

Should we View Autism More Positively?

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About the Study

Recent research has shown that the terminology used for describing autism is important to those who are being described [1]. In an Australian study 198 adults, when asked, preferred terms such as 'autistic person' or 'person on the autism spectrum'. In the UK autistic adults preferred the term 'autistic' although there was no clear consensus about the best terms to use and autistic people and professionals have differing views [2] suggesting that we should be mindful to ask individual people or groups their preferences. More importantly several themes emerged from the Australian study: That autistic people regarded autism as reflecting diversity (and part of their identity) and struggled with over medicalised language and rejected stigmatising language. Organisations on the internet giving information about autism can present that information as difference but many continue to use medical language and describe deficit and impairment [3].

Deficit focused language dominates discussion around autism in many different areas. For example, diagnostic systems use terminology such as 'failure' and 'abnormalities' (APA, 2013). Awareness of autism is high in the UK [4] and other western countries [5,6] however misconceptions still exist such as confusing autism with intellectual disability [4]. Awareness of autism among people from ethnic minorities in the UK is much lower [4]. The medicalised approach to autism implemented through diagnostic systems may not promote acceptance of the condition; A desire to cure autism among individuals is heavily associated with stigma around autism [7]. Media representations of autism are also often deficit focused, with terms such as 'suffering' and 'victim' frequently used [8]. Recent media coverage of an early intervention study for autism [9], has been reported by newspapers in a way which could suggest that poor parenting is a factor in the condition [10] despite this not being implied in the original paper.

A light was shone on this issue by our recent paper suggesting that autism could and should be described in a more positive way by society and certainly by those in statutory services such as health services [11]. This explores things that autistic people are good at and the positive things they bring to society. For example, research has found autistic people to have advanced skills in memory [12], mathematics [13], visual [14,15] and sensory perception [12], music [16], art [17,18] and pattern/system comprehension [19,20]. In many areas the skills of people with autism are not dissimilar of those without [21,22] so how then can we justify this deficit-based description of autism that is currently so prevalent in our society?

This paper goes one step further and asks what the evidence is in deeper historical times or in prehistory for the presence and influence of autistic people. Whilst we need to treat such evidence with caution, there is

considerable cause to consider that autistic people had much to offer. Indeed, taking an evolutionary perspective helps us understand some of the important contributions that autistic people make in society. For example, attention to detail and logical thinking may have been beneficial skills for hunter gatherers to have in prehistoric times [23]. Arguably, these skills are also important for humans today: A logical thinking approach with reduced influence of emotionality may be advantageous to have when working within justice and legal systems [24]. In this way terminology used to describe autistic people should usefully describe strengths as well as differences [19,24].

One way of achieving this could be through reframing diagnostic systems in a more balanced way that describes difference rather than deficits. The below gives an example of how this could be constructed.

Differences in social communication compared with neuro-typical people such as

- Logical approach to appraisal of socio-emotional situations.
- Utilitarian approach to the need for communication.
- Preference for communicating only when it is necessary to achieve an outcome (often using written or electronic communication in preference to verbal and nonverbal communication).
- Stronger reliance on environmental information than eye contact and body language.
- Small close group of functional relationships in preference to larger group of social acquaintances

Differences in patterns of interest and occupation, as manifested by

- Liking for structure and routine.
- A tendency to an interest in facts, details, categorization, patterns, visual or topographical memory, numeracy and how things work.
- Differences in interaction with the sensory environment including ability to perceive patterns and details that others can't easily perceive.
- A tendency to like rules and logic.

These are an alternative set of criteria for autism spectrum disorder.

This paper highlights the need for a difference-based approach to describing autism and begins to address ways in which this could be achieved. Further action is needed to implement a more positive description of autism into diagnostic systems, media coverage and public society.

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