

## **Autism as a Prelude Rather Than a Post-Script: Towards a Phenomenology of Difference**

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Regardless of their approach to theory of mind (Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, as well as embedded/embodied cognition and phenomenological approaches), current social cognition literature invariably makes use of autism as an exception to the typical course of development (Doherty 2009). Autism is often instrumentalized as the outlier to the main tenet of the theory under question. For instance, if the theoretical stance is what essentially characterizes human interaction, then this is precisely what people on the autism spectrum are purported to lack (Baron-Cohen 1995). Similarly, if simulation is put forward as the quintessential mode of social cognition, then this is what autistic children are purportedly deficient in (Goldman 1992). If, on the other hand, the primary mode of understanding other minds is through embodied practices of intersubjectivity, then this pre-theoretical capacity is construed as what is truly impaired in autistic persons (Gallagher 2001).

In all three cases, the atypical autistic experience is utilized as an affirmation-in-inverse of the explanation of the typical experience the theory provides. The theory's ability to account for exactly where autistic individuals are deficient is touted as a marker of explanatory power. Compared to their representationist/Cartesian alternatives, embodied phenomenological approaches are more promising, though still insufficient, in capturing typical experience. Ultimately, however, both general strands fail to understand the atypical experience. What if autism was not an add-on or a post-script to social cognition theories but a point of departure? What if we looked at how social cognition theories fare in understanding autism in order to judge their theoretical merit, rather than looking at how individuals on the spectrum fail at experiments designed by and for neurotypical persons?

The strength and promise of phenomenology is the focus on the what-its-likeness of experience. Surprisingly, until recently very few studies on autism (whether in the field of social cognition or elsewhere) paid serious attention to the what-its-likeness of the phenomenal autistic experience (Grandin & Panek 2013), arguably contributing to many misunderstandings about the spectrum as well as its mischaracterization in social cognition studies. The studies that do take into account the what-its-like-ness, such as the ubiquitous but understudied sensory hypersensitivities in autism, do not necessarily come from a phenomenological perspective (Makram et al 2007; Gepner

& Féron 2009; Grandin 2009; Lane et al 2010 & 2014; Marco et al 2011; Hannant et al 2016; Schauder & Bennetto 2016; Takarae et al 2016).

In this paper, I would like to propose a phenomenological account of autism and social cognition with particular attention to the atypical sensory processing styles and sensory hypersensitivities that define being-in-the-world for most autistic individuals. Taking the what-its-likeness of autism as a prelude rather than a post-script might bring us to the brink of a different phenomenology, a phenomenology of difference.

In this regard, I will first provide a brief history of the dynamic, and still-evolving, diagnostic criteria of autism from the time it was defined as a specific syndrome by Leo Kanner until its final iteration in the last edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Social cognition theories are informed by this diagnostic history as well as being an influential part of it.

Second, I will review three dominant etiological theories about autism which are relevant to theory of mind discussions in social cognition literature: Weak Central Coherence, Executive Dysfunction and Mind-blindness Theory. Since these theories are not etiological in the proper sense of causality but explanatory models that attempt to account for all or most of the features of autism under one unified speculative paradigm, they are evaluated for their explanatory merit.

Third, I will examine two opposing approaches to theory of mind, the mentalistic (particularly the 'mind-blindness' variant of Theory Theory) and the phenomenological (Direct Perception Theory), and how they account for autism. I argue that both approaches ultimately mischaracterize autism because they both fail to take into account the what-its-like-ness of autism, offering what amounts to third-person interpretations of behavior.

Finally, I suggest a different, non-normative and truly embodied, way of approaching autism, based on some exemplary phenomenological studies that take into account the being-in-the-world of autism and point in the direction of a phenomenology of difference.