Letter to the Editor.

**Empathy and a personalised approach in Autism.**

A recent literature review of Empathy and Autism claims to highlight clinical nature and understandings of empathy in autism. The author acknowledges the method utilised may miss relevant scholarship, simultaneously argues the review can inform therapies. Later, they suggest a personalised approach is more helpful than the spectrum approach to autism (Harmsen, 2019). Firstly, we challenge contentious topics in the review. Secondly, we seek to fill gaps in the review, thus, combining to allow a personalised and empathetic approach to autism.

The article refers to various dated clinical language, primarily autism subtypes, referring to differences between categories (Harmsen, 2019). However, for such practices has been falling out of favour for almost a decade, since the replacing of autism subtypes with one blanket Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) (Happé, 2011). Autism subtypes do not hold up in clinical practice and all autism subtypes lack validity (Happé, 2011; Kapp, 2019; AUTHOR/S, DATE). Reasons for this include: (1) that persons with autism frequently transition between subtypes; (2) it can be exceedingly challenging marking the boundaries between subtypes (AUTHOR/S, DATE); considering the concept of ‘spiky profiles’ in the autistic population i.e. atypical developmental trajectories compared to their age-matched non-autistic peers; (4) persons with autism can have different responses to the same task (Kapp, 2019). Furthermore, a study investigating diagnostic practices across 12 sites found the best predictor of category received was the specific clinics (Happé, 2011; AUTHOR/S, DATE). Attempts to divide autism with biomarkers have failed (Kapp, 2019), and it is now recognised these endeavours are unlikely to succeed (Hens, 2019). This diversity among persons with autism is implied by Harmsen (2019). This reflects the wider situation in psychopathology we should not expect any major breakthrough in biomarker research (AUTHOR/S, DATE). It begs the question, why are researchers trying to subtype autism?

Autism subtypes lack specificity in relation to each other; for instance the proposed female form subtype Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is noted as lacking specificity, with its behaviours found in other subtypes (AUTHOR/S, DATE). This is supported by a recent content analysis of autistic traits and broader autism phenotype tools (BAP); these constructs represent and traits qualitatively similar to autism and persons who do not meet the clinical threshold for a diagnosis. The results indicate that autistic traits and BAP are lack specificity and reified terms and those persons with BAP are likely undiagnosed persons with autism (Chown, 2019). This is not surprising by how most who meet threshold for an autism diagnosis, currently lack it (Kapp, 2019).

Steven Kapp in his analysis of social deficit theories contests that they contribute to the negative treatment of persons with autism by broader society (2019). There is growing consensus that persons with autism camouflaging in both males and females, conforming to non-autistic social norms has a deleterious impact on their wellbeing (Mandy, 2019). It has been argued the strongest merit of a singular ASD approach is the empathetic motive to reduce stigma for all persons with autism (Happé, 2011). The specifiers used in the DSM5 allow for individuals with autism to receive personalised support, through a dimensional approach. There is arguably potential here to expand the clinical threshold of current diagnostic tools, with benefits for the heterogeneous population including varying demographic features such as gender presentation.

Harmsen (2019) often refers to the Extreme Male Brain (EMB) theory of autism as the fundamental way to understand Autism Spectrum Disorder. While alternative theories to the EMB theory have been addressed, including Theory of Mind, simulation theory, and the social motivation hypothesis, contemporary scholarship critiquing EMB theory has not been included. For example, Ridley (2019) argues that the EMB theory is essentialist and reductionist in nature, and she calls for abandonment of EMB theory. An excessively essentialist perspective of the brains of persons with autism has the potential to encourage a homogenous understanding of individuals with autism. Some view a combination of autism theory best explains autism (Chown and Beardon, 2017). With emerging qualitative evidence Monotropism being the strongest theory (Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2019; Wood, 2019). Moreover, it is accepted that this theory can explain PDA in persons with autism who meet the proposed subtype’s profile (AUTHOR/S, DATE). With such a focus on EMB, the broader scholarship on wider autism theory, both headed by persons with autism or not, are missed.

Harmsen (2019) discusses the favouring of diagnosing boys over girls with Autism Spectrum and its wider impact. We expand this, to explore controversy around EMB. Disorder and notions of ‘gendered schema’ (Krahn and Fenton, 2012), and of which the impact could be detrimental to services that would inhibit the diagnosis of females, transgender and non-binary persons. It is recognised that females are often diagnosed later than their male counterparts (Rynkiewicz et al., 2016). Through reliance on a theory which supports an essentialist perspective of the gender binary, Autism Spectrum Disorder is stereotyped as a ‘male’ disorder, thus excluding people who do not fit the essentialist criteria to not receive diagnosis and subsequent support that should follow diagnosis. Harmsen (2019) suggests that males and females need separate diagnostic thresholds that can possible increase access to support for females with autism. Nonetheless, as previously set out in the paper, there is likely a more pressing need to lower diagnostic threshold for all persons with autism and this should ensure adequate support to more of the autistic population than Harmsen’s solution.

The review does not provide critical consideration of the links between Theory of Mind behaviours, empathy and prosocial behaviours. A Cochrane Library systematic review by Fletcher‐Watson and colleagues (2014) suggested even when explicitly instructed in non-autistic-presenting Theory of Mind skills (e.g. joint attention behaviours), said skills have little to no transference outside of the context in which they are taught. Research reports that persons with autism language acquisition is ‘highly systematic’ (Tager-Flusberg, 2000), as opposed to socially-reinforced units of meaning over time. Failing to account for, and award equal respect to, persons with autism communication development is incredibly problematic.

The implication of EIBI (Early Intensive Behaviour Intervention) being extremely effective in negating autistic ‘symptoms’, echoes the ethos of deficits-based approach evidenced in this research. The paper also fails to acknowledge the systematic review evidencing the limited benefits of EIBI interventions on behaviour in children with autism (Reichow, Barton, Boyd, and Hume, 2018). Although, Reichow and colleagues (2018) could only draw upon a small selection of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs). An interesting small scale study utilising Functional Analysis that is common in EIBI, found that using interventions based on measures of child’s happiness behaviours are comparably effective at reducing challenging behaviours as interventions informed by challenging behaviour (Thomas et al, 2019). Replication of studies with large scale RCTs are needed to resolve the debate around the effectiveness of EIBI, in all its forms. Harmsen (2019) discusses a selection of novel therapies that like EIBI need large RCTs to establish their effectiveness, for example oxytocin. One area that is not mentioned is about non-autistic empathy towards persons with autism and relevant approaches from this, this will be explored next.

It has been put forward by persons with autism that an explanation for empathy deficits in autism can be the result of a breakdown in mutual understanding between persons who subjectively experience the world differently to each other (Nicolaidis et al, 2018). This phenomena, is the Double Empathy Problem and has a growing evidence base (Milton, Heasman and Sheppard, 2018). In a recent editorial for the journal *Autism*, Will Mandy calls for an ecological context based approach, where interventions aim to address the mismatch between a person with autism’s needs and their environment (2019). Harmsen (2019) notes that some persons with autism may benefit from therapy by accessing their special interest in day-to-day life. Such methods may compliment approaches that allow persons with autism to engage in their special interests, which can combine with the positive effects of allowing pupils with autism access to their special interest; as observed in a small scale qualitative study (Wood, 2019). An important RCT, the Preschool Autism Communication Trial (PACT) investigated if synchronising the carer’s actions to their infant with autism’s behaviours. A six year follow up study revealed a sustained reduction in autism symptoms (Pickles et al, 2016). The PACT research can be viewed as training the carers to be more empathetic towards their child with autism. Thus, indicating the potential benefits to following the approach advocated by Will Mandy (2019).

Returning to the debate around autism subtypes is important, because a key factor for removing subtypes from the DSM5 was that, clinically they have similar outcomes and this point is being put forward in the PDA debate about if there is a clinical need for that construct. Mainly because it is argued that PDA strategies which involve: lowering demands, negotiating and offering choice; are simply good practice for all persons, including children and young persons with autism. It has been noted that comparable approaches to PDA strategies have been utilised in autism for years independent of the PDA construct. PDA strategies and comparable methods like the Low Arousal Approach (AUTHOR/S, DATE), require large scale RCTs to investigate their effectiveness. Such research, acting in concert with biomarker approach suggested by Harmsen (2019); can inform policy and practice, along with using diagnostic specifiers in the DSM, to provide individualised support.

Harmsen (2019) proposes that a personalised approach could be beneficial, to explore this we built upon their article to discuss wider debates; detailing the scientific and clinical difficulties in attempting to divide autism. Specifically addressing the need to lower diagnostic thresholds for all persons with autism, instead of a dual threshold based on gender. Going forward there is an urgent need for research that investigates a transactional approach between persons with autism and their environment, echoing Mandy (2019), it is our view that such interventions are more likely to be beneficial. In conclusion, the recommendations for progress on this topic would be person-centred approaches with robust critical analysis.

Yours sincerely,

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