

## Abstract

Professional discourse plays an important role in shaping our understandings of autism. However, the powerful position of professional discourse has been challenged by some people with autism. This paper seeks to present research conducted that employed the use of internet technologies in investigating representations of autism. Through this work frequent postings were made to online discussion lists by people with autism which present sophisticated challenges to expert knowledge bases. One way of presenting this challenge was through the creation of 'NT Syndrome'. In discussing NT syndrome an inverted construction of diagnosis is drawn upon, positioning autism as a *difference* rather than a *deficit*. Through such discussions complex reflections are posed concerning the position of people with autism in relation to non-autistic/neurologically typical (NT) individuals, with autism often portrayed more positively than NT in light of this.

## Introduction

Since its 'discovery' by Kanner in 1943 and Asperger in 1944 autism has become a highly researched area, receiving detailed scrutiny by professionals and academics alike. In this time several key ideas have become prominent in shaping our understanding of autism e.g. The triad of impairments (Wing 1997) and the theory of mind hypothesis (see for example Tager-Flusberg 1999; Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith 1985). All of these understandings and explanations of autism have in common a particular view of the autistic individual, one that in some way constructs the individual as 'abnormal' on some measurement.

In this poster we seek to present an alternative construction of autism to this, one that challenges the positioning of people with autism by drawing on understandings of autism that invert dominant constructions of autism and present a syndrome of 'NT', or non-autistic as the deficit. Thus, this poster seeks to position discussions of autism not in terms of neurological deficiency, but in terms of neurodiversity and difference.

The terminology used throughout the poster draws on writings of people with autism who have used the term 'AS' to refer to the autism spectrum, which includes people with both a diagnosis of autism and Asperger's syndrome. The terminology that we have used to refer to the non-autistic population has also taken the lead from the writings of people with autism, and such a population is referred to as 'neurologically typical' or 'NT'. The use of NT is now commonplace within the autism community online, and is a term widely recognised by people with autism, parents and some professionals working within the field of autism.

## Method

The study is a textual analysis of contributions to online discussion lists by people with autism and a brief reflection on some website material which challenges the superiority of NT traits. In our analysis we have reproduced a number of the quotes in order to highlight particular themes. Authors of the contributions to the discussion lists have been given pseudonyms.

## Analysis

Two themes have been prioritised as being important in the analysis and are detailed here.

### 'NT strangeness'

This theme was evident in exchanges on several online asynchronous discussion groups whose primary contributors were people with autism. Several reflections were made on NT characteristics and these were frequently presented as 'NT strangeness'. Such highlighted 'strange' behaviour serves to question the dominant and elevated position of NT traits within a society. For example:

Humans, even NTs, possess the linguistic ability to express concepts, ideas, and emotions verbally with clarity, but the NT brain seems incapable of actually doing so. They rely heavily on the animalistic means of body language. It's primitive and unnecessary, I think. Further, NTs can't seem to express thoughts completely. They use an irritating form of verbal shorthand, where significant gaps are left to be filled by the listener. It's absurd!  
Archie.

In addition to serving the purpose of highlighting the strange behaviour of NTs, the quote also questions some common assumptions surrounding traits of AS. Here the much researched 'impairments in social interaction' commonly associated with people with autism are positioned as being a consequence of the illogical behaviour of NTs.

### NT syndrome and an inverted construction of diagnosis

The dominant position of NTs is further questioned through commentaries that implicitly highlight autistic traits as being superior to NT ways. For example:

A good number of them also immerse themselves in sports, such as watching people kick a durable rubber sphere around a green grass field towards one of the two 'goal-posts'. They seem to delight in such passive participation even though this does not contribute to their intellectual ability that they can use in other areas.  
Edward.

Further reflections on the 'primitive' ways of NTs are presented when commenting on NT social hierarchies. For example:

My most amazing discovery lies with the fact that NTs often execute frequent queries (i.e. gossip) over their social network systems that try to discover more data about other nodes and networks... Like the CIA, they keep a huge mental database and inventory of who does what, who goes where, and everything you can think about a person's relationships with another... Carrying the CIA analogy further, they often have a rather good ability in providing misinformation, especially if such misinformation can please others. Apparently, some of them do this under perceived duress that the other person will take offense at their words and reduce their relationship strength. This comes at a cost because they have to maintain a [sic] internal database of misinformation which they must look up on demand at very rapid speeds.  
Edward.

The traditional impairments in communications highlighted by professionals as being associated with autism are questioned and inverted in order to present the NT communicative styles as the ones that are illogical and impaired.

Such repositioning of typically dominant NT traits is also reflected on websites written and maintained by people who identify themselves as autistic

The ideas presented in the websites challenge dominant academic thinking by constructing NT ways as the ones that should fall under the clinical gaze and presenting material in a way that echoes some traditional literature about autism. For example:

Definition of NT: "Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterised by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity... Neurotypical individuals often assume that their experience of the world is either the only one, or the only correct one... NT is believed to be genetic in origin. Autopsies have shown the brain of the neurotypical is typically smaller than that of an autistic individual and may have overdeveloped areas related to social behaviour."

How common is it?: "Tragically, as many as 9625 out of every 10,000 individuals may be neurotypical... There is no known cure for Neurotypical Syndrome. However, many NTs have learned to compensate for their disabilities and interact normally with autistic persons."  
Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical (1998)

## Discussion

The postings and websites present eloquent and challenging arguments concerning the unusual behaviour of neurologically typicals, which can consequently be marked out for special interest. Such a commentary enables an examination of an alternative construction of autism by examining the traits traditionally associated with autism that are considered to be impairments in the individual and investigating these by positioning them against the equally impaired portrayal of NT traits, which are generally accepted by wider society as the norm. Such debates raise issues concerning the valuing of diversity and the celebration of neurodiversity – a position in which one half of the dualism is seen as not necessarily better than the other, with both having positive and important contributions.

The ideas raised above have important implications for possible constructions and understandings of autism. Such eloquent discussion points made by people who identify themselves as autistic pose potential challenges to representations of people with autism as being unable to communicate and consider complex arguments that arguably draw on a theory of mind. The benchmark of NT traits being representative of 'normality' serves as a reflection of power relations operating within society. Such discussions highlight the need to place a gaze on the dominant majority as well as looking for 'abnormalities' within the minority autistic group. In embracing alternative representations of autism the concept of neurodiversity can be celebrated and constructions of autism as a deficit can be resisted, instead presenting autism as a difference that is equal to the more dominant NT traits valued in society. This in turn raises a range of possibilities for individuals with autism with respect to identity construction and their role and position within their society.

## References

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