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Professor Fred Volkmar

Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders
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Dear Professor Volkmar,

**What about the other side of double empathy?: A response to Alkhaldi, Sheppard and Mitchell’s JADD article concerning mind-reading difficulties in autism**

This interesting article on one side of double empathy, reports that non-autistic "perceivers" rated autistic "targets" lower for social favourability (likeability) in each of four scenarios (being met by an experimenter with compliments, a story or a joke or being made to wait) than they rated non-autistic targets. The researchers also measured target readability and say there is an association between readability and social favourability. They then discuss the possible reasons for all this. Whilst the authors mention Milton’s (2012) double empathy hypothesis, they did not study autistic perceiver ratings of non-autistic targets.

Alkhaldi, Sheppard and Mitchell quote Edey et al. (2016) reporting that 'Recent evidence suggests autistic people have minds that are difficult for others (perceivers) to read, including autistic perceivers … as well as neurotypical perceivers'. This clearly implies that it isn't just a matter of double empathy but that autistic people have difficulty reading other autistic people. Alkhaldi and her colleagues also quote the following from the Edey et al. article:

(1) 'Two recent studies [the Edey et al. study being one of them] report that people (perceivers) find it difficult to read autistic individuals (targets)'.

(2) 'In summary, the evidence suggests autistic people are less readable than non-autistic people'.

The focus of the article we are responding to is solely on difficulties faced by autistic people whereas double empathy posits that neurotypical (NT) people have the same difficulties.

We would like to draw attention to the fact that Edey et al. also wrote that:

(3) a finding of theirs ‘raises the possibility that typical individuals experience difficulty interpreting the actions of individuals with autism, in the same way that those with autism have problems interpreting … and predicting … typical movements [their study involved the kinematics of movements].

(4) ‘interaction difficulties between typical and autistic individuals may be attributable to both parties; typical individuals may make less accurate mental state attributions about individuals with autism (demonstrate ‘mind-blindness’) in the same way that individuals with autism appear to display mind-blindness towards typical individuals’.

Clearly, there will always be limitations on the ability of researchers (especially doctoral students) to undertake as extensive a study as they may wish. However, even if the resources were unavailable to enable the authors’ study to encompass both sides of double empathy despite the possibility of using their perceiver and target cohorts in reverse, we would expect them to state why they were only able to investigate ‘half’ of double empathy. It would also have been good to read a recommendation for other researchers to look into the other side. As it stands, one could interpret the quotations from the Edey et al. article as being selective.

Regarding the authors’ point that autistic people have minds that are difficult for autistic perceivers to read, we note that Edey et al. stated that the autistic group in their study performed at a comparable level with the NT group but that the former ‘did not show the same benefit from observing ‘same’ group animations – performance when observing autistic animations was comparable in the two observer groups’. In other words, the NT perceivers were better at evaluating NT targets than autistic targets whereas autistic perceivers evaluated both at about the same level. Edey and her colleagues suggest two possible reasons for this difference: either increased variability of movements in the autistic targets made it difficult for the NT perceivers, or, alternatively, autistic people may be tuned to both NT and autistic movements. This latter explanation is consistent with Chown’s (2012) view that autistic people develop the ability to read NT individuals because they have to develop this ability if they are to survive, let alone thrive, in a NT world (and interact with NT people much of the time). But there is no imperative for NT individuals to learn to read autistic people.

This letter is not intended to be a full critique of either of the two articles under consideration but we would like to include one comment on each study.

1. There could be explanations for variations in the social favourability of autistic and NT targets other than those discussed by Alkhaldi et al. For instance, failure to acknowledge the target while text messaging could produce greater anxiety in an autistic person than in an NT person as the former is likely to have faced being ignored regularly. Perhaps the autistic target wondered if they had made a mistake and were not supposed to be there? We question whether this scenario is appropriate for a study involving autistic targets and wonder if the matter was included in the researchers’ ethical impact assessment.

1. Edey et al. write ‘We have recently observed that those with [autism] move differently – specifically, with greater jerk, acceleration and velocity – relative to typical individuals’. We think this assumption that the movement of *all* autistic people is necessarily more jerky and quicker relative to NT people is an overgeneralisation. We work with many autistic children and adults (including some with high-level martial arts qualifications) who have flowing, typical speed movements. We have also noticed jerky, quicker movements in some NT individuals.

We leave the last words to Rosanna Edey and her colleagues: ‘Interaction takes two: Typical adults exhibit mind-blindness towards those with autism’.

Yours sincerely,

**NICHOLAS CHOWN, LIZ HUGHES & JOANNA BAKER-ROGERS**

**References**

Alkhaldi, R. S., Sheppard, E. and Mitchell, P. (2019). Is there a link between autistic people being perceived unfavorably and having a mind that is difficult to read?, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, Last accessed 16 June 2019 at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-019-04101-1>

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