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The nuances of empathy

by Damian E M Milton

Baron-Cohen (2011) suggests that empathy can be defined by:

“...our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion.”

According to the influential study by Attwood et al. (1988), abnormalities in modulating one’s voice, a dearth of facial expression, poverty in bodily gestures, and “an often curious impression of woodenness”, characterised the autistic difference. This difference was seen as stemming from an inability to appreciate the expressive gestures of others, rather than a difficulty (for whatever reason) in the performance of said gestures (for instance, how such performances might become compromised by sensory overload and stress).

“...no autistic adolescent ever used expressive gestures.”

Much research regarding the recognition of emotions in others, including that of Attwood et al. (1988) and Baron-Cohen (2011) base their work on the idea that basic emotions are a universally expressed and understood phenomenon across cultures. However, in recent years this notion has come under more scrutiny, particularly from Barrett (2012). She suggests that how one interprets emotional expressions is far more socially conditioned and situated, than traditionally had been recognised. The false-belief tasks utilised by Baron-Cohen and followers has also been widely criticised, most recently by Peterson et al. (2013) who compared the awareness of other minds demonstrated in a competitive game scenario to that of the Sally-Ann test. They found that only 13% of their autistic participants passed the latter test, whilst 74% of the same participants passed the former.

“This finding demonstrates that many children with autism who fail motivationally barren standard false belief tests can spontaneously use ToM to track their social partners’ beliefs in the context of a competitive game.”

In her blog, autistic writer Rachel Cohen-Rottenburg (2012) suggests that the idea that autistics lack empathy is a myth. She suggests that much of what is considered a lack of empathy is based on the performance of expressed empathy, with non-normative expressions being deemed as a deficit in functioning located in the individual. She suggests that she is rather more sensitive and reflexive regarding her own expressions toward others:

“I am sensitive to the fact that a response that might work for one person might not work for another.”

She states that she struggles with the reading of non-verbal cues, yet not when in the company of other autistics, nor with people she had got to know over a period of time, suggesting an intuitive understanding of the communication preferences of people of similar disposition. Similarly, Smukler (2005) pointed out that failures in social communication between autistic and non-autistic people are seen as located within the autistic person, rather than in an interactive breakdown between the

two parties, which would be assumed in relationships non-autistic people have with one another. A point that I also suggested myself in an article I wrote last year (Milton, 2012).

Cameron (2012) uses the term 'dyspathy' to highlight how empathy is often blocked or resisted by people. She suggests that when looking at social interaction, one also has to take into account 'dyspathic' instances, which inhibit or screen out emotional connections to others. Cameron cites a number of recent studies using fMRI scanning that suggest that there is a bias towards in-group members in 'automatic' empathy. Such findings support the earlier social psychological theories of Billig (1985) and 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).

Whilst working on this article I happened upon a post on the Internet regarding 'interview tips' and how to 'master non-verbal communication' (Turner, 2013). Amongst the suggestions were to: not over-think questions posed, not to become distracted, to demonstrate confidence, have excellent body posture, keep eye contact and a calm demeanour, avoid fidgeting, and at the same time as all of this, pay attention to the non-verbal signals of the interviewer.

"These nervous movements and fidgets may be a sign of anything from uncertainty in your qualifications to lying about something."

If this is how such expressions and bodily gestures can be interpreted by NTs, then can the lack of empathy really be located in the autistic mind alone? I seriously doubt it, which is why I have previously proposed that there is a 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) between the two parties, that both parties struggle to interpret the expressions of people with divergent dispositions from their own.

"I think they are just as bad at reading us as we are at reading them; it's just that because they're the majority, their failure to understand us is not as disabling as our failure to understand them." (Lindsay, 2012).

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