SELF AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN AUTISM: DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The Self is essentially a social structure and arises out of social experiences. There are different views about the concept of Self and the process of its differentiation. Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that makes it hard for the people with autism to communicate with others and relate to the outside world. Since autistic people have problems in relating to the outer world, they may have problems in forming a coherent sense of 'self and the other'. Intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations are fundamental to a human being's very essence and being-in-the-world. This paper attempts to analyse the concept of Self and intersubjectivity with reference to autism disorder. An understanding of Self and intersubjectivity is essential for communication and social interaction. An attempt is made to draw views from various theoretical models of Self, and factors which constitute self and intersubjectivity, are discussed. These factors viz, perception, thematisation, symbolisation and theory of mind are examined with reference to autism disorder. Inputs from previous research on these aspects in autism are incorporated and directions for further research are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Both social cognition research and psychoanalytic object relations theory address the cognitive and affective processes that mediate interpersonal functioning. Since the 1940s and 1950s, psychodynamic theory and therapy have seen a shift towards a greater emphasis on patterns of thought and feeling that underlie interpersonal behaviour. Fairbairn (1) enunciated an interpersonal alternative to Freudian Theory, arguing that what binds people to one another is a need for relatedness, not the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Sullivan (2) developed an interpersonal theory that emphasises the person's construction of an understanding of Self through early social interaction and the distortions in personality and self-concept necessitated by the avoidance of interpersonally generated anxiety. Sullivan emphasised the centrality of affect in representations of self and others, particularly in childhood. For Heinz Kohut (3), serious or long-lasting disorders of the psyche are all fundamentally the result of deficiencies in the self-object relationship, either in the present or more commonly in the past, so that an adequate nuclear Self either has not formed or cannot be actualised in life. G.H. Mead analysed the phenomena of consciousness from the standpoint of how they are formed within the structures of linguistically or symbolically mediated interaction (4). The Self is essentially a social structure and arises out of social experiences. The expression 'me' designates the perspective from which the child builds up a system of internal behaviour controls by adopting the expectations of the generalised other towards himself. The 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. The result of a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, autism and its associated behaviours have been estimated to occur in as many as 1 in 500 individuals (5). Autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. In a normal child, until about the second year of life, we are told that there is no differentiation between Self and other. Before the stage of self-development, or during infancy, all there is, is a striving to gain comfort and to avoid discomfort. Once the infant experiences that its needs are not always met, the manageable frustration that follows is what makes it aware that an outer world exists. When, through its own efforts, through signals or by giving signs; the infant learns that it has been able to influence the external world, is the point at which it begins to become a social being. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction and leisure or play activities. The disorder makes it hard for them to communicate with others and relate to the outside world. Since autistic people have problems in relating to the outer world, they may have problems in forming a coherent sense of 'self and the other'.

Perception, Meta-perception and Autism

Intersubjectivity and interpersonal relations are fundamental to a human being's very essence and being-in-the-world. Without intersubjectivity the subject cannot be a subject. Encounters with the world of things is not sufficient to establish subjectivity; human interaction is necessary. The basis of intersubjectivity is established via perception (6). Intersubjectivity is a part of our experience and we observe it in action. The condition for knowledge is the presence of the 'other'. We become aware of the world not primarily because of our contacts with things, but because of our interrelations with others. There are situations in which the presence of the other is not in fact a menace, but on the contrary, a confirmation of one's being — not only psychologically, but also ontologically.

The phenomenon of perception is not an objective but an inter-subjective one. Perception becomes complete when proper meanings are given to our sensations. When we fail to give appropriate meanings to sensations, perception becomes distorted. This is what happens in autism. Perceiving inanimate things as real persons, called physiognomic perception, might be a very characteristic mode not only in infancy, but also in autism. Rimland (7) described the perceptual capacities of autistic children as 'molecular perception'. In autism, according to Rimland, stimuli are apprehended, but not comprehended.

Meta-perception, a term coined by R.D.Laing (8), is the perception that people have of another person's perception of someone. Here the concern is with the perceptions of the targets' perception of the perceiver. Meta-perception is a complex task which requires meta-representation ability. Because of the problems of autistic children in second-order representations, they have problems in meta-perception also. The difficulty in meta-representation is reflected in various aspects of social interaction like reciprocity, consensus, self-other agreement and anticipation.

Thematisation and meaning in Autism

The process of making sense of things may be referred to as Thematisation, a concept taken from phenomenological psychology. Thematisation consists of what a person does to give meaning to experiences (9). Meanings are objective in that they must be responsibly discovered rather than arbitrarily invented. Being human always points to, or is directed towards, something or someone other than oneself. A human being is always reaching out for meanings to 'fulfil' in the world, but he is never primarily concerned with anything within himself (10). The process of thematising not only allows an individual to make sense of what is going on in the present (11) but also offers a structure for the thought in different temporal and spatial modalities such as those involved in imagining (12), dreaming (13) and remembering (14). Thematisation implies that there is some cognitive capability for holding thoughts in the mind, or what Piaget calls "representational thinking" (15).

Autistic children have problems in originating themes. It can be found in two major characteristics of these children viz. obliviousness to their environment and self-stimulatory behaviours. Autistic people have themes generally different from other people. Thematic contents may be narrower in that they are focused on a single aspect rather than the larger picture. It is clear from the following conversation between a sixteen-year-old autistic boy, SC and his teacher. SC is bilingual with Bangla as his mother tongue and English, second language. He is fluent in both these languages. The following conversations are recorded in natural as well as semi-structured settings.

Conversation 1

Teacher : Hi…How are you?

SC : I am all right. Can I laugh now?
Yes, if you want you can laugh.
Baat Nikale………………

T : You can sit on that chair.

SC : I don't feel comfortable on this chair. There is grass on it.
Can I laugh now? If you want you can.
Aa………..Aaa…………..forty five.
Forty five……….Baat Nikale…………..Forty five.

T	:	Is it a song?
SC	:	This record is 33rpm. If you play it at 45rpm, then it . listens very bad.
T	:	What?
SC	:	Baat Nikale……………….

    It is by Jagjit Singh.   I like Jagjit Singh's songs too much.
    It is my choice.
    I like Jagjit Singh's ghazals……………….Baat nikale
    Why I don't like Balamuralikrishna songs?
    It is my choice. I like Baat nikale.

In the case of autism, it could be argued that since autistic children have problems with metapresentation, the underlying cause is a difficulty with handling various aspects of thematisation - initiating themes, terminating themes, creating proper theme contents and in holding multiple themes in mind at once. This, in turn, affects the social interaction of autistic individuals.

Theory of Mind

Minds are challenging to describe because one of the most obvious properties of all minds is that they are opaque (16). We can never know with absolute certainty what another person means—we can at the very best, make inferences about mental states. 'Mind', in the developmental frame of reference indicates mental actions which cannot be directly perceived but are only implicated in another's behaviour through awareness of conscious thought. The capacity and desire to participate in deep and enduring relationships with others emerge in the first two years of life and requires an integrated sense of Self and the other. Children with autism apparently fail to develop an integrated sense of themselves and as a result, have profound difficulties in experiencing differentiated feelings towards others or in developing a coherent inner world of internalised objects (17).

A capacity to call on mental phenomena to interpret and give meaning to one's own actions and those of others expands the child's world to include events and states it cannot observe but must infer. Having a theory of mind means being able to understand what another individual is thinking, to ascribe beliefs, desires, fears and hopes to someone else and to believe that they really do experience these feelings as mental states. When children reach about four to four-and-a-half years of age, they suddenly seem to realise that other individuals can hold beliefs different from their own. Up to that part in Time, children tend to interpret the world rather as they see it. The important consequence of this is that up to the age of three, children cannot lie. i.e. they do not seem to be aware that the other's state of mind, and beliefs can be manipulated. An autistic person simply assumes that the world is transparent, that he and his audience share the same information. As a result, they take the world exactly as it comes. They fail to recognise the richness of meaning often buried in our use of language. Autistic people simply cannot reconstruct the speaker's mind state in conversations.

Complex social interactions demand not only that the child be able to understand the relation between mental states and behaviour but also that it be able to judge the "correctness" of such states relative to the world as it both perceives and believes it to be. Autistic children frequently fail to develop a sense of the other, a person having feelings, beliefs, cognition and emotion (18,19,20) and they seem to have considerable problems understanding the association between mental states such as those between beliefs and feelings (19).

Difficulty in Symbolising

Symbols identify conceptualisations about objects, not the objects themselves. This fact may support the argument that in social referencing, infants identify another person's conceptualisation of objects, rather than the objects themselves. On encountering objects, human beings give meanings to these objects by placing them in a temporal and spatial domain. From the phenomenological point of view, the object as such is meaningless, but the experience of objects is important.

One of the important pre-requisites for social behaviour is the ability to distinguish between people and objects. It has been said that infants make this discrimination in the second month of life or before. Social interaction reportedly begins at about the same age. An unambiguous differentiation of people and objects, is

inherently linked to social behaviour may depend on detecting the presence of 'intention' (21), an attribute that unequivocally distinguishes people from objects. If the infant does not recognise intention, a clear discrimination of people and objects may be delayed. Many researches have shown that children with autism have difficulty in assimilating as well as attributing intention in their interactions. As a result, inter-subjective interaction, for autistic children becomes a very difficult and a mechanical affair.

When layers of meanings or significations are attached to an object, it becomes a symbol. In the case of individuals with autism, there seems to be a defect in the process of signification. Viewing an object itself is interpreting and hence has meaning. So an autistic person's interpretation may be different from that of the other people, i.e. there may be distortions in it which make it typical.

Conversation 2

SC   :   I am not troubling anyone. Why?
                       Because I'm big
                       I don't like bad smell. Why?
                       Because it is bad.
                       I don't like boys now. I like girls now.
                       Teacher, why I like orange?

Teacher   :   Why?

SC   :   It is your choice
                       Why I want to wear this shoe?
                       Because it doesn't hurt me.

(Teacher gives independent work to SC. He has been given a picture in which three girls are going to a building while one boy is coming from the building. He has to imagine the situation and write 5 sentences about it.)

SC wrote   :   The three girls in the picture are going to the building to listen the song Kisi rang se hava do...
                    While the boy had already listened to the song.

SC   :   Why this girl is wearing a white shirt?

                    Why not blue shirt?

                    (He has stroked off the face of the boy in the picture and kept saying - I don't like boys. I like girls now).

Normal infants' mental landscape contains two functionally separate modes of information processing— the 'I-it' process specialised for understanding objects and 'I-thou' processing, specialised for understanding people. The I-it and I-thou processes normally coalesce early in development and their coalescence is a necessary precondition to enable the child to construct a theory of the minds of others and to manipulate symbols imaginatively in social communication and cognition. The autistic infant possibly suffers from absent or abnormal I-thou information processing. Consequently, the autistic child will not experience a normal coalescence of I-thou and I-it information processing mechanisms and can never develop normal symbolic, cognitive, linguistic or social skills or a normal sense of Self (22).

Ontological Insecurity

An ontologically secure person (one who has a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person) will encounter all the hazards of life—social, ethical, spiritual and biological—from a centrally firm sense of his own identity and other people's reality and identity. If a position of primary ontological security has been reached, the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to one's own existence (23). An autistic person, for whom the elements of the world are coming to have or have come to have a different hierarchy of significance from that of the ordinary person, begins to live in a world of his own. External events no longer affect him in the same way as they do others.

It is not that they affect him less; on the contrary, frequently they affect him more. If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous, this means that he can experience neither that separateness from, nor his relatedness to, the other in the usual way. In the face of being treated as an 'it', his own subjectivity drains away. Basically, he requires constant confirmation from others of his own existence as a person. Even normal people require confirmation from others. But in autism, we can argue that they are not satisfied even after constant and repeated confirmations.

Conversation 3

Teacher	:	Hello
SC	:	Hello... Laugh Now ... Laugh Now....
T	:	Yes you can
SC	:	why? ...... laugh now? (Writing in air).
T	:	Why are you standing outside?
SC	:	Am I a good boy?
T	:	Yeah. You should go inside.
SC	:	If I stand here ... Am I a good boy?
T	:	Good boys will go inside
SC	:	Then what boy?
T	:	What boy?
SC	:	That boy
T	:	Tell me what boy
SC	:	That boy. ... Laugh now.

An individual may experience his own being as real, alive, whole as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness and worth- a firm core of ontological security. For an individual whose own being is secure in this primary experiential sense, relatedness with others is potentially gratifying. An autistic individual on the other hand, is ontologically preserving rather than gratifying and is pre-occupied with himself; the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his low threshold of security.

CONCLUSION

An autistic mind can operate in different domains, including those of mechanical action and interactive socialisation, but not at all or not well in that of intersubjective socialisation. The missing link is intersubjective interpretation. As a result, the autistic mind fails to develop normal metamentation. 'Metamental' means 'about mental' or thinking reflexively. Failures in communication are apt to resurface as failures of metamentation, not because communication shapes metamentation but because the design of both abilities is indebted to intersubjective interpretation. Like conversation, metamentation also operates in topic-comment formats and unfolds by maintaining topics through long sequences and changes of comments (24).

The way in which one conceptualises and reasons about others, has a major effect on how one interacts with them. Social interactions and experiences have a major influence on the child's social conceptions. The cognitive representations of particular people, the wishes and emotions attached to these representations, and the fantasies and fears about the Self and significant others are seen as critical in mediating interpersonal functioning. Some of our knowledge of who we are arises from introspection, but a great deal of our Self-image certainly comes from others. We do not know whether our communication has been successful or not until we can observe the reactions of others. So perception, thematisation and symbolisation are the important processes involved in the development of a coherent Self and other.

It has been shown in various experiments and research that individuals with autism have severe problems in areas like the 'theory of mind', symbolisation and thematisation. Consequently, autism is manifested as an abnormality in acquiring a coherent sense of Self and an effective intersubjective interaction. Every intersubjective interaction demands a sense of the other's mind, which is a chief means of giving meaning to

experience. Since these two aspects are impaired in autism, they have problems in social interaction. It is possible that individuals with autism may find it hard to distinguish between their internal (emotional, psychological, mental) and external (environmental, social and physical) worlds. They may find it difficult to recognise and understand their own experiences and their consequent feelings and emotions. The means of bridging the gap between Self and other is impaired. Besides this, autistic people lack joint attention and recognition of the perceptions and knowledge of others and this has devastating consequences for interpersonal relationships and social understanding.

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