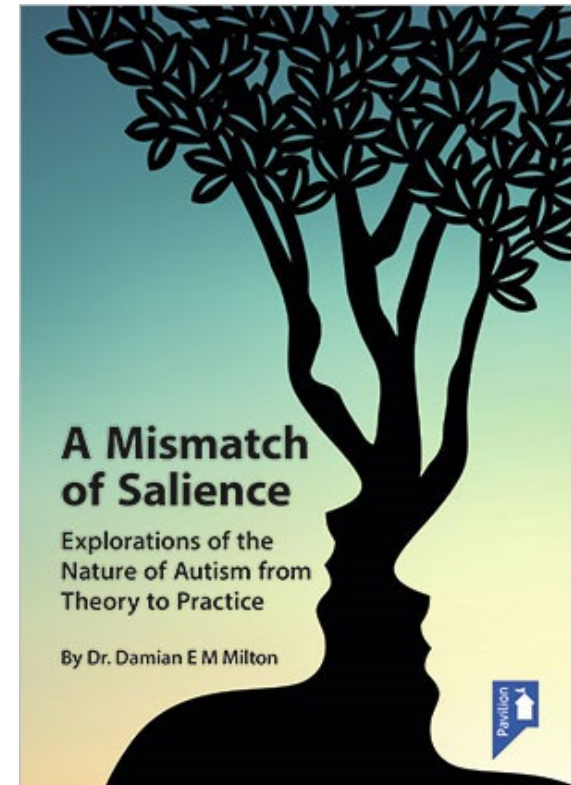


Reflecting upon the double empathy problem: new directions and practical implications.

Dr. Damian E M Milton



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.

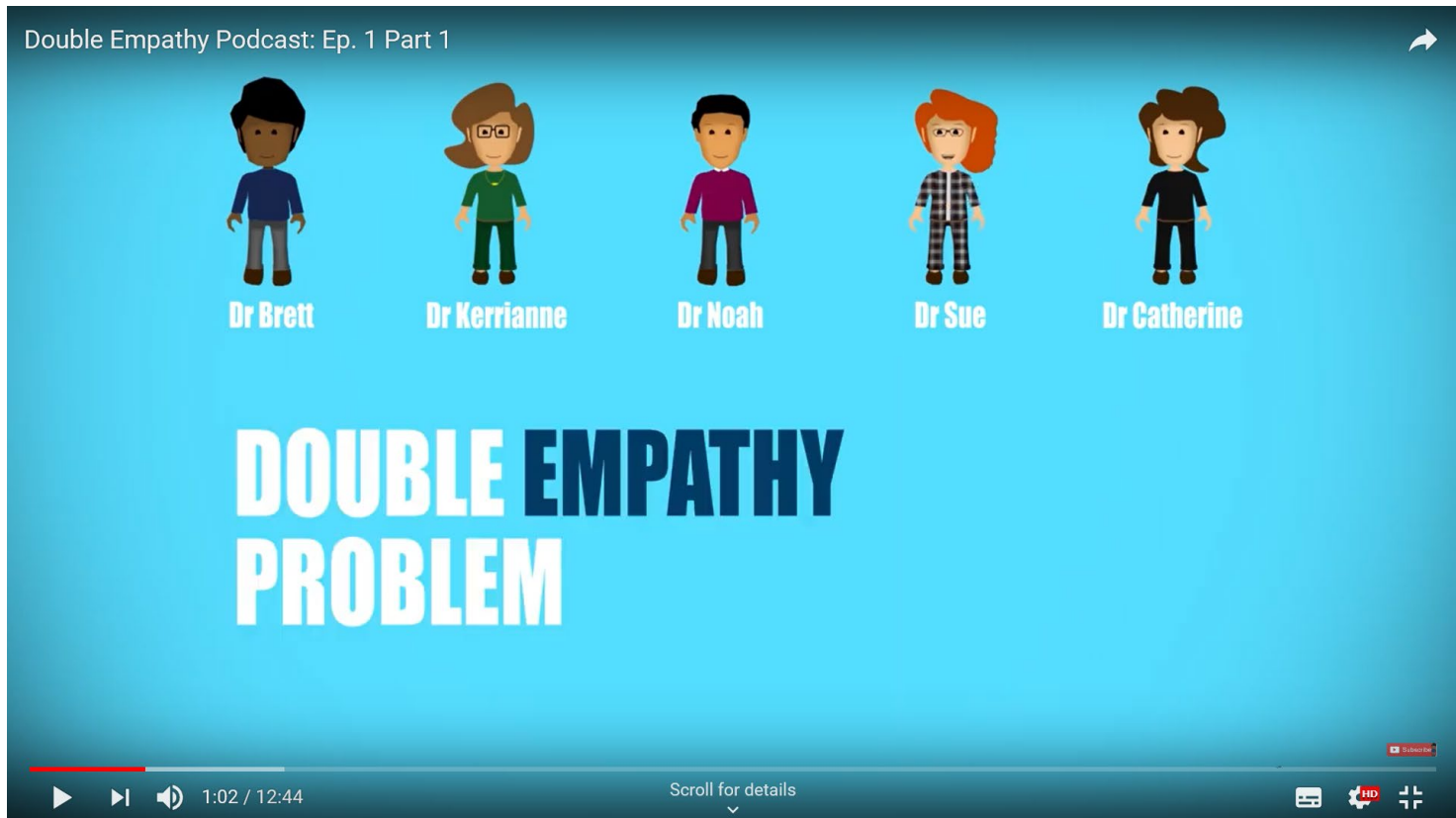
- Heasman and Gillespie (2017) investigated perceptions and misperceptions for dyads of autistic individuals and their family members.
- When asked about reasons for misunderstandings, family members tended to cite an extreme impairment in social understanding of the autistic person, while autistic participants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



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.

Student-Peer Neurotype Match Rather than Autistic Diagnosis Predicts Peer Connection Density and Strength in Autistic¹ and Non-Autistic Adolescents in an Inclusive School Club

We use an identity-first language as it is preferred by a large percentage of the autistic community (Benny et al., 2016).

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Background

- Social connections are crucial to autistic mental health and well-being.
- Research on autistic social connections indicates that autistic students tend to have fewer peer relationships and are peripheral in their classroom social networks.
- Even though social interactions are fundamental, little is known about how peer effects affect autistic students' social outcomes.
- The double empathy problem theory posits that autistic people's social challenges may be due to bidirectional mismatches between autistic and neurotypical social perceptions and characteristics, emphasizing the role of social and peer context of social interactions.
- Recent studies found that within-neurotype social interaction predict better social outcomes than cross-neurotype interactions, suggesting the need to understand how peer factors affect autistic social outcomes.

Objectives

- To compare same-neurotype and cross-neurotype peer connections among autistic and non-autistic adolescents in a social, longitudinal social networks of peer interactions in inclusive education.
- To investigate whether student peer neurotype match predicts student density and strength of social connections, besides autism diagnosis.
- To examine whether student social networks demonstrate assortative mixing based on neurotypes of social density, that is, whether students tend to connect with a same-neurotype peer or a peer with similar levels of social activity/participatory.

Method

- Participants: 8 autistic and 6 non-autistic adolescents (grades 6 to 12).
- Setting: six inclusive school clubs under CUNY at public middle school in a large, urban area.
- Student social networks in the club were plotted based on longitudinal observation of peer interactions in 4 club sessions over 5 months.
- The following social network measures were calculated for both within- and cross-neurotype peer connections:
 - Degree centrality: The quantity of a student's social connections.
 - Node strength: The total strength of a student's social connections, as indicated by interaction rates for 4 club levels.
 - Assortativity coefficients were calculated to examine assortative mixing by neurotypes and degree centrality in the club networks.

Results

- Figure 1 shows the proportions of within- and cross-neurotype peer connections in autistic and non-autistic students. Both groups showed higher degree centrality and stronger node strength in within-neurotype than cross-neurotype connections (Table 1).
- Mixed effects models showed that student peer neurotype match was significantly associated with more social and stronger connection strength when controlling for student neurotype and gender (Table 2), suggesting that students had more and stronger within- than cross-neurotype peer connections.
- Autistic students did not predict better the quantity or strength of connections in both networks.
- Figure 2 plots the average club social network across 4 sessions. The plots reveal a strong tendency for students to connect with a same-neurotype peer, particularly in the subgroup of strong peer connections.

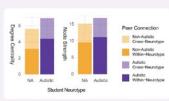


Figure 1. Within- and cross-neurotype social connection. (Left) Degree centrality suggests the quantity of within- and cross-neurotype connections for each student group. (Right) Node strength suggests the frequency of students' interactions with same- and cross-neurotype peers.

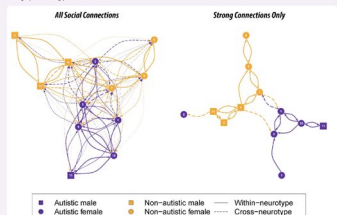


Figure 2. Mean club social network across 4 observation sessions. Each student was represented as a node, and peer connection between two students, as indicated by the socializations between them, was denoted by an edge between the two nodes. The thickness of the edges between nodes reflects the strength of peer connections in 4 club levels. Because social behaviors are dynamic, the social networks were derived from the ordered co-occurrences to the measures of social behaviors, as indicated by the arrows.

- Figure 3 includes all social connections in the average club network.
- Figure 4 highlights that only those the strongest social connections among the students.

Results (cont)

- The assortativity coefficient by neurotype (mean across sessions = 0.24, SD = 0.22) revealed a tendency for students to connect with same-neurotype peers.
- Students showed little tendency to connect with peers with similar levels of social activity and participatory (mean = 0.06, SD = 0.10).

Table 1. Degree Centrality and Node Strength by Neurotype

Neurotype	Within-Neurotype	Cross-Neurotype
Mean (SD)	4.02 (2.23)	3.14 (2.26)
Min (Max)	0 (12)	0 (12)

Table 2. Degree Centrality and Node Strength by Neurotype

Neurotype	Within-Neurotype	Cross-Neurotype
Mean (SD)	0.08 (0.08)	0.05 (0.05)
Min (Max)	0 (0.4)	0 (0.4)

Conclusions

- This preliminary study explored the role of interpersonal similarity on autistic adolescents' social networks in natural peer interactions.
- The results showed that matched student peer neurotype rather than autism diagnosis predicted the quantity and strength of connections, and students tended to connect with their same-neurotype peers.
- This study emphasized that peer context influences autistic social partners, suggesting that social interventions may still be based on autistic social behaviors to peer context, such as peer understanding.

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1. Chen, Y., Patten, K., & Debrander, M. (2024). Student-peer neurotype match rather than autism diagnosis predicts the quantity and strength of connections, and students tended to connect with their same-neurotype peers. *Autism*, 28(1), 1-12.

2. Chen, Y., Patten, K., & Debrander, M. (2024). Student-peer neurotype match rather than autism diagnosis predicts the quantity and strength of connections, and students tended to connect with their same-neurotype peers. *Autism*, 28(1), 1-12.

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Autistic Adults Accurately Detect Social Disinterest in their Conversation Partners when Non-Autistic Adults Do Not

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Background

- Misinterpretation refers to how one perceives they are perceived by others.
- Consistent with a social cognitive deficit model, some studies report that autistic people are less accurate at predicting how they are perceived.
- However, these studies often assess misperceptions using discrepancies between self- and informant report or video recordings to obtain impressions.
- Within real-world social interactions, autistic participants may be more accurate than non-autistic (NA) participants at predicting how they are perceived by NA conversation partners.
- This may be because they are less likely than NA participants to demonstrate a "self-enhancement" bias in which NA people overestimate how positively they are viewed by others.
- Here, we examine the accuracy of misperceptions of autistic and NA adults within same-diagnostic and mixed-diagnostic, conversational dyads.
- Participants predicted how their conversation partner would evaluate the quality of the interaction, that is, how enjoyable, comfortable, and how social interest in future interactions with them.
- We hypothesized that autistic adults would show greater misperception accuracy with autistic relative to NA partners.

Methods

- 47 autistic (A) males with confirmed diagnoses, 58 NA males.
- Three dyad types: A-A, A-NA, NA-NA.
- Diadic and diagnostic groups comparable on core (primarily verbal) White and IQ (mean = 110) but differed slightly on age ($M_A = 23.5$, $M_{NA} = 26.8$).
- Age, sex, and IQ were controlled in analyses.
- Method 1: "structured 5-minute" "get to know you" conversation with personally unfamiliar or NA partner.
- Computational questionnaires.
- Recall Interaction Evaluation Measure (REM) - 11 items measuring conversation quality, disclosure, engagement, and intimacy. Averaged to create an overall quality composite.
- First Impression Scale (FIS) - 10 items assessing perceptions of others on six traits (e.g., awkwardness) and four social interest (e.g., would hangout with this person). Traits analyzed independently; social interest averaged to a composite.
- After the conversation, A and NA participants completed two versions of the REM and FIS.
- First, on how they felt.
- Then, on how they believed their partner would rate them.

Results

Active Partner Interrogation Model (AIM): Estimate efficacy of the active partner and interaction of the two on each partner's communication.

The Truth and How Model: Assess the "truth" of a judgment (e.g., partner's accuracy at predicting how they were rated by their partner) or a dimension of a judgment (e.g., the degree to which a person over- or under-estimated how they were rated by their partner).

Results:

- Active truth values and active misperception ratings were significantly related to interaction quality, attentiveness, and trustworthiness.
- Autism rating their partners more favorably on these items predicted that their partners would rate them higher in return.
- No significant partner effects: Participants' predictions of how they were rated by their partners did not align with their partners' actual ratings.
- Significant interaction between active diagnosis and the partner's truth value for social interest ($p = .003$).
- Autism misperception for social interest was significantly related to the partner's actual evaluation the autistic adults ($p = .007$) but not NA adults ($p = .20$).
- Misperception of intelligence was significantly and equally related to the truth value for NA adults ($p = .02$).
- NA participants who perceived themselves to be more intelligent were rated as less intelligent by partners. This effect was not significant for autistic adults ($p = .16$).

Conclusions

- Both autistic and NA adults showed relatively poor misperception for many traits.
- All participants, not just autistic ones, had difficulty predicting how others viewed them after a conversation.
- However, only autistic adults' ratings of their partner's social interest aligned with how those partners actually perceived them.
- They accurately predicted both when their partners wanted to interact again and when they did not. Such findings are inconsistent with social cognitive deficit interpretations.
- In contrast, NA adults predicted that their conversation partners would be more interested in future interactions with them than their autistic and NA partners actually reported.
- Autistic adults did not share the typical NA "self-enhancement bias."
- This may be due to prior poor social experiences and internalized beliefs that contribute to them expecting low social interest.
- The more accurate appraisal of their partners social interest could relate to greater social experience and social anxiety than NA adults who assume greater social interest from others.

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1. Chen, Y., Patten, K., & Debrander, M. (2024). Student-peer neurotype match rather than autism diagnosis predicts the quantity and strength of connections, and students tended to connect with their same-neurotype peers. *Autism*, 28(1), 1-12.

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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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