

View from different perspectives

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An excerpt from

Infinite Paradigms: A Re-Conceptualisation of Autism and Society

Criticism of the tradition can also be a way of connecting with tradition, of showing the truth of the tradition by revealing the falseness of what the present mistakenly takes to be traditional (Couzens Hoy, 1978:167).

From any perspective we care to take, autistic individuals seem to be complex, and explanations for, and of behaviours can appear to be contradictory. Autistic individuals can be viewed as having disabilities and abilities, they can be considered to have different ways of thinking or have different brain types. There are autistic individuals who have exceptional talents whilst others have none to note of compared to the rest of the population. There are autistic individuals who have many specific identifiable medical difficulties, ranging in severity from life threatening through to simply annoying and, there are autistic individuals who have no quantifiable medical issues whatsoever.

Whilst I understand these are not only very general views of how autistic individuals can be described and, that they are also extreme ends of a 'spectrum', it bothers me that all of these statements are also true of the non-autistic population; this can be seen in the following version of the same paragraph with only the references to autism removed.

The paragraph then reads:

From any perspective we care to take, individuals seem to be complex and explanations for, and of behaviours can appear to be contradictory. Individuals can be viewed as having disabilities and abilities, they can be considered to have different ways of thinking or have different brain types. There are individuals who have exceptional talents whilst others have none to note of compared to the rest of the population. There are individuals who have many specific identifiable medical difficulties, ranging in severity from life threatening through to simply annoying and, there are individuals who have no quantifiable medical issues whatsoever.

So why do I consider this to be so important? For me it highlights a point seemingly lost in most research, literature and general discourse, and the point is...*we are not the same*. I understand that the statement, *we are not the same*, seems to be in complete contradiction to the example paragraphs, but please bear with me because it isn't contradictory at all. The whole point of the paragraphs is to highlight that making the assumption, and therefore, utilising the '*we are all the same*' (homogeneity) paradigm alone, is an easy trap to fall into and a very comfortable one at that. To believe simply because both paragraphs work identically well for both *groups* of individuals, an assumption can be legitimately made where both *groups* have the same characteristics. We can, therefore, assume that both groups are the same in some way, however, we also know both of the *groups* identified in the paragraphs have significant and quantifiable differences which cannot be ignored. After much deliberation I can only justify aligning these groups as Human, and, even grouping what is essentially the whole Human population as Human could be contentious and debatable dependent on your definition of Human. For example, if we define Human as having specific behavioural characteristics, there are going to be individuals who some would class as being inhuman, dependent on

perspective. This is of course a completely different discussion and, I am only highlighting the dangers inherent in grouping people together.

When I state, we are not the same (heterogeneous), I am not only highlighting differences between the autistic population and the non-autistic population but, highlighting differences between any two people within the Human Race, in any situation, at any given time. Even in the most extreme cases of human similarity, for example identical twins, there are still marked differences, yes there are similarities and bonds that go way beyond the knowledge and imagination of people like myself but, there are still marked differences. This being the case then, and there is plenty of evidence to suggest it is, why is there a general discourse purporting homogeneity, when it simply cannot be possible. The apparent contradiction between the concepts of *individuality* and *similarity* within these paragraphs, mirrors that of societies and appear like a yawning chasm so wide they seem highly unlikely to be comfortable bed fellows. However, they are definitely not uncomfortable bed fellows.

One of the main difficulties we have when trying to understand behaviours is because general and professional discourses tend to rely on the homogeneity paradigm and it appears to be all pervasive. The homogeneity paradigm is used in schools, it's used in the workplace, it's used in the medical industry, it's used in politics, and importantly, it's also used in research. There is an ironic overtone of understanding by large sections of our society that heterogeneity is key. Large sections of society believe we should be having greater individualisation in education, that every court case is taken on individual evidence placed within individual contexts, that individual patients are cautiously given medications with the understanding that no two people will react in exactly the same way to the same treatment as somebody else. Still, these beliefs are taken with the homogeneity paradigm as a basis, that we are all the same and heterogeneity is an add on, or

simply a stray from the norm. Individuality is not a stray from the norm...it *is* the norm.

At present there are two main viewpoints from which there have emerged several models of autism trying to explain atypical behaviours seen in the Autistic population and, possible reasons for those behaviours. The main point here is that they are viewed from the same (homogeneity) paradigm which plays out in the extreme as, we are the same what's wrong with you or, we are the same what's wrong with society. It is all well and good examining things in great depth and fine detail, however, if whatever is to be examined is effectively viewed from the same place, then irrespective of how much detail is collected, the analysis will always be skewed. What will happen is a more detailed view of the same perspective will be gained and, a holistic view will never be gained. We will always be missing what could be significant information, and not only will we be missing information, but we will have no idea how important the missing information is to a truly holistic understanding of any given situation.

So, to all intents and purposes, the viewpoints pertaining to autism appear antithetical yet, both viewpoints are significant and valid in given situations. The fact that both points of view appear counterintuitive whilst simultaneously both holding merit tells me that another paradigm is necessary to view both Autism and societies. The easiest way to find a new paradigm is to flip the present one from homogeneity to heterogeneity and to reanalyse the hard work and research that has already been done. To example how questioning could look when flipping the paradigms, assume difference and ask, what makes us similar? ... the world looks like a very different place from there.

A note just to be very clear, the homogeneity paradigm is totally valid in the sense of generalisation and a starting point for investigation however, it is just a small part

of the picture, as is the heterogeneity paradigm. When the heterogeneity paradigm is investigated, it should be compared to the homogeneity paradigm, the crossover points examined, and then look for another paradigm ... who knows, we might actually get somewhere.

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