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**M U N I
P E D**

**Psychosocial Developmental Stages
of a Neurodivergent Person with a
RAB11A Gene Mutation**

Developmental psychology (SZ6603, SZ6628, SOe115)

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1 Introduction

This paper aims to briefly analyse the emotional development of a 23 years old neurodivergent male with a rare mutation of RAB11A gene resulting in autism, epilepsy with extreme seizures, reduced ability to feel fear, severe memory loss, muscle hypotony, joint hyperflexibility, motor coordination issues, and a number of less apparent symptoms. The analysis will be conducted mainly through the lens of Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development theory (Erikson, 1950) with occasional references to other relevant works in the field.

2 Theoretical background

The respondent will be mainly probed for relative alignment with Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental stages as per the *Erikson, E. H. (1950). Childhood and society* work, and interpret the drawing made by the respondent as per *Mottron, L., Dawson, M., Soulieres, I., Hubert, B., & Burack, J. A. (2006). Enhanced perceptual functioning in autism: An update, and eight principles of autistic perception* work.

3 Research

3.1 Research aim

The research aims to explore the nuances of psychosocial development in neurodivergent (namely autistic) people, as well as document how reduced fear perception and brain damage inducing amnesia stemming from extreme acute seizures affect the development and self-perception of an individual. The main goals are:

- To measure as to what extent the respondent's apparent psychosocial development aligns with the Developmental Stages outlined by Erik Erikson (1950), with a prevalent focus on:
 - Identity vs. Role Confusion,
 - Intimacy vs. Isolation.
- To gauge how neurodivergence and specific mutations affect personality, affective awareness, social awareness and emotional self-concept.
- To probe the respondent for threat processing.

3.2 Description of the method

The data was collected via a semi-structured (with a predefined framework but branching follow-up questions in the context) open-ended online interview, which lasted close to 2 hours. This method was selected because it was impossible to otherwise observe the respondent for a meaningful period of time.

Due to the limitations of the format, it was not possible to extensively observe the respondent's behaviour, nor was there any factual information about the respondent's life and circumstances prior to the interview available, therefore all the presented information was extracted from the respondent's answers directly and may be biased or untrue.

The initial questions were essentially split into three generalised categories – directly related to Erikson's Psychosocial Stages (with a focus on, but not limited to: Identity vs. Role Confusion, and Intimacy vs. Isolation), related to emotional and social (self-)awareness and perception, related to the respondent's purportedly reduced fear and danger perception, and questions related to the respondent's art which he revealed at one point (see figure 1).

3.3 Participant(s) and data collection

The interview was conducted with Mike, 23 years old. He is male with a rare mutation of RAB11A gene resulting in autism, epilepsy with extreme seizures, reduced ability to feel fear, severe memory loss, muscle hypotony, joint hyperflexibility, motor coordination issues, and a number of less apparent symptoms. He is among the 17 currently living people who have been diagnosed with such a condition, which in itself is rather underdocumented. He has a good verbal and cognitive ability.

The interview was conducted at noon, roughly 12 o'clock. Mike was at his home, in his room, and seemed well and enthusiastic.

3.4 Data analysis

In the framework of Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental stages, the initial focus as per the interview structure were supposed to be Identity vs. Role Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation. The former turned out to be the more prominent theme throughout the interview.

As per the observations, it seemed that Mike was still unsure of what kind of person he posits himself as, even in a way juxtaposing what he may believe he comes off as versus how he believes himself to be:

Interviewer: On that note, how would you describe your personality?

Mike: Like what?

Interviewer: I mean, if, for example, your friends or family were to describe you, how would they describe you? Not in a physical way, but emotionally?

Mike: Other people would find me exhausting, too sociable, way too trusting, oblivious, and a danger.

Mike: I'd describe myself as an extreme extrovert with no personal space who just wants to keep making friends.

A similar self-conscious approach was also observable when he was talking about the way he perceives the world, he was clearly aware of and separating his perspective from the perspective of other people:

Interviewer: What do you wish people understood better about how your brain works? Maybe there have been some misunderstandings you've gotten into because people didn't know you enough?

Mike: My greatest wish is to have the point-of-view gun from Hitchhiker's Guide. [This is a gun that makes the target see the world from the perspective of the shooter]

Mike: The biggest thing is how I think. I don't think in pictures or words; I think in voices. People in my head tell me how to do everything, and no, I'm not schizophrenic.

Another interesting thing that was unknown prior to the interview, and was not accounted for in the structure, was his recurring memory loss, which may have affected the way he perceives his own identity:

Mike: I can't really remember anything before 2024. I lose a lot of memory with the seizures.

Mike: Every time I have a seizure, I lose like six months of old memories.

Interviewer: So, you don't remember your childhood?

Mike: Hardly any of it.

Interviewer: Are there any interesting stories from your childhood? Maybe if your parents told you?

Mike: Not really stories, but in 2012, my dad and I went on a road trip through most of the USA and Canada.

Interviewer: How often do you have seizures? But also, that sounds kind of scary to me. I would be afraid if I forgot something just like that. How do you even feel about it? Any regrets, do you have those?

Mike: The seizures are caused by my immune system. My immune system is very weak; like, I get ear infections, oral thrush, staph infections, and strep. All of that my body can't fight off on its own.

Mike: The only plus of the seizures is even though I lose a ton of memory, a very old memory will come back.

Interviewer: A very old one, like from your childhood?

Mike: Just an image.

Interviewer: Can you describe at least one such memory?

Mike: Like me and two other friends swimming in the bay near the drop-off.

Mike: At my dad's house, one side is on the river, the other on the bay on the beach, and you can walk out to the drop-off, which is the part where big ships sail in. It's like 3 feet to walk out there, then the drop-off is around 60 feet deep. No riptide, so it's perfectly calm and safe. Like, in the drop-off, if you don't know how to swim, simply lay on your back.

While Mike refused to answer my questions as to whether he's anxious or regretful about losing memories, him presenting memory retention as a positive thing is a clear indication of him being negatively affected by memory loss at an emotional level.

Although there are signals indicating possible inner imbalance when it comes to his identity, some of the responses were more affirming:

Mike: My main goal is to stay alive, and that's hard due to seizures. I've legally died 25 times.

Interviewer: Do you have a dream or something like that?

Mike: In a perfect world, I'd be an electrician or engineer.

It's clear that he feels like his condition is preventing him from experiencing a lot of things, and possibly achieving his dreams or personal expectations, but nonetheless he has a few hobbies he wishes to be better at; he is not apathetic.

When it came to Intimacy vs. Isolation, Mike seemed either more reserved or less versed in his answers. While he did express his love for his parents, he didn't seem to say much on the topic of friendship or partnership. Making friends is, as he stated, one of his favourite activities, but he admitted to not feeling lonely:

Interviewer: You mentioned you like making friends. Does that mean you're feeling lonely sometimes?

Mike: I've never felt lonely due to so many Discord friends.

Mike: Most of my friends are all on Discord. I'd say 10 people I simply text.

Interviewer: How did you make friends before Discord / social media? Do you remember?

Mike: I didn't really. I just befriended my brother's friends. Then, when I joined my special needs group four years ago at my church, I befriended them.

Mike: I first joined Discord when Smash Ultimate came out so my brother could video chat from his house and my mom's apartment.

Interviewer: Have you ever wanted to be / been in a romantic relationship? Do you feel the need for that?

Mike: Yes, I have one friend who considers me her boyfriend 'cause we've known each other since 2014. She's two years older than me but is a complete narcissist; she cares about no one except me.

Interviewer: How did you realize that, that she doesn't care for anyone else?

Mike: I watch her treat other people. She's a family friend; I met her in 6th grade.

Interviewer: Also, do you feel any romantic feelings toward her?

Mike: Yes, I like redheads.

Interviewer: Or lust?

Mike: We have never been intimate.

Mike didn't seem to want to dwell on romantic relationships much, so the topic was dropped. Mike is also pretty active in the Discord server he is a part of, and can be found chatting there with people quite often.

Since Mike's life and routine was largely dependent on his caretakers, he was also probed for Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt – to see how he himself feels about him being very reliant on other people. While he feels for his caretaker's abundance of chores, he seems to be unable, or not allowed to be more self-reliant:

Interviewer: How independent do you think you are? Do you plan your day yourself? Do you have any problems you figure out by yourself? I know your family is always by your side, so it's kind of hard to be separate from them.

Mike: I'm completely dependent. Like, my mom cooks, cleans, and plans the day.

Mike: She's my legal guardian.

Interviewer: Do you think you could do most of the stuff on your own?

Mike: A judge said I'm incapable of doing all that. I couldn't plan the day or cook, but I could clean. Like, I clean my room myself, but my mom insists that she does everything.

Interviewer: Do you feel like she may be taking on too much, since she also has to care for her mother?

Mike: She also cares for my dad when he comes up.

Mike: Yes, she's close to a mental break, but she has no choice.

Interviewer: Do you wish you could help her somehow?

Mike: I do help her, but I can't do all she's doing.

During the investigation on how Mike's neurodivergence and numbed fear perception has affected his social life, it was easy to infer that he was quite bold in his dealings, often only realising the threat post factum, if at all:

Interviewer: Could you please tell me more about your fear response? You mentioned [before the interview] that you were not scared of horror movies or seizures, but what about something like the dreams you told me about? [Mike mentioned having constant "nightmares" before the interview]

Interviewer: Like, how does it feel when you are getting killed in a dream?

Mike: Agitated. Just when I die, I wake up.

Interviewer: So, have you never been scared in your entire life?

Mike: Correct.

Interviewer: Have you ever had troubles because of that? Like, maybe getting into dangerous situations?

Mike: Absolutely.

Mike: Once, a few years ago, an upstairs neighbor was being too loud at 12 a.m. My mom asked me to speak to the guy, so I got my rubber mallet and bashed [...] his door. He came out of his apartment yelling and screaming. It was hysterical; I laughed so much. He screamed at me me; I didn't feel a thing. He just kept on acting like an ape. So after I laughed for a while, he got too tired and went back inside. That guy really loves me. When I see him, I wave, and he glares back. Another funny event was once I jimmied a bathroom door, and a guy was mad I busted in. I told his ass to get out since there was a stall and a urinal. He still was mad for some reason, but when I brandished my knife, he chilled the fuck out. He was just displeased.

Mike: I was told by my family that this was dangerous.

Interviewer: How old were you in those situations?

Mike: I was either 18 or 19 at the time. I have memory loss, so it's hard to know exactly when.

Mike: I also have no pain or temperature sensation on the top layer of all my skin below my neck. I don't know if the gene mutation caused that or not.

It was hard to infer whether Mike was lying or exaggerating, but due to his overall communication style being absolutely transparent, open, and lacking irony, it can be assumed that at least the core of the story was true, indicating not only his reduced ability to read emotions, but also reduced ability to process threats. While he himself stated that he was not really able to understand others' emotions, he clearly differentiated between what he considered to be positive and negative qualities in people, with a strong accent on egotism and narcissism:

Interviewer: Are there any traits you like in people? Are there any traits you dislike in people?

Mike: I like people who are extroverts and outdoor people. I'm also an outdoor person. I also like compassionate people who pay attention and are respectful. What I dislike are narcissists who only care about themselves. I don't care much for people who are nasty just because they don't feel good; that's no excuse. My grandmother is a perfect example of this. She's 82 and a raging narcissist who's a bitch to everyone around her. And you may say, "Well, that's due to her age," but my mom says she's been this way for her whole life, so for 54 years, she's been nasty. She is only fake-nice when she needs something. She's my least favorite person, definitely most hated. I help her only 'cause she pays me 30 bucks a month.

Interviewer: So, your grandmother makes you uncomfortable? Or is it more that you dislike the way she treats other people?

Mike: Both. She treats me and our family badly.

Mike: When my grandma dies, I'll throw a party.

Mike: What sucks is we have to help her a lot 'cause she's so physically disabled.

Interviewer: Are you able to properly understand people's emotions and all? Like, you mentioned you sometimes didn't understand why people were getting triggered.

Mike: I don't understand people's emotions hardly at all.

Interviewer: So, you don't really understand it when someone is angry at you, for example?

Mike: Yup.

Interviewer: What about empathy? Do you "feel" for other people?

Mike: Not really.

Interviewer: Like, do you feel sad because your grandma, for example, abuses your other family members?

Mike: I don't feel sad because I know she can do better; she's choosing not to, though.

Mike: She will be the sweetest thing if she's trying to sucker someone to be her slave.

This part, among else, shows that there are either discrepancies between his words and reality, or not enough clarity was put into questions or answers' interpretation, since Mike claimed that he didn't get uncomfortable, but also that his grandma was making him uncomfortable:

Interviewer: Also, once again, if you don't feel comfortable answering something, just say so. I am genuinely curious.

Mike: I don't get uncomfortable.

Interviewer: Like, at all? Are there things in your life that make you angry or just make you feel any negative emotions? Maybe like annoy you or something? Or maybe do you have any triggers?

Mike: No, I have no triggers, but I trigger other people. Like, if someone gets mad, I often get in their face and offer them to help get their anger out. For some reason, it just makes them madder.

[...]

Interviewer: So, your grandmother makes you uncomfortable? Or is it more that you dislike the way she treats other people?

Mike: Both. She treats me and our family badly.

Apart from his psychosocial situation, Mike also opened up about unique aspects of his mind, such as second-person imperative auditory "hallucinations" – which are not a thing inherent to ASD:

Mike: The biggest thing is how I think. I don't think in pictures or words; I think in voices. People in my head tell me how to do everything, and no, I'm not schizophrenic.

Interviewer: Hmm, are those voices of people you know?

Mike: No.

Mike: About 20 people in my head, male and female, guide me on how to do everything, like how to walk and move my arms and such.

Interviewer: Wow, so does it mean that whenever you do literally anything, you first have to "hear" how to do it? What about when you're typing, like right now?

Mike: Basically, I'm told how to do it the second I think about something.

Mike: Even typing on the phone, the voices tell me where to move my finger.

This condition is intrinsic to schizophrenia or psychosis, but Mike does not seem to be diagnosed with either.

Mike has also shared his drawings (figure 1., figure 2.). He was calling them primitive, but was pretty enthusiastic to share and discuss them:

Mike: I make art.

Interviewer: What kind of art?

Mike: [Figure 1.] This is my art. This is me, Lila, and my mom at the dog park. Lila looks more like an anteater in this drawing. Grass takes the longest to draw.

Mike: It's primitive.

Mike: I drew it 'cause I challenged my mom to draw Lila. She drew Lila in a 3D way, and I drew Lila this way. She likes this version a lot more than hers.

Mike: If you look at the bottom right, you will see the skeleton of an inmate who failed trying to escape with a spoon.

Mike: All the squares by the trees are mulch chips.

Mike: The plus signs are dirt underground.

The drawings, while do resemble children's works of with disproportionate bodies and lack of certain body parts, seem to have been made with a great attention to detail to the point of a "primitive" drawing almost resembling a mosaic. Disjointed or very simplified body parts, as well as lack of variation between figures strongly correlate with research that outs such style as very common to people with ASD (Mottron, 2006)

4 Discussion and conclusion

It proved to be a challenge to consciously comprehend the entire interview context, while also building upon it. Looking back on the transcript now, it's obvious that many topics have been left underexplored – either due to the lack of time, attention, or experience. For a future reference, a good idea would be to use even less vague expressions and explain the perception of definitions more. It is more than possible that some discrepancies in the interview were caused simply by different interpretations of definitions from both sides. It is also impossible to assess as to what was a lie and what wasn't, what could be taken at a face value and what couldn't. Time and format constraints also played a role in interview feeling more rushed than it should have been. Another good idea to keep in mind is that it's not necessary to force-tick all "checkboxes" of the script, and that it's sometimes beneficial to let the dialogue take a more natural course.

Resources

- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Mottron, L., Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Hubert, B., & Burack, J. A. (2006). Enhanced perceptual functioning in autism: An update, and eight principles of autistic perception. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*

Supplement

Expanded interview text: <https://rentry.co/interviewmuni>

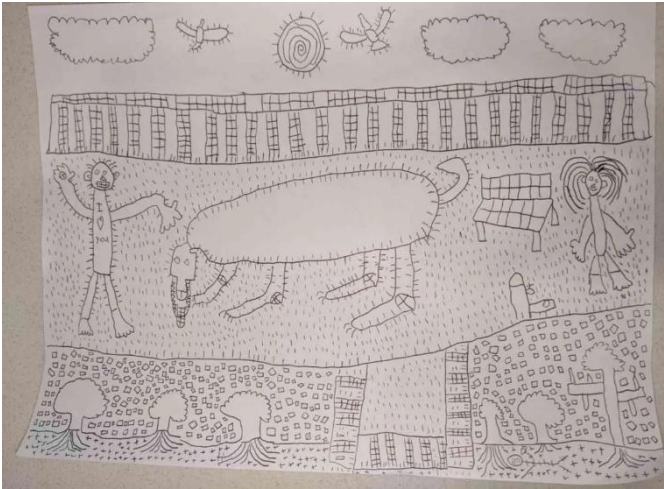


Figure 1.



Figure 2.