Article

Can Muggles be Autistic?

Extreme and Exemplary Examples of Autism

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Abstract

This paper explores the tension between perceiving autism as a spectrum of traits or as a core. A spectrum is defined as a tension between two extremes. A core, on the other hand, is defined by an essence or a pervasive structure. I present the views of three autistic women that try to establish autism as a core, in which people with autism are separate from the rest of humankind and not extreme versions of humanity, the consequences of their statements are that there are no extreme versions of autism. Autism as a 'core' manifests itself in behavior (e.g. whether you hug others in distress or not, an example put forward by the women), which allows them to re-evaluate the diagnoses of fellow autistic humans. I argue that the worldview of the three women is exemplified by their use of examples, and that what could be considered as 'extreme examples' on a 'human spectrum', might represent 'ideal examples' in their view of the 'autistic spectrum'. Thinking about autism as a spectrum with its own examples allows us to understand the social dynamics of broadening the autism criteria. Furthermore, this article discusses how extreme examples can be used to create new wholes when spectrums are being broadened to the point of bursting.

Keywords

extreme examples, autism, Harry Potter, myths, identity

Introduction

This article explores the use of examples for autism brought forward by three autistic women and discusses how extreme examples can be used to create new wholes when spectrums are being broadened to the point of bursting. The word extreme comes from French *extrême* and from Latin *extremus* meaning – outer pole – as in furthest away from the middle center (Hårbøl, 1999). Extreme examples are

therefore always relational and are only extreme when seen from the outside in relation to the rest of the spectrum they are part of; extreme examples are an extreme version of something. According to *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Stevenson, 2010), a spectrum is defined in relation to the extremes of its range. This article builds on the premise that extreme examples are the outer poles of a spectrum and it draws on ethnographic data from an interview with three autistic women from Denmark who perceive autism as a core – in opposition to a spectrum characterized by varying degrees of autism. Their argumentation on the nature of autistic people as radically different from everybody else stands in opposition to dominant psychiatric ideas on autism as a diagnosis that can be altered and broadened (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Maenner et al., 2014; Volkmar & Reichow, 2013; World Health Organization, 1992). The three women I interviewed try to reconfigure what autism is by describing it through a metaphor based on the fictional novels on the wizard Harry Potter (Rowling, 2015) and through their own concept of the ‘autism core’. Building on the theory of Lévi-Strauss (1955) and his idea of the mythical thought, I analyse the women’s use of Harry Potter and the autism core, thus making their world accessible, independently of scientifically defined diagnostic criteria and labels otherwise given. Hence, I wish to provide an ethnographic entry point into how people with autism relate to each other. Moreover, grounded in an analysis of the women’s statements, I conclude that they do not think that an extreme version of autism exists or that autism is an extreme version of humankind. They argue that people cannot be extremely autistic, as they believe autism is something you either have or don’t. On this basis, I argue that identities that were previously perceived as extreme can be reconfigured as exemplary ones on a different spectrum.

Background

Autism is defined in the diagnostic manuals as a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, stereotyped or repetitive behaviour, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 1992). Once considered rare, autism is today being diagnosed in increasing numbers all over the world (Nassar et al., 2009). In Denmark alone the number has risen from 6.750 people diagnosed with a mental developmental disorder in 2013 to 14.300 people in 2018 (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2019). The numbers have gone up so much that some have described the trend as representing an ‘autism epidemic’ caused by social and historical changes (Eyal, 2010; Grinker, 2007; Hacking, 2007; Lawlor & Solomon, 2017; Seeberg & Christensen, 2017; Liu et al., 2010). A key change that favoured this trend was turning autism into a spectrum, positioning high-functioning people with Asperger’s syndrome at one end of the autism spectrum and children with mental retardation and severe chronic developmental disabilities at the other end of the spectrum (Feinstein, 2011; Wolff, 2004). The diagnostic manual (DSM) has been criticized for what has been seen as ‘expansionist’ tendencies and the general increase in psychiatric diagnoses is historically contingent rather than reflecting an increase in the reporting of symptoms (Rose, 2018). Moreover, the increase in diagnoses is

also linked to the broadening of the criteria for autism and the greater awareness of autism (Grinker, 2008).

Autism is often understood by biomedicine as having a genetic cause and hence an essence – so you either have it or you don't. However, autism is diagnosed on the basis of behaviours that are very diverse and that result in a great variety of symptoms and degrees of severity, people can appear more or less autistic and are thus defined from high to low functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Autism has often been presented as a distinct ontological category by biomedicine despite its heterogeneity (Verhoeff, 2012) and the official name is 'autism spectrum disorder', a name given so that the diagnoses can encompass its whole diversity (Feinstein, 2011; Wolff, 2004). Cascio (2015) notes similarly that it is difficult today to come to terms with what autism is, because it has so many names. Sometimes it is simply just called autism, other times it is called autism spectrum disorder (singular) or autism spectrum disorders (plural), autism spectrum conditions, the autism spectrum or even just 'the spectrum'. Whether autism is an essence or a spectrum, is therefore unclear. Autism pioneer and psychologist Frith (2014) similarly asks within the debate on the nature of autism: 'Should we only believe in continua and quantitative differences, or by contrast in categorical and qualitative differences?' She expresses a known tension between understanding autism as a continuum of humankind or as so radically different that it becomes something more, a category of its own.

It is within this discussion that this article takes its point of departure and positions itself within the growing body of anthropological literature on autistic identity and sociality, framing autistic people as active and social members of communities (Christensen, 2021; Fein, 2015a, 2015b; Ochs, et. al., 2004; Ochs & Solomon, 2010; Silverman, 2008; Solomon, 2010, 2015). Nevertheless, it sets itself apart by revealing some social tensions generated within autistic communities as a direct consequence of the broadening of the diagnostic criteria. Within the autism communities and science on autism, the concept of neurodiversity (Cascio, 2015; Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Ortega & Choudhury, 2011; Silverman, 2015) has been a way to approach autism, by framing it as a difference rather than a deficit. It is to be treated not as a disability, but as a natural human variation. People with autism argue that there are many ways for the brain to be 'wired' and that the human spectrum is very diverse, so being autistic is one way and being neurotypical ('normal') is another, although both are equally good (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). In line with this perspective, in anthropological literature autism has often been presented as a different way of being in the world (Ochs et. al 2004; Ochs & Solomon, 2010; Prince-Hughes, 2004). The primary reason for framing autism as a neurodiversity has been to argue in favour of human rights and as part of critical disability studies (O'Dell et al, 2016), with autism understood as a way to be different on the broader human spectrum, or in other words with the 'autistic spectrum' representing a segment of the 'human spectrum'. Fein (2015), in particular, has worked on subcultures of autism and how autism identi-

ties were reconfigured through role-playing camps. She shows a deep consolidation between autism communities, sociality and identity.

The present article is also placed within a much larger discussion on shared identities (Finke & Sökefeld, 2018) and provides insights into the lived experience of biological identity explanations (Hacking, 2006; Rabinow, 2010), by focusing on the demarcations for membership in the subculture of Danish autistic females. More broadly, this paper contributes to our understanding of the use of examples within anthropology. Whereas the three women aim to define autism and to spread the idea of the 'autism core', this article aims to understand examples used in creating or for maintaining group identities.

The Autism Core

The fieldwork for this article was carried out in Denmark from 2014 to 2015 (with a follow-up in 2019) at two special institutions and included 20 in-depth interviews with parents of autistic children. This paper is based on one of those interviews, a three-hour-long interview that took place in 2015 in a remote meeting room at the Moesgaard Campus of Aarhus University (Denmark). It was a semi-structured interview that was afterwards transcribed and analysed by focussing on the lived experiences and perception of autism of three Danish women who have been diagnosed with autism and have autistic children. This interview stood out from the rest of the fieldwork; the three women participated in a focus-group interview, instead of individual in-depth interviews, the main reason for doing this was to expand my knowledge on autism, adulthood and friendship. I had met the women at a Danish autism conference. Prior to the interview, all the questions were sent to the women, giving them the opportunity to prepare, which reduced the stress for them and was a condition for them to participate. The interview was, therefore, characterized by a predetermined structure, but the women had a clear point they wanted to make, and this meant that some questions were given more attention than others, so in this sense the interview was open and flexible. The interview was followed by a series of emails continuing our dialogue, to make sure that the prevailing messages had been correctly understood by me and to further explore some of the topics addressed. The interviewees were three friends: Anja, Stinne, and Pernille, all women in their 40s, who see the increase in diagnoses in previous years as problematic; this informed our conversation on what autism is. The women all had an interest in understanding their own diagnoses. They went to autism conferences and kept updated on the development of the science on autism. It was at an autism conference that I met the three women, and I wanted to get to know their experiences living with autism as friends, parents, and as people who were diagnosed themselves. Besides these three women, a support person participated in the interview. Her job was to help Anja in communicating with others and in dealing with new situations. She also helped the others during the interview, making sure that they got the breaks and structure they needed.

Anja was the most eye-catching of the three; she entered the interview room with a Darth Vader mask on for reasons unknown to me. Underneath the mask was a former 'Miss Denmark' and participant in a 'Miss World' beauty pageant, at which Anja met her first husband, who was her bodyguard. Together they had a son. Later Anja had two girls with another man. All three of her children have received an autism diagnosis, and at the age of 38 Anja also got hers. From inside her Darth Vader mask, she told me that she is a 'servant idiot', meaning that she was good at recognizing patterns and that she had several unfinished degrees, but also a diagnosis.

As we sat down by the long table, next to Anja was Stinne, a quiet woman dressed in pale pink with matching necklace and her hair firmly pulled back into a ponytail. She and her son both have autism. Stinne was educated in communication and culture studies and worked for the municipality. She sat still on her chair with a straight back throughout the interview.

Lastly was Pernille. Like the others, she and her children have autism. Despite the winter light that shone brightly through the window and the pumping radiators making the heat intense, Pernille had her green padded jacket on and headphones around her neck. Besides autism, the women have other diagnoses including anxiety, OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), and depression. All three have ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder); this was most noticeable in Pernille, who struggled with keeping on the subject of the conversation. The women had agreed to participate in the interview because they hoped to reverse the recent rise in autism diagnoses by presenting their views on autism.

According to Stinne, Pernille, and Anja, the differences between people with and without autism depend on the core of one's development. They define the core as the structure that delineates all of a person's being, perception and personality and most importantly – it sets autistic people apart from other people. One can have a neurotypical psychological developmental core, which they told me is the case of people without autism. Pernille, Anja, and Stinne call those people *Muggles*, a concept from the universe of Harry Potter (Rowling, 1997) that describes people without the ability to perform magic. Harry Potter (Rowling, 2015) is a series of seven fantasy novels about a young Wizard, written by the British author J.K. Rowling who describes two kinds of people: people with magic and people without magic. Borrowing words from here, the women claim, one can have an autism 'developmental core', or in other words be a *Wizard* with a different development and way of thinking than the Muggles. Within these two groups of Muggles and Wizards, there is much diversity.

'People are different', Anja told me, 'but categories have characteristic features, and they are important to our communication and understanding'. She elaborated on this by explaining that people with autism are not just 'different' from Muggles

but have a disability that is more or less dependent on the environment and the opportunities they are given. This means that if the autistic person is very stressed, the symptoms of autism become more apparent, whilst if the autistic person is less stressed, the symptoms become less apparent. Whether the symptoms are more or less manifested does not mean that autism disappears because the core is always there. Nobody is more autistic than others, but the symptoms might be more or less extreme/mild on an individual basis.

At one point during the interview, the support person interjected, commenting on the diagnostic criteria and changes that were expected. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association released the fifth edition of the DSM (2013) in which changes were made to the criteria for diagnosing autism. The interviewees expected that the next time the diagnostic manual used in Denmark (ICD) would be reviewed, it would be changed by taking into account the changes made in the fifth edition of the DSM. That would mean that the pervasive definition of autism would be deleted and that the sub-diagnoses (Asperger syndrome, infantile autism, and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified) previously used to specify the autism diagnosis would be consolidated under one umbrella diagnosis of ‘autism spectrum disorder’. So, instead of being given a specific diagnosis such as Asperger syndrome or infantile autism, all would just be labelled as having autism. On the other hand, people with autism would be assigned levels of 1, 2, or 3, with level 3 being the most severe (extreme), depending on the severity of their disorder and need for support.

The support person had also heard that clinicians were already taking the revision into account when diagnosing, for example by no longer using the Asperger Syndrome diagnosis because it will soon be superseded anyway. The support person suggested that this could be very problematic, especially the removal of the pervasive description in the diagnoses, because she considered it very good at making people understand what autism is. She was deeply concerned, and she wanted the women to comment on this. Anja commented that it felt like reverting all the recent years of progress in the understanding of autism, because it was important and fitted their view that autism is pervasive. She joked that since they (i.e. ‘clinician Muggles’) do this, it is they who have a disorder in their development.

The new social situation created by changes in the diagnostic criteria on categorization and gender, as well as increase in numbers, was obstructing the order and system of the world. Not only did the women fear that this would affect how they would be viewed, as it would change other people’s expectations towards them, but also that it would confuse categories of identity and generally create chaos. Anja indicated that some women were given the autism diagnosis, albeit without qualifying for one: ‘And then we are back to the thing about girls and diagnoses – they make too many mistakes’, she said.

Another rumour that the women confirmed, was that ‘more pink coats were filling the wardrobes at the psychiatric department’, insinuating that more girls than previously were being diagnosed. This was a concern for the women, because they feared it was based on the unsubstantiated notion that there is ‘a special girls’ profile’ (Eriksen, 2015; Kyung, 2011). This girls’ profile caused women and girls who were more socially skilled to be diagnosed under the assumption that they strategically hide their disabilities (Landsforeningen Autisme, 2014). Anja added that she did not understand this: ‘it is not the woman that has autism, it is the human. There can, therefore, be no such thing as a girl’s profile.’ She reasoned: ‘One of the distortions we, unfortunately, experience is that girls who deviate from the autism core are categorized as autistic. It is important to keep a clear description of the autism core’, she stressed.

Figure 1: Neorotypical core by Anja Hende

After the interview, Anja sent me two pictures illustrating the differences between Muggles and Wizards, which illustrate the differences in being. The pictures show atom-like structures with either an autism core (i.e. nucleus) or a neurotypical psychological development core, orbited (as electrons) by ADHD (with an engine in the background), OCD, sleeping disorder, stress, the senses, etc. On the backdrop of these atom-like structures were concepts such as logic, rituals, social gatherings, stomach aches, facts, depression, etc. The two atoms were similar with the exception of their nuclei or, as Anja called them, their cores. This detail means that although the two pictures are at first sight similar, according to Anja they are actually very different, because the core affects all other parts of the atom, as the expression of all parts changes depending on whether the person has an 'autism core' or not. Just like in the old diagnostic criteria autism is pervasive according to Anja, as opposed to the present criteria.

Figure 2: Autism core by Anja Hende

Harry Potter as an Explanatory Myth

A key fictional character for understanding the women's perspectives on the autism core is Harry Potter. The story is about the life of a young Harry Potter and his friends at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as they fight the evil Lord Voldemort and his plans to become immortal, overthrow the Wizard governing body (the Ministry of Magic) and subjugate all Wizards and Muggles (people without magic). The magic world of Harry Potter is hidden and unknown to the Muggles, and it is thus a parallel world. Within the magical world, the 'good Wizards' fight evil and therefore there is also a divide between people with magic – Wizards – and without – Muggles. The story of Harry Potter has captured the collective imagination worldwide, not only through bestselling books, but also as a result of the movies inspired by them. Moreover, the 'Harry Potter theme' has also been used as a driver for tourism, ranging from the promotion of visits to localities used for filming to the creation of tourist attractions and festivals devoted to the Harry Potter saga. The universe of Harry Potter has become an element of popular culture and thus has great appeal for many people (Alderton, 2014; Apostolides & Meylahn, 2014; Kidd, 2007).

Anja, Stinne, Pernille and their children¹ use the story of Harry Potter as a way to describe themselves as radically different beings. They identify themselves as Wizards in contrast to the majority of people whom they see as Muggles. In Stinne, Anja and Pernille's version of autism, an autistic person is a very different being, similarly to a Wizard in a Muggles' world. The world of Harry Potter offers a popular universe to perceive how a group of people can be radically different from the rest of humankind and still differ within itself at the same time. Just like in the debate on autism, Wizards are not defined in relation to extremes, but rather in relation to an essence or better a core – magic.

What is striking about this use of Harry Potter as a metaphor is that Muggles and Wizards live in two different or parallel worlds. The three women draw on the universe of Harry Potter as a parallel between relations, where the relations they see in the universe of Harry Potter can be transferred to the world they experience, not unlike the function of myths. Lévi-Strauss' (1955) structuralist approach to myths presupposes that the unconscious structure in myths is used by people to relate to the world around them. When the women feared that the expansion and changes in the diagnostic criteria would confuse the categorization of their identity, they adopted their own classification of autism to prevent chaos. Without the ability to classify and, therefore, separate, we have to assume that everything would be like a simultaneous, undivided, chaotic whole.

¹ In fact, it was one of their children that had first come up with the idea of calling the non-autistic people, Muggles.

According to Lévi-Strauss, an important part of mythical thinking revolves around keeping separate that which needs to be kept separate. In *The Savage Mind* (1966), Lévi-Strauss argues that totemic classifications are part of a *the science of the concrete*; it is a proto-scientific classificatory system enabling tribal individuals to classify the world in a rational, coherent fashion. This, he argued, is a general human trait. Classification systems are part of the human mind and language. As Anja puts it: ‘we have categories so we can communicate’. How these categories take their form is a matter of culture, but it also becomes an argument for autism as a core, given that for Anja all categories are defined by their core or common feature. Put differently, if the outermost extremes become blurred, then they can no longer define what a spectrum is – in this case what autism is – and the spectrum becomes an undivided chaotic whole which then includes incorrectly-diagnosed individuals (i.e. Muggles).

The pseudo-mythical parallelism aims to show that the women are different from the majority of people, but at the same time exemplary. By identifying with Harry Potter, the three women argue both for their special needs as well as for their ‘more-than-human’ identity because Wizards are ‘humans plus magic’ and for this reason go to a special school (Hogwarts). My interlocutors (more broadly than the three women I interviewed) focused often on the qualities of people with autism in an effort to give a nuanced account of what autism can be. They highlighted virtues such as being unjudgmental, honest, creative, concentrated, resolute, fair and passionate. Anja has a high IQ, is good at recognizing patterns, and can concentrate for hours, all of which she highlighted by referring to herself as a ‘savant idiot’², in an effort to accommodate both her strengths and challenges. The environmental activist Greta Thunberg has called her Asperger’s Syndrome (one of the subcategories for autism) a superpower (Limburg, 2019). This is also in line with the neurodiversity movement that sees autism more as a difference than a deficit (Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Ortega & Choudhury, 2011; Runswick-Cole, 2014). In my view, the three women I interviewed want to balance having a disability with strong and positive skills so that they can contribute to the world. In this respect, Anja, Stinne and Pernille are good examples of autism because they have all the superpowers that are considered good autistic qualities.

To play with the idea born from the three women, the Harry Potter metaphor can be taken a long way. The autism-rights activist Jim Sinclair writes that a person with autism is a foreigner in every society (Sinclair, 2012: 2). This feeling of not belonging and not relating to fellow humans might be the same feeling that the three women express when they draw on Harry Potter as a good metaphor for autism. Throughout the Harry Potter books, the reader is led to consider magic as something valuable, while in the world of the Muggles it is something to hide that makes Wizards stand out. It is not unproblematic to be Wizards despite their su-

² Referring to her diagnosis ‘savant-syndrome’, which is a rare condition in which people with significant mental disabilities demonstrate certain abilities that far exceed average skills within a field (e.g. maths, music, art).

perpowers. Even though Harry Potter is the hero of the saga, his magic is neither appreciated nor allowed in the world of the Muggles. On several occasions, Harry Potter gets in trouble and is discriminated by the Muggles because of his magic.

Jenkins (2015) has defined mental illness as an ‘extraordinary condition’, and she calls mental illness a life on the edge of experience. Even though autism is not a mental illness but a disability or radically different way of being, it should perhaps be understood as the extraordinary condition of being extremely human, rather than not very human as Collins points out:

Autists are described by others – and by themselves – as aliens among humans. But there’s an irony to this, for precisely the opposite is true. They are us, and to understand them is to begin to understand what it means to be human. Think of it: a disability is usually defined in terms of what is missing ... But autism is *an ability and a disability*: it is as much about what is abundant as what is missing, an overexpression of the very traits that make our species unique. Other animals are social, but only humans are capable of abstract logic. The autistic outhumans the humans, and we can scarcely recognize the result. (Collins, 2004, p. 161).

Being at the extremes is rarely flattering, although as the quote above states, perhaps with autism it is different. What Collins (2004) describes is exactly the feeling of being alien but in a way that is more human than human. This does not mean that the women only want to be in the category of the skilled people with autism, but rather they pointed out that they shared the same core as people with autism who have mental retardation and no language.

A common refrain among some of the people affected by autism that I worked with is that ‘if you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism’. In other words, the variation in autism is so large that it might be difficult to recognize the shared characteristics of autism. The notion that autism covers a large diversity is also one of the reasons for framing it as a spectrum. The National Institute of Mental Health (2018) in the United States argues that ‘autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience’. However, the women explained that they are able to identify the ‘autism core’ based on a code of social conduct. For instance, observing the reactions to social demands can help identify a direct link between behaviour and core, with specific kinds of behaviour being markers of categories of belonging. Within this mind-frame, they identify their fellow diagnosed as good (= ‘correct’) or bad (= ‘incorrect’) cases of autism.

Good and Bad Examples of Autism

The women elaborated further on the consequences of the increase in the diagnoses of autism, particularly among girls: 'There is something that is noisy for us. We meet more and more women in autism forums where we cannot recognize that they have autism. It is really disrupting our picture. They do not have the autism core'. They elaborated more on their opinion, explaining that even if these 'new' girls have some of the symptoms, there is something in them that does not conform with autism.

Pernille explained that she had a strange experience in a physical meeting for women with autism, where a woman had raised a question on how to handle a family problem. Pernille had given the woman some concrete advice, writing it up in bullet points on the board to debate it from a logical point of view. To her surprise, however, her fellow-autism-diagnosed had been more interested in receiving hugs from some of the other people present. Pernille explained that it was almost alienating for her to stand in what she thought was a safe zone for autistic behaviour and then be met with the social demands of Muggles. She just stood there with a blank face. Anja added that all people with blank faces present on that occasion would have had autism. Whereas all the people saying 'schmoopsie schmoopsie' and who were giving hugs were considered by Anja to be misdiagnosed.

A similar example was given by Stinne: 'What did you think of her on Facebook, that just wanted a hug?' Stinne asked the others. 'Hmm' both Anja and Pernille nodded in agreement. 'It was a mother that wrote that she was upset because she had lost contact with her grown-up daughter. And then I wrote something very specific'. Anja interjected, 'and there were 60 people that wrote something like hugs to you and stuff like that'. Stinne responded: 'Yes, and I wrote matters of fact. I was being practical. What a possible explanation could be for why her daughter could have rejected her. And there was just no response to what I wrote. But all the hugs and best wishes got so many likes and hearts. And that was apparently what helped her'. Anja interrupted once more: 'Yes, they get so upset with us'. To which Stinne responded, 'but hadn't she asked what she should do? And then she cannot use an answer, but she could use a hug?' Stinne was puzzled.

All three women agreed that those who offered hugs and the women accepting them could not be autistic, and neither could the people who took too many selfies and posted a lot. This is not part of the social code of autism because it does not reflect 'getting socially exhausted'. For the three women, 'the hug' becomes a marker for distinguishing Muggles from Wizards, independently from their autism diagnoses. Autistic people are known for having and preferring explicit intentions and concrete language. 'People with autism are direct and not polite', Stinne explained to me. This is just one difference between how people with autism and Muggles socialize, with the hug identified as another marker for in which social world one belongs. The social life in autism forums had previously been dictated by a narrow group of people according to whom there were autistic ways of doing

things and socializing following specific norms and conduct. But the constant broadening of the spectrum and rise in diagnoses has changed these social dynamics. The three women find it problematic when people who do not conform to the social codes of autistic behaviour (e.g., no hugging) are being let into their group and are at the same time given access to the help, identity, and support granted to people with autism.

In their understanding of autism, there are qualities connected to an autistic ‘figured world’ (Holland et al. 2001) that involve a ‘special way of socializing’, which includes social fatigue and practical approaches to problems, thus becoming markers for correct examples of autism and of whom has been wrongly placed on the spectrum. To act in accordance with one’s being has often been linked to authenticity. Within the science on authenticity and mental disorder, the focus has been on the internal conflict between how one feels alienated within oneself, for example by medication or by the disability/illness (Erler & Hope, 2014). In this case, however, the alienation is caused by what is perceived as an outer source, namely through the effects of new diagnoses on who is part of a group within which the three women feel pushed to the margins or even beyond the extremes. In the case of Pernille’s autism gathering, she felt alienated because what she understands as autism-related behaviour is being challenged by the behaviour of the newly diagnosed Muggle girls. According to the three women, this alienation is happening because the new diagnoses force them to be more like the other humans (i.e., the Muggles) to whom they appear as lesser people.

There is a paradox in that the women alienate themselves from the human spectrum, in order to become more human. Defining autism through symptoms and their severity conveys more importance to the extremes of the spectrum, implying not only that one can be more or less autistic but perhaps also that people with autism fall within the general human spectrum, representing extreme examples of some rigid human behaviours and even bad examples of social people. Anja, Pernille, and Stinne believe their way of socializing differs from that of the Muggles, making them ‘bad examples’ on the Muggles spectrum since they don’t ‘fit in’. Now they experience the same thing is happening with the autism spectrum. As a consequence of Muggles being wrongly diagnosed, they feel as though they no longer conform and have become bad examples of their own disorder.

The view held by clinicians – that criteria for autism should be broadened – is making autism flexible and placing it on the outer pole of the human spectrum. This constitutes a grey area in which people might have mild autism or autism-like symptoms, personality, or even a so-called girl’s profile. A consequence of introducing increasingly diverse people into the spectrum (e.g., those with mild autism or autism-like symptoms, personality or an autistic gender-dependent profile) is that the perception of the ‘exemplary type’ of autism is altered. Autism pioneer Frith (2008) notes that the reporting of ‘classic autism’ cases has become rarer, given that it is mild or moderate degrees of autism she now sees. Seeing autism as a spectrum ranging from mild to severe is being undermined by the current trend

with more and more girls being diagnosed, which is upsetting the balance through the inclusion of more mild autism cases. Since the ‘special girls’ profile’ has been introduced and clinicians have started to account for gender, the three women no longer feel that they can live up to the (new) exemplary types for autism.

All spectrums have outer poles and extremities, but these are only defined as such relative to the span of the spectrum. In my view, the women responded to this by generating their own classification of autism by deciding what cases are good and bad examples of autistic people. In this way, they have created an entire theory of autism as they try to create a ‘new whole’. This new whole is not in direct competition with the human scale and has its own normative examples to draw from, as well as exemplary examples to live up to. Anja, Stinne and Pernille were not interested in being categorized simply as different, neither do they want to be viewed as socially disabled within their own group.

To stay within the Harry Potter metaphor to reach a deeper analytic insight, it could be stated that some are more Wizards than others. In Harry Potter, there is a definition of ‘pure-blooded’, which are people without Muggle blood, in opposition to ‘mud-bloods’, people without magical blood but with magical skills. When reading the Harry Potter books, the phrase of mud-blood and pure-blood echoes the Nazi phrases on the theory on a pure race. This is not what Anja, Pernille, and Stinne aim at when they call people without autism Muggles. The anthropologist Carsten (2011) has described blood as a matter of belonging and kinship. Similarly, what is at stake for the three women, is a matter of belonging and recognition, because the changes created by the newly-diagnosed girls blur the borders of their own category and does not make them ‘feel at home’ anymore in it. Since the new kind of girls have received the label of Wizards, but do not have the magic, they simply have the diagnosis but neither the behaviour nor the core.

This could be expressed within the Harry Potter metaphor as them not being ‘pure-blooded’ and perhaps not even Wizards at all. In this sense, there are two spectrums: the neurotypical spectrum and the autism spectrum, and the problem with the ‘new kind of girls’ is that they blur the boundaries between the two. The new kind of girls are ‘incorrect examples’ and therefore ‘bad examples’, and this creates problems for the women because they are supposed to share an identity. In this sense, the three women add value to the people representing examples of autism, and some are better examples than others. Anja and Stinne’s friendship even partly arose from Anja calling Stinne full-blooded, meaning that she felt a sense of kinship with her, a connection. The words and the writing style of Stinne in an email had convinced Anja that Stinne had the ‘autism core’ (i.e., was pure-blooded). In this way, Stinne was a good and correct example of an autistic woman. By using a fictional character like Harry Potter, the women are not trying to say that he has autism, but this well-known fictional character becomes an explanatory example for some of the experiences the women have: feeling like an outcast, living in a parallel world, having a special gift.

Bursting the spectrum

Suhr (2015) and Forbess (2015) have both pointed to the power of bad examples, as they can be the best examples to give insights into normative understandings. In the same way, the three women are bad examples of what is understood as preferably normative on the two spectrums (Wizards and Muggles) and, consequently, they feel they have nowhere to belong anymore. Suhr also adds that bad examples can serve to establish a sense of direction, so that humans know which way not to go (Suhr, 2015: 101).

This is interesting in relation to the three women, because the people they see as bad examples – the new kind of girls – are evidence for Anja, Stinne and Pernille that something is going the wrong way. That someone is considered a bad example is a sign of tension within the group and the consolidation of autism according to the new diagnostic criteria was experienced as homogenizing the group, creating further alienation. The dichotomy between the two kinds of people, Wizards and Muggles, became a way to reconfigure what autism is by applying it to new examples and exemplars. ‘Much like the good ethnographic example or exemplar, an exemplary type reveals new connections and manages to reconfigure things through a revelatory and clarifying analytical practice’ (Højer & Bandak, 2015: 5). What I would like to take from this is that the women are trying to establish a theory based on a classic understanding of autism with the fictional story of Harry Potter, to create a new narrative (or perhaps just to keep the old) of what autism is and who can be given the diagnosis. The women do this by trying to create a new spectrum for autism outside the neurotypical human spectrum. By applying a bottom-up model, by stating the power of examples used by my interlocutors, it becomes clear that extreme examples are means through which to change theories. Suhr (2015) and Forbess (2015) argue that bad examples entail a tension, I suggest that perhaps so do extreme examples. Extreme examples highlight a crisis, a crisis that tries to establish a new whole by going from being extreme to exemplary.

Extreme examples are the outer poles of spectrums and there is nothing beyond them, so it is problematic for the three women that the ‘new girls’ bridge the gap between the autism spectrum and the neurotypical spectrum. The women were therefore not interested in what was extreme autistic behaviour but rather in the cases characterized by *extremely little* autism – and this scared them because for them the spectrum of autism was not based on outer poles but on its core. The women wanted to change the idea that there is such a thing as a girl’s profile or mild autism and did so through their theory on the ‘autism core’. The three women were not just making sense of the world through examples but wanted to change the world through them and aimed to create a new and improved autism paradigm - a new whole. If the autism spectrum is continuously broadened, the question is where the borders are, who belongs to the spectrum and based on what criteria. When spectrums are being broadened to the point of bursting, what were previously extreme examples might be reconfigured into exemplary examples.

Being extreme entails a kind of otherness, because it involves becoming distant from the average. The concept of otherness is also embedded in the idea of neurodiversity as expressed by Murray: 'Indeed, it is the *personification* of difference and otherness: a person, just like you or me (so the argument runs), who is in fact nothing like you or me, but rather subject to a condition that supposedly defies logic and understanding' (2006: 25). The question that is being raised by the women is whether it is preferable being different (or an extreme version) on the human spectrum or being exemplary examples on their own spectrum. On a spectrum, it is not the average that makes the differences in comparisons but the extremes. Extremes are important because it is at the outer poles that tension towards and distance from others are highlighted. It is the extremes that tip the balance.

Brinkman et. al. (2014) argue that Danish society has become a 'society of diagnoses' and diagnoses are given increasingly, including in the case of autism and probably because of the expansion in diagnostic criteria (Gernsbacher, 2008). When sub-categories such as 'a girl's profile' and 'mild autism' more frequently qualify for an autism diagnosis, this introduces a new level on the spectrum, tipping the balance from a dominance of classic autism cases to mild autism ones. As a result, what were previously classic or good examples no longer constitute good examples due to the new preponderance of mild autism/girls' profile. When the balance tips, classic examples are pushed further down the spectrum to less functional or more severe levels. Expanding spectrums by pushing the extremes further apart might result in bursting the spectrum, and paradoxically this is one way to avoid becoming an extreme example. What anthropology, in general, can take from this analysis is that people who feel incorrectly pushed to an extreme position do not necessarily see themselves as anything other than exemplary examples on another spectrum.

Conclusion

In the light of this study, I find it striking that debates on broadening the autism spectrum have paid so little attention to the experiences of autistic people themselves. The literature on autism has overlooked the possible in-group tensions. There are, of course, good reasons for broadening the criteria. Early interventions can make a big difference in the outcome for the affected people (Andersen & Bay, 2002) and early recognition of the problems and subsequent support are likely to improve the quality of life for people with autism (Laursen, 2014).

However, the story of Anja, Stinne and Pernille shows us that a broadening in the criteria has generated an alienation for these autistic women both from their diagnoses and from their fellow humans. The three women I have introduced have experienced a move along the entire spectrum from exemplary to bad examples, and now they attempt to get back to being exemplary examples by taking up the extreme position of dividing people into the two categories of Wizards and Muggles. By excluding some of their fellow diagnosed as bad or incorrect examples for autism, the women try to restore the balance on the autism spectrum, which they

experience as being distorted by new concepts such as ‘the girls’ profile’. By creating a new understanding of good and bad examples for the autism spectrum, the women constitute a new whole, in which they are not the outer poles but exemplary examples for autism. From this, we learn not only how people with autism relate to each other on the spectrum but also about the power of creating examples as a way to give meaning to the world and, at the same time, as a tool for altering it. Extreme examples moving further apart on the spectrum not only creates tension but also risks eroding and bursting spectrums.

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