4 Autism and the 'double empathy problem'

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Introduction

Since the term autism first entered common clinical usage, the notion that autistic people were somehow deficient in their social interaction and communication has been central to how it has been conceptualised and diagnosed, those so diagnosed thus being commonly represented as radically different from non-autistic people.[1] From the 'machine-like' metaphor adopted by Hans Asperger (Milton 2014), through the 'empty shell' of Bruno Bettelheim (1967), to the 'triad of impairments' as outlined by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould (1979), one can see an emphasis on defining autism in terms of a lack of social reciprocity. Deficits in social interaction, social communication, and – according to some – 'social imagination' have thus become an embedded framework in diagnostic criteria and tools for distinguishing autistic people from subjects with normative development. Perhaps the most dominant cognitive theory that has attempted to explain these issues has been that of a deficit in 'theory of mind' and variations thereof such as 'empathising-systemising' theory and the theory of the 'extreme male brain' (Baron-Cohen 2003). Theory of mind refers to the ability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others, in order to comprehend and predict their behaviour. For Baron-Cohen (2003) autistic people show a lack of theory of mind or 'cognitive empathy' (the ability to infer mental states and predict the behaviour of others) while being able to feel 'affective empathy' (emotional reciprocity) and emotional sympathy when made aware of the situation and context. Baron-Cohen (2003) also theorises that whilst autistic people may have deficits in 'empathising', they can have strengths in what is referred to as 'systemising' – the ability to identify the rules and patterns that govern a system in order to predict how that system or network will behave. This difference is said to be due to elevated levels of foetal testosterone in early development and postulated as a reason for higher diagnostic rates among males.

In more recent years, we have seen a growing number of criticisms of conceptualising autism as a social/empathic deficit (Milton 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Yergeau 2013; Gernsbacher and Yergeau 2019; Nicolaidis et al.

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2018). The deficit model of autistic social interaction fails to acknowledge relationality and how social reality is constantly reconstructed and contested by social agents, often representing the autistic person as lacking agency, of being somehow outside of society and processes of socialisation, and therefore outside of 'normalised' concepts of empathy. This notion of autistic people as being in deficit is reinforced by a variety of theories and accompanying narratives in relation to their sociality and interaction, whereby autistic people are framed as lacking a theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), lacking in empathy (Baron-Cohen et al. 2002) and being 'mindblind' (Baron-Cohen 1995). Particularly of note are the assertions that a theory of mind is a 'quintessential aspect of being human' (Baron-Cohen 2000, p. 3) and that autistic people are unable to empathise (Baron-Cohen et al. 2002). Assumptions surrounding what constitutes 'empathising' and 'systemising', and their association with specific genders and gender roles (Sample 2013), has led to critique and debate on the usefulness of this concept when applied to autistic people. Empathising in relation to autistic people has been defined as 'having an appropriate emotional reaction to another person's thoughts and feelings' (Baron-Cohen 2009). Questions remain as to who defines an 'appropriate' emotional response. Although some may link empathising with affective empathy (Davis 1994), social norms may contribute to what may be considered 'appropriate' in terms of the appropriateness of an emotional response. Discussions of 'appropriateness of emotional response' run the risk of radically othering social actors from different lifeworlds, through situating the interactional onto the individual – in this case, the autistic individual who sits at a disempowered position (Milton 2016).

Systemising has been described as the drive to analyse or construct systems – any kind of system (Baron-Cohen 2009). Although this is an attempt to give a more 'strengths-based approach' to autistic cognition, with the understanding that autistic people may spot patterns or collect information on certain topics, systemising when paired with a deficit in empathising as a dichotomy, moves away from a 'strengths-based approach'. Through pairing such different tasks and processing together as a dichotomy, this produces an appearance of a polarised dichotomy between empathising and 'systemising'. Furthermore, associations of lacking empathy and increased systemising have resulted in theorising of an 'Extreme Male Brain' (EMB) (Baron-Cohen 2002). This theory has been labelled as essentialist and reductionist (Ridley 2019), with critique of a 'gendered schema' (Krahn and Fenton 2012), disempowering autistic people through reducing autistic brains to that of 'extreme male brains'.

Whilst we agree that it is true that autistic people, particularly when young, can struggle to process and understand the 'quick-fire' social interactions which many non-autistic people take for granted, we want to ask the following questions. To what extent do such interactions require empathy? What do we mean when we talk of empathy? Where does the ability to predict the thoughts and actions of others reside? To what extent do

non-autistic people acquire a 'theory of autistic mind'? How do such ways of viewing autism produce oversimplified dehumanising and stigmatising narratives? Drawing upon both personal experience of being autistic and a parent to an autistic child, as well as theory and relevant interdisciplinary research, this chapter will explore these questions, arguing that such a way of framing autism and empathy is deeply problematic. The theory of the 'double empathy problem' and relevant related research will be described, which suggests that rather than a deficit solely located in the mind of the autistic person, during empathetic engagements breakdowns in reciprocity and mutual understanding can occur, especially between people of very differing dispositions.

So what exactly is empathy, anyway?

Definitions of empathy relate to a breadth of cognitive and subjective states, often as Baron-Cohen (2003) indicates, split into 'cognitive' and 'affective' empathy. In contrast to psychopathy and narcissism, which are often characterised as resulting from deficits in affective empathy, autism (alongside bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder) have been linked to a deficit in cognitive empathy. More recently, it has been suggested that autistic people may struggle with 'alexithymia', which indicates an impairment in understanding, processing, and describing one's own emotions, potentially affecting on one's ability to recognise or mirror those of other people (Cook et al. 2013).

Whilst much theorising of empathy resides within the discipline of psychology, which often leaves the social context of empathy unaccounted for, it is worth taking a broader view of the enactment of empathy (or not) within social contexts. Whilst it is true that people tend to show affective empathic reactions to people they love and care about deeply, this often becomes less the case the further away from such attachments a person may have with others. The work of Tajfel et al. (1979), for example, shows how empathic reactions were heightened toward those considered part of one's own social 'in-group' and lowered in interactions with people perceived as members of an 'out-group'. From this broader social perspective, one may wish to question perhaps that the framing of autism as a lack of (cognitive) empathy may indeed itself be symptomatic of a lack of empathy (both cognitive and affective) toward autistic people and their way of being (or form of life: Chapman 2019). If the theory of an autistic deficit were true, then it would follow than non-autistic people would not struggle to empathise and understand autistic behaviour, as they would not hold such a deficit. And yet, there are numerous conferences, books, and articles produced every year attempting to help explain the 'enigma' (Frith 2003) of autism. One may then legitimately ask if this framing of autism as an enigma is revealing of some sort of empathetic deficit on the part of non-autistic people toward autistic people. When considering affective empathy, then, one may wish to

view it on a scale that also includes apathy and antipathy toward the experiences of others, and what Cameron (2012) described as 'dyspathy' (the lack of employing empathy toward others). One might even suggest that the whole notion of emotional empathy is somewhat of a convenient illusion (Milton 2012a) constructed so that we feel less alone and isolated in our existential angst. In a psychotherapeutic setting, Holland (this volume) identifies the limitations and dynamical ecologies of empathy (i.e., what once was an empathic gesture may not be recalled as such later) and supports the view that rather than being straightforward – even among non-autistic people – empathy is a fraught process, subject to emotional fluctuations and incomprehension.

The disposition of an outsider

Damian

I was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum in 2009 at the age of 36. This was following my son's diagnosis some years earlier at the age of 2. Like many others of my generation or older, the broader autism 'spectrum' as a concept had not been applied to me until well into adulthood. When I was younger, there had been numerous psychiatric professionals who had their own pet theories as to what was 'wrong with Damian' (Milton 2013), but autism was not a conceptual framework I had to work with until I was introduced to it in relation to my son. From as far back as I remember, I have felt as something of a social outsider, struggling to navigate the school environment and peer groups, and then relationships and workplaces in later life. In my young adulthood, I had passively rebelled and 'dropped out' to the fringes of social life and was soon considered 'long-term unemployed' with few prospects. It was during this time that I discovered the philosophical work of Robert Pirsig (1974, 1991) and began my own explorations into the 'qualia' of lived experience. It was perhaps here that such theorising and reflection on my own experiences as a misunderstood outsider were where the foundations of what was to later be understood the concept of the 'double empathy problem' were first laid out for me. My own experiences seemed to be more locked into the 'dynamic quality' of the sensory world that Pirsig referred to than those of others. The feeling of sharing of 'qualia' reported on by others was but a rarity to me.

By the mid-1990s, I had begun to delve into the disciplines of sociology and philosophy, and had begun my second attempt at a degree course. It was here that I came across the work of Thomas Nagel and in particular the article: 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel 1974). For me, it was of course impossible to have any idea what it was like to be another person, let alone a bat. I also read the seminal works of Erving Goffman (1956, 1963), Howard Becker (1963), Harold Garfinkel (1967), and others who were to become central figures in my own theoretical work for years to come. By

the late 1990s, I had been influenced by the work of disability scholars and radical psychiatrists, and begun to theorise about how people were uniquely constructed materially, socially, and discursively, yet within power relationships whereby some dispositions were deemed pathological disorders and others within the normative range:

> Extremes of any combination come to be seen as 'psychiatric deviance'. In the argument presented here, where disorder begins is entirely down to social convention, and where one decides to draw the line across the spectrum [spectrum referring to the 'human spectrum of dispositional diversity'].
>
> (Milton 1999, cited in Milton 2017, p. 32)

At this time, I spoke of a 'human spectrum of dispositional diversity', whilst unaware of the notion of an 'autism spectrum' or that the Australian sociologist Judy Singer had coined the term 'neurodiversity' (Singer 2017). For me, this dispositional diversity was not fixed or static, nor completely fluid, but changeable nonetheless, albeit for each person within certain somatic affordances and bodily limitations, with attributions of a disordered disposition being the somewhat arbitrary decisions of those with power in society to shape how less powerful others are perceived. When my son and then I were diagnosed as autistic in the first decade of the 2000s and I came across the dominant theories for explaining autism, it was inevitable that I would find the theory of mind deficit hypothesis to be partial at best.

Krysia

I was diagnosed as autistic at the age of 3 in 1995, and a second time at the age of 13 in 2005. Two main things have followed me throughout my life as an autistic person: the persistent feeling of being an outsider, which led to a PhD exploring belonging for autistic people, and particularly 'outsiderness' within communication and salience. I was always 'getting the wrong end of the stick' or being told I am 'misinterpreting things', placing me into the position of the deficited individual, however hard I tried. Even studying two foreign languages left me as a 'perennial outsider', with my autistic nature being misunderstood by both the French university system and my former German employers. The narratives I had been fed, and those my parents had been fed, were those framing autistic people as 'lacking theory of mind', and not considering the bidirectional nature of communication. Socially situating me as the 'outsider', paired with narratives of 'lacking a theory of mind', further ostracised me from having my own agency and built the idea that I should perceive myself as having less value than others.

Theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), as previously stated, frames autistic people as 'lacking a theory of mind'. Theory of mind in the case of the argument of Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) assumes a 'sameness' in theory

of mind of interlocutors, with the theory of mind being used in social and discursive situations. A positioning of a lack of theory of mind onto one individual when there is a breakdown in reciprocity, notably of the theory of mind in this case, creates otherness through the lack of a 'sameness', like in Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Turner (1989). The deficit framing of theory of mind in autistic people creates the illusion of empathy being built on having a theory of mind, and therefore an assumption of 'sameness' between social agents. Those who fall outside the parameters of this sameness – or those who fall at the extremes of dispositional diversity (Milton 1999, cited in Milton 2017, p. 32) – may be considered as socially deviant (Goffman 1963), with the 'flaw' of a lack of empathy being likely to be socially stigmatised. Othering autistic people not only stigmatises them, but it also casts them as 'non-moral agents'. In addition, framing empathy as a construct with moral implications has the consequence of making autistic people as the 'immoral other': stigmatised and deviant on account of perceived moral failings. The implications of presenting autistic people in this manner are numerous, leading to ethical quandaries regarding interventions done to autistic people (e.g., in reference to social skills training: Bambara et al. 2021; and in response Keates 2022) and questions on the political nature of being autistic in society and social groups (e.g., Waldock 2021).

The double empathy problem – a growing evidence base

The original published definition of the double empathy problem is as follows:

> 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'.
> (Milton 2012a, p. 884)

Due to differing qualia of experience, social lifeworlds, dispositional viewpoints and discursive repertoires, interactions between autistic and non-autistic people are vulnerable to breaches in mutual understanding, framed as a 'double problem' as both parties in the interaction will experience a sense of disjuncture, not simply a deficit in the autistic person's mind. Whilst this experience may be novel for many non-autistic people, it is commonplace for autistic people. Such a framing would also suggest a greater likelihood of feelings of empathy between autistic people with one another and with those they have close relationships with, yet perhaps over differing elements of their lives.

Whilst the double empathy problem was initially proposed based upon personal introspection and qualitative accounts (Milton 2017), we have seen

in recent years a growing body of experimental research that is supportive of the double empathy problem theory (Milton et al. 2020). Sheppard et al. (2016) researched how well non-autistic people could interpret the mental states of autistic people within naturalistic settings. They found that non-autistic people were less able to guess an event that a person being recorded was responding to if they were autistic, apart from when the reactions were to a joke. Edey et al. (2016) asked participants to use two triangles to depict mental states within an interaction such as 'mocking'. Non-autistic participants were better able to decipher the mental states being depicted of animations that had been created by other non-autistic people compared to those created by autistic participants.

There are physiological similarities between non-autistic and autistic dyads found by Stevanovic et al. (2019) whereby both neurotypes require dominance within a social exchange to experience 'calm' (autonomic nervous system). Stevanovic and colleagues suggest that it is the non-autistic interlocutor that creates the 'trouble' within the cross-neurotype dyads, which supports the theory of cross-neurotype differential socialisation. Furthermore, Stevanovic and colleagues suggest that autistic people have increased affective empathy, due to the non-autistic sample providing extensive emotionally relevant information leading to 'socio-emotional overflow'.

In a study looking at first impressions, Stagg et al. (2014) found that non-autistic people rated autistic children as less expressive and attractive than non-autistic children based on short recordings of them. Sasson et al. (2017) found that non-autistic people rated autistic adults and children less favourably than non-autistic people in a range of measures and a reduced rating for the intention to interact with them. This was replicated by Alkhaldi et al. (2019) and Scheerer et al. (2022), extending the findings across multiple situations. Sasson and Morrison (2019) also found, however, that by providing information to participants regarding the diagnosis of autism, autistic people were rated more favourably. Of course, such knowledge and shift in attitudes may not be mirrored in people's actions in everyday life. Of interest is that a favourable first impression of autistic people may exist when text-based and not through video (Cage and Burton 2019).

Utilising the same recordings from Sasson et al. (2017) and Sasson and Morrison (2019), Sasson et al. (2018) investigated metaperceptions between autistic and non-autistic people. Participants were asked how they thought others would perceive them, and this was compared to how observers did on a range of personality traits. In this study, autistic people overestimated how positively they would be seen by others. Whilst this study looked into how people thought they would be perceived by others in general, Usher et al. (2018) studied the perceptions of dyads of young people where one of the pairing was autistic and one not who engaged in a five-minute conversation. In this study, autistic participants were more accurate than non-autistic people at judging whether the other liked them or not.

In a study by Heasman and Gillespie (2018), Interpersonal Perception Methodology was utilised to examine the perceptions and misperceptions of dyads made up of autistic people and their family members. Both autistic people and their family members predicted that the other would rate them differently than they would themselves on a range of traits. Both groups were, however, fairly accurate in estimating the perceptions of each other. When asked for reasons for misunderstandings between them, however, family members tended to use a narratives of impairment in autistic understanding of the social world, whilst autistic participants reflected on both themselves and their family members as potential causes of misunderstandings. Such evidence suggests that autistic people do not have a deficit in metaperception and theory of mind at a fundamental level, and such framings could be adding to the misperceptions of others, including those in a close relationship to the autistic person.

Gernsbacher et al. (2017) suggest that there is a disjuncture in how autistic and non-autistic people view themselves in relation to one another, in that autistic people report fewer 'autistic traits' when the reference for questions is the perception of other autistic people. Heasman and Gillespie (2019a) studied 30 interactions between autistic adults playing video games that focused upon intersubjectivity and shared understanding. The findings from this research suggested a particular kind of social coordination that occurred between the autistic participants, where there was a tendency to give detailed descriptions and have a low expectation for a tight coordination of interaction. In another study by Heasman and Gillespie (2019b), a video game scenario was used to test metaperception whereby non-autistic participants were led to believe they were interacting with another player online to navigate a maze, whilst they were actually interacting with an AI programme. The AI was given differing diagnostic statuses: autistic, dyslexic, or none. When the AI was thought to be autistic, the AI was viewed as more intelligent but less helpful. Participants also believed that they were being more helpful but without any behavioural evidence to suggest that this was so. These studies suggest that stereotyped views of autistic people are likely to contribute to the double empathy problem, and that there may also be differences between people's perceptions of being helpful and actually being so to others.

In recent research by Crompton et al. (2020), the transfer of information between people were studied across a diffusion chain of eight people in total, similar to a game of 'telephone'. When there were only autistic participants or only non-autistic participants, there was equally good transfer of information. However, when there was a mixed diffusion chain of autistic and non-autistic people, there was a much greater reduction in information successfully passed on.

Further research reflects the 'double empathy problem' resulting in social breakdowns within a given group. The dominant form of sociality could

be suggested to be based on social group identification and dominated by non-autistic people. The basis of autistic socialisation is interest-based (Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist 2019). The mismatch of social form and enacting the necessary mode (interest-led versus social alignment) may hinder the flow of the group and ultimately result in social exclusion. The analysis of bloggers' posts indicate a 'double empathy problem' through the disparity of metaperception and the consequential impact (Welch et al. 2022). There are real-life applications of the double empathy problem across settings and dimensions, such as in the criminal justice system (Holloway et al. 2020), education (Hummerstone and Parsons 2021), employment and job interviews (Maras et al. 2021; Remington and Pellicano 2019), and even the daily dissonance of the autistic lived experience (e.g., impression management: Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Cook et al. 2021; Schneid and Raz 2020; understanding the use of gaming: Pavlopoulou et al. 2022) that may include 'thwarted belonging' and lead to suicidality (Cassidy et al. 2018; Pelton et al. 2020), and breakdowns in feelings of social inclusion and belonging between autistic and non-autistic individuals (Waldock et al. 2021). In a study by Chen et al. (2021), natural peer interactions among six autistic and six non-autistic young people were observed over a five-month period to examine peer preferences and real-world social interactions. The findings showed that the young people preferred within neurotype interactions and that such interactions were more reciprocal and relational (rather than instrumental), such as sharing thoughts and experiences.

The evidence is thus building to suggest that the theory of mind deficit theory of autism is indeed 'partial at best' with growing support for the double empathy problem. If autism is not a deficit in social understanding, then to what does the term autism refer? Atherton et al. (2019) have begun identifying an autistic theory of mind, proffering the desire for transparency (honesty), developed sense of humour necessitated by the social requirement to understand non-autistic sensibilities, use of sensory stories in creativity, and anthropomorphising non-human entities. Alongside the diagnostic criteria for social interaction and communication is what is often called 'repetitive behaviours and interests', also referred to (in all of the authors' opinion, incorrectly) as a deficit in 'social imagination'. Wing (1988) states that 'social imagination' deficits present as an inability to authentically understand other people's actions, which may be apparent in an autistic person's pretend play. Non-autistic people would have begun developing 'imaginative' social capabilities through copying their parents' physical expressions (i.e., face) at age 2 or 3. To us, it is such differences in embodied cognition and sociality which are key to understanding autism and thus also in understanding the double empathy problem. The socially situated nature of breakdowns in reciprocity, as suggested by the double empathy problem, and supported by the growing evidence outlined previously in this section, tentatively illustrates other factors which may be important in 'cross-neurotype' communication. The pervasiveness of discrimination and

exclusion and breakdowns in communicative reciprocity demonstrate the impact of the double empathy problem when enacted on a societal level, and breakdowns in communicative reciprocity on an interpersonal level. However, with the multitude of factors involved in communication, finding reconciliation is not a simple task.

The theory that perhaps has been dominant in terms of trying to explain the repetitive behaviours and interests observed in autistic people has been that of a deficit in 'executive functioning', referring to the ability to process new information and to remember and retrieve such information to use to solve problems and plan ahead. Whilst autistic people may show difficulties in some of these areas, an impairment in all of them in all contexts is more suspect. There is no doubt that the perceptual processing of new information is different, perhaps heightened or less filtered than for non-autistic people. Utilising relevant information from previous experience in the here and now may also prove difficult at times. Yet what of so-called autistic 'special interests', where such difficulties may be less prevalent or reduced? Another theory looking at such autistic differences is that of 'monotropism' or an interest model of autism (Murray 1992; Murray et al. 2005; Lawson 2010; Murray 2018). In this theory, attention is seen as a scarce resource whereby it is our interests that help to direct it with differing interests being salient at differing times. To a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any one time, and they attract more processing resources, making it more difficult to engage one's attention outside of one's current focus. Disruptions to any such tunnelling allegedly lead to feelings of discombobulation, with mismatches in salience (Milton 2017) affecting breakdowns in mutual understanding. Similarly, Bolis et al. (2017) drew upon a combination of socio-cultural theories and Bayesian accounts to argue that consideration of psychiatric and neurological differences need to move beyond individualistic accounts and need to instead be considered as a dynamic interpersonal mismatch, utilising autism as a case example. This theory is thus for us completely in unison with that of the double empathy problem. Ai et al. (2022) also used Bayesian computational modelling to investigate impression management by autistic and non-autistic people. They suggest that autistic people face distinct computational challenges, yet these are inherently socially situated and transactional, and can also take a toll on autistic people in terms of social masking.

Empathy, morality, and power

Kennet (2002) suggested that autistic people may lack moral competence (i.e., those compelled to action by reason are defined as conscious moral agents), even with those capable of passing false-belief tests and demonstrating theory of mind, through more subtle deficits in social understanding. Such speculation regarding autistic people and their moral agency further alienates and disempower autistic ways of being and subjective

introspective insights, including the production of knowledge that autistic people have about themselves (Milton and Bracher 2013; Milton 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017), yet unfortunately is not uncommon that philosophical texts on this subject continue to perpetuate such ideas (see for instance, Bollard 2013).

The idea that moral agency is predicated on a symmetry between self and other and the ability to assume the other's point of view is a common belief (Benhabib 1991), yet was criticised by the feminist theorist Iris Marion Young (1997). In Young's theorising, it is neither possible nor desirable to possess a full understanding of the other (much as was argued previously in relation to the philosophy of Thomas Nagel) and instead suggests an approach highlighting 'asymmetrical reciprocity'. Young argues that 'equal treatment' of individual people will not override group-based social oppressions. Due to this inability to fully 'empathise' with the perspective of another, Young (1997) advocates for a position of humility and 'wonder' in interactions with others. In interactions with autistic people, we (authors DM and KW) would not be the only autistic people to be in full agreement with such a theoretical position and moral outlook. Combining the theorising of Young (1997) alongside the double empathy problem, questions are raised about to what degree moral agency' is gained through 'sameness' and 'symmetry' in interactions, with questions of power paramount.

Milton (2016) suggests that the power relationships that can form between autistic people and psych-professionals who may see their 'patients' as lacking in socialisation, empathy, moral competency, and even full humanity can produce forms of psycho-emotional disablement, constraining not only what people can do but also what they can be and become. In such interactions, one's own interpretations of oneself can be undermined by the 'expert knowledge' being applied to them, a case of 'psychsplaining'. Indeed, those questioning the moral competencies of autistic people may wish to question their own.

Another dimension to add in relation to power is that of intersectionality and how this intersects with power relationships between autistic people and other social agents in their milieu. As seen in other chapters in this edition, for example Özyürek (this volume) and Wanner and Pavlenko (this volume), mismatches in understanding also occur outside of the Anglophone environment, and as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argues, some social characteristics or identities can compound. As Waldock and Keates (2022) outline, this can further exacerbate disparities in interactions and lead to further psycho-emotional disablement and disempowerment.

Implications for working with autistic people

Another significant influence on the theory of the double empathy problem has been the philosophy of George Herbert Mead (1934) and his distinction between the 'me' and the 'I'. According to Mead, the 'me' is learnt through

interactions in the social environment, comprised of the attitudes of others once internalised. The 'I', on the other hand. is a creative response to such attitudes and holds potential for social change. For Mead (1934), this relationship constitutes selfhood yet such influences can enter into a tension between selfhood or identity, and situated lifeworlds. When there are disparities between how one sees oneself and the views of others, this can lead to a potential crises in identity formation (Erikson 1968) and social stigma (Goffman 1963), affecting experiences of inclusion, belonging, and group membership amongst others and in group settings (Waldock et al. 2021), with potential resulting impacts on mental health. Therefore, the double empathy problem can affect very negatively on those who have limited power within social groups and society, such as a marginalised minority – notably, in this case, autistic people. In order to address such issues, it is therefore a requirement to examine not only micro-scale social interactions, but also the wider social and systemic contexts within which these interactions occur; for example, a young autistic person seeking an arts career that is radically othered by social agents, or the networking requirement within the wider cultural or creative industries (Buckley et al. 2021).

The implications of the double empathy problem for those supporting autistic people are widespread, and this has been shown in research looking at experiences of accessing health care generally (Doherty et al. 2022) and mental health care specifically (Mitchell et al. 2021). Mitchell et al. (2021) lend further support to the argument presented by Milton (2017) that the misperceptions and subsequent actions of the non-autistic majority can affect the self-impressions, identity, and mental health of autistic people. In their investigations of the nature of masking and impression management influenced by theory on the double empathy problem, Ai et al. (2022) highlight the need to change current practice models defined by an ethos of normative social skills building and the targeting of societal attitudes to reduce stigma.

In recent years, the concept of the double empathy problem has been incorporated into numerous established autism training programmes and support strategies. Strategies that target the social environment and actions of those around the autistic person have the potential to decrease the potential negative impact of the double empathy problem on autistic individuals. One example is the ATLASS training programme developed by Studio3 based within the 'low arousal approach' (first developed by McDonnell et al. 1994). According to McDonnell (2010), this approach contains four main elements: decreasing demands made of service users in order to reduce potential conflict, avoiding potential 'triggers' of unwanted stress, avoiding aggressive non-verbal behaviour by staff, and challenging staff beliefs about the 'management of challenging behaviour'. These elements clearly indicate the social situatedness of social interactions and the responsibility of all involved. The theory of the double empathy problem links well with such an approach. Another approach which has integrated the double empathy

problem is that of the Synergy programme developed by AT-Autism. This programme takes a broad view of building collaborative communities of practice, primarily within educational environments.

Amongst the autistic population, the co-occurrence of a range neurological conditions is often found, among which a significant minority also have learning disabilities. Whilst we would reject simplistic characterisations of mental functioning, there are often debates about the relevance of conceptualisations of autism and support strategies for those with significant learning disabilities particularly. Yet, if one follows the logic of the double empathy problem, such issues of mutual misunderstanding are only likely to increase in social interactions with those with limited verbal ability. Support strategies for autistic people with learning disabilities often strive for increased social integration and can be highly normative and looking to 'remediate' from a deficit-model perspective. Increasingly however, there have been strategies developed which concentrate more on rapport building and mutually fulfilling relationships, such as Intensive Interaction (Caldwell 2013) and parent-mediated communication-focused treatment (PACT) (Green et al. 2010). Such approaches recognise the significance of relationality as well as the perpetual making and remaking of social reality through social agents, acknowledging that the autistic person is an active agent who is not outside of society and its influence.

Future directions

Whilst the evidence base for the double empathy problem is exponentially increasing, such research will improve understanding of the processes through which the problem arises, as well as potential support strategies to mitigate against its negative impacts. Social disjunctures have a great impact on quality of life, and work regarding social stigma and mental health can hopefully be informed by interactive and socially situated conceptualisation of the issues. Another area to explore further would be the role of culture or differing means of communication on amplifying or reducing the impact of the double empathy problem. This theorising also has practical relevance in a host of social situations, importantly (as one example) regarding the experiences autistic people have of employment practices. One only needs to think of the job interview scenario to see how disabling such social misunderstandings and judgements might be. The theory may also be able to illuminate understanding of autistic people who for one reason or another may need to engage with the criminal justice system. There is also the risk of potential harm and abuse occurring within the context of mutual misunderstandings within intimate relationships (Ridout and Hayward 2019).

Furthermore, the double empathy problem has implications for the way in which research regarding autism is carried out. Misunderstandings can easily occur between a researcher and a research participant (Milton

2014), and need to be carefully considered and mitigated against before any research takes place. Pellicano et al. (2014), for example, reported the existence of a mismatch between autistic (and family member) priorities for research and what kinds of research tends to be funded, wanting more of a practical focus on how to make an impact on everyday life and wellbeing. It is of great importance, therefore, for greater engagement of autistic people with the research process from topic selection to design and interpretation of findings (Milton and Bracher 2013; Milton 2014; Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019; Waldock and Keates 2022), thus calling for a more participatory process. Ultimately, the concept of the double empathy problem challenges the foundations of framing autism as a 'social deficit' located in the individual autistic person, and forcefully brings forth its broader social and interactional nature.

Note

1 In keeping with other autistic self-advocates, this chapter will refer to 'autistic people' rather than 'people with autism'. Two of the three authors are autistic (DM and KW), and asserting our identity and positionality is key to the work we present.

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