

Myth: Autistic people lack empathy

The word “autism” is from a Greek word meaning “self.” Autistic people are often assumed to be self-centered, uninterested in any other person’s reality, and incapable of appreciating or responding to other people’s concerns. A plethora of literature has been written that sums up this apparent narcissism as due to an inability to empathize. Just this February in *Psychology Today*, a mainstream publication on mental health issues, an article on the possible cause or causes of autism paints a negative picture of autistic people.

In the movie *Rain Man*, Raymond will not go outside on a rainy day and will not leave the hotel. He gives no weight to the fact that his brother is in a hurry, and is unaffected by his brother’s assurance that the rain won’t harm him. The implication is that Raymond is incapable of caring about or even considering his brother’s quandary. He can’t change his reality and his rules for life, despite the distress his refusal to leave the hotel is causing another person.

Some psychologists and psychiatrists go by the “Mind-Blindness” theory, which basically asserts that an autistic person can’t, by nature, understand what another person is going through or what another person might be thinking. According to the theory, autistic people only consider their own feelings and thoughts when responding to the world and choosing how to behave in it.

On the other hand, autism is equally characterized as a “social disability” with an inability to read non-verbal cues and facial expressions and a literal or pragmatic understanding of language. Practically this manifests as potential problems recognizing emotional clues, innuendos, body language, jokes, subtle hints, teasing, and all the non-verbal ways one person might try to communicate with another. An autistic person may have the tendency to rely strictly on the content of verbal information exchanged with another, completely missing the 90% of information exchanged in social situations that is not verbal.

A few events from my life will serve to illustrate “social disability” in action. One day at work, the xerox machine jammed again. To me, this was an opportunity to take a break from my desk, to do something physical and challenging. I was working away on the machine, muttering to myself and trying all the buttons. A co-worker came in and said, “Looks like you’re having a bad hair day!”

What was wrong with my hair? I suddenly became self-conscious. “Well that’s OK,” I said. I went to the bathroom with my comb. My feelings were very hurt.

Until I asked my mother that night if something was wrong with my hairstyle, I had absolutely no idea that my co-worker wasn’t talking about

my hair at all. She thought I was having a hard day because the xerox machine broke!

On July 4th, I spent the day filing. I did not have any bar-b-q parties to go to. Besides, I am vegetarian so the idea of grilling meat is not appetizing to me. I did take a walk at night to spy on the fireworks, but I could not see any from my neighborhood. I spend every July 4th organizing my papers. I am content to have the whole day to myself to organize my file cabinets without interruption.

The next day at work, everyone asked me what I did for the holiday. "Filed. I file every year on July 4th."

Some would giggle slightly at my answer. Others probed with annoying questions like, "Didn't you go out for fireworks?"

Then I would have to waste a few moments explaining that I did, but that I could not see any.

I watched them interact with each other in my scientific way, and I discovered that they placed some degree of value on holiday conversations, and that the point was to exchange descriptions of common experiences.

One would ask the other, "What did you do on July 4th?"

The correct answer was something like, "Oh, my boyfriend and I slept late, then we went to a friend's house for a bar-b-q and watched the fireworks from her roof."

Without fail, the answerer would return the question, "What did you do?"

Again, the correct answer was something like, "We saw the fireworks too!" And usually another question designed to prompt further engagement, such as "What fireworks did you see – the east side fireworks or the ones by Chelsea piers?"

This casual banter would continue back and forth for a few moments. By Thanksgiving, I had the routine down. When someone asked me, "What did you do for the holiday?" I knew the answer.

"Oh – I saw my family. It was very nice. We had a good dinner."

I wrote some basic rules on a sticky note – 1) Don't get into details about what you really did, which was sit on the thruway for 5 hours and then read 6 books in two days because you were so bored; 2) Smile when answering; 3) Don't forget to ask back!

I forgot to ask back, "How was yours?" a few times. But overall, I was really able to be part of the holiday conversations that November. I discovered it wasn't too hard to flow into one or two more questions after

the initial question and answer routine – like what was served for dinner, or where relatives live – and I found myself really enjoying my co-workers' stories.

The merit of the idea that autistic people lack empathy wanes and then fails once a new understanding of autism unfolds. For me, the social world is a minefield. I deeply wanted to get along with my co-workers and I wanted to be friends too! I wanted to be asked to go out for lunch. I wanted the other girls to think I was interesting and talented and a hard worker. But something as basic as having a conversation about July 4th was replete with rules and nuances I did not understand automatically. Without knowing my inner life, an observer might conclude from a strict interpretation of my July 4th answers that I was not interested in my co-workers, that I did not care if they had fun on the day off, that I did not want to share a description of my activities. And that could make me seem aloof and cold.

But the truth is, I just did not know how to interact and join in the social culture around me at the office. How was I supposed to know that holidays are interesting and that conversations about them are a fun way to learn about each other? And how was I supposed to know that you just give a brief and positive synopsis of your holiday – at least at first? And how was I supposed to know that when you are done describing your holiday, you ask the other person about theirs?

I have to continually learn what is important to talk about, when to ask and answer questions, what information to share or not share and in what tone and to what degree, when to share more vulnerable emotions and with who and in what manner, how to decipher when someone is kidding or serious or untrustworthy or helpful. Not just at work, but with family and friends too. For me, any social engagement is a totally conscious process that requires a hefty amount of energy. Frankly, it is exhausting. Sometimes I get to a point where I just can't do any more decoding for the day, and I do shut into my world that is safe and familiar. But this is not because I intrinsically don't or can't care about other people.

I have Asperger's Syndrome, which is considered to be a less severe form of autism. Still, every day is a challenge. One simple social interaction can require an immense amount of scientific work: What does that facial expression mean? Am I supposed to respond? How? When? What voice should I use? What facial expression would match what I am feeling in this moment? What are the subtle clues that would let me know this person is serious or just kidding?

Imagine how much more of a challenge this would be if I could not speak. Or if I could not stand up for myself and say, "I am confused. Did you say that as a joke? Or is it true?" Or if you add sensory issues into the mix: You try deciphering the social world when your eyes are stinging from the florescent lights or 10 million sounds are bombarding your ears.

Although I do not want to detract from the seriousness of what I am saying, an outer-space analogy is called for. What if you were beamed to an alien planet? All around you aliens are interacting and going about their day. You can not tell what they are feeling, you can not tell if they are kidding, you can not tell if they are acting benevolently toward you or if they have a different, subtle motive that you do not know how to detect. You would probably be hard-pressed to describe what was going on in their minds. In fact, every attempt you made to interact with them would probably fail – at least at first, until you slowly worked out the system and rules of the social world you found yourself dunked into.

Should a scientist label you lacking in empathy? Or could it possibly be more accurate to say you lack the social and linguistic skills to navigate an alien social world successfully? And if you became so frustrated in your attempts to connect with beings whom you could not understand that you withdrew or gave up, or maybe did not even try in the first place, should you be blamed for this? Or could it possibly be said that by withdrawal you were protecting yourself from an overwhelming sense of failure and loneliness?

Even in more severe cases of autism, I suggest that the behaviors scientists are considering to be “lack of empathy” may rather be a complex response to just not knowing how – or not being able to – be among the confusing and context-riddled social environment. A general reliance on rules and routines by autistic people should itself be an indication that the anarchy of social engagement is the root of the trouble, not an innate lack of the full range of emotions all human beings experience.

Going back to the movie Rain Man again and the scene in the hotel room on a drizzly day, perhaps it is not as simple as Raymond lacking empathy for his brother, who is desperate to continue the journey. An entire world of possibility other than sheer lack of empathy could explain Raymond’s inability to alter his behavior and choices in light of his brother’s experiences and feelings. It could be that Raymond just can not read his brother’s language – his brother’s posture, his facial expressions, his tones, his urgency. It could be that Raymond has memorized a series of rules – such as “do not go outside when it is raining” – that serve to protect him in a world that is chaotic and ever-changing. He could also have sensory issues with water, and staying indoors during a storm shelters him from an overwhelming physical experience.

With these scenarios in mind, it is possible that Raymond’s non-autistic brother is the one who lacks empathy: The brother has removed Raymond from all that Raymond knows is safe, which is cruel and manipulative. Then he makes no attempt to share Raymond’s concerns, decipher Raymond’s confusion and upset, or understand the purpose of Raymond’s rules and routines. He also demands that Raymond conform to

his own set of priorities and goals, selfishly disregarding Raymond's needs and limits.

When a group is vulnerable and has either had difficulty articulating its experiences or has had little opportunity to do so, it is easy for everyone else to make assumptions and come to conclusions that may be wholly inaccurate. Autistic people may lack the skills and information needed to navigate social reality – the kind of skills and information most everyone else gathers automatically. But that is not synonymous with lacking empathy, or any other human emotion.