

DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This document is a foundational academic article by Dr. Damian Milton (2012) that introduces the concept of the "**double empathy problem**." It critiques dominant psychological theories of autism, such as the "**theory of mind deficit**," by reframing social difficulties not as a one-sided impairment in the autistic person, but as a mutual and reciprocal breakdown in understanding between autistic and non-autistic (neurotypical) people. The paper argues that this disjuncture in lived experience and perception is a two-way street, challenging the pathologizing and "othering" of autistic sociality.

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METADATA

- **Primary Category:** RESEARCH
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- **Tags:** #double-empathy-problem, #autism, #neurodiversity, #theory-of-mind, #social-interaction, #sociology, #empathy, #neurotypical
- **Related Docs:** This paper offers a critical lens through which to re-evaluate the findings in "Motttron_2006_research_review_article_enhanced_perceptual_functioning_autism" and "Rumball_2020_research_article_trauma_ptsd_autism."

FORMATTED CONTENT

On the Ontological Status of Autism: the 'Double Empathy Problem'.

Damian E M Milton

University of Birmingham

Abstract

In recent decades there has been much debate over the ontological status of autism and other neurological 'disorders', diagnosed by behavioural indicators, and theorised primarily within the field of cognitive neuroscience and psychological paradigms. Such cognitive-behavioural discourses abstain from acknowledging the universal issue of relationality and interaction in the formation of a contested and constantly reconstructed social reality... The nature of these contested interactions will be explored in this current issues piece through the use of the term the '**double empathy problem**', and how such a rendition produces a critique of autism being defined as a deficit in '**theory of mind**', re-framing such issues as a question of reciprocity and mutuality.

Introduction

In recent decades there has been much debate over the ontological status of autism and other neurological 'disorders', diagnosed by behavioural indicators, and theorised primarily within the field of cognitive neuroscience and psychological paradigms. The triad of dominant theories that include: **theory of mind deficit**, **executive dysfunction**, and **weak central coherence theory**, as well as behavioural diagnosis and behavioural psychological intervention paradigms; all position autism as a neurological disorder, a pathological deviance from expected functional stages of development. This approach when applied to the education of those diagnosed becomes a 'treatment program' of modifying the '**autistic person**' as 'best one can' to fit in with the mainstream culture of society.

Assumptions of social relationality

The inability to 'read' the subtext of a social situation is often deemed to be a major feature of those diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, yet it is suggested here that social subtext is never fully given as a set of a priori circumstances, but is actively constructed by social agents engaged in material and mental production. The '**theory of mind**' and '**empathy**' so lauded in normative psychological models of human interaction, refers to the ability a '**neuro-typical**' (NT) individual has to assume understandings of the mental states and motives of other people. When such '**empathy**' is applied toward an '**autistic person**' however, it is often wildly inaccurate in its measure. Such attempts are often felt as invasive, imposing and threatening by an '**autistic person**', especially when protestations to the contrary are ignored by the NT doing the 'empathising'.

The 'double empathy problem': A disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld - perceived as a breach in the 'natural attitude' of what constitutes 'social reality' for '**neuro-typical**' people and yet an everyday and often traumatic experience for '**autistic people**'.

To expand on the above definition, the '**double empathy problem**' refers to a breach in the 'natural attitude' that occurs between people of different dispositional outlooks and personal conceptual understandings when attempts are made to communicate meaning. In a sense it is a 'double problem' as both people experience it, and so it is not a singular problem located in any one person. Rather, it is based in the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors... The '**empathy**' problem being a 'two-way street' has been mentioned by both 'autistic writers' (Sinclair, 1993) and NT writers alike (Hacking, 2009), yet despite such protestations, the 'lack of theory of mind' myth persists.

The stigma of being 'othered' and the normalisation agenda

To be defined as abnormal is potentially to be seen as 'pathological' in some way and to be socially stigmatised, shunned, and sanctioned. Then if there is a breakdown in interaction... a person who sees their interactions as 'normal' and 'correct' can denigrate those who act or are perceived of as 'different'. If one can apply a label on the 'other' locating the problem in them, it also resolves the applier of the label's 'natural attitude' of responsibility in their own perceptions and the breach is healed perceptually, but not for the person who has been '**othered**'.

Internalised oppression and psycho-emotional disablement

The imposition of one's views upon another and the subsequent internalisation of this view can be seen to be a form of **internalised oppression**, where the negative connotations of the normative model of pathological difference becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to a self-imposed **psycho-emotional disablement**. For those who resist such self-identifications and attempts to normalise, however 'well intentioned', are experienced as an 'invasion' of the '**autistic**' 'lifeworld' by people wanting to modify one's behaviour to suit their purposes and not one's own.

Conclusion

The lack of 'social insight' seen to be manifested in the actions of '**autistic people**' is both biologically and socially derived, and yet is also historically and culturally situated in discourse. The experience of a lack of realisation or the lack of insight is a very common one in social interactions of many varieties however, and leads to the '**double empathy problem**' between differently disposed social actors.

So it is true that autistic people often lack insight about NT perceptions and culture, yet it is equally the case that NT people lack insight into the minds and culture of '**autistic people**'... Conversely, the NT person has no pertinent personal requirement to understand the mind of the '**autistic person**' unless closely related socially in some way.

In analysing the interactions that '**autistic people**' have with the wider population, it is easy to problematise the definition of autism as a 'social deficit' located within an individual's mind. Differences in neurology may well produce differences in sociality, but not a 'social deficit' as compared to an idealised normative view of social reality. Such definitions may help to signpost disability support services, but they are no way of defining autism in any kind of holistic sense.