

“Vicious when poked with a stick”:

Doubtful descriptors of autism

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A major concern for autism advocates is defeating myths about the autistic. These are mainly popular misconceptions or outdated descriptions in psychological literature, but may include what even serious professionals will believe and defend. Here are my picks for the worst autism myths.

Aggression?

One of the most vague of the common descriptors, perhaps especially among those trying to link autism to mercury poisoning, is “tantrums and aggression”. I find this perception reminiscent of a critique I saw once of early studies of the Tasmanian devil. Such studies helped perpetuate (if not create) the image of the Tasmanian devil as a uniquely ferocious and destructive animal. As the later critic pointed out, these studies of the devils' behavior always read something like this: “Tasmanian devil placed in barrel, then poked with stick by grad student. Viciously bit grad student's finger off. Grad student given longer stick.”

The truth is that experienced clinicians have often characterized as passive compared to neurotypicals. If it appears that an autistic has made an attack or other “aggressive” act without provocation, it is most likely an illusion, created by one of several factors. The autistic may have been unable to communicate a problem verbally, and so tried physically to “solve” the problem or draw others' attention to it. He may have responded to a problem with passivity, successfully containing a reaction at first only to have stress build up until he had a visible break-down. He may be unable to communicate the reason for his actions, or not even try because he thinks others already know. Finally (I suspect most often), he may have been driven to an inappropriate action by a group of bullies, and said as much, but been ignored because the sadistic sociopaths who forced him to act inappropriately lied to clear each other and get him punished for trying to fight back or escape.

Retardation?

One misconception which has been defeated, in professional sources and for the mainstream media, is the idea that 75-80% of autistics have retardation. However, it is likely still to be encountered in some “popular” sources, particularly those which claim autism as a form of vaccine injury. The rebuttal has been that, while several old studies in which autistics were tested for IQ did produce such results, further support came mostly from uncritical repetition rather than replication of results, and that the results were unreliable due to autistic problems with communication. I, personally, rejected this hoary statistic as soon as I saw it mentioned, based on an event I have not seen mentioned by anyone else: Back in 1918, the now-infamous Yerkes-army study gave standard IQ testing to over a million servicemen, including blacks who couldn't read and recent immigrants who spoke little or no English. The “results” for immigrants and blacks were as bad or even worse than those of autistics. Thus, the apparent “retardation” rate among autistics could and should have been recognized immediately as what would be expected from any group of subjects with a limited ability to communicate.

Lack of empathy?

Another myth that there has been much progress toward overcoming is autistics lack “empathy” for others (begging the question what the hell is wrong with “normal” kids who target the autistic for abuse). Tests have consistently shown a real problem: Autistics fall behind others in applying “theory of mind”, as measured most directly in “hidden object” tests. In the setup for the test, two children are shown an object being hidden, and then only one is shown it being moved. The test itself consists of asking the one who knows the present location of the object where the other person will look for it. Children with sufficiently developed “theory of mind” will point to the original location, while those without it will point to the current one. Autistic children do the latter well after same-age “neurotypical” peers begin to do the former. The valid conclusion from this is that autistics tend to assume that others share their own knowledge, thoughts and feelings. But many over the years have dubiously defined the autistics' difficulties as a lack of theory of mind, and drawn the wholly spurious conclusion that they have trouble recognizing that others have feelings at all. On the question (and definition) of “theory of mind”, it would be better to say that it is impaired rather than absent in the autistic: Autistics are clearly capable of recognizing other people as thinking and emotional beings, rather than mechanical objects. The handicap is that when they try to envision the thoughts and feelings of others, they have trouble coming up with anything but a repetition of their own thoughts and feelings. Now, within the framework of this assumption, an autistic may go to great lengths to accommodate others' feelings, especially by *doing for them what he would want himself* in the same situation. But, of course, it is doubtful whether others will appreciate their actions or recognize their good intentions.

To illustrate the subtleties of the problem, I will give an experience from my adolescence: From childhood onward, I have found insects fascinating and even beautiful. I especially enjoyed finding the shed exoskeletons of cicadas, left intact on tree trunks. They reminded me of crystal sculptures, and I would always stop for a look when I found one. Once, I found a number of molts while exploring the woods during a church retreat, and while I was examining one of them, a girl passed by and asked what I was looking at. I just told her to come and look. From what I remember, I was excited about sharing an interesting and beautiful sight with someone else. She took one look, screamed and left. (I don't remember if she ran.) This took me completely by surprise, and left me disappointed and sad. But I suppose she just thought of me as some boy who set her up for a “gross-out”.

Unable to “read” body language?

This final myth is one that, to my knowledge, is taken for granted among specialists. Indeed, I do not consider it false, exactly. I think saying autistics don't register body language is like saying a car with no steering wheel handles poorly on corners. What's said is true, technically, but it doesn't get to the root of the problem. In my own experience, I accepted this fully as applying to myself, and when it came to social interactions, it was entirely true. But, relatively recently, I have realized that I had set something of a double standard for myself. I am extremely visually oriented, as seems typical for autistics, and I certainly can follow body language outside of social situations. If it is an animal in a zoo or a TV nature program, a creature in a science fiction movie, or a character in a cartoon, movement, posture and facial expression are not just things I follow but things I find intensely interesting. As I reflected on this, I had to ask myself why I had not been applying the same skills to other people in real life social situations. The only answer I could come up with was that when I talked to people, I would usually look away from them, and I recognized that as nothing more or less than failure to make eye contact (another pervasive autistic trait). I have heard different theories about why autistics don't make eye contact. For myself, I have been able to arrive at a very simple answer: Not looking at someone makes it easier for me to follow what he or she is saying. Thus, it is at least my personal experience that I do not have trouble with “body language”; rather, I have so much trouble

with verbal communication that it is hard to do anything else at the same time.

The well-known failure of “facilitated communication” inadvertently provides strong evidence that autistics may have average, good or even exceptional grasp of body language. Facilitated communication appeared to give the lowest-functioning autistics the ability to communicate despite an inability to speak. Critical cross examination showed that autistic children were reacting to “cues” from the “facilitators”, very much like the historic case of “Clever Hans”, a horse that appeared able to do math problems until someone blindfolded it. The verdict on “Clever Hans” is that, while the horse's counting was illusory, the horse displayed impressive genuine intelligence through its ability to “read” human body language. Facilitated communication offers a similarly dramatic demonstration that even the lowest-functioning autistics are capable of recognizing nuances in body language.

“Anti-social”?

A final perception I feel needs to be called into question is that autistics are solitary. I relate the problem with this to a fine distinction in animal behavior. In the strictest sense, “social” animals are those that not only gather in a group but work together for specific purposes. By this definition, a pack of wolves is social in a way that a herd of elk is not. I have suggested the term “gregarious” for animals that gather in large numbers without practicing higher social behavior. Similarly, the description of “solitary” best applies to animals that are not just alone most of the time, but actively avoid each other. (These distinctions inspired a joke in my description of the fictional species *Archididelphis invicta*: The “gregarious” ones kill you if they don't like you, while the solitary ones kill you if you get near them.) I suspect that the “natural” tendency of autistics is toward my definition of gregariousness: an ability to tolerate the physical presence of others, despite a lack of interest in activities as a group. Where autistic people instead avoid even being near others, I would predict that it is because others are doing things that stress them or (as in my experience) intentionally abusing the autistic.

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