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The double empathy problem

By Dr. Damian Milton

Embedded within diagnostic criteria for autism is the idea that autistic people have impaired social understanding. A number of psychological theories suggest autistic people have a deficit in empathising with others or in 'theory of mind' – the ability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others, in order to comprehend and predict their behaviour (also called 'mind-reading' and 'mentalising'). It is certainly true that autistic people, particularly when young, can struggle to process and understand the 'quick-fire' social interactions which many non-autistic people take for granted. Yet to what extent do such interactions require empathy? What do we mean when we talk of empathy? Where does the ability to predict the thoughts and actions of others reside?

It is clear from my own personal experience and from a number of projects I have been involved with as a researcher, that a more common experience felt by verbally expressive autistic people than not understanding the social interactions of others, is a feeling of not being understood oneself. It is striking to me as an autistic person, the number of books, conferences and training programs dedicated to trying to understand the 'enigma' of autism, which suggests that it may not be just autistic people who can struggle to empathise with people with differing experiences to themselves.

Over recent years I have published a number of articles that give a theoretical account of this 'double empathy problem'. Others can be found in the work of Ian Hacking, Luke Beardon, or Nick Chown. Personal accounts of such issues can be traced back to the earliest of writings by autistic people. Recent research by Elizabeth Sheppard at the University of Nottingham showed that in experimental conditions, non-autistic people struggled to read the emotions of autistic participants. Such evidence would suggest that the dominant psychological theories of autism are but partial explanations.

According to the theory of the 'double empathy problem', these issues are due to a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding that can happen between people of very differing dispositions. If one has ever experienced a conversation with someone who one does not share a first language with, or even an interest in the topic of a conversation, one may experience something similar (albeit probably briefly). This theory would also suggest that those of a similar disposition and experience are more likely to form connections and a level of understanding, which has ramifications in regard to autistic people being able to meet one another.