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Damian E. M. Milton

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Disposable dispositions: reflections upon the work of Iris Marion Young in relation to the social oppression of autistic people

Damian E. M. Milton

School of Law and Social Sciences/Centre for Education and School Partnerships, London South Bank University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This brief commentary piece looks to apply the theories of Iris Marion Young to the social position and oppression of autistic people, as previously theorised by Milton. The concepts of 'Asymmetrical symmetry' and the 'Five faces of oppression' are explored in this regard. The article concludes by arguing that autistic people, particularly those who have significant intellectual impairments, can be socially marginalised to the extent of occupying the social position of 'non-human' with the staggering consequences for social well-being that this implies.

Introduction

This brief commentary piece looks to apply the theories of Iris Marion Young (1980, 1990, 1997) to the social position and oppression of autistic people. The concepts of 'Asymmetrical symmetry' and the 'Five faces of oppression' are explored in this regard, before concluding with some final remarks about the 'disposable disposition' that this can entail.

Asymmetrical symmetry

In 1997, the seminal feminist theorist Iris Marion Young introduced the concept of 'Asymmetrical reciprocity' as a model of moral interaction between people, as opposed to what she described as 'symmetrical reciprocity', characterised by Young (1997) in the work of Benhabib (1991). The model of moral interaction proposed by Benhabib (1991), for Young (1997), was predicated on symmetry between self and other, with the perspective of each being reversible. Such a moral argument (as with dominant theories of empathy and 'theory of mind') relies upon those within an interaction being of a similar social 'disposition', and that individuals are able to assume the point of view of others in order to conclude upon moral decisions.

For Young (1997), to assume the ability to possess full '*verstehen*' (social understanding) of the other is neither possible nor even desirable in terms of ethical engagement. This is a point echoed by neurodivergent activists and scholars (Chown 2014; Milton 2012, 2014b)

in the context of interactions between autistic and non-autistic people (referred to as the 'double empathy problem'). Young (1997) argues that asymmetry between people in inter- actions arises due to the great diversity of life histories and social positions that people inhabit, a point also echoed in Milton's (2014a) account of the 'embodied sociality' of autistic people or Hacking's (2009) account of 'biolooping' effects with regard to autism. Young (1997) demonstrates the asymmetry of moral relations by giving the example of the relationship between a mother and her daughter as non-reversible subject positions. A moral ethics that presupposed the achievement of symmetry and reversibility of subject positions (full '*ver- stehen*') is thus flawed.

For Young (1997), the 'equal treatment' of individual people could not override or redress group-based oppression. Instead, much as Milton, Mills, and Jones (2016) do in relation to practitioners working with autistic people, Young (1997) advocates a standpoint of moral humility and 'wonder' in the face of the other, because she states that one's starting point should be the assumption that one cannot see the social lifeworld through the perspective of someone else, and thus one must wait to learn and gain a gradual understanding through listening and engaging with the other person. Such an emphasis can also be found in edu- cational research with autistic children that utilises critical pedagogy and/or Personal Construct Theory (for example, Greenstein 2013; Milton 2014c; Moran 2006; Williams and Hanke 2007). Therefore, in this analysis, humility and the suspension of judgment become the basis for Young's (1997) ethics. In order to do this, similarly to Garfinkel (1967) and sub- sequently Milton (2012) in the context of autism, Young (1997) suggests that one should also see one's own position as 'strange' in order to interrogate it.

Autism and the five faces of oppression

One of the most celebrated aspects of Young's work was her model of the 'five faces of oppression' (Young 1990). In her critique of more classical Marxist explanations of oppression, she suggested that capitalist economic exploitation was but one 'face' of oppression. The other faces of oppression as stated by Young (1990) are as follows:

- *Marginalisation.* For Young, marginalisation is a process of exclusion whereby a group of people are reduced to a lower social status and the margins of society. Marginalisation can in some ways impact upon an individual in greater ways than economic exploitation of labour, when people are seen as incapable of being a 'functional' wage labourer. By relegating a whole class of people as incapable of useful participation in social life, a group can be subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination.
- *Powerlessness.* For Young, the effects of powerlessness in society inhibit a person's auton- omy and expose them to harmful treatments due to their lowered social status.
- *Cultural imperialism*. The process of cultural imperialism, according to Young, involves the establishment of ruling-class ideology as the hegemonic norm. Those who have power in society can determine how those in a position of powerlessness are interpreted and talked about. 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.
- *Violence.* The most visibly obvious form of oppression is that of violence. Members of oppressed groups will often live in fear of violent attacks upon them.

When applied to the social position of autistic people, it is not difficult to see what an oppressed position this is when utilising Young's (1990) framework. Autistic people often report staggeringly low levels of employment or satisfaction with their work and pay (Milton and Sims 2016). Autistic people are some of the most marginalised in society, historically depicted as embodying 'deficits' in their social being, incapable of full socialisation and personhood (Milton 2014b). When the lived experiences of autistic people remain poorly understood and/or useful supports are withdrawn, and when people are perceived as 'having challenging behaviour' or have additional intellectual impairments, the loss of liberty is common, with such marginalisation often leading to gross injustices, violence against the person and a position of powerlessness. This oppression has been highlighted most strongly through the JusticeforLB campaign (Justice for LB 2016), which focused on the death of a young autistic man, Connor Sparrowhawk, also known as Laughing Boy or LB, and the resultant Mazars LLP (2015) report which reviewed all of the unexpected deaths between 2011 and 2015 in the NHS Trust in which Connor died. This review found less than 1% of the unexpected deaths of learning disabled people were investigated.

The social marginalisation and powerlessness suffered by autistic people, however, are not confined to those with additional intellectual impairments. A recent study conducted in Sweden by Hirvikovski et al. (2016) found that autistic people had significantly higher mortality rates in virtually all causes of death studied, from cancer to circulatory disorders. For autistic people without intellectual impairments there was a suicide rate over nine times that of the general population. This would suggest a severe issue of alienation and anomie if found associated with any social grouping.

A very familiar form of oppression for autistic people is that of cultural imperialism (Milton and Bracher 2013). Indeed, the entire neurodiversity movement could be seen as a response to such a way of being and emergent cultures being wholly pathologised within a medical model perspective:

> … right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced. (Williams 1996, 14)

Despite the growth of the neurodiversity movement and autistic scholarship (Arnold 2012; Kapp 2011; Murray, Lesser, and Lawson 2005; Robertson 2010), the amount of influence that such work, or indeed sociological or critical theory, has had on the field has been limited (McWade, Milton, and Beresford 2015; Milton and Bracher 2013; Pellicano, Dinsmore, and Charman 2013). Recently, I coined the neologism 'psychsplaining' to try and account for the way 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'.

Disposable dispositions

In her work, Young (1980, 1990, 1997) explores differences between people through a gendered and embodied phenomenological perspective. Young (1980) discussed how girls become conditioned and socialised into viewing their own bodies as weak and fragile, with consequences for their self-identity and life-chances. For Young (1980, 1990, 1997), each person's standpoint – or social 'disposition' in Milton's (2014a) analysis of 'embodied

sociality' – is constituted in its relations to others; for example, the relationship of mother and daughter that Young (1997) uses. When a person is 'othered' to the extent of being not seen as fully human, as is often the case with social attitudes toward autistic people, particularly those with significant intellectual impairments, one's disposition can become that of the socially 'disposable'. Unfortunately, this can be evidenced in the horrendous barriers to a happy and autonomous life autistic people currently face (Justice for LB 2016). By occupying a social 'disposition' (Milton 2014a) perceived primarily in terms of 'social deficit', combined with that of 'intellectual impairment', the chances of being othered by dehumanising stigma becomes ever more likely (Milton 2013, 2014a).

Perhaps there is one advantage of occupying such a disadvantaged social position, however? That is, who better to highlight the inadequacies of an ethical model based on symmetrical reciprocity? In doing so, however, autistic scholars and activists can find a rich theoretical framework for such pursuits in the work of Iris Marion Young (1980, 1990, 1997).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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