An exploration into 'autspace'

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In this article, I will be exploring the notion of 'autspace', which to me can be distinguished from 'autism-friendly space' as often remarked upon elsewhere, and obviously from 'autistic-unfriendly space'. I was originally going to write this article as a review of the Autscape conference held in August 2013, an event led by, and for, autistic people. I was asked a puzzling question however by the manager of this site, as he asked what other autism related organisations could learn from such an event. My initial response was to suggest having more autistic involvement in the running of organisations, as it was not possible to emulate 'autspace' without such participation.

'Autistic people don't do social'

I was recently at an autism related event, where an autistic speaker, who has become quite sought after, proclaimed that she just 'doesn't do social'. I have heard this said before, and as an autistic sociologist I have often found it a difficult statement to empathise with. Yet, on this occasion, I asked myself the question, what does she mean by this narrative? She also talked about the value of having good working 'relationships' (if not 'friends'). In the wider sense of the word 'social', one could say we are all socially embedded beings in this world. So, what aspects of the 'social' is it that autistic people are not 'doing', and if we are not 'doing it' well into adulthood, should this be the focus of so much 'intervention' aimed at autistic people?

At the same event, I also heard an eminent professor suggest that she did not believe that there was an 'autistic culture'. This I questioned at the time, giving examples of Autscape and my own family home as an 'autistic culture'. Her response to this was to suggest that these spaces of interaction were 'possibly a subculture'. To me, there is no 'possibly' about it, and I would assert that subcultures are part of wider culture, or at least that they interact with it to form the widest sense of the word 'social'.

The 'machine-like' metaphor

Ever since the term 'autism' was used as a clinical description to describe people, there has been a notion that being autistic meant a lack of socialisation into a society's norms and ways of behaving appropriately (an idea based on an outdated and flawed view of how society and people operate – in my opinion).

"The autist is only himself...and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly." (Hans Asperger).

The view of autistic people lacking social reciprocity has become embedded in the theories of many prominent academics in the field including Uta Frith and Simon Baron-Cohen, yet, if autistic people

were truly 'machine-like' (in our current understandings of machines), we would not be able to be creative and social at all. From the expressions one can see from the so-called 'non-verbal', their interests and tastes and sense of security from significant others, to the communications through the use of technology shown by Carly Fleischmann. From accounts in the film 'Wretches and Jabberers', to the experiences of people such as myself, a supposedly 'successful' autistic person (although that is a matter of perspective!), one could say that autistic people are most certainly 'social' in the wider sense of the word.

A differing disposition, a differing sociality

Going back to my earlier question regarding what it is, as autistic people, that we are not doing and not learning well into adulthood (if at all), is for me not a lack of sociality, but a lack of a non-autistic sociality. At the root of the so-called 'social disorder' aspects of autism, is a differing way of processing information, leading to idiosyncratic experiences of social life, but certainly not a total lack. Autistic people do not have 'zero degrees of cognitive empathy' as suggested by Simon Baron-Cohen, as empathy is interactive, contextual and socially situated. Autistic people are not machines, aliens, but human (social) beings, albeit idiosyncratic and unusual in our various presentations, and one would be wise to remember that if one is working with autistic people in some capacity.

There is a problem however for both parties, that of a mutual incomprehension, or a 'double empathy problem' as I have called it many times. How an autistic and non-autistic person may experience the world and interact within it can easily lead to breakdowns in mutual understanding and negative consequences for both. Recently I was asked by a professional in the field, what would help build empathy toward autistic people? I replied that it would take patience, a tailored approach, leaving one's assumptions 'at the door', being like Phoebe Caldwell (an excellent practitioner who embodies many such qualities), and finally, the kind of effort that autistic people have to expend every day.

So, what has this all got to do with 'autspace'?

I would assert that 'autspace' is where autistic people are leading the interactions within a social space, particularly when they are in a numerical majority. You may think that such a space could potentially be fragmented, without anyone taking a lead, or sometimes with some overpowering others, and you would be right, just as one could say the same things about non-autistic social spaces. What is different, is who is framing the agenda, who has a voice and influence, what kind of social flexibility is in operation, and what kinds are not. Yes, we are also differently/idiosyncratically 'flexible' as well! Does this mean that 'autspace' is always perfect and peaceful? No, bluntly speaking, as that would be an idealistic invention of non-autistic social ideologies. In fact, we should not just accept minimal 'reasonable' adjustments but rather, our priority should be our own needs and our aim to keep evolving as a community.

What can autism related organisations learn from all of this? Employ more autistic people! Adjust to each individual rather than apply one-size-fits-all rules. Stop thinking what works well for you will be beneficial to all in every circumstance. Stop thinking that autistic people have a social disorder

somehow located inside their 'social brain', and start thinking of autistic people as uniquely positioned human beings acting within a social world.