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Another Way to Approach Theory of Mind (and Lack of It)

Olga Bogdashina

It has been noticed that autistic people find it hard to perceive the mental states of others and it has been suggested that the central feature of autism is an inability to infer another person's views, that is, they lack understanding of what other people are thinking, feeling, intending to do, etc.; in extreme cases autistic children may have no concept of mind at all (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985; Frith 1989). This inability has been termed lack of Theory of Mind (ToM) or 'mindblindness'. This theory seemed to explain a lot in 'autistic behaviours', and it was enthusiastically welcomed by the researchers and developed further. Numerous experiments have been conducted in order to prove that, unlike normally developing children and children with other developmental disabilities, autistic individuals cannot understand and predict actions of others. New terms have been coined that have spread rapidly in the field: 'mind-blindness' and 'mind-reading'.

ToM theory has stimulated a great amount of research and a lot of criticism. Numerous studies have shown that ToM cannot be a primary impairment in autism. Paradoxically, however, despite the growing evidence that ToM difficulties are secondary to some primary (and as yet unidentified) deficit(s) in autism, the theory of ToM theory has grown in popularity among professionals working with autistic individuals. Having failed to explain the development of autism, this theory has proven to be very useful when applied to practical work with people with ASDs because it gives professionals and parents explanations of what otherwise have been seen as idiosyncratic behaviours, and provides ideas on how to address these problems. So-called lack of ToM in autistic children implies a different interpretation of 'rudeness' and 'deliberate stubbornness', as well as suggests the necessity to explain explicitly our intentions and emotions.

The downside of this theory is one-sidedness – it implies that there must be only one ToM for all people, and either you develop it (and become 'normal'), or you fail to develop ToM (that indicates autism). The proponents of the ToM theory state that the ability to understand one's own and others' minds appears to occur spontaneously in childhood. In autism, however, this lack of ability leads to many developmental abnormalities which are characteristic of the disorder (Howlin et al. 1999). But is the development of ToM always spontaneous, independent from any other variables?

Let us consider several scenarios:

Mother hugs her baby and smiles to show happiness and affection. The baby responds to the hug feeling happy and loved. They share experience and the first seed of ToM is planted. If the same happens to the baby who feels pain when being touched, would the baby learn that the smile means affection?

Mother is angry with her toddler and punishes him by sending him to his room. The child learns that Mummy is cross because he has misbehaved. Another toddler (who has experienced sensory overload) suddenly finds himself in the safety of his own bedroom. The lesson has been learned: the 'punishment' (from the mother's point of view) means affection for the child.

It is true that autistic people lack ToM and are ‘mind-blind’ to the thoughts, feelings and intentions of those around them. Non-autistic people’s behaviours become unpredictable and confusing to an individual with autism. However, are non-autistic people ‘mind-sighted’ when they deal with persons with autism? Do they easily recognise feelings and intentions of individuals with ASDs? Considering that autistic and non-autistic people do not share perceptual experiences due to differences in perceptual and cognitive mechanisms, don’t non-autistic people find difficult to take autistic individuals’ perspectives? If autistic people lack Theory of Mind, then non-autistic individuals are sure to have deficits in the ability to understand the Theory of Autistic Mind. If we could remove one-sidedness from our interpretation of ‘mind-blindness’, we would see how limited we are in our ability to ‘mind-read’. “Thus both, the autistic and non-autistic alike, in relation to each other are ‘mindblind’. Independently, they are not, together they are: Each is mindblind to the other” (Myer et al. 2004, p.57)

From the very beginning of the ‘official history’ of autism (Kanner 1943), the syndrome of autism was described from the outside, how it looks, rather than how it feels from the inside. Now we can get a unique opportunity to learn what it is like to live with autism. Numerous personal accounts have been published and many autistic individuals are willing to talk at conferences and congresses about their experiences. The autistic authors feel they have to give their side of the story as hundreds of books on autism written by professionals and parents often get it wrong. They want to clarify things and their views must be taken seriously. They want us to know what it is like to live with a nervous system that functions differently, what it is like to be different, what it is like to be misunderstood and mistreated.

Autistic people become aware that they are different but they do not know why. They often find it difficult to take another person’s perspective. However, to be logical, neurotypical people (NTs – non-autistic people) are also aware that they are different from autistic people, and they do not know why yet. NTs also find it difficult to take the perspective of a person with autism. So, let us look at the ‘autistic interpretation’ of autism and let them explain autism to us. They know a great deal more about autism than most non-autistic people. Let us take it on trust that they know what they are talking about. Of course, each individual gives his or her personal perspective on autism which may not coincide with each other.

Nevertheless, despite the differences, there are many similarities that can be seen in their accounts. All people have ToM and it has its validity and makes points of what is noticeable. However, every person has a different kind of ToM. ToM of autistic people is different from people who do not have autism. The way that people with autism think is just as valid as the thoughts of people without autism (Bovee Undated). Because autistic people see most normal people as seeming to assume everyone is like themselves, and would react as they would in the same situation, normal people may often seem as ToM-less NTs to many individuals with autism (Blackburn 1999).

Let us consider the claim that autistic people ‘may not even know that they have minds and may be unable to think about their own thoughts’. Non-autistic children are not born with a ‘ready-made’ Theory of (Non-Autistic) Mind. They develop it usually by the age of four. As their thought-processes are similar to those around them and develop in accordance with ‘normal lines of development’, they soon become very successful in ‘reading minds’. Autistic individuals may learn to read (non-autistic) minds later on in life, and using qualitatively

different cognitive strategies and mechanisms. As a result, they are not quite successful in applying this theory in every-day life, with rapidly changing social situations, where they have to analyse each change as it comes. Given time they may be able to come to the right conclusion, but may not pick up on certain aspects of an interaction until they are considering it hours or days later (Blackburn 1999). On the other hand, non-autistic people are often unaware of their own oddities, as seen by autistic eyes, but quick to detect the odd in a person with ASD (Meyerding Undated).

ToM as a theoretical construct, may be very useful not only when dealing with autistic and non-autistic populations, but also with different groups of people closely involved personally or professionally. For example, do professionals working from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days a week and coming home ‘free from autism’ for a weekend understand thoughts, feelings and behaviours of parents of an autistic child living with autism 24 hours a day, seven days a week? (I wish they could!) Though it is possible to imagine what it is like theoretically, in practice it is a different matter. They do not share experiences and that is why their Theories of Mind do not coincide. Teachers, psychologists and other professionals will not always see things the same way that a parent does. This can be very frustrating, as the parents have actually to fight for their children against ignorance of others (Lawson 2001).

Using the Theory of (Different) Minds as a framework, we could approach autism through the ToM of three large groups of people, united by shared experiences: autistic people, their parents (or significant others, living with them) and professionals working (directly or indirectly) with autistic individuals and their families. It is natural that individuals within these groups are likely to have different views on certain issues. For example, different parents may have different ideas about treatments for their child because their views are formed by their particular experiences, backgrounds and environment, i.e. there are different theories of parents’ mind. And it is impossible to expect all the members of the given group to agree on all the issues. What unites them, however, is that the effects of autism, although they may vary in each particular case, tend to have a lot of similar features.

As we have developed different strategies to teach autistic children ‘mind-reading’ (see, for example, Baron-Cohen 2003), we have to do the same for their parents (‘mind-reading’ of other parents who disagree with our views) and for professionals (‘mind-reading’ of parents). Unfortunately, it is quite common for professionals to be mind-blind when dealing with the parents of autistic children. But it is the parents who have to cope with broken nights, violent outbursts, bizarre behaviours and tantrums. And it is doubly hard to know that you have not got much time to change things (as one day you will not be there to provide the care for your child). When the parents experience a lack of understanding and empathy, their frustration is difficult to imagine. Educating professionals and autistic people in ToPM is a necessity.

However, parents need to learn the theory of autistic mind as well (at least, be aware that autistic people have feelings and interpretations of what is going on around them, that may be very different from the perspective of others). And it is true not only for high-functioning autistic and Asperger Syndrome people. So called low-functioning autistic individuals may be hurt by the attitude when their parents think their children do not understand much of what is going on.

The discussion of perspectives (formed by different experiences, social roles, and background) will encourage all the people involved to learn from each other and bring

together understanding between (and within) the groups. Only by combining different perspectives of insights of all the parties concerned, can we all become ‘mind-sighted’.

Before we can educate the outside world about ASDs and create environmental conditions that make both autistic and non-autistic individuals comfortable, we should stop fighting amongst ourselves and learn to understand the Theory of Different Minds. We have to accept that we all lack (or have very little) empathy towards each other and work out how we can address this deficit in each of us. Lack of empathy is often caused by misunderstanding. Misunderstanding results from a lack of shared experiences, beliefs and attitudes. Let us try each other’s shoes on and share the experiences (even if it is only in our imagination – theoretically). Only then we can achieve mutual understanding and learn to mind-read. For all the parties involved the main goal should be to develop Theories of Mind. It can be done in two steps:

- to accept that people do have alternative viewpoints
- to accept that other people's viewpoints have equal validity.

We need each other. What affects one group affects all. If we want to achieve a higher quality of life for all, it is through working together rather than separately. Autistic people need parents and professionals because they have to learn about the world, which is foreign to them, and they need help to treat autism-related problems that often disable them. Parents and professionals need autistic people to learn about autism, what it is like to live with an ASD, and the ways to communicate with autistic people. Professionals need parents who know their child better than anybody else and can help interpret the child's behaviours. Parents need professionals who can provide advice, treatment and support to help the child and the whole family to improve the quality of life. If all three groups unite their efforts and really try to work together, we will be half-way to ‘mind-sightedness’. We have to learn from each other. Parents, professionals and autistic people have the same goal to achieve – a brighter future for all. However, they may use different strategies and approaches to get there. All the three groups should accept that they are not perfect and that they do not know everything. We all make mistakes and it is OK to err if we are prepared to learn from our mistakes. Only open discussion of different views and empathy will replace misunderstanding and prevent hurt and frustration, and uncomfortable coexistence will be replaced by comfortable cooperation. Then everybody will win.

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For more information see - Theory of Mind and the Triad of Perspectives on Autism and Asperger Syndrome http://www.amazon.com/Theory-Perspectives-Autism-Asperger-Syndrome/dp/1843103613/ref=pd_sim_b_10

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