as a potential asset within communities of practice.



# Tacit knowledge

- Collins (2010) demarcates three main categories of tacit knowledge:
- Weak / relational (can be made explicit)
- Medium / somatic (limited by affordances)
- Strong / collective (dependent upon being engaged in communities of practice)



- *What is being argued is that humans differ from animals, trees, and sieves in having a unique capacity to absorb social rules from the surrounding society – rules that change from place to place, circumstance to circumstance, and time to time. (Collins, 2010: 124).*

# Autistic sociality

- If autistic people were primarily machine-like, then where do the idiosyncratic expressions of autistic people (Mullin, 2009) originate from?
- If one were to follow the theory of Murray et al. (2005), perhaps it is the affordances of an autistic way of being leading to the honing-in on particular aspects of the social which inspire interest and attention?

- *They [autistic people] are creating the language in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the concepts in which to think autism. (Hacking, 2009, p. 1467).*

- Collins (2010) points out that domesticated animals, whilst immersed in human society are not able to be socialised, in the sense one does not encounter vegetarian, arty, or 'nerdy' dogs, they are simply just dogs.
- Yet one does encounter autistic people who are vegetarian, artistic, and certainly 'nerdy'.
- Autistic people have distinct interests and abilities that involve social practices, and this includes those who are deemed 'non-verbal' who are often musical or artistic, and whose bodily movements have been argued to be a form of language (Baggs, 2007, Milton, 2012c).

# Learning about social life

- Much social skill or behavioural training with autistic people are predicated upon breaking down such social information into explicated strings of information which does little to help autistic people adjust to the changing flux of negotiated socially constructed realities.
- Recently however, methods such as 'Intensive Interaction' (Nind and Hewitt, 1994) which focus on relationship building and child-led activities have begun to challenge this dominance within the field.

- *...the individual is a temporary and leaky repository of collective knowledge. Kept apart from society for any length of time and the context sensitivity and currency of the individual's abilities will fade. (Collins, 2010: 133).*

# Interactional expertise

- The imitation game
- Contributory expertise
- How much interactional expertise is possible (Milton, 2014)?

# The evidence-base

- Sheppard et al. (2016) investigated non-autistic participants' ability to interpret the behavioural reactions of autistic people in naturalistic social interactions.
- Autistic and non-autistic participants were covertly filmed reacting to a seemingly incidental but actually scripted aspect of the researcher's behaviour.
- While briefing the participant she either told them a joke, paid them some compliments, told them about the difficult day she was having or kept them waiting while doing irrelevant activities.
- Non-autistic participants who viewed the recorded videos were less able to guess which event the video participant had experienced for autistic than non-autistic participants, apart from for reactions to the joke.



- Edey et al. (2016) asked autistic and non-autistic participants to manipulate two triangles to create animations depicting mental state interactions such as 'coaxing' or 'mocking'.
- Non-autistic observers who viewed the animations were better at identifying the mental state depicted for animations created by other non-autistic participants than autistic participants.

# Studies of forming first impressions

- Research has also asked a more general question of how autistic people are perceived by non-autistic others.
- If autistic people are perceived less favourably then this could result in avoidance and social exclusion, contributing to the social difficulties they experience.
- Stagg et al. (2014) found that non-autistic adults rated autistic children as less expressive and less attractive than the non-autistic children based on brief videos of them.

- In a study using a much larger sample of adult participants, Sasson et al. (2017a) carried out three studies in which they showed that non-autistic adults rated autistic adults and children less favourably than non-autistic adults and children on a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, as well as indicating reduced intentions to engage with them.
- Further research by Sasson et al. (2017b) examined the impact of providing diagnostic labelling information on the impressions formed and found this to have a positive effect.

# Studies of metaperception

- Sasson et al. (2018) investigated metaperception using the same videos from Sasson et al. (2017a/b).
- Video participants were asked to estimate how they thought others would perceive them on a wide range of personality traits, then observers judged them on the same traits after viewing their video.
- They found that autistic participants were less accurate than non-autistic participants in judging how they would be perceived as others, because they overestimated how positively they would be perceived.

- While Sasson et al.'s (2018) study asked participants about how they come across to others in general, Usher et al. (2018) studied impressions formed by dyads of adolescents where one member of the dyad was autistic and one was not, who engaged in a five-minute conversation.
- Autistic participants were found to be more accurate in judging whether the non-autistic partner liked them than non-autistic participants were.

- Metaperception has also been investigated between dyads of autistic and non-autistic people who know each other well.
- Heasman and Gillespie (2017) used the Interpersonal Perception Methodology (IPM) to investigate perceptions and misperceptions for dyads of autistic individuals and their family members.
- When asked about reasons for misunderstandings, family members tended to cite an extreme impairment in social understanding of the autistic person, while autistic participants themselves reflected on both the self and other as causes of misunderstandings.

- Overall, studies of metaperception suggest that autistic people are quite good at estimating how specific others perceive them, but may have some difficulty judging how they come across in general. Consistent with the DEP, non-autistic people may have difficulty working out how they are perceived by autistic people whom they have just met.

# Neurodiverse interactions

- It has been observed that autistic people appear to have a greater affinity with other autistic people than non-autistic people generally do (Chown, 2014).
- This raises the possibility that autistic people may show improved, if not superior, understanding of other autistic people and may consequently show fewer signs of 'social impairment' in the company of their in-group (Tajfel, 1981).



# Personal construct theory (PCT)

- People are viewed as active agents that construe events that happen to them, rather than being simply shaped by them (Kelly, 1955).
- The 'Jackass in the middle' (Kelly, 1955).
- Kelly (1955) described people as 'like scientists', each with their own theory about the world and about themselves. Indeed, an individual's sense of 'self' was conceived as a working theory.
- PCT focuses upon the individual's theory about his/her self and how they perceive others, revealing their personal system of constructions.
- Each person uniquely creates reality for themselves, building shifting landscapes of meaning in the process.

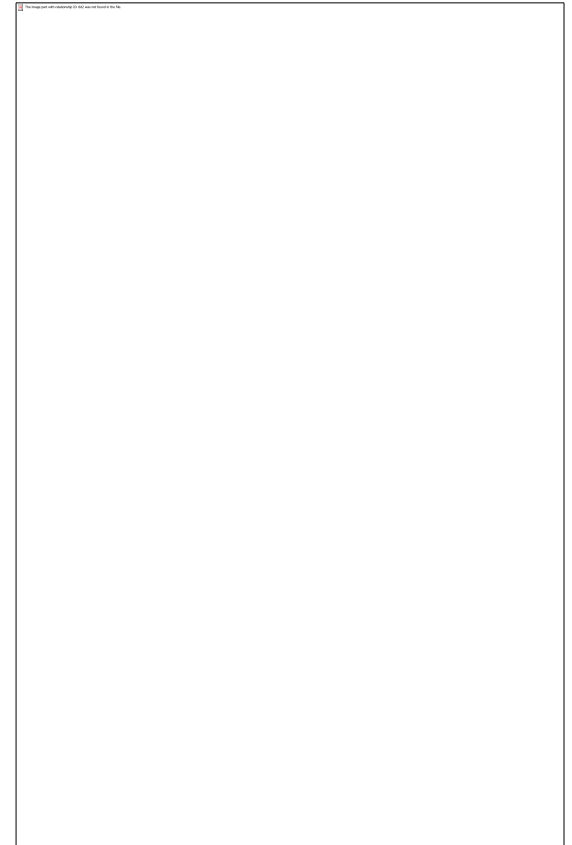
- PCT suggests that individuals create systems of understandings and constructions about the world, based upon their own idiosyncratic personal experiences, yet these constructions are also seen as socially situated in culture and history (Butt, 2004).
- PCT is primarily concerned with appreciating the diversity of 'world views' that individuals have, emphasising 'lived experience' and personal and intentional meanings as the root of action and human agency.
- The PCT adopted by Salmon (2003) recognises the relativistic nature of human knowledge, the multiple realities and positionalities that this creates and the subsequent provisional nature of knowledge and attitudes.

# PCT and 'aut-ethnography'

- Some good examples of the use of PCT in the field of autism, yet often with research relating to children.
- Many years ago I worked on a series of projects with my mother and other colleagues that utilised PCT, yet also drew upon the work of Garkinkel (1967) and Derrida (1988) in terms of breaches to personal constructions, reconstructed narratives – continuity and discontinuity (Milton, 2002) – what I now refer to as 'aut-ethnography' (Milton, 2017).

# Subverting the 'functional' family album

- Single photographs – accompanied by narratives written in hindsight by both myself and my mother.
- Focusing on the traumatising effects of the road-traffic accident.
- Charting the history of the effects and continuation of the process (rather than resolution).
- Trauma as a breach which does not 'heal' (Garfinkel, 1967). Trauma as permanent discontinuity with previous sense of self.



## **‘Views’ (Blay, 2004)**

- Severe head injury in 1985 – leading to both working and long-term memory difficulties.
- Dissertation project ‘Views’ – perceptions of ‘being and spirituality’.
- Black and white portrait photograph – followed by a translucent sheet with personal narratives written in own handwriting, and then a photograph depicting how that person wanted to be seen.

# Utilising photographs

- The 'Photo Book'.
- Photo taking and reporting.
- Photo sorting.
- Photo-montage and collage (Ridout, 2014).

# Violation through interpretation

- *“To communicate? I understand well, or rather the word, as I understand it is doubled...In order to make the tacit speak, what is required is to want, to do violence and to violate, and not at all a secret or something that would resist being said.” (Deligny, 2015: 91).*
- *“When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process.” (Pirsig, 1974: 86).*

# Cultural imperialism

- Those that have power in society can determine how those in a position of powerlessness are interpreted and talked about (Young, 1990).
- Notions such as 'ableism' and 'mansplaining' can be seen as having roots in similar notions of a taken-for-granted unconscious frame of reference which renders the 'other' invisible.





# Psychsplaining

- *Those categorised by psych-professionals are often reduced within such relationships to that of the ‘sick role’ (Parsons, 1951), with one’s own interpretations of oneself undermined by the ‘expert knowledge’ being projected upon the autistic person, who by default is positioned in a relatively powerless social position of medical ‘patient’. (Milton, 2016).*

## A couple of quotes to conclude:

- *Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms...Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. Define your terms. Work with me to build bridges between us. (Sinclair, 1993)*

- *When I am in an environment I feel comfortable in, with people who are kind and tolerant, and doing things I enjoy, then I am as happy as the next person. It is when people tell me I should think, speak or behave differently that I start to feel different, upset, isolated and worthless. So surely the problem is a lack of fit with the environment rather than something inside my brain that needs to be fixed? (Victoria, 'Are You Taking Something for It?', issue 76, 12; cited in Milton and Sims, 2016).*

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