Autistic identity and the limits of inclusion

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90s: Finding each other

- Autistic people finding each other online

- "Autism" became my key for belonging to a community of some description (for the first time in my life)

- The idea of *being* autistic became embedded in my sense of identity

"Emerging autistic culture"

- Autistic culture (akin to Deaf culture), based on shared communication characteristics (Dekker, 1999)

- Self-advocacy (US et al)

- Empowerment (Scandinavia)

- "Expert by experience" (NL)

Identity

- Online participants discovered their autistic identity through a shared, yet deeply personal, exploration of a different way of being

- Autism is "not an appendage" (Sinclair, 1993), meaning: it's inseparable from the person

Neurodiversity

- 'We are beginning to divide ourselves [...] according to something new: differerences in "kinds of minds" [...] swinging the "Nature-Nurture" pendulum back towards "Nature".' (Singer, 1998)

- (Peeve: one person cannot be "neurodiverse"; the word is *neurodivergent*)

"Identity politics"

- Turns shared personal exploration into a social movement, enforcing conformism

- "Self-advocacy" abandoned in favour of polarising identity-based political activism

- "Listen to autistic people" (but only those who agree with us)

- "I like you, so you must be autistic"

Inclusion

- Differences are recognised

- People with them are accepted as belonging

- Factors that limit or damage inclusiveness:
  - social norms
  - political agendas
  - mutual and external stereotyping
  - a history of being considered special
  - incompatibilities between different access needs
  - …

Disability

- Social model vs medical model

- By definition, *all models have limited validity.* Risk of overapplication

- The social model is usually taken to an extreme (Dunn, [year?])

- Is it possible to be autistic without being disabled? (Note: disabled ≠ "no abilities")

What is autism anyway?

- There is no one thing called autism "The ASD diagnosis lacks biological and construct validity" (Waterhouse, London & Gillberg, 2016)

- Most of us do seem to have something important and fundamental in common

- Self-defined or community-defined?

- Autism is a stereotype!

Stereotyping

- Social pressure to conform to autistic role *(including "immunity from social pressure")*

- Not just by outside society but also mutual

- This can even be necessary for survival, e.g. during assessments for benefits or services

- "All autistic people fake autism":
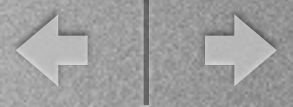The stranglehold of self-fulfilling autism stereotypes (Baggs, 2016: a, b, c)

Choice vs "hard-wiring"

- One common stereotype: everything we are is hard-wired

- Problem: takes agency out of the individual

- *Is anything truly accepted if it's not acceptable to choose it?*

- "Yes, I've changed! I'm learning to be me!"
  ('windsweptchildonashootingstar', 2016)

Conclusions

- Autism politics have become far too polarising, dogmatic, and black & white

- Should be more democratic and pluralist, representing diverse views and experiences

- Neurological "wiring" is fundamental but not the be all & end all. Even accepting that you have a certain kind of wiring, there is a lot of room for choice and growth.

References
(note: underlined titles are clickable links)

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