Kent Academic Repository

Milton, Damian (2018) *The double empathy problem: practical implications.* **In: Scottish Autism Conference: Innovation in Autism Practice: The Future is Here, 14 Nov 2019, Glasgow, UK. (Unpublished)**

University of
Kent

The double empathy problem: practical implications

Dr. Damian E M Milton

A Mismatch of Salience

Explorations of the Nature of Autism from Theory to Practice

By Dr. Damian E M Milton
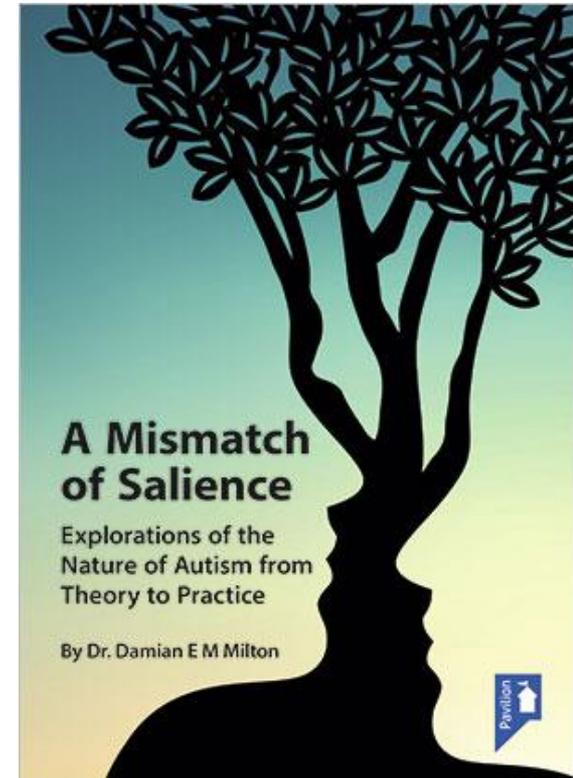
- *Socrates: ...Can you point out any compelling rhetorical reason why he should have put his arguments together in the order that he has?*

- *Phaedrus: You do me too much honour if you suppose that I am capable of divining his motives so exactly. (Plato, 1973: 78).*

University of **Kent**

- *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.* (Asperger, 1991: 38).

Dr. Damian E M Milton

University of Kent

Theory of mind

- The ability to empathise with others and imagine their thoughts and feelings, in order to comprehend and predict the behaviour of others.

University of **Kent**
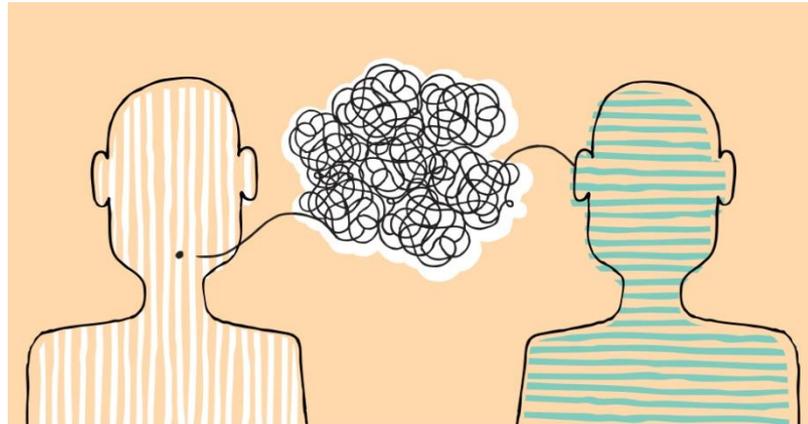
Early days and how the theory developed

- "Embodied sociality and the conditioned relativism of dispositional diversity" (Milton, 2014b)

- *Extremes of any combination come to be seen as 'psychiatric deviance'. In the argument presented here, where disorder begins is entirely down to social convention, and where one decides to draw the line across the spectrum.* (Milton, 1999)

- By late 2000s had come across the work of autistic authors such as Jim Sinclair and Claire Sainsbury and had started to use the term 'double empathy problem' at a parent group I was a part of as a response to ideas regarding 'theory of mind'

- First presentations on topic in 2010, and first publication in a journal in 2012.

- Yet not alone in way of thinking – see Ian Hacking, Luke Beardon, and Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg among others.

University of Kent

Mutual incomprehension

- *"95% of people don't understand me".*

- *"Friends are overwhelming".*

- *"Adults never leave me alone".*

- *"Adults don't stop bullying me".*

- Quotes taken from Jones et al. (2012).

University of Kent

The 'double empathy problem'

- A case of mutual incomprehension?

- Breakdown in interaction between autistic and non-autistic people as not solely located in the mind of the autistic person. The theory of the double empathy problem sees it as largely due to the differing perspectives of those attempting to interact with one another (Milton, 2012a; 2014a; Milton et al. 2018; Chown, 2014).

- Theory of autistic mind can often leave a great deal to be desired.

- Fork handles!

University of Kent

Empathy, ethnomethodology and autism

- *It is argued here that 'empathy' is a convenient illusion, and the phenomenon that people speak of when referring to it has more to do with language and a sense of 'shared' cultural meanings/symbols (or their 'ethno').* (Milton, 2011b).

University of Kent

Dyspathy

- Cameron (2012) uses the term 'dyspathy' to highlight how empathy is often blocked or resisted by people.

- Such research supports the earlier social psychological theories of Tajfel (1981), which found that people felt increasing emotional connection to those deemed within their social 'in-group', whilst stereotyping 'outsiders'.

- *If we were to be continually tuning into other people's emotions, we would be perpetually anxious or exhilarated, and very quickly exhausted. We must therefore have very efficient inhibitory mechanisms that screen out most of the emotional empathy being carried out by our brains, without us even noticing.* (Cameron, 2012).

University of Kent

An 'interest model' of autism

- Autism and monotropism (Murray et al. 2005; Lawson, 2010).

- Attention as a scarce resource.

- Monotropic attention strategies and the 'attention tunnel'.

- Monotropism, repetitive behaviour and interests, and 'flow states'.

original

Types of block available for making the pattern

(a)   (b)

University of Kent
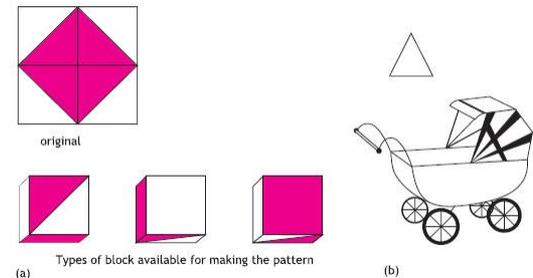
Embodiment and socialisation

- The acquisition of knowledge and expertise.

- Expertise as functional competence.

- Embodied experience (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi, cited in Collins and Evans, 2007).

- Collins and Evans (2007) – the primary site of the acquisition of knowledge and expertise is social, thus the mastering of a skill requires more than the embodiment of it, but the socialisation of people into relevant social practices.

University of Kent

The sociality of an 'outsider'

- With autistic people, especially those who acquire verbal articulacy, one often finds the sociality of an 'outsider' (Becker, 1963).

- Also, it is often said that one of the most defining features of autism is a 'spiky' cognitive profile (Milton, 2012b) that can lead to extreme strengths in areas of interest, but also potentially a widening of perspective and sociality, particularly in later years of development.

- Such a sociality is then stigmatised (Milton, 2011) rather than being seen as a potential asset within communities of practice.

University of Kent

Tacit knowledge

- Collins (2010) demarcates three main categories of tacit knowledge:

- Weak / relational (can be made explicit)

- Medium / somatic (limited by affordances)

- Strong / collective (dependent upon being engaged in communities of practice)

University of Kent

- *What is being argued is that humans differ from animals, trees, and sieves in having a unique capacity to absorb social rules from the surrounding society – rules that change from place to place, circumstance to circumstance, and time to time.* (Collins, 2010: 124).

Autistic sociality

- If autistic people were primarily machine-like, then where do the idiosyncratic expressions of autistic people (Mullin, 2009) originate from?

- If one were to follow the theory of Murray et al. (2005), perhaps it is the affordances of an autistic way of being leading to the honing-in on particular aspects of the social which inspire interest and attention?

University of Kent

- *They [autistic people] are creating the language in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the concepts in which to think autism.* (Hacking, 2009, p. 1467).

University of Kent

- Collins (2010) points out that domesticated animals, whilst immersed in human society are not able to be socialised, in the sense one does not encounter vegetarian, arty, or 'nerdy' dogs, they are simply just dogs.

- Yet one does encounter autistic people who are vegetarian, artistic, and certainly 'nerdy'.

- Autistic people have distinct interests and abilities that involve social practices, and this includes those who are deemed 'non-verbal' who are often musical or artistic, and whose bodily movements have been argued to be a form of language (Baggs, 2007, Milton, 2012c).

University of Kent

Learning about social life

- Much social skill or behavioural training with autistic people are predicated upon breaking down such social information into explicated strings of information which does little to help autistic people adjust to the changing flux of negotiated socially constructed realities.

- Recently however, methods such as 'Intensive Interaction' (Nind and Hewitt, 1994) which focus on relationship building and child-led activities have begun to challenge this dominance within the field.

University of Kent

- *...the individual is a temporary and leaky repository of collective knowledge. Kept apart from society for any length of time and the context sensitivity and currency of the individual's abilities will fade*. (Collins, 2010: 133).

- Wolfensberger and the 'normalisation thesis'.

- Removing the normative bias - #flipthenarrative

University of Kent

Interactional expertise

- The imitation game

- Contributory expertise

- How much interactional expertise is possible (Milton, 2014)?

- How much effort has been made by researchers and those designing practice models?

University of Kent

The evidence-base

- Sheppard et al. (2016) investigated non-autistic participants' ability to interpret the behavioural reactions of autistic people in naturalistic social interactions.

- Autistic and non-autistic participants were covertly filmed reacting to a seemingly incidental but actually scripted aspect of the researcher's behaviour.

- While briefing the participant she either told them a joke, paid them some compliments, told them about the difficult day she was having or kept them waiting while doing irrelevant activities.

- Non-autistic participants who viewed the recorded videos were less able to guess which event the video participant had experienced for autistic than non-autistic participants, apart from for reactions to the joke.

University of Kent

- Edey et al. (2016) asked autistic and non-autistic participants to manipulate two triangles to create animations depicting mental state interactions such as 'coaxing' or 'mocking'.

- Non-autistic observers who viewed the animations were better at identifying the mental state depicted for animations created by other non-autistic participants than autistic participants.

Dr. Damian E M Milton

University of Kent

Studies of forming first impressions

- Research has also asked a more general question of how autistic people are perceived by non-autistic others.

- If autistic people are perceived less favourably then this could result in avoidance and social exclusion, contributing to the social difficulties they experience.

- Stagg et al. (2014) found that non-autistic adults rated autistic children as less expressive and less attractive than the non-autistic children based on brief videos of them.

Dr. Damian E M Milton

University of Kent

- In a study using a much larger sample of adult participants, Sasson et al. (2017a) carried out three studies in which they showed that non-autistic adults rated autistic adults and children less favourably than non-autistic adults and children on a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, as well as indicating reduced intentions to engage with them.

- Further research by Sasson et al. (2017b) examined the impact of providing diagnostic labelling information on the impressions formed and found this to have a positive effect.

University of Kent

Studies of metaperception

- Sasson et al. (2018) investigated metaperception using the same videos from Sasson et al. (2017a/b).

- Video participants were asked to estimate how they thought others would perceive them on a wide range of personality traits, then observers judged them on the same traits after viewing their video.

- They found that autistic participants were less accurate than non-autistic participants in judging how they would be perceived as others, because they overestimated how positively they would be perceived.

Dr. Damian E M Milton

University of Kent

- While Sasson et al.'s (2018) study asked participants about how they come across to others in general, Usher et al. (2018) studied impressions formed by dyads of adolescents where one member of the dyad was autistic and one was not, who engaged in a five-minute conversation.

- Autistic participants were found to be more accurate in judging whether the non-autistic partner liked them than non-autistic participants were.

University of Kent

- Metaperception has also been investigated between dyads of autistic and non-autistic people who know each other well.

- Heasman and Gillespie (2017) used the Interpersonal Perception Methodology (IPM) to investigate perceptions and misperceptions for dyads of autistic individuals and their family members.

- When asked about reasons for misunderstandings, family members tended to cite an extreme impairment in social understanding of the autistic person, while autistic participants themselves reflected on both the self and other as causes of misunderstandings.

University of Kent

- Overall, studies of metaperception suggest that autistic people are quite good at estimating how specific others perceive them, but may have some difficulty judging how they come across in general. Consistent with the DEP, non-autistic people may have difficulty working out how they are perceived by autistic people whom they have just met.

University of Kent

Neurodiverse interactions

- It has been observed that autistic people appear to have a greater affinity with other autistic people than non-autistic people generally do (Chown, 2014).

- This raises the possibility that autistic people may show improved, if not superior, understanding of other autistic people and may consequently show fewer signs of 'social impairment' in the company of their in-group (Tajfel, 1981).

- This is indeed what has been shown in work carried out by Catherine Crompton at the University of Edinburgh.

University of Kent

The Double Empathy Problem Virtual Symposium

University of Kent
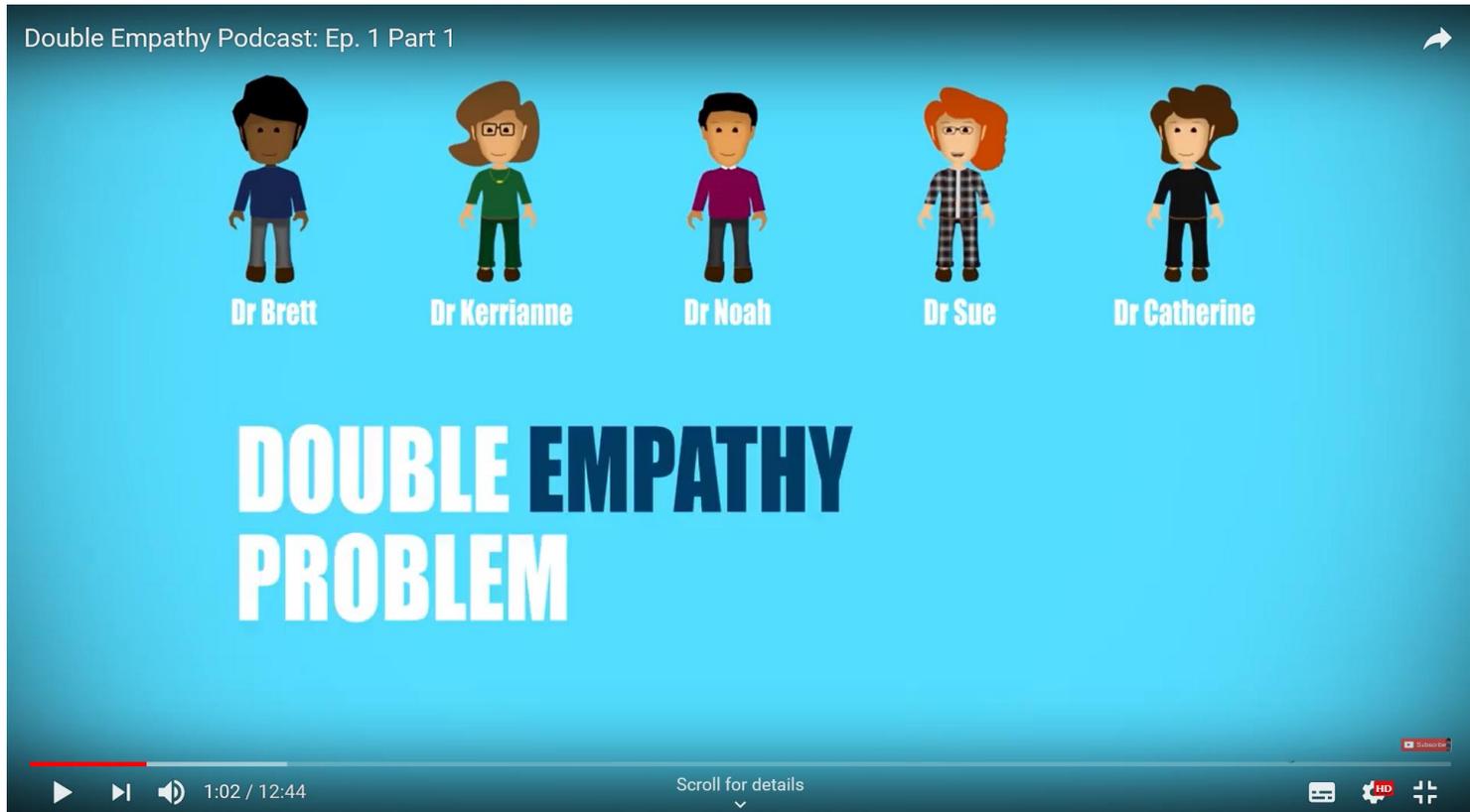
New directions

- The work of Robert Chapman, Gemma Williams, and designers such as Wendy Keay-Bright, Katie Gaudion and Jelle van Dijk.

- Crossover with neuroscientific theory regarding 'predictive coding':

- "*Priorities (interests) differ widely. An exchange of wrong predictions – NT autism 'priors' and autistic NT 'priors' both go wrong.*" (Dinah Murray – personal exchange 2019).

- The dialectical misattunement hypothesis: *"…views psychopathology not merely as disordered function within single brains but also as a dynamic interpersonal mismatch that encompasses various levels of description.*" (Bolis, 2017).

- A 'mismatch of salience'.

University of Kent

Violation through interpretation

- *"To communicate? I understand well, or rather the word, as I understand it is doubled...In order to make the tacit speak, what is required is to want, to do violence and to violate, and not at all a secret or something that would resist being said."* (Deligny, 2015: 91).

- *"When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process."* (Pirsig, 1974: 86).

University of Kent

Cultural imperialism

- Those that have power in society can determine how those in a position of powerlessness are interpreted and talked about (Young, 1990).

- 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.

Dr. Damian E M Milton

University of Kent

Psychsplaining

- *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'.* (Milton, 2016).

- Important to remember that the double empathy problem is situated within wider unequal (and intersectional) power relations.

- Avoiding tokenism and ceding power. Humility and rapport (tacit knowledge) building. #flipthenarrative

University of Kent

A couple of quotes to conclude:

- *Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms…Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. Define your terms. Work with me to build bridges between us.* (Sinclair, 1993)

University of Kent

- *When I am in an environment I feel comfortable in, with people who are kind and tolerant, and doing things I enjoy, then I am as happy as the next person. It is when people tell me I should think, speak or behave differently that I start to feel different, upset, isolated and worthless. So surely the problem is a lack of fit with the environment rather than something inside my brain that needs to be fixed? (Victoria, 'Are You Taking Something for It?', issue 76, 12; cited in Milton and Sims, 2016).*

University of Kent

References

- Baggs, A. (2007) *In My Language.* Accessed from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc, on 19/10/12.

- Bolis, D. (2017). Beyond Autism: Introducing the Dialectical Misattunement Hypothesis and a Bayesian Account of Intersubjectivity. *Psychopathology.* Vol. 50(6): 355-372.

- Cameron, L. (2012) *Dyspathy: the dynamic complement of empathy. The Open University.*

- Chown, N. (2014) More on the ontological status of autism and double empathy. *Disability and Society.* Vol. 29(10): 1672-1676.

- Collins, H. (2010) *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge.* London: University of Chicago Press.

- Collins, H. (2011) Three dimensions of expertise. *Phenomenological Cognitive Science.* Published online 06/04/11.

- Collins, H. and Evans, R. (2007) *Rethinking Expertise.* London: University of Chicago Press.

- Deligny, F. (2015) *The Arachnean and Other Texts (trans. Drew S. Burk and Catherine Porter, 2015).* Minneapolis: Univocal publishing.

- Derrida, J. (1988) *Limited Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

- Edey, R., Cook, J., Brewer, R., Johnson, M. H., Bird, G., & Press, C. (2016). Interaction takes two: Typical adults exhibit mind-blindness towards those with autism spectrum disorder. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 125(7), 879-885.

- Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

- Hacking, I. (2009) Autistic autobiography, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society: Biological Sciences.* Vol. 364(1522), p. 1467-1473.

University of Kent

- Heasman, B., & Gillespie, A. (2017). Perspective-taking is two-sided: misunderstandings between people with Asperger's syndrome and their family members . Autism, Epub ahead of print 07 July 2017. DOI: 10.1177/136. http://doi.org/10.1177/1362361317708287

- Kelly, G. (1955/1991) *The Psychology of Personal Constructs, volumes 1 and 2.* London: Routledge.

- Lawson, W. (2010) *The Passionate Mind: how people with autism learn.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

- Mills, R. (2013) *Guidance for Considering a Treatment Approach in Autism.* Accessed 11/02/14: http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/strategies-and-approaches/before-choosing-an-approach/guidance-for-considering-a-treatment-approach-in-autism.aspx

- Milton, C. (2002) *Beyond the Frame [MA project – unpublished].* University of Portsmouth.

- Milton, D. (1999) *The Rise of Psychopharmacology [Masters Essay – unpublished].* University of London.

- Milton, D. (2011) 'Who am I meant to be': in search of a psychological model of autism from the viewpoint of an 'insider'. *Critical Autism Seminar 18/01/11*. Sheffield Hallam University.

- Milton, D. (2012a) On the ontological status of autism: the double empathy problem. *Disability and Society.* Vol. 27(6): 883-887.

- Milton, D. (2012b) *So what exactly is autism?* Autism Education Trust.

- Milton, D. (2014a) Autistic expertise: a critical reflection on the production of knowledge in autism studies. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice,* Vol. 18(7): 794-802.

- Milton, D. (2014b) Embodied sociality and the conditioned relativism of dispositional diversity, *Autonomy,* Vol. 1(3).

- Milton, D. (2016) Disposable dispositions: reflections upon the work of Iris Marion Young in relation to the social oppression of autistic people. Disability and Society, Vol. 31(10): 1403-1407.

- Milton, D. (2017) *A Mismatch of Salience: an exploration of autism from theory to practice.* Hove: Pavilion Press.

- Milton, D. and Bracher, M. (2013) Autistics speak but are they heard? Medical Sociology Online. Vol. 7(2): 61-69, [online]. http://www.medicalsociologyonline.org/resources/Vol7Iss2/MSo_7.2_Autistics-speak-but-are-they-heard_Milton-and-Bracher.pdf, [Accessed 06/11/16].

- Milton, D., & Sims, T. (2016). How is a sense of well-being and belonging constructed in the accounts of autistic adults? Disability and Society, 31(4), 520–534. http://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1186529

University of Kent

- Moore, H., & Gillespie, A. (2014). The caregiving bind: concealing the demands of informal care can undermine the caregiving identity. Social Science and Medicine, 116, 102–109. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.06.038

- Mullin, J. (2009) *Drawing Autism.* New York: Mark Batty.

- Murray, D. (1992). 'Attention Tunnelling and Autism'. In P. Shattock and G. Linfoot (eds), Living with Autism: the Individual, the Family and the Professional. Durham Research Conference, April 1995, pp. 183 193.

- Murray, D., Lesser, M. and Lawson, W. (2005) 'Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism.' *Autism.* Vol. 9(2), pp. 136-156.

- Nind, M. and Hewitt, D. (1994) *Access to Communication.* London: David Fulton.

- Parsons, T. (1951) The Social System. New York: The Free Press.

- Pirsig, R. M. (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* London: Vintage.

- Pirsig, R. (1991) *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals.* London: Black Swan.

- Polanyi, M. (1958) *Personal Knoweldge.* London: Routledge.

- Ridout, S. (2014) More than Picture-Making: Reflecting on Collage as a Narrative Tool for Opening Discourse on the Involvement of Autistics in Autism Research. *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*, 1(3), [online]. http://www.larry-arnold.net/Autonomy/index.php/autonomy/article/view/AR14/html, [Accessed 11th August 2017].

- Salmon, P. (2003) 'A Psychology for Teachers'. In D. Langbridge and S. Taylor (ed's) *Critical Readings in Social Psychology. Milton Keynes: Open University.*

- Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D. P., & Grossman, R. B. (2017a). Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments. Scientific Reports, 7, 40700.

- Sasson, N. J., & Morrison, K. E. (2017b). First impressions of adults with autism improve with diagnostic disclosure and increased autism knowledge of peers. Autism, 1362361317729526.

- Sasson, N. J., Morrison, K. E., Pinkham, A. E., Faso, D. J., & Chmielewski, M. (2018). Brief Report: Adults with Autism are Less Accurate at Predicting How Their Personality Traits are Evaluated by Unfamiliar Observers. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 1-6.

University of Kent

- Sheppard, E., Pillai, D., Wong, G. T. L., Ropar, D., & Mitchell, P. (2016). How easy is it to read the minds of people with autism spectrum disorder?. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 46(4), 1247-1254.

- Stagg, S. D., Slavny, R., Hand, C., Cardoso, A., & Smith, P. (2014). Does facial expressivity count? How typically developing children respond initially to children with autism. Autism, 18(6), 704-711.

- Tajfel, H. (1981) *Human groups and social categories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

- Usher, L. V., Burrows, C. A., Messinger, D. S., & Henderson, H. A. (2018). Metaperception in Adolescents With and Without Autism Spectrum Disorder. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48(2), 533-548.

- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Young, I. (2005, first published 1990), "Five faces of oppression", in Cudd, Ann E; Andreasen, Robin O., *Feminist theory: a philosophical anthology*, Oxford, UK Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, pp. 91–104.

University of Kent

THE UK'S EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

University of
Kent