



**Autism: Exploding the
Myths and Introducing a
Positive Perspective**
Dr Luke Beardon
The Autism Centre
Sheffield Hallam
University

Positionality

- Senior Lecturer in Autism, SHU
- 'Practice based academic'
- Decades of working in the autism field
- Range of research interests
- Hands on practitioner
- Course leader Post Graduate Certificate in Autism/Asperger Syndrome (with the NAS)
- Not a clinician - rather than having clinical training my skill set comes from academic pursuits juxtaposed with hands on experience²

The Escape Clause

- My opinion only
- Meant to challenge, not upset
- Intention is to encourage deeper thinking
- I am not dismissing the myriad of very real problems associated with autism
- Generalisations are unfair and invalid

Myth 1: Autism is a Spectrum

- Autism is not a spectrum
 - AS is not a mild form of autism
 - it is not possible to 'grade' autism
 - people make assumptions based on behaviour and presentation - mostly, those assumptions are wrong
 - autism can not be changed

Myth 2: Everyone is a bit Autistic

- Autistic traits/tendencies/etc. are useless concepts and only demonstrate the inadequacies of current thinking as well as demeaning the entire autistic population

Myth 3: Autism consists of a 'Triad of Impairments'

- ▣ We are led to believe that individuals with autism are 'impaired' in certain areas
- ▣ Is this accurate – or is it a 'majority rules' judgement?
- ▣ Is the skill set of the predominant neurotype (PNT) really so wonderful?
- ▣ Could an autistic manner of behaving be far more sensible and rewarding?



Myth 4: People with Autism are unsociable

- ▣ People with autism are not unsociable
- ▣ The PNT make very little logical sense
- ▣ Unwritten rules are unwritten!
- ▣ Social niceties could be seen as banal, utterly incomprehensible and a waste of energy – really, what is the point and get to the point!
- ▣ Many people with autism can socialise with one another perfectly well - much of the PNT cannot!



Myth 5: People with Autism are Impaired in Verbal Communication

- ▣ Literal interpretation is simply accuracy
- ▣ Being pedantic is being linguistically honest
- ▣ Tautological discourse - a waste of breath?
- ▣ Prolixity, verbosity, garrulousness, wordiness, effusive, loquacious...
- ▣ If we actually said what we mean (and meant what we said) then life could improve considerably



Myth 6: Non Verbal Communication is Useful and Effective

- Actually...it leads to misinformation, confusion, and lack of clarity – for all of us
- Would you prefer everything to be clear expressively and receptively – or prefer doubt, uncertainty, and stress?
- The dreaded first date...snog or no snog?



Myth 7: People with Autism lack a Theory of Mind

- People with autism do not lack a Theory of Mind

- Or, the PNT lack a Theory of Mind

It is cross neurological boundaries where the problems arise – not because of any deficit in people with autism

- The PNT and people with autism each lack a cross neurological ToM

- We teach the PNT about autism - do we teach people with autism about the PNT?



Myth 8: Dysexecutive Functioning leads to Disorganisation - is there dysfunction at all?

- Allows for detailed planning
- Order over chaos
- Knowing what happens when, for how long and in what order is logical and sensible
- Reduction in wasted time
- Unpredictability is scary
- In addition - hypothetically organisational skills are equally as effective, but the sheer amount of organisation required in the autism



Myth 9: Weak Central Coherence is Bad

- Meticulous attention to areas of interest
- Detail *is* important
- Ability to remain focussed
- Provision of a wonderful balance with the gestalt led PNT



Myth 10: Sensory Processing is Dysfunctional

- (Almost) unbelievable senses
- Sheer joy in processing
- Perceptual beauty – not a bad thing



Myth 11: People with Autism have Obsessions

- ▣ Intense passions
- ▣ Vocations
- ▣ Having an 'obsession' can be a wonderful thing
- ▣ Interests are motivational and can be extremely useful

Myth 12: People with Autism are 'Inappropriate'

- ▣ Judgement decision based on PNT concepts
- ▣ It's inappropriate to use the term inappropriate without qualifying it
- ▣ Autistic behaviour (invariably?) makes logical sense - based on individual logical parameters

Myth 13: People with Autism cannot...

- look at you in the eye
- have friends
- be sociable
- get married and have children
- walk properly
- communicate effectively
- get a job
- empathise
- behave politely and appropriately

Autism as a Logical Premise

- Heterogeneity of the population
- learning styles compared to the PNT
- Problems with comparing self to the PNT
- Problems with comparing self to others with autism



Other Aspects

- Sense of fairness
- Burning desire for justice and rightness
- Sense of humour
- Ability not to lose childlike fun
- Intensity of feelings
- Loyalty

So, what is Autism, and what are the implications of getting a diagnosis?

- Differing cognitive state
- Understanding of self
- Other people's understanding of you
- Reduction in disrespectful and inaccurate labels

Associated Problems

- Secondary psychiatric issues
 - depression
 - OCD
 - pathological anxiety states
- Autism + Environment = Increase potential for MH problems



Issues to Consider

- ▣ Autism is not inherently problematic
- ▣ Yet people with autism face many problems in society
- ▣ People with autism seem to have huge pressures to change and adapt
- ▣ Societal adaptation and changes in the PNT is far more sensible



Sheffield Hallam University

□ Contact:

Luke Beardon

Senior Lecturer in Autism

The Autism Centre

Sheffield Hallam University

L.Beardon@shu.ac.uk

Follow on Twitter @sheffieldluke