**Can a person be ‘a bit autistic’?: A response to Francesca Happé and Uta Frith**

As one would expect from two such autism research luminaries, the annual research review put together by Francesca Happé and Uta Frith (2020) is an exemplary piece of work. This response relates to one point they make that others might see as a passing mention, but which we regard as being of particular importance. We refer to their statement that, ‘it does appear that, at the behavioural level at least, one can be “a bit autistic”’ (p. 6). Their full comment about being ‘a bit autistic’ is as follows:

While it should be born in mind that the same behaviour can have different underpinnings, it does appear that, at the behavioural level at least, one can be “a bit autistic”. At the genetic level too, it appears that the genetic influences on subclinical traits largely overlap with those on diagnosed autism (p. 6)

Given that diagnosis of autism is predominantly based on behavioural traits (NICE, 2011; 2012), the assertion that some people can be ‘a bit autistic’ at the behavioural level, is significant and, we suggest, will add to misunderstandings about what it is to be autistic. Happé and Frith go on to state:

the dimensional conception of autism has no natural cut-off point where high autism traits become ‘autism’. In DSM-5, an ASD diagnosis requires that the autistic traits ‘cause clinically signiﬁcant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning’ (p. 11)

and refer in their article to the concept of the broad(er) autism phenotype of individuals with ‘subclinical autistic traits’ (p. 6). We take issue with the concept of ‘autistic traits’ which, we believe, ‘arises from a misuse of language’ (Chown, 2019, p. 46). This misuse led the first author to write that ‘It is ironic that a belief in the existence of a broader phenotype depends on ‘autistic traits’ being normally distributed amongst human beings, when these very same traits are why autism is pathologised’ (ibid., p. 50).

It has been pointed out that ‘If there were such a thing as “autistic behaviour” then we would be able to identify autism simply by identifying that behaviour’ (Beardon, 2017, p. 19). There are no behaviours (‘traits’), or groups of behaviours, which are exclusive to the autistic population. So-called ‘autistic traits’ are actually a cluster of ‘human traits’ used to diagnose autism, not a set of traits unique to autism (Chown, 2019). Thus, it is to be expected that so-called ‘autistic traits’ (behaviours) are observed individually across the entire population. There is no single behaviour that can be observed within the autistic population that is not observable within the non-autistic population.

Our interpretation of the statements from Happé and Frith (2020) quoted here, is that – from a behavioural perspective – they believe the general population can be divided into the following three categories:

Category 1 – those who have no so-called ‘autistic traits’;

Category 2 – those with insufficient ‘autistic traits’ to justify a DSM-5 diagnosis of autism (i.e., subclinical ‘autistic traits’); and,

Category 3 – those having sufficient ‘autistic traits’ to create significant impairment which justifies a DSM-5 diagnosis of autism.

This categorisation reflects the DSM-5’s (APA, 2013) behavioural approach to diagnosing autism, which fails to acknowledge those autistic individuals who present with insufficient ‘autistic traits’ to warrant a diagnosis (i.e., those individuals whose autism is not significantly impairing their life at the point of assessment (Leatherland, 2018). The DSM-5 takes no account of the fact that autistic individuals present differently in different contexts/situations, and at different times. The NICE guidelines for autism in adults (2012) note the issue of masking, and there is a wealth of information on the prevalence of masking in autism, which reduces the chances of a diagnosis/identification (Beardon, 2019; Cage, Di Monaco & Newell, 2018; Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2018). Those people whose autism does not *appear* to impair their lives significantly, whether due to masking; because their environment accommodates their autistic needs; or where a clinical interview situation is not especially stressful for them, are not considered to have reached the point where their behavioural traits ‘become autism’ (Happé and Frith, p.11). This does not mean they are not autistic; however, under DSM-5, they remain in Category 2. Only people in Category 3 are autistic in a strictly diagnostic sense, leaving room for the misinterpretation that those autistic people whose lives are not ‘significantly impaired’ are only somewhere on the ‘bit autistic’ scale, along with those who are not autistic, but who display some ‘autistic’ (human) traits.

Perhaps a more useful way to identify autism would be to recognise, as in the following definition, that autistic people’s behavioural presentation fluctuates according to their environment and the level to which what they need, to maintain global stability (Beardon, 2017), is available at any given time. Our view is that a person cannot be a ‘bit autistic’, although they may *appear* to be only a ‘bit autistic’ in an environment that is sufficiently friendly to their autism. In other words, the extent to which someone *appears* autistic is dependent upon their autism and the environment they are in. Beardon’s ‘golden equation’ (autism + environment = outcome; Beardon, 2017) and the following definition of autism from the second author reflect the views expressed here.

Autistic individuals share a neurological type, which is qualitatively different from that of non-autistics, and which will necessarily impact, both positively and negatively, on: aspects of their thinking and learning; sensory processing; social relational experiences; and communicative style, abilities, and preferences. An autistic person’s experience of and ability to be successful in the world will be dependent on the closeness of compatibility between their individual profile of skills and difficulties and their physical and social environment. Levels of sensitivity to environmental factors vary between individuals, and within the same individual over time, so that the presentation of autism is ever changing. A person’s neurological type, however, remains constant, and being autistic is a lifelong identity. (Leatherland, 2018, p. 359)

Of course, being autistic impacts a person’s behavioural presentation in any given context, because of the way in which the world is being experienced as a result of their qualitatively different neurology, but we assert that it is this, rather than their behavioural presentation, which defines whether a person is autistic or not. i.e., ‘the same behaviour can have different underpinnings’ (Happé and Frith, p. 6). Taking a purely behavioural approach to autism identification, without due consideration of such ‘underpinnings’, is to risk miscategorising autistic individuals as ‘sub-clinical’ rather than recognising their ability to function well in certain environments. This perpetuates the misunderstanding that people can be a ‘bit autistic’, and potentially denies actually autistic people the opportunity to better understand themselves.

We firmly believe that a person is either autistic or not autistic. All people can be observed to exhibit so called ‘autism traits’ because these ‘traits’ are not autism. Rather they are ‘human traits’ which, when presented in a cluster that ‘significantly impairs’ a person’s life, are considered justification for a diagnosis of autism (DSM-5). This focus on behaviours (‘traits’) in isolation, rather than the factors underpinning the behaviours, creates the opportunity for researchers to perpetuate the potentially damaging ‘bit autistic’ fallacy.

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