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Horizon: Living with Autism (BBC2)

By Damian E M Milton

The programme began with Uta Frith explaining how she became interested in the field of autism, and in the process, showing how she still sees autistic people as puzzling and amazing and fascinating people who exist in another reality. One could count this as a good example of the exotic othering (Said, 1977) of autistic people, and yet she has found autistic ways of being an enigma for quite some time. One would have hoped however that for all her years of studying autistic people, that such an othering narrative of autistic people would have subsided in her discourse.

Within minutes we are told that through rigorous experiments (although critiques to the rigour of these experiments are not mentioned throughout the programme), one can compare autistic people to the rest of us and learn more about our own world. Thus, she presents autistic people as the other to which human normativity can be measured. She then stated how half of all autistic people have learning disabilities and how 80% do not live independently, without clarifying how she is utilising this term, but taking the statistic for granted. In doing so, she helps to build a narrative of autism as being a dysfunctional pathology. The fact that many autistic people and disabled people more widely dispute the use of the term and may favour others such as autonomy or interdependence is not mentioned. She then went on to describe the autism spectrum in a linear fashion from mild to severe, massively simplifying the diverse heterogeneity of autistic presentation to something describable by a bell-shaped curve.

The audience is then presented with a young autistic boy who is able to tell the day of the week from a date given to him by others. This human calendar trick of course shown as an example of a savant skill. Frith describes such skills as being rare, but that as much as ten percent of autistic people have them, and 30% remarkable talents such as unusual memories or perfect pitch recognition. Frith frames such talents in terms of comparisons to the normative ideal, with them only appearing ...at odds with rest of abilities, a notion that was neatly deconstructed by Arnold (2013).

The next section of the documentary concentrated on the concept of mentalising (or lack of it), presented as if factual, rather than a flawed interpretive heuristic, based on limited evidence and the denial of the epistemological validity of autistic subjectivity and insider accounts (Milton, 2012, 2014). In this model, autistic people are depicted as struggling to understand that others have a mind of their own, although based on scant evidence from the much critiqued Sally-Anne test.

Although deception and manipulation does not a social being make, Frith states that:

Not having a social navigation system is what sets them apart from the rest of us.

For Frith, the social awareness and empathy shown by ordinary people is instinctive, whereas autistic people have to work out what other people are thinking scientifically. Yet it has been demonstrated that the instinctive empathy of non-autistic people when applied to autistic people can leave a great deal to be desired due to wrongly made assumptions, expectations, and emotional projections (e.g. Milton, 2012, 2014). For the non-autistic person to work out the enigma of the

autistic mind, one seemingly has to think scientifically too, yet for a whole career in the field, it would seem that Uta Frith is still struggling. Of course for Frith though, it is the autistic mentalising circuit that is not working properly, rather than a differing embodied disposition and way of being leading to an empathy problem in both directions. The programme also utilised the moving triangles experiment, where two triangles move around a square with a hole in one side. Those producing the animation intend to depict a story where the triangles are symbolic of people. The autistic people participating in the experiment often saw the triangles as symbolic of people, yet told idiosyncratic stories, not reading into the activity the stories that had been intended to be read by the researchers who produced them. Autistic people were then described as lacking the ability to see the gist and as missing the point, rather than having a differing (more creative and less conformist) social interpretation due to a differing way of processing the information at hand.

One autistic woman who appeared on the programme was described as one of the rare people who can explain the condition and how: copying behaviour has helped her get on with life. It would be interesting to find out if these were the thoughts of the autistic woman herself, or just the projections of those producing the film. In contrast to these comments, in another point in the film this woman described how she was peas in a pod with her husband who was also on the autism spectrum.

Perhaps the scene in the documentary which highlights the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012, 2014) between autistic and non-autistic people most clearly, was when Uta Frith met up with Simon Baron-Cohen in a cafe, so that he could simply explain to her his autism quotient measure (despite Uta having been his PhD supervisor). This kind of staged interaction and fakery is not my cup of tea whatsoever, but I guess that would be interpreted as due to my deficit in mentalising. Or perhaps I am getting increasingly troubled by the exotic othering of autistic people, and the claims to expertise from those who would seem to dismiss any critique or protest against their position of authority within the field. There was one saving grace to the film however, and that was when Uta Frith asked an autistic young man what he thought caused autism, to which he replied: peoples brains are different. It felt like a beacon of clarity within the deep fishbowl (Milton and Moon, 2012) fog created by Frith's narrative.

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