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## *Autistic development, trauma and personhood: beyond the frame of the neoliberal individual.*

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### **Key point summary:**

- The paper critically explores notions of childhood development, particularly in regard to autism, reactions to traumatic events, and the meaning of ‘personhood’.
- The construction of the neoliberal individual is contrasted with that of personhood as experienced by an autistic person.
- Person-centred methods of engagement as outlined in this paper can give opportunities for opening up a respectful discursive space, where autistic development is not framed from the outset as ‘disordered’.

### **Introduction**

This paper critically explores notions of childhood development, particularly in regard to autism, reactions to traumatic events, and the meaning of ‘personhood’. The paper begins by looking at ‘consensual normalcy’ as a dominant thread throughout the history of Western philosophy and how contemporary neoliberal ideology constructs the individual. This idealisation of ‘functional and productive’ personhood is then contrasted with the experience of developing as an autistic person. The arguments presented in this paper have been influenced by a diverse range of theory, from Kelly’s (1995) Personal Construct Theory (PCT), to Garfinkel’s (1967) notion of ‘breaching’, and Derrida’s methods of deconstruction, and goes on to explain how through a number of projects, this theorising was implemented to help empower both myself and other members of my family, who had experienced traumatic events in their childhood and/or sense of self/personhood. In conclusion, it is argued that autistic development can be seen as an affront to neoliberal notions of functional stages of child development, and yet person-centred methods of engagement as outlined in this paper can give opportunities for opening up a respectful discursive space, where autistic development is not framed from the outset as ‘disordered’. Of course, such a construing of autistic development as part of natural diversity is incongruent with the pathologising narrative of neoliberalism. In this sense, the ‘double empathy problem’ between autistic and non-autistic people (Milton, 2012) is not only personal, but political too. In accordance with other ‘autistic voices’ (Sinclair, 1993; Sainsbury, 2000) this article will use the descriptors of ‘autistic person/people’ and ‘autistic spectrum’:

“We are not people who “just happen to have autism”; it is not an appendage that can be separated from who we are as people, nor is it something shameful that has to be reduced to a sub-clause.” (Sainsbury, 2000: 12).

## **Western society and its strong drive toward central coherence**

One of the dominant psychological theoretical explanations of autism suggests that autistic people have a 'weak drive toward central coherence', depicted largely as a deficit or impairment compared to the 'neuro-norm'. Suggesting that autistic people may have a particular strength in processing details because of a lack in the ability to synthesise information quickly and gain meanings. It is an interesting exercise however, if one reverses the gaze and considers the predominant typical neurotype, or at least its fanciful construction, as having a 'strong drive toward central coherence'. One can say there is a thread in Western philosophy connecting Plato's forms, Hobbes' views of the descent of man without civil society, Durkheim's collective conscience, and the value consensus of Talcott Parsons; containing a desire for coherence and consensus. Some of these theorists noticed however, that with this drive toward hegemonic normativity, one will always have those who do not fit: the pathologically dysfunctional deviant minority.

"The web of domination has become the web of reason itself, and this society is fatally entangled in it." Marcuse (1964: 123).

Within current hegemonic norms, the notion of the fully independent, neoliberal functional individual, the social agent who is responsible for their actions, has become the ideal to which pathological deviance is contrasted, creating categories of those who can pass as 'normal', those who severely struggle to pass, and those who cannot (and/or may not wish to). Each could be said however, to be constrained within these parameters. This form of 'individuality' does not allow for the celebration of diversity in all its forms, and creates an 'us and them' mentality and 'othering' of an ever-increasing number of people.

Within the history of Western philosophy there has also been a tradition that has not highlighted solidity, structure and consensus however, but rather fluid and transactional processes. From Heraclitus to contemporary postmodernist theory such a tension has existed. Postmodernist theorists such as Foucault (1972, 1973) and Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980) reject notions of structure, massification, meta-narratives and conformity; individual identity is seen as in a state of constant becoming, and notions of difference and multiplicity not consumed by binary categorisations.

## **Fragmented perception and building an 'aut-ethnography'.**

A popular technique within critical disability studies is that of the auto-ethnography. A method that focuses upon the writer's own subjective experience, and reflects upon this to connect such situated understandings to wider cultural, political and social meanings and discourse (Milton, 2014b). A common feature of this interpretive method however, is the notion that one builds a coherent story of identity over time. Not only does this take on the hue of neoliberalism, it is also an experience that may not be applicable to some autistic ways of being in the world.

A number of cognitive psychological research studies have suggested that people on the autistic spectrum show a 'deficit' in the use and construction of personal episodic memory, yet an accompanying strength in semantic factual memory (Millward et al. 2000, Goddard et al. 2007, Crane and Goddard, 2008, Goldman, 2008). Rather than taking a deficit model of autism, one can view such differences in perception and memory construction as embodied differences that can impact on the social lifeworld experienced by autistic people. However, such development as an

autistic person could also be seen as an affront to the construction of the functional and productive independent neoliberal individual identity and notions of selfhood:

“An intensive trait starts working for itself, a hallucinatory perception, synesthesia, perverse mutation, or play of images shakes loose, challenging the hegemony of the signifier. In the case of the child, gestural, mimetic, ludic, and other semiotic systems regain their freedom and extricate themselves from the "tracing," that is, from the dominant competence of the teacher's language - a microscopic event upsets the local balance of power.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 15).

As an autistic person, my own sense of identity is not a coherent one, nor is it a completely fluid identity. For me, memories and sense of self are experienced as fragments, painstakingly structured and constructed to make patterns. Such patterns are movable, yet they shift and alter each time one attempts to view them (Milton, 2013a). Personally this is not a deficit to be remediated, but a difference to be acknowledged and worked with. Such a way of being in the world contains a tension between continuity and discontinuity and is more akin to a rhizomatic model of becoming, a milieu without boundaries, a continually evolving ‘inter-being’. Thus, one might ask: what would an incoherent and nomadic ‘aut-ethnography’ look like (Milton, 2013a, 2014b)?

### **Personal Construct Theory (PCT).**

It is not only autistic people who might have a fragmented experience of self-development over time. The construction of personal narratives can also be radically altered for those who have memory challenges following head injury, or through reactions to personal trauma. In the construction of a personal narrative, there are a number of ways in which visual media such as photography can be utilised. This can include photo-montage or collage (Ridout, 2014), giving a camera to young participants in research to capture what is of meaning for them in a given situation, photo-sorting and Q-sort methodology (Milton, 2014c), and many more.

My own theorising in this area dates back to projects carried out with my mother (Milton, 2002). These projects involved the use of photography with respect to individuals who struggled to compose personal narratives of self. These projects were influenced by a number of theoretical antecedents, the first of which being the Personal Construct Theory (PCT) of George Kelly (1905-1967).

PCT developed as a pragmatic theory through Kelly’s psychotherapy practice. At the time of conception, such therapy was dominated by two divergent schools of thought: Psychoanalysis and Behaviourism. Both perspectives were vastly different to one another, yet both took the standpoint that people were moved to act by forces largely outside of their own control. In contrast, PCT saw the person as an agent, making choices and decisions and acting upon them. This conceptualisation would not divorce actions from the context within which people act, but for Kelly (1955), it was the constructions that an individual places on events that shapes the meanings they form and the reactions they have to events. Thus, the starting point for PCT was the idiosyncratic ways in which people make sense of the world and how that leads to social action.

Such an approach to personal constructions draws heavily on a phenomenological approach, attempting to approach issues through the viewpoint of the individual experiencing them, rather than fitting them into *a priori* theories. Kelly (1955) used the term ‘constructive alternativism’ to

suggest that there were many differing ways of perceiving and making sense out of the same thing or event, and rather than seeing any interpretation as 'correct', one should look pragmatically at how useful such a framing is to one's purposes. For Kelly (1955), following on from the work of Mead (1934), social roles were not fixed positions, but something navigated by an individual in their interactions with others. Importantly in the context of autism, it involved placing oneself in the position of the other with whom one was interacting, so that one could adjust one's social performance accordingly:

"He [George Kelly] argued that there were two ways of treating other people. You can relate to others in the way that the early behaviourists thought normal, and treat them as 'behaving mannequins'. Only psychopaths do this, he claimed. The moral way to relate is to act in the light of the other person's view of things. In other words, taking their thoughts and feelings into consideration." (Butt, 2008: 13).

Autistic people are often deemed to lack the ability to relate to others. Empathy is a two-way process, thus I would contend that to locate the 'deficit' in the autistic mind is an ableist theory. It is often autistic people who are the ones deemed (in this sense) to be 'behaviourist psychopaths', when all too often the theories of a lack of 'theory of mind' combined with behaviourist ideology are used to frame the 'lifeworld' of autistic people from the outside, and consequently are often rejected by the way autistic people construe themselves (Milton, 2012, 2014a; Milton and Bracher, 2013). Indeed, the current media tendency to equate autism with psychopathic behaviour (Park, 2014) can be seen as a powerful construction being fed by notions of autistic people lacking empathy or as being empty vessels in need of behavioural remediation. Such constructions and ways of construing autism, as being defined by a lacking or deficient 'theory of mind', are dehumanising and disempowering, denying autistic people a voice in their own affairs. Indeed, rather than there being such a deficit in the minds of autistic people, I have previously argued that a 'double empathy problem' exists, that indicates an inherent difficulty for both parties to understand the way of being, construing, and acting of the other (Milton, 2012, 2014a). One could even say that suggesting a deficit in theory of mind in autistic people is a form of projection of what is being done to autistic people. When conceived of in this way, the power differential with regard to who it is that produces knowledge about autism can be seriously questioned (Milton and Bracher, 2013, Milton, 2014a).

Kelly (1955) envisaged the personal construct to be ways of construing events along bipolar continuums, e.g. from happy to sad, anxious to relaxed. This is not to say constructions are of the nature of either/or extremes, but can be placed along continuums. Placed together these constructions comprise a 'construct system'. In this sense, discourse tells us little about the actual event, but tells us a lot about how someone is construing an event. Constructs are more than just conceptualisations however, as they are both ways of reflecting upon phenomena and of motivating social action. Construing can also be seen as something that is an active process, rather than something static that one 'has'. Therefore, a construct system is not a cognitive entity existing in a vacuum, but is socially and discursively situated.

According to PCT, there is no such thing as a static 'self', as a cognitive entity made up of 'traits'. Equally, an individual is not seen as an empty vessel moved to act by outside forces alone, rather that there was a direction to a person's actions, or as later post-modernists may have said, a 'line of

flight' (Deleuze and Guttari, 1980). To make sense of this phenomenon, Kelly suggested that people develop 'core constructs' at the centre of their construct systems, which are therefore essential ways in which people construe the 'self'. In this conceptualisation, the 'self' is neither static nor fluid, not working with a psychological vacuum nor totally driven by external forces, but as a personally constructed 'clumping' of meaning-making activity (Milton, 2013a, 2014a, 2014b), a 'self-theory'.

Kelly (1955) and later theorists in the field produced a number of techniques and methods for investigating the meaning making strategies and construct systems that people employ, the most famous of which being Kelly's own 'repertory grid'. This technique involves eliciting a number of 'elements' within a situation (for instance particular people someone is associated with, or activities or organisations someone is involved with) and a number of constructs about these elements. One way in which this is elicited is to ask how two elements are similar to one another, but different to a third. This produces a grid, where the individual can rate on a numerical scale how much constructs relate to the various elements in question. What this technique does is produce a way of mapping how that individual is construing an event. The technique was not devised to be used in a mechanistic way, but as a way of strategically enquiring about how someone is making sense of phenomena.

"The rules of logic do not apply in a person's phenomenology. Instead, we see an idiosyncratic psycho-logic in operation." (Butt, 2008: 41).

Another technique developed utilising PCT was that of 'the Salmon line' named after its creator Phillipa Salmon (2003). This technique asks an individual to draw a line with words representing opposite extremes at each end (e.g. anxious to relaxed). The individual is then asked to place themselves along this line and where they would like to be in future. The individual is then asked to write or talk about how they think they will get from one point to the other. It is in this discursive space that for Salmon (2003), the learning experience takes place. Similar techniques have also been devised with regard to expressing a sense of 'real' and 'ideal' self-image (of course with both being seen as constructions), or of the organisation one works within. Such techniques have helped inspire participatory work with autistic children (Moran, 2006, Williams and Hanke, 2007, Greenstein, 2013).

It is also of great relevance to the understanding of the use of construct systems by autistic people, that Kelly (1955) theorised that the construing and meaning-making process of human beings begins prior to language development. Thus the construction of meaning and positionality in this view can be built upon sensory and emotional reactions to events without the need for linguistic interpretation, and yet goes beyond the simple stimulus-response conceptualisation of behaviourism. This presents an interesting dilemma however, as to how one might be able to build a dialogue with a less-verbal or non-verbal autistic person. The visual methods utilised by Williams and Hanke (2007) would not be accessible to all, yet through the use of 'talking mats', sorting photographs, or building an interactional rapport with individuals, a 'map' of how an individual is construing the world may be able to be built, however incomplete that map may be. This should always be seen as an ongoing process of interaction though.

**What if one has a 'rhizomatic' construct system?**

In previous articles, I have argued that the construct system employed by autistic people may well be divergent from those of non-autistic people, due to differences in both neurological embodiment and cultural understanding (Milton, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). In this conceptualisation, autistic ways of being can be seen as being constructed as 'rhizomatic', a psycho-logic system that has no parameters, no hierarchy nor status, but seemingly endless connections. This can lead to a tendency to not 'fill in the gaps' in meaning-making by using previously learnt schema (Milton, 2013b), or alternatively, a tendency toward building a concrete and rigid construct system as a defensive strategy, or constructing a fragmented construct system, which can mean anything from a contented 'embracing of the chaos' to a traumatic loss of a sense of self altogether (Caldwell, 2014, Milton, 2014b). As previously mentioned in this theoretical account, autistic people can sometimes have quite an incoherent sense of self over time (Milton, 2014b). For some, expressions of one's personal construct system may be better suited to non-linear activities.

### **Childhood trauma and the personal construction of self**

The initial theorising that began with my mother (Milton, 2002) led to a number of projects involving the personal construction of self following family trauma. The first of these was the construction of an alternative family album. This method involved collecting together photographs of family history, yet without the usual emphasis of the traditional family album, of presenting a happy and functional family unit. Instead, photographs were selected on the basis of the personal emotional impact of them, or 'punctum' (Barthes, 1977). With each photograph, both my mother and I wrote descriptions of the personal relevance the photographs held. This was completed in isolation from one another and then compiled in chronological order and placed into a booklet. At the centre of the booklet were two blank pages, representing a traumatic event in our family history: that of a multi-car road traffic accident that led to my mother sustaining disabling multiple injuries and severe psychological trauma to myself. This project opened up a space in which to talk about traumatic events of the past and how each of us had our own personal interpretations of these events, such a dialogue helped us both to communicate and express our own perceptions and understandings.

Following the road traffic accident, my previous set of beliefs and constructs about the world were shattered into tiny fragments. The mainstay of my previous existence being my mother, the construct of 'carer' was reversed and notions such as childhood and self-identity begun to dissolve, leading to a very psychologically turbulent time through my teenage years (Milton, 2014b). The alternative family album project, not only helped me and my mother to connect to one another, but helped me to connect my new sense of self with that of my former childhood and find consistencies between them.

Such a linear narrative was however deconstructed in the next project my mother embarked upon entitled: 'Beyond the frame' (Milton, 2002). Again, this project involved reflection upon a set of family photographs, exploring the tensions and traumas that the personal narratives contained. My mother discovered five photographs that had been taken of her and her sister in 1956. These photographs were taken on the day that my aunt was 'banished' (to live with their father in another country) since their mother was literally obliterating her existence from her social 'lifeworld' for having been born with brain damage. From that day forth my aunt was never referred to or seen by her mother. This profound fracture could have caused an entire separation of the sisters, however their childhood memories of that event proved to be extremely similar when they individually

assessed their own memories of that fateful day, and, the act of my aunt's voice being heard and an equal partner in the project ensured a renewal of their bond. By the subversive act of bypassing the dominant voice they were able to repair the emotional damage that further disabled my aunt and latterly my mother following 'the accident' and her own subsequent altered identity within family dynamics.

This project employed Derrida's (1988) concepts of deconstruction and discontinuity to explore the personal narratives of my mother and aunt concerning their separation as children and how they subverted the dominant narrative regarding disability, which came from their own mother and was the reason for their initial separation. The focus of the project was to examine the trauma sustained to the psychological 'inner-self' through the domination of their mother's narrative regarding disability throughout their lives. One can therefore view these projects as being compatible with the concept of 'psycho-emotional disablism' (e.g. Reeve, 2011), a concept that I and others have since applied to the experiences of autistic people (Milton and Moon, 2012).

Through a collaborative process, my mother and aunt explored how disability and the 'othering' process produced fractures in our family history, and in doing so discovered an ever-changing sense of identity, one that could never be fully realised. Yet, through this process they both reached a sense of mutual fulfilment in asserting their own voices regarding their own personal histories.

"Every memory and experience is unique to the individual, even if they share the 'same' event." (Milton, 2002).

In this project, my mother expressed how meanings associated with historical traumas were always escaping being fully captured, and often lay 'beyond the frame' of the photograph. Thus, in the installation piece that my mother created from the project, influenced by Derrida (1988), she suggested that when engaging with the piece, there was something always unreadable in terms of meaning, what Derrida (1988) termed as the *parergon*. It is also interesting to note at this juncture, that it has also been argued that autistic people may struggle to read the subtext of the social interaction of others, being literal in interpretation. For autistic people, it may be the case that the *parergon* lacks meaning and tangibility, being too ethereal to grasp (Milton, 2013a, 2013b). Influenced by these theories, my mother decided to crop and re-present aspects and details of the photographs. These fragments were then accompanied by fragments from two independently recorded monologues from my mother and aunt that had been triggered by their responses to the discovered photographs. This was placed within an installation piece set above a family mantelpiece. This multi-sensory experience disrupted assumptions of family life for those viewing it and the dominant family narrative that had led to the further disablement of both my mother and aunt.

"The wounds of trauma can be seen, openly exposed free from suppression...the unsettling exposure of hidden narratives." (Milton, 2002).

This installation used deconstruction as a mode of questioning the visual narrative of photographic representation, and how such representations inhabit emotional and subjective experiences. By deconstructing the dominant family narrative, and by distorting and cropping images, interspersed by fragments of vocal narration from both sisters, this project was able to express the emotional

impact of the childhood separation and trauma, giving 'voice' to the disabled other within the microcosm of family power dynamics.

Both projects looked into the notion of trauma, as a reaction and personal construing of an event that damaged some of the core constructs of selfhood for those involved. Trauma was thus conceptualised as a permanent discontinuity with a previous sense of self. The notion of 'breaching' (Garfinkel, 1967) was also used, yet in the case of trauma, the 'natural attitude' is unable to quickly rebuild itself, and in some cases is almost entirely fractured (Milton, 2014b).

"What devastates one individual will not necessarily have the same effect on another...This is because different sense is made of the same event. Of course, this does not deny the massive effect of what is termed trauma. But it directs our attention to the sense-making process of personal construction. It makes us re-think the nature and definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)." (Butt, 2008: 49).

What Butt (2008) suggests here is that the trauma comes from the meaning endowed onto an event, rather than the event itself (which is of course is still important to the reaction / creation of meaning). However if anything were to breach or damage an individual's construct system, particularly at a 'core construct' level, it is potentially traumatising. Perhaps it is no wonder that the 'natural attitude' is to defend one's own core construct system at all costs. Some psychologists might conceive of such defensiveness as a form of 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957).

"Any construction is part of a system, a package deal, and change involves reverberation within that system. In this sense then, our freedom is not absolute, as Sartre would have it. It is always to be seen within the context of a personal construct system." (Butt, 2008: 77).

And Butt (2008) continues:

"Behavioural regimes for tackling 'problem behaviour' frequently (but not always) involves the prospect of a wider disruption, and hence resistance on the part of the client." (Butt, 2008: 95).

To add to Butt's formulation here, one can also locate the constructs that people utilise within a wider social and discursive dynamic too. At worst, behavioural regimes can be seen as a control mechanism employed by surveillance staff to discipline and punish those that have had their personhood 'othered' leading to further psycho-emotional disablement of their identity development (Milton and Moon, 2012).

In the 'Beyond the frame' project, no simplistic resolutions to trauma were to be found, but a sense of fracture and incompleteness. The othering of disability within the family itself caused fractures in the family narrative that simply are not 'resolvable'. Yet, by subverting the dominant narrative, a more fulfilled and empowering (yet incomplete) narrative could be constructed.

Both these projects were completed before my son and I were diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, yet the notion of fragmentation and fracture became a construct that helped me to make sense of my own sense of self over time (Milton, 2014b). In the figure below, you can see a collage that I created at a workshop at the Autscope conference (Milton and Ridout, 2014). In this collage, there are two rhizomatic formations, on the left my sense of self prior to self-identification as being

on the autism spectrum, and on the right my sense of self after that time (including being diagnosed).

(Images – see attached – Figure 1.1: My sense of self prior to diagnosis, Autscape 2014. Figure 1.2: My sense of self post-diagnosis, Autscape 2014.)

### **Conclusion**

Autistic development could be said to be an affront to neoliberal notions of functional stages of child development leading to a ‘healthy’ and productive citizen, as ‘nature’s answer to over-conformity’ (Milton, 2012). Many of the ‘interventions’ designed to ‘treat’ autistic people are intimately embedded within ableist notions of normalcy and pathology. The subjectivities of autistic children and of autistic adults regarding their own childhoods are often trivialised in attempts to teach autistic children how to act less autistic (Milton and Moon, 2012).

In order to redress the gap created by the ‘double empathy problem’ (or the mismatched salience of differing dispositions and constructions of the social lifeworld) between autistic and non-autistic people (Milton, 2012, 2014a), it is suggested here that autistic people be seen as having their own personal constructions of the world, and that methods deriving from PCT could be useful in building mutual rapport and understanding. All too often however, the opposite is the case. I would also suggest that when utilising PCT, links need to be made between the personal constructions an individual utilises, whether in this case it be an autistic person, or a practitioner working with an autistic person, and the wider interpretive/discursive repertoires that they are drawing upon and employing to make sense of the world. In this sense, the double empathy problem can be seen to be deeply embedded within unequal power relations (Milton and Bracher, 2013, Milton, 2014a). Such methods do however give opportunities for opening up a respectful discursive space, where autistic development is not framed from the outset as ‘disordered’. Of course, such a construing of autistic development as part of natural diversity is incongruent with the pathologising narrative of neoliberalism. In this sense, the double empathy problem between autistic and non-autistic people is not only personal, but political too.

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