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# On Silence and Autism

SHAUN MAY

“In the realm of conventional academic literature (e.g., peer-reviewed journals and books from mainstream academic presses) the discourse on autism is dominated by the voices of non-autistic writers whose work is based in the pathology paradigm. Autistic voices and narratives that pose critical challenges to this dominant discourse, and to the host of beliefs and practices around autism that are rooted in the pathology paradigm, are systematically marginalized in this literature – excluded, silenced, disingenuously misinterpreted, or condescendingly dismissed.” (Walker 2016: n.p.)

## Theory of Mind (ToM) and Autistic Silencing

“ToM theorists have ... propagated a clinically-sanctioned silencing of autistic people on a large scale ... ToM theorists, whether their theories operate on the printed page or in the throes of diagnostic assessment, are complicit in the systemic oppression of autistic people.

The rhetorician who hypothesizes that her student is autistic because he lacks audience awareness is complicit.

The philosopher who suggests that autistic people cannot live a “good life” because they lack empathy is complicit.

The parent who suggests that I cannot understand the “grasp” of autism because I lack introspective ability is complicit.”

(Yergeau 2013: n.p.)

## Quiet Hands and Autistic Silencing

“Abuse and silencing is a constant, pervasive theme in the lives of autistic people, and for many it is best expressed by that old, familiar phrase from special education: *quiet hands!*

*Loud hands* means resisting ...

The autistic community needs to be heard, speaking in our own ways on our own terms about the items on our agenda.”

(Autistic Self Advocacy Network 2012:8-9)

“A boy pacing by himself, flapping and humming and laughing.

An “interest” or obsessions that is “age appropriate” – or maybe one that is not.

A shake of the fingers in front of the eyes, a monologue, an echoliated phrase.

All of these things autistic people are supposed to be ashamed of and stop doing?

*They are how we communicate our joy.”*

(Bascom 2011: n.p.)

“One of the biggest and most insidious maltreatments involves the concept and practice of what I call ‘normalisation’, which springs out of the belief that Autism is an inferior or ‘wrong’ state. Thus ‘becoming normal’ is seen by many parents and therapists as the ultimate goal, the only one worth pursuing, because being autistic is such a Terrible Thing, and the aim of all therapy is to make us ‘indistinguishable’ from our ‘normal’ peers ... This normalisation can involve many different therapies and practices. Let me make it clear – it’s not *what’s* done, but *why* it’s done.”  
(Winter 2012:115)

### Theatre Intervention and Normalisation

SENSE

“The efficacy of a peer-mediated, theatre-based intervention on social competence in participants with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was tested.” (Corbett et al 2016:658)  
“The study extends previous findings showing that the theatre-based intervention leads to improvement in core areas of social competence for children with ASD based on behavioral and neural measures. In particular, SENSE Theatre facilitated gains in memory for faces and social communication skills.” (ibid 669)

“This study examined the effectiveness of a novel intervention ... intended to improve social skills among adolescents with Asperger syndrome and high functioning autism diagnoses. SDARI adapts dramatic training activities to focus on in vivo practice of areas of social skill deficit among this population.” (Lerner, Mikami & Levine 2011)  
“Results of this study suggest that SDARI may be an effective intervention for addressing some areas of social skills development as part of a continuum of care for young people/ adolescents with ASDs.” (ibid 67)

SDARI

“It’s not *what’s* done, but *why* it’s done.”

(Winter 2012:115)

### Autistic Sociality

“The parallel between deaf people and autistic people lies mainly herein that both populations have a communication style that is different from the norm. Deaf people often use sign language to communicate, which has nowadays been almost universally accepted to be every bit as functional and diverse as spoken language. The differences in communication style in autistic people are much more subtle than in deaf people, and often very hard to detect for an outsider. Yet, such differences clearly exist, as autistic people often report that they have very few problems communicating with and understanding people ‘of their own kind.’” (Dekker 1999)

“I wish you wouldn’t interpret my silence as silence.

My silence is, in fact, a compliment.

It means that I am being my natural self around you, that I trust you enough to engage my way of knowing, my way of speaking and interacting.”

(Yergeau 2012:303)

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