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Reflecting upon the double empathy problem: new directions and practical implications.

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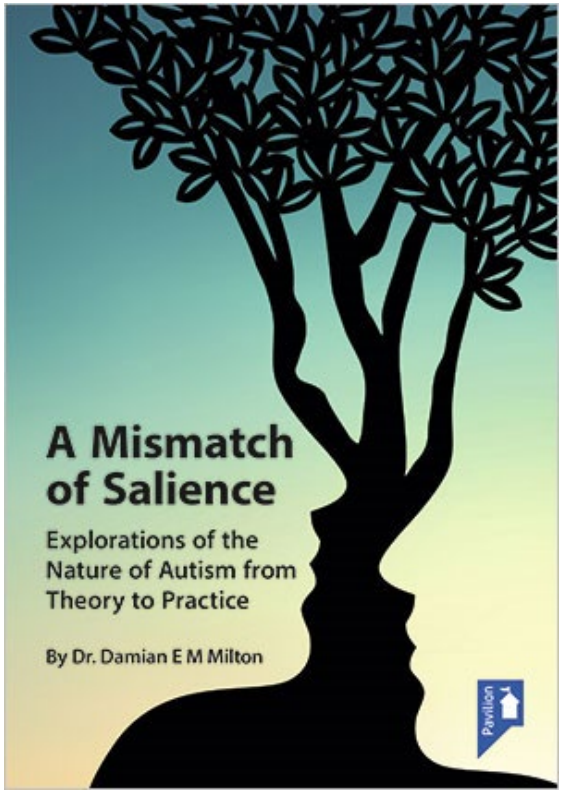


Introduction

- Overview of the double empathy problem and some of the evidence base to support it.
- Practical implications and support strategies.

- “The autist is only himself...and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly.” (Asperger, 1991: 38).

Early days and how the theory developed

- Initial ideas behind the double empathy problem originated in my personal experience and work as a sociology student in the 1990s.
- By late 2000s had come across the work of autistic authors such as Jim Sinclair and Claire Sainsbury and had started to use the term ‘double empathy problem’ at a parent group I was a part of as a response to ideas regarding ‘theory of mind’
- First presentations on topic in 2010, and first publication in a journal in 2012.
- Yet not alone in way of thinking – see Ian Hacking, Victoria McGeer, Luke Beardon, and Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg among others.

Mutual incomprehension

- *“95% of people don’t understand me”.*
- *“Friends are overwhelming”.*
- *“Adults never leave me alone”.*
- *“Adults don’t stop bullying me”.*

- Quotes taken from Jones et al. (2012).

The ‘double empathy problem’

- A case of mutual incomprehension?
- Breakdown in interaction between autistic and non-autistic people as not solely located in the mind of the autistic person. The theory of the double empathy problem sees it as largely due to the differing perspectives of those attempting to interact with one another (Milton, 2012a; 2014a; Milton et al. 2018; Chown, 2014).
- Theory of autistic mind can often leave a great deal to be desired.

The ‘double empathy problem’

- “A disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld - perceived as a breach in the 'natural attitude' of what constitutes 'social reality' for ‘neuro-typical’ people and yet an everyday and often traumatic experience for ‘autistic people’.” (Milton, 2012: 883).

Dyspathy

- Cameron (2012) uses the term ‘dyspathy’ to highlight how empathy is often blocked or resisted by people.
- Such research supports the earlier social psychological theories of Tajfel (1981), which found that people felt increasing emotional connection to those deemed within their social ‘in-group’, whilst stereotyping ‘outsiders’.
- “If we were to be continually tuning into other people’s emotions, we would be perpetually anxious or exhilarated, and very quickly exhausted. We must therefore have very efficient inhibitory mechanisms that screen out most of the emotional empathy being carried out by our brains, without us even noticing.” (Cameron, 2012).

The evidence-base

- Sheppard et al. (2016) investigated non-autistic participants' ability to interpret the behavioural reactions of autistic people in naturalistic social interactions.
- Non-autistic participants who viewed the recorded videos were less able to guess which event the video participant had experienced for autistic than non-autistic participants, apart from for reactions to a joke.

Studies of forming first impressions

- Research has also asked a more general question of how autistic people are perceived by non-autistic others.
- If autistic people are perceived less favourably than this could result in avoidance and social exclusion, contributing to the social difficulties experienced.
- Stagg et al. (2014) found that non-autistic adults rated autistic children as less expressive and less attractive than the non-autistic children based on brief videos of them.

- Sasson et al. (2017a) carried out three studies in which they showed that non-autistic adults rated autistic adults and children less favourably than non-autistic adults and children on a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, as well as indicating reduced intentions to engage with them.
- Further research by Sasson et al. (2017b) examined the impact of providing diagnostic labelling information on the impressions formed and found this to have a positive effect.

Studies of metaperception

- Sasson et al. (2018) participants were asked to estimate how they thought others would perceive them on a wide range of personality traits, then observers judged them on the same traits after viewing a recording of them.
- They found that autistic participants were less accurate than non-autistic participants in judging how they would be perceived as others, because they overestimated how positively they would be perceived.

- Usher et al. (2018) studied impressions formed by dyads of adolescents where one member of the dyad was autistic and one was not, who engaged in a five-minute conversation.
- Autistic participants were found to be more accurate in judging whether the non-autistic partner liked them than non-autistic participants were.

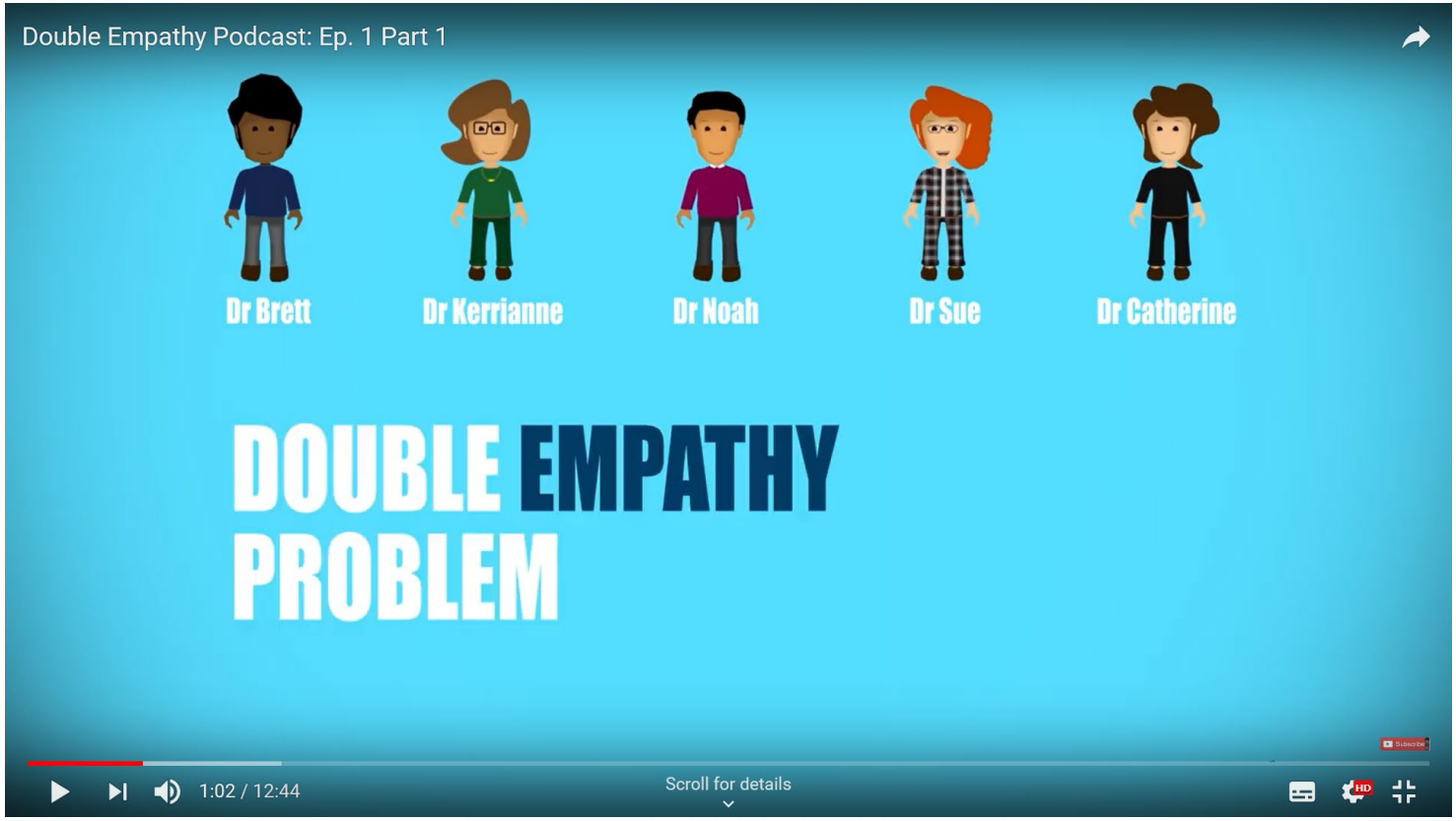
- Heasman and Gillespie (2017) investigated perceptions and misperceptions for dyads of autistic individuals and their family members.
- When asked about reasons for misunderstandings, family members tended to cite an extreme impairment in social understanding of the autistic person, while autistic participants themselves reflected on both the self and other as causes of misunderstandings.

- Overall, studies of metaperception suggest that autistic people are quite good at estimating how specific others perceive them, but may have some difficulty judging how they come across in general, especially with strangers or in initial contact. Consistent with the DEP, non-autistic people may have difficulty working out how they are perceived by autistic people whom they have just met.

Neurodiverse interactions

- It has been observed that autistic people appear to have a greater affinity with other autistic people than non-autistic people generally do (Chown, 2014).
- This raises the possibility that autistic people may show improved, if not superior, understanding of other autistic people and may consequently show fewer signs of 'social impairment' in the company of their in-group (Tajfel, 1981).
- This is indeed what has been shown in work carried out by Catherine Crompton at the University of Edinburgh: Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective - Catherine J Crompton, Danielle Ropar, Claire VM Evans-Williams, Emma G Flynn, Sue Fletcher-Watson, 2020 (sagepub.com)

The Double Empathy Problem Virtual Symposium



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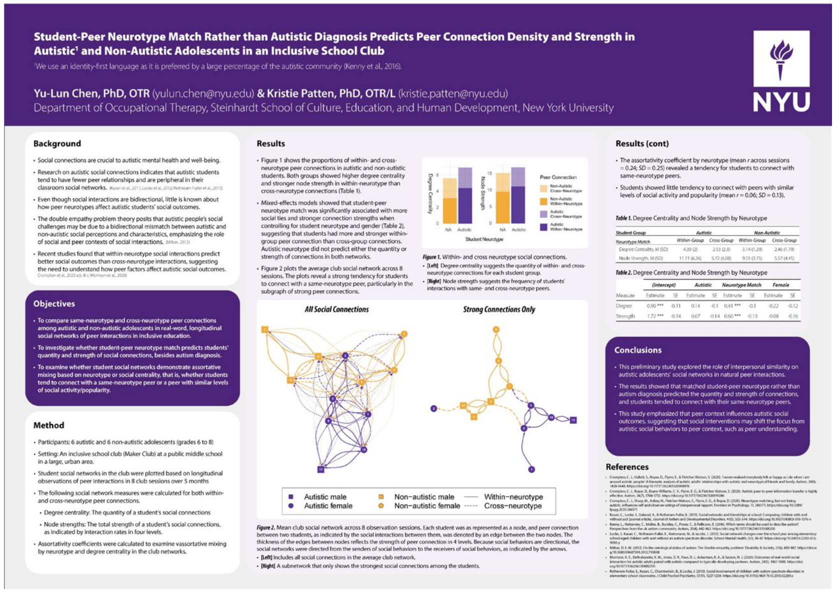
New directions

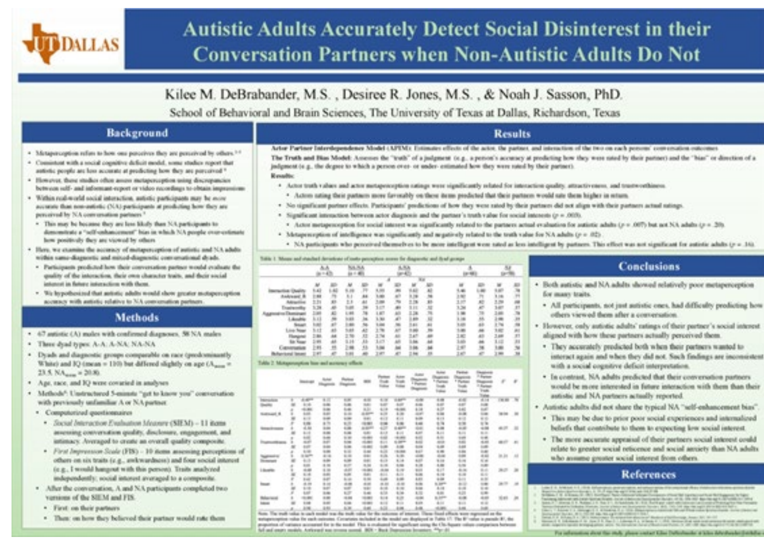
- Crossover with neuroscientific theory regarding 'predictive coding':
- The dialectical misattunement hypothesis: *"…views psychopathology not merely as disordered function within single brains but also as a dynamic interpersonal mismatch that encompasses various levels of description*." (Bolis et al., 2017).
- A 'mismatch of salience'.

New directions

- Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in autism research - Katie Howard, Napoleon Katsos, Jenny Gibson, 2019 (sagepub.com)
- An Expert Discussion on Autism and Empathy | Autism in Adulthood (liebertpub.com)
- Frontiers | Mutual (Mis)understanding: Reframing Autistic Pragmatic “Impairments” Using Relevance Theory | Psychology (frontiersin.org)
- Autism and the double empathy problem: Implications for development and mental health - Mitchell - 2021 - British Journal of Developmental Psychology - Wiley Online Library
- Barriers to healthcare for autistic adults: Consequences & policy implications. A cross-sectional study | medRxiv
- Non-Autistic Children Do Not Object to Autistic-Like Behaviors – YouTube

New directions – Yu-Lin Chen and Kristie Patten; Debrander et al.





Research concerning how to overcome the double empathy problem

- Chapple et al. (2021) - this study aimed to explore how literature, through its ability to uncover nuanced emotional response differences between readers, could facilitate double empathy understandings within pairs of autistic and non-autistic adults.
- A longitudinal, qualitative design was used, with 4 gender-matched pairs.
- The non-autistic group reported a more sensitive understanding of what it means to be autistic, while the autistic group overcame concerns about non-autistic people stereotyping autism, and instead reported feeling valued and accommodated by their non-autistic partners.

Critique – Livingston et al. (2024)

- A weak derivation chain in psychological science.
- The DEP is poorly conceptualized, and we find that it is being conflated with many other constructs.
- Difficult to translate theoretical claims into empirical predictions and evidence.
- Needs reconsideration, particularly through a better synthesis with the cognitive neuroscience literature on social interaction.
- Argue for a strengthening of the derivation chain pertaining to the DEP.
- Until then, we caution against the translation of DEP research into applied settings.

Critique – A response

- Concept did not originate in psychological science but was grounded in phenomenological experience.
- Psychologists have been exploring various aspects pertaining to the concept (not conflation between concepts) and translating theoretical claims into empirical predictions and evidence gathers apace with synthesis with cognitive neuroscience literature ignored in the critique.
- Argue for a strengthening of the derivation chain pertaining to the DEP. Yes, work to be done to refine factors at work.
- Caution against the translation of DEP research into applied settings? I could not disagree more!

The Mind-space framework (Long et al., 2025)

- The Mind-space framework is founded on the notion that different minds will give rise to different mental states in the same situation.
- For example, an extraverted individual at a party might intend to speak to as many people as possible—an intention that an introverted person is unlikely to share.
- The Mind-space framework thus suggests that information about a target's traits (such as their personality traits or cognitive abilities) is used when inferring their mental states. This information is represented as a location in "mind space": a multidimensional space in which each dimension represents a separate trait.

The Interview Task (Long et al., 2022)

- In this task, participants watch videos of a practice job interview and report their inferences about the traits and mental states of the interviewer and the candidate.
- Importantly, the interviewers and candidates were not actors but were instead recruited as study participants.
- Interviewers and candidates engaged in the unscripted practice job interviews, which formed the Interview Task stimuli, and reported their mental states along the same dimensions as participants later used to report their inferences.

- “The Mind-space framework, then, makes clear predictions about possible ways in which ToM inference might differ between autistic and neurotypical minds.” (Long et al., 2025).

Power

- Important to remember that the double empathy problem originated from lived experience and social theory and is thus conceptualised as situated within wider unequal (and intersectional) power relations.
- Avoiding tokenism and ceding power. Humility and rapport (tacit knowledge) building.
- Reducing imposition of social expectations.
- This to me is ‘translation into practice (and other) settings’.

Collaboration

- Setting the agenda.
- Design and development of strategies and methodologies.
- Avoiding tokenism.
- The Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC): www.PARCautism.co.uk

A couple of quotes to conclude:

- “Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms…Recognise that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours. Question your assumptions. Define your terms. Work with me to build bridges between us.” (Sinclair, 1993).

- “When I am in an environment I feel comfortable in, with people who are kind and tolerant, and doing things I enjoy, then I am as happy as the next person. It is when people tell me I should think, speak or behave differently that I start to feel different, upset, isolated and worthless. So surely the problem is a lack of fit with the environment rather than something inside my brain that needs to be fixed?” (Victoria, ‘Are You Taking Something for It?’, issue 76, 12; cited in Milton and Sims, 2016).

- “We need to see the world from the autistic perspective and apply approaches based on a mutuality of understanding that are rational and ethical – which respect the right of the individual to be different – yet recognises and deals with distress and offers practical help. We should encourage and motivate the person to develop strengths rather than focus on 'deficits'. This will mean offering opportunity for development while supporting emotional stability.” (Mills, 2013).

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