



in camouflage:

a zine on the intersection
of autism & gender

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Cover image by Sophie (first published in Varsity newspaper)

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Foreword



In 2016, the Disabled Students' Campaign (DSC) organised an event entitled 'Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds' in opposition to a talk given by Simon Baron-Cohen in Cambridge at the time.

'Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds' challenged Baron-Cohen's extreme male brain theory of autism (https://iancommunity.org/cs/understanding_research/extreme_male_brain) and his refusal to consult autistic people on their own experiences of their neurotype and gender by creating a space for honest and safe discussion of how these issues are interlinked. [A transcript of the talk (in three parts) can be accessed on the CamNeurodiversity site: <http://camneurodiversity.tumblr.com/post/139679166093/talk-intro>.]

This one-off zine, 'In Camouflage' (a reference to the phenomenon of 'autism camouflaging'), aims to create a space to further develop thoughts on this theme: How are autistic traits gendered? Why is autism underdiagnosed in certain groups of people, particularly non-men? How do autistic people experience gender?

Collectively, its contributors (from students of Cambridge, Oxford and Anglia Ruskin Universities) call for a better understanding of how gender and autism interact. All contributors self-define as autistic, though only some have managed to obtain official medical diagnoses, and those who have often obtained them in adulthood.

If, after reading this zine, you feel that you too may be autistic, see the National Autistic Society for more information: www.autism.org.uk. If you're a Cambridge student, you can also speak to the Disability Resource Centre (DRC; www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk): email reception disability@admin.cam.ac.uk to make an appointment with an advisor.

Any responses or questions about this zine should be directed to incamouflagezine@gmail.com.

Please note: It should be recognised that not everyone wants a diagnosis of autism and/or wishes to come out as being autistic. This zine by no means intends to deny this. Instead, this zine wishes to raise awareness of the experience of non-men, so that they may seek support if they wish to do so, and that they are addressed in theories of autism, among other things.

Seeking Validation *by anonymous*




cn: validation? diagnosis-less / peer-diagnosis, meltdowns, autism erasure

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can I just have validation that it is ok to tell people you're autistic even if you don't have an Official Medical Diagnosis? I always tell other people this is fine but just need someone to tell me. family members (and a gp I once saw) doubting me makes me doubt myself. (family were fondly recalling the other day how I was 'a challenging child who regularly needed to be locked in the bathroom to calm down if my plan was disrupted', i.e. meltdowns, and still deny!). context is me writing a thing and mentioning autism and feeling like a fake. thank u

 Like

 Comment

A person, a paper, an ASD *by G.*

CN: wetting oneself, panic attacks, academic achievement

This poem is in the style of Stephen Chbosky's version of Earl Roum's 'A person, a paper, a promise', which I found not only inspirational during some complicated times in my life, but also (for its repetitive structure) very stimmy. I wrote it as a response to Mr Baron-Cohen's assertion that girls are more rarely diagnosed as autistic due to a biological lack of 'man-ness', to illustrate that some of the more stereotypical autistic (/masculine) traits are often systematically socialised out of us, and resisting this is very tricky. Boys are emotional and girls are rational, and that in no way undermines their gender.

Once on square-ruled graph paper with a fact-file underneath, she wrote an equation
And she balanced both sides
Because that was what was right, and she loved doing things right
And that's what she was all about.
Her teacher gave her full marks and a smile
And her daddy was proud
He told her she could be a scientist
And she believed it.

That was the year she wanted to be the first Astronaut-Lawyer
And she designed carbon-neutral cars
On the way to school.
She read books at lunchtime
And learned times-tables by rote

She wet herself sometimes
Because she wouldn't use the school bathrooms full of strangers
But her mother said she loved her
(even when she was difficult)

Once on the last page of her science project, she wrote an equation
And she balanced both sides
Because that was what was right, and she wasn't supposed to do things wrong
And that's what she was all about.
Her teacher gave her an A and started calling on the boys for answers instead
And her daddy was proud
And he told her she was very naughty for not liking his cuddles
And she believed it.

That was the year she wanted to be a Doctor
And she made potions in the garden
Before school.
She still read books at lunchtime
But had to hide them when the dinner ladies came near

(continued on next page)

She wet herself sometimes
Because the big kids hit her for being a Know-It-All
And her mother said this was getting silly now
She was a big girl wasn't she?

Once on the back of her hand, she wrote an equation
And she balanced both sides
Because that was what was right, and she really wanted to be alright
And that's what she was all about.
Her teacher gave her Cs all year and asked why she had stopped trying
And her daddy was proud
Because she started making friends at school
He told her it was important to fit in
And she believed it.

That was the year she wanted to be Normal
And she made lists of what Not To Do
At school.
She gossiped with the other girls at lunchtime
And giggled when the boys walked past

She didn't wet herself any more
Just had panic attacks in the stalls
And her mother said she looked much prettier with long hair
Which got in her way

Once in a fashion magazine, she wrote an equation
And didn't finish balancing it
Because maths was for boys, and she thought that that was right
And that's what she was all about.
Her teachers said she should be a teacher too, or a Social Worker
And her daddy said he was happy
Because she was his sweet caring girl
And she believed it.

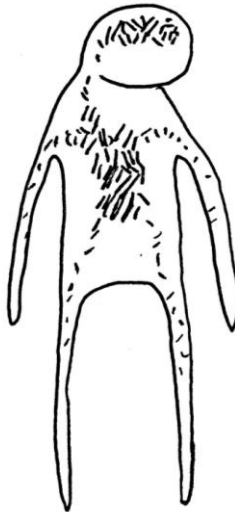
That was the year she wanted to be a Social Worker
And she wished she was pretty
On the way to school.
She was sad at lunchtime
But didn't know what this feeling was

She bunked off school a lot now
And hid at local parks to be alone
And her mother said
Why was she so quiet these days?

Once, in black sharpie over an ignorant article, she wrote an equation
And she balanced both sides
Because she liked balance and she knew that was right
And that's what she was all about.
She got all As because she stopped listening to what her teachers said
And her daddy said he was pleased
That she was his little mathematician again
And she believed it.

That was the year she wanted to be Happy
So she stopped pretending
At school
She was quiet at lunchtimes, and sometimes walked away when it got too loud
And her friends knew that was okay

She got into university
And only smiled inside at the news
And her mother said
She was so proud of her little girl.



Male brain, female brain, autistic brain:

I don't get it. *by Aisha*

CN: Heteronormative cisnormative language (reflecting experiences growing up as an autistic ciswoman of colour); themes of boundaries being crossed non-consensually; pressure to behave neurotypically; allistic language.

Growing up, I was a tomboy. Not in the 'developed understanding of gender performance' kind of way, but in the 'boys' brains like science and girls' brains like dolls' kind of way, reminiscent of most pre-feminist-theory binaries our childhoods were molded by. In the early 90's, the fact that I spent much of my time in solitude creating biological research projects on the animal kingdom, in the garden collecting bugs, and skating all day, hurled me into a category of masculinity long before my taste for androgynous clothing did. But this was fine. I was generally oblivious, as my autism afforded me a gift of unconscious non-conformity that would let me revel in my interests without too much concern for what it meant to the outside world.

However, when I hit my teens, this freedom to reject the constructed world around me changed. With life becoming increasingly social, I was catapulted into more prescriptive gender roles. As a Pakistani girl, it was no longer appropriate to be out rollerblading in my area, or tossing bras and dresses aside for the comfort of oversized band tees and baggy skater trousers. Unspoken lessons in femininity were thrust upon me from every angle; the segregation between designated male and female spaces now applied to me. I was included in conversations of how to make myself as marriageable to men as possible, never straying far from housekeeping and having children. Hair removal, makeup, and modest but fashionable femininity. I tried, but I didn't get it.

Simultaneously, as a British girl entering womanhood, perceptions of having gendered interests also became a complex mess. While I went to a traditionally British all-girls school, thanks to consumption of Hollywood and Cosmo mags, the distinction between male and female spaces was just as prominent amongst my peers as it was in my home and community. Finding myself in predominantly masculine spaces because of my attraction to the interests categorised to them, would bear consequences my then undiagnosed mind had no awareness of, and muddied my social ineptness a hundred times over. Girls didn't seem to like me, boys couldn't distinguish my infodumping of 'their' interests from flirting (I can't help but assume the two were connected). I repeatedly found myself in conflicts or in relationships, neither of which I understood or consented to, purely because of how my gender was perceived. As an adult who now understands how she experiences the world, I realise I was inadvertently playing a social game with no ability to process the game plan. I just didn't get it.

My apparent gender/interest paradox has constantly been questioned, and my autism diagnosis was no exception – "you clearly display autistic traits" says my psychiatrist after an in depth ninety minute assessment, "but you don't look autistic, you're fashionable, you have makeup on. It's not exactly trench coats and trainspotting. I'll have to think about it". After a lifetime of being deemed masculine because of my autistic traits, I was now too femme presenting to be autistic? I don't get it.

But here's the thing; who genders interests? Who decides that brain activity can be divided into male and female? Concepts of human nature, particularly sex and gender - and excuse me for sounding quintessentially HSPS here - are socially constructed. One of the things I love most about being autistic is that because of my social ineptness, I don't feel constrained by social rules. I don't see the world in binaries and categories. After all, living the world in such vibrant colours, sounds and sensations means that there's entire spectrums of experience to be had. I'm autistic and androgynous. Not because 'boys' brains like science and girls' brains like dolls' but because through a 'developed understanding of gender performance', I've learnt to embrace and celebrate the full spectrum of my Self. And I get it now.

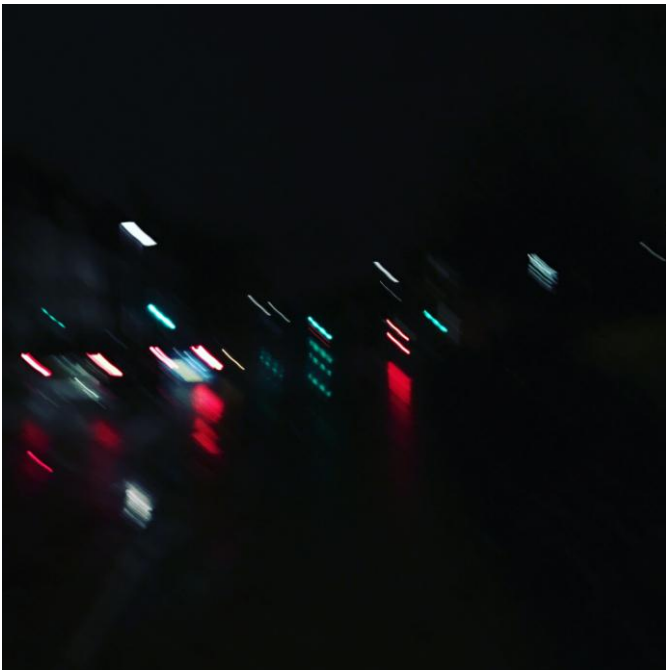


image by Sophie

Female with an Extreme Male Brain *by Heather*

Autism has been defined as having an 'extreme male brain', and I agree with that to some extent.

As a woman diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, I feel quite masculine in many of my personality traits. Confident, excitable, unafraid, strong and opinionated. But when I start to list of the personality traits that make me 'masculine', I consider the feminine traits. Being caring? Being emotional? These are traditional considerations, and also not incorrect.

The reality is that many on the spectrum feel emotions incredibly strongly but often cannot express them appropriately; or not in a way a neuro-typical person may understand.

The trans-gender movement is battling gender stereotypes that many of us have battled with from all walks of life. Many women with Autism have fought with identifying as a specific gender, but not necessarily for reasons due to sexuality.

I worked as a professional fashion model in China for 3 years, and I trained to apply as an Army Officer for 2 years and learned all about heavy artillery. I have been a lovely, summer-dress-wearing kindergarten teacher, and I have worked in physical, dirty, laborious jobs.

All of these endeavours were met with a certain type of reaction, and when you are able to decide on what personality you will be that day (a social chameleon is what it is called generally), you can pick who you are, according to the response that you want/think you should have.

This is often the existence of females on the spectrum. We have a specific insight into the odd ways our society functions, tricks or white lies that everyone says and accepts are very apparent to us and playing that game that comes naturally to most, for us requires consistent effort and memorization. It is, however, a survival technique if one with Autism wants to not stand out too much socially. You cannot read facial expressions, but you can recognise the signs of someone that's feeling annoyed, such as tone or obvious body language through memorization.

So when I am told that Autism is extreme male-ness, I think 'great, I can be that person!' If society thinks that I will be clever, confident, a leader, then that's almost, in a sense, permission to be those things every day.

For me, my diagnosis of Asperger gave me permission to explore and admit a lot more of my masculine traits.

Often, as a young woman, you don't get permission to be those things. We get thought of as annoying for talking, or bossy for leading. Flirty for laughing or making too much eye contact. Desperate for telling people our weaknesses or feelings.

Somebody saying 'oh, she's autistic' is far more endearing than 'oh isn't she bossy and loud'.

So if we live in a world today that is so heavily restricted on stereotypes, I don't mind having a one that represents strength.

But that is not a long-term solution. I cannot forever pretend it will be okay for my potentially autistic future daughter to need to identify as Autistic to people because they are upset at her more masculine personality traits.

We were not raised with the perception of socially expected boundaries, and we were not naturally aware that girls act one way and boys act another, because we did not fit those moulds.

So while I can stand here and say sure, identify me as an Autistic woman if it helps to put me in a comfortable box of 'woman with a manly personality', I don't know if I can say the same thing for the next generation that we will warn of our own mistakes and misconceptions.

At some point we are all going to have to realise that expected stereotypes are more damaging than helpful, and hinder the emotional development for many on the spectrum and off.

The Autistic brain is different structurally. A different perception, and hindered socially, resulting in the Autistic person being less likely to build their entire existence on the gender that they are supposed to be. While this results in a genuine reality, it also results in a lot of confusion and pain as to why they are different.

I think we can all learn a lesson regarding the message we send to children in their formative years regarding who they are and who they will become, Autism or not, and branding literally anything that is not genitalia or medical specifics 'extremely male' or 'extremely female' is just restricting the potential of many, for no real outcome.



i think we do the world differently

image by Anna

On the Invalidation of Trans People with Autism

Excerpt from CamNeurodiversity 'Autistic People, not Gendered Minds talk:
<http://camneurodiversity.tumblr.com/post/139682732908/discussion>

CN: cissexism

Anon:

One of the big problems with theories like Baron-Cohen's, especially for transgender autistic people, is that whichever sort of transgender they identify as, you get invalidated by his theories.

So essentially, if you are for example transfeminine, and you've been assigned male at birth but identify as more feminine, or as a trans woman, or as anything feminine, then often people including doctors will say 'No, no, you can't be a girl because you're autistic, so that means you're a boy.' And that means you can't get access to healthcare and other things that you need, as well as obviously just social things like using she pronouns for example, because people are like 'No, you're a boy, you're autistic'.

And equally if someone is transmasculine, then they're told by family and doctors et cetera 'Oh, of course you're masculine, because you have a male brain, because you're autistic.'

So that's really how the two interact quite closely. They're either used to sort of explain your transness or deny you your transness, and that's why it can be really really harmful for trans people who are autistic [in] actually access[ing] things that they need.

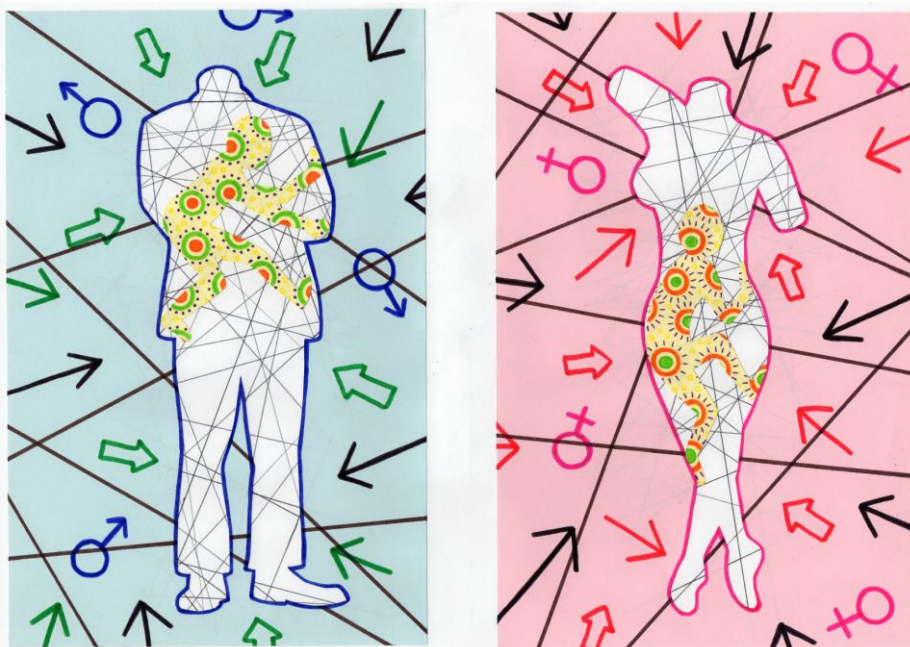
[...]

Jessica:

[...] I don't care if autism causes a gender identity thing. Like, that should not be a question ... who cares if they overlap significantly. That should not invalidate the experiences of an autistic trans person, or an autistic cis person, or a neurotypical trans person. That shouldn't be any barrier to accessing the medical things [e.g. hormone replacement therapy] that you need and should be having.

Trapped by Phoebe

I have focused on how we are stuck with society's associations and stereotypes of our outward gender, despite what we may feel inside. For people with autism it can be even harder to navigate other people's expectations and reactions.



For the Cost of Admission, You Could *by Florence*

for this checkbox

she says:

of course

and in fact she doesn't even have to ask it:

uh...

I have eyes.

oooooh maybe a year before that

i did say it actually, didn't squelch or sift out

she said

oh!

you should have said earlier

turn the pencil upside down, erase that

change that.

talking to a friend in first year while in waiting

i don't know if i want it or not

how do i wait for news

when i can't pre-programme

a reaction to it. in Pizza Express on

Saturday meeting my girlfriend's dad for the first time

he turns his phone to me

(it's amazing)

there's this not-so-recent picture of him

he's showing me he's laughing & i've already

laughed at all his references even though i didn't understand

so i just stutter and smile and say

i don't know how i'm supposed to react

so it's funny so maybe this one admission

is why he later gives you that information

that i don't want to know but have to go

through upset to ask not to find out and

to try and forget, but here i am, writing

a poem or telling my friend about it on

the train the next day.

they're on at me saying the deadlines already gone im like buhhh

i don't have it i can't give it to you what do you want

i try and console, a natural mode or learned, who cares if you survive

don't worry there's always submissions after deadline

they're just antsy because they have to be

i'm already doing something

so how do i prepare myself for doing it,

is it another leaving new-coming opportunity to

remake?

First year again
talking to someone i'd seen in a newspaper clipping
i had to book him, like
 let us mediate your solidarity
 so we can get ally points and know who the trannies are,
 so we can prepare arguments against your adjustments later
but anyway he said
 theres no choice
i said
 well i kind of made a decision
because i did, i was looking at gross coming up around paving stones at a bus stop
i said
 fuck it, i'm a girl
i don't remember it exactly but he said again
 theres no choice

when i was maybe 14 i remember meeting a friend of a friend,
the type you could almost call his cousin
only they got on too well to actually be related.
in the minutes before they came i said to my friends
 humph i wonder what kind of person i'll be for them
they didn't understand
said
 what
 you're always just yourself, you
 twat

but it was true back then, just like excuses
i had persons on a wheel of fortune;
who to be in this instance? which im pretty sure
is not how teenage boys
usually operate.

i remembered this incident while cycling the other night
and it made so much sense, and since
i lost track of one of the biggest influences of my life
also in first year
i feel like i've slowed down, like i jumped up only to settle
with no progress, just accepting, just never anymore brave enough
to change; algae-gilled

and it made so much sense
because i've always lived
in my head, always away from my body, it

(continued on next page)

always a disproportioned thing, always a wrong thing, always
a

 why can't you do this thing
why would a new name
ever make that change?

 it feels like you've been running on the wrong fuel
 and suddenly its right and its all now going correctly
that's great mate but
i need a whole new engine.

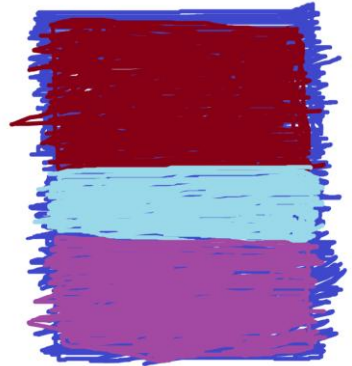
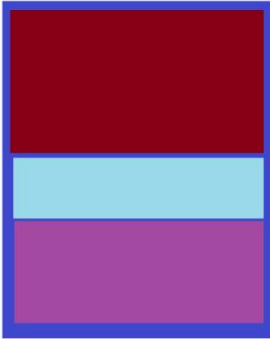
in the waiting room the other day
i was glad to see you both but my stomach sank
because you'd have to hear them call the wrong name
(which i tell myself i'll change when i move
when i have to change i'll change then it'll fit in i'll make a list the new self
can be reached at this new address)
but we said hi, found we'd all read the same book i was reading
one of you went in
the other stayed and we talked and you said
 congratulations

i said
 thank you
but you also later say
 so why do you actually need a transgender rep
 when you already have an LGBT one

and i say
 well
 it's a new thing so we thought we'd cover bases
 but also disability and gender do cross of course,
 like lots of people are both transgender and autistic
 and some people feel like their autism makes it hard
 for them to understand gender & gendered roles
not like it can be caused & effected that easily
 but you know,
 it's okay if im not needed because im there if i am
 if that makes sense?

we all leave the doctors at the same time
but split off at two separate points in the journey
even though we all live in the same place.

Rothko Triptych *by Florence*



I love making art but often don't understand the tools.

This is a triptych of a Mark Rothko painting (I don't know which one) of which two of the images are reproductions I made in different styles on Microsoft Paint.

In my GCSE art class I made up for not understanding mediums by learning colour instead: I got good at the colour blue (and it's still my favourite.)

'Paint' to me is much the same now; as weird and janky as it looks (and is often meant to look) I really really like it, and it's kind of fun to me to walk the line between awful and interesting.

There is quite a simple explanation of this piece is that the way 'we' are affected by our various disorders and divergences is also not very orderly.

Sometimes, businesses will 'poach' or 'headhunt' someone because their diagnosis gives them a set of skills, or a way of seeing; yes, we get it, you've seen *Rain Man*.

Sometimes, it feels like the very same thing that makes you possibly desirable (read: exploitable) is the thing that makes you oh God, oh God really really really how did they let me in here? Still really God they said it that first time 'don't worry; everyone gets it it'll wear off' then why do I have to walk fast like if I stand still long enough to be inspected someone will see I'm a mistake? When they sit me down to explain myself will they laugh at right time at the speech I've prepared?

It is all the time like this;

I live a life where I constantly have to explain and justify myself to myself and I hope this somehow also explains these weird MS Paint things.

Facebook Status *by Virgo*

Piece originally published as a Facebook status in March 2017, which shared Everyday Feminism's article entitled '8 Things You Were Probably Taught About Autism That Are Completely Wrong' (<http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/03/wrong-things-taught-autism>).

CN: Binge eating, anxiety

As a hyper-literal person it can be hard to realise that some words mean different things to different people.

To autistic people, the word "autism" describes our way of processing the world and some of the spectrum of behaviors that can result as we attempt to cope.

To allistic (non-autistic) people, it seems the word is buried in stereotypes and stigma. Forrest Gump or Rain Man.

Aspergers (now a defunct label) seems to sit more comfortably with people. Abed from Community is a lovable "aspie", and some might say the same of Sheldon Cooper (if you like awful tv shows 😊).

People like Courtney Love, Albert Einstein, Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Nikola Tesla or Isaac Newton being "on the spectrum", is something that seems to be accepted with a kind of hesitant maybe-ing, a desire to conflate the "level of autism" with the level of perceived impairment to living skills.

It is assumed that these people are somehow successful *in spite of* their autism, rather than autism as an essential part of their unique perspective on the world.

The act of "passing" as allistic, day in, day out, for your entire life. It inverts your usual mindset towards work and play.

Your intellectual hobbies become your relaxation time, while socialising becomes more like homework.

We often develop special interests or obsessions that we become veritable experts on at any age, because our passion is driven by an urge to escape into our own private world, rather than the intense outside world, with all its overstimulation and social complications.

But even then, there's two ways to go. The stereotypes of autism almost unanimously agree that autistic people are socially reclusive. Treating this assumption as almost a diagnostic inevitability. When in truth, if we are generally anti-social: it's because society is generally anti-us.

We live in a world that tells us that our forms of communication and interaction are abnormal and have to be controlled, suppressed and/or hidden from view.

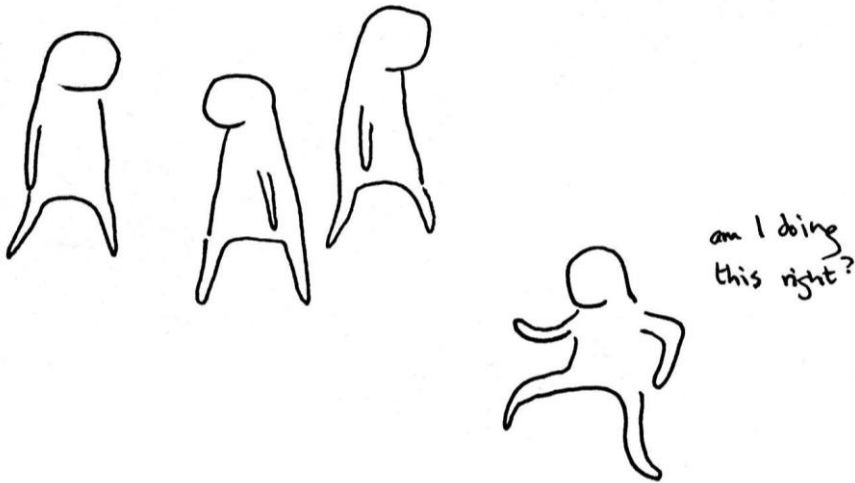


image by Anna

I've been studying physics for 10 years now, and while I had many other special interests overlapping, quantum physics was my main special interest for the bulk of that time. But the number of chances I got to share that part of myself with friends or family have been slim to none until I came to learn about autism.

I absorbed the idea that my interests were abnormal and not polite to bring up. So I learned to just try to focus on mutual interests with each person I spoke to. Which has been brilliant for my social skills. I learnt to mirror the emotional energy of other people and hence build real connections with thousands of wonderful, engaging humans over the last ten years. :)

But at the same time, in all my mirroring, I never learnt to form my own separate sense of self. Socialising became a draining process of constantly trying to please every person I met, in hopes of being accepted.

In many ways I was, but because of the energy it takes, or perhaps because of how intensely I came across... this strategy rarely led to the formation of true deeper friendships.

Instead, I found myself in the seemingly paradoxical status of the "popular aspie". The autistic extrovert. A combination only really possible when you add the more ADHD side of the autism spectrum into the mix. To have the energy to keep this up throughout high school requires copious stimulation.

In primary school, I was the lollie-fiend. The kid who would buy 100 generic chocolate caramels in one day and laugh with the other kids as I raced to eat my bounty before it melted.

(continued on next page)

In high school, I was the don of the soft drink mafia. Selling 72 cans a day at a \$1-\$0.30 profit margin, and providing myself with all the sugar I needed to keep up.

Later, a friend did an assignment on my diet to try to make sense of how I stayed so strangely skinny despite my binge eating.

The truth was that I was unknowingly caught in the same anxious binge-purge cycle that tends to trap young girls on the autism spectrum. My stomach could never handle the combination of junk food and the daily anxiety of schoolyard socialising. (Not to mention I was lactose intolerant and eating cereal twice daily).

Anyway, getting into my life story now. But this is what I'm getting at. Autism isn't a set of symptoms on a sheet in a doctor's office. Autism is a life story.

We all start with similar neurology, but completely different environments. We adapt and change to our environment, or we adapt our environment to us.

Males on the spectrum tend to have the privilege to do the latter. While autistic girls are socialized in such a way that we are forced to adapt to our surroundings or be ostracized.

We tend to not form daily routines so much because we are expected to fit in with the routines of others.

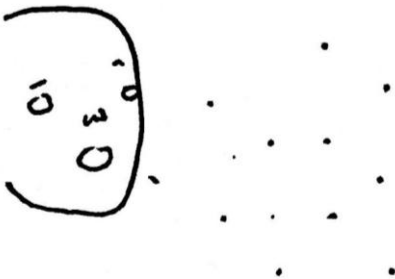
Instead of singular special interests that last our whole lives, like many autistic boys. We autistic girls tend to form new "obsessions" at different stages of our development. We mimic the girls around us, so that our special interests stay within the expected range of interests for girls our age, but hide the intensity of our interest.

Perhaps we listen to the same musical genres as the other girls and boys, but no one noticing that we've memorised the lyrics to every song. Perhaps we've become so obsessed with one band (Sublime) that we even learnt their non-English lyrics by heart ("Chica Mi Tipo").

We live in a constant state of anxiety of being discovered, while channeling that anxiety into our obsessions. And **this** is what I think makes for the most prolific and transformative thinkers in history.



(No) Words *by Anna*



On Diagnostic Questionnaires

Excerpt from CamNeurodiversity 'Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds' talk: <http://camneurodiversity.tumblr.com/post/139682732908/discussion>

CN: masculine-orientated diagnostic tests



image by Anna

Anon:

[...] One of the other things that's come about from this very masculine-orientated 'autism is a masculine thing', is that a lot of cis women as well fall under the diagnostic radar, because the tests are associated [with male characteristics] ...

Because a lot of the testing that they use particularly for children when they ask parents is to do with masculine socialization. So for example I suppose a lot of people here have been through similar tests, potentially, but they'll ask parents for example 'Does your child enjoy pushing the wheels round on a toy car a lot?'

But if you have a child who you're treating as a girl, the likelihood is that they don't have a toy car, and I have friends who for example were brought up as girls and would brush the hair of Barbie a lot, and that was sort of what they thought was the equivalent, but because the test said 'Does your child play with the wheels on the car?' the parents said 'No, no, no, so cross that box, that's not something that they do'. So it's like 'oh, they're not autistic then!'

Other things like that, I'm trying to think of some examples – like 'Does your child avoid talking to relatives?', whereas the girls, the people who were brought up as girls have been forced to speak to relatives because that's what you do as a Good Girl. So the equivalence wasn't there but they were getting missed, not being diagnosed when they needed the help of being diagnosed, because they just weren't in the right social thing.

Jessica:

CN: swearing

[...] I was referred, and then I was, you know, scared shitless they had asked the question 'Are you interested in systems?' and I mean, like...what's a system when it's at home? [group laughter] What am I interested in that's a system?

I... studied linguistics; I had a book which was full of horse breeds when I was a kid and I knew every single breed of bloody horse and whether it was warm blooded or hot blooded. [...]

The person who was doing my assessment was like, 'Um, you've just said that you really love language. Language is a system. 'And I'd never really – it's not like language is gendered as a female thing [...] it's definitely not gendered as a male thing to be interested in though, and I never really thought of it because you think of systems as cars and I don't know, things that are traditionally gendered as masculine things to be interested in. But actually it's very legitimate to be interested in language as a system and that is a real thing. And I was like 'Oh. Shit. Thinking about it yeah, I am interested in systems like language and stuff like that'.

It was nudges. I had to be nudged – I'm very lucky in that the person assessing me nudged me a lot in the direction of actually you are thinking these things, you do experience these things. You just probably aren't conceptualising them in the way [I am] – because of the unhelpful way that these questionnaires are made.

Jenny:

CN: cutting up worms

[...] I was reading the systemizing and empathizing questionnaires. And what struck me as really funny was how it would present these really specific examples asking you to identify with them or not identify with them. And the one thing that is an incredibly neurotypical brain thing to do is to generalise from a specific example! [group laughter] And I think that when this thing asks me whether I was interested in – and it's a slightly gross thing – I think it was a Baron-Cohen questionnaire and it was like 'When you were little were you interested in cutting up a worm to see how it worked?' [...]

And that struck me as so weird, because ... if I was somebody who was interested in how insects or little animals worked, but I hadn't specifically had an interest in worms, how am I supposed to answer that? [...] it doesn't say insect. It doesn't say ant or beastie. It said worm. And that's way too specific.

Pomegranates (Oct-Dec, 2017) by Sophie

at what point will I be creative enough to be artistic?

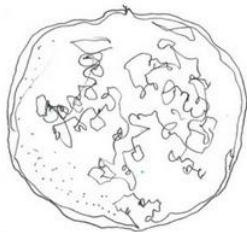
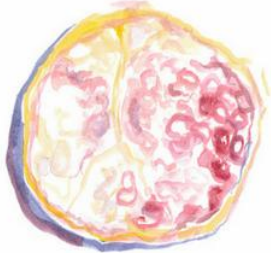
obsessive enough to be

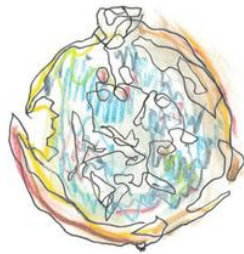
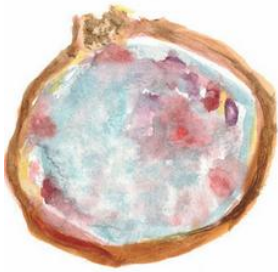
autistic?

was

Georgia O'Keefe?

For more pomegranate drawings, see https://issuu.com/sophiebuck/docs/merged__3_





MOULDY POMEGRANATE

STUDIES

02.11.16

Vintage Cameras by Anna (2)



Vintage Records *by Anna (2)*



Interpreting symptoms of autism through the lens of gender. *by Sophie*

CN: gender stereotypes, implication that women are weaker than men, sexual activity, misogyny, wetting self, autism as a 'social and communication disorder'

Shyness

I was frequently described as a 'shy' child. This was never seen as a problem like it might be for boys - good girls are quiet.

But, on reflection, I recognise I was avoiding social situations I didn't know how to navigate. In my early school years I'd frequently wet myself because I didn't know how to ask to go to the toilet. I spent many play-times observing from a tree stump rather than joining in: I wasn't sure how to use the slide or swings and navigate the ambiguous queuing system. Instead of acting wrongly in unfamiliar social situations, I avoided them altogether.

So my social difficulties weren't obvious - or, at least, weren't problematic for those around me. As an adult, the social-norm-filled situations I engage in have changed, now potentially including asking work colleagues for help, ringing customer service helplines, or engaging in sexual activity. But the attitude - avoidance over error - persists. And the consequences of such avoidance usually fall on me: things that would benefit me don't get done.

Quiet is harder to notice than noise.

Oversensitivity

Women are expected to be (and are shamed for being) more sensitive than men. Gender stereotypes do not even promote this notion in the sense of women experiencing the world more intensely than men (at the stage of filtering the world, as in autism), but rather than they are less able to cope with the same amount of intensity (at the stage of managing the filtered information).

As an (undiagnosed) autistic woman, I internalised that I was just less able to manage the world as others around me, as a reflection of my inherent weakness. You're such a girl! Stop making a fuss! You're being oversensitive! You don't want to be high maintenance! Just put up with it! The noise, the lights, the smell, the itchiness, the taste. Everyone else can cope. Why can't you?

Before I realised I was indeed autistic, I spent years scolding myself for making a fuss (city life is overwhelming) when there were people with autism out there for whom this was a real issue. For them, I thought, the world must be unbearable, if I was just an oversensitive woman.

Interest in social behaviour and communication

Women are expected to be good at social interaction, and are shamed for not being so. It is no surprise then that some autistic women and people of other genders may end up studying social behaviour and/or communication formally, in subjects like Psychology, Sociology and Languages?

For me, people's unpredictability is stressful, but their strange ways are also intriguing. People are - to quote 17-year-old me applying to study Psychology (PBS) at Cambridge University - 'The Ultimate Mystery'. I sought to understand them. Social Psychology helped highlight rules of social behaviour: e.g. if someone copies your body language (mirroring), it means they like you or want to build rapport. Neuroscience helped make concrete abstract thought processes and emotions: e.g. executive functioning is a management headquarters. I was able to learn rules and concepts I otherwise struggled to comprehend. The consciousness with I had to learn everything even improved my ability to be critical of it.

Overall, it's hard to identify as having 'a social and communication disorder' when I studied Psychology: I'm *meant* to be good at understanding people and how social interactions work. It is frequently joked that Psychologists can read other people's minds. Yet Theory of Mind is what autistic people are meant to struggle most with. When I'm asked whether I struggle with social interaction, I'm not sure how to answer: if I say I struggle, I feel like a useless Psychology student.

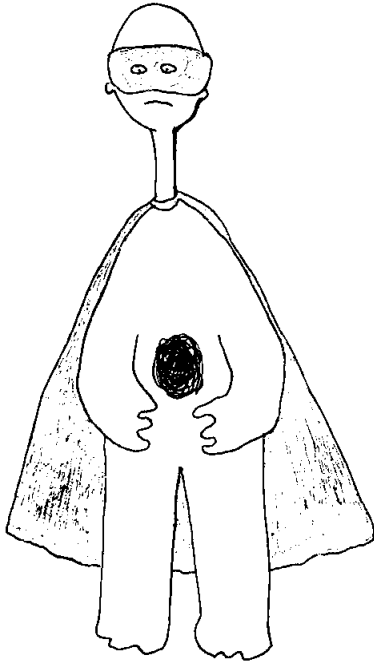


Image by Sophie (first published in Blueprint zine)

Untitled *by James*

As someone who (a) is interested in claims about 'types' of brain in cognitive science, and (b) has had the dubious pleasure of being formally assessed for autism whilst perceived as both cis male and cis female, I enjoy thinking and talking about the intersection between autism and (experience of) gender. Perhaps the only consistent 'fact' about autism is that boys are diagnosed far more often than girls - though WHY that happens is still up for debate. How much of the discrepancy can be accounted for by diagnostic bias (e.g. missing subtler or less archetypal presentations)? Is there really an (average) gender difference in how autistic people present? If so, are there biological or social reasons for this? Similarly, it seems to be the case that within the trans population, rates of autism (as measured by formal diagnosis) or autistic traits (assessed using screening tools such as the AQ) are considerably higher than in the general population, but more than this, nobody really knows.

Personally, what I find most interesting is how adamant the research community is that gender is a relevant difference, and one that can be investigated biologically. Many studies show significant differences between control males and females on self-report screening measures that correlate with autism diagnosis (for instance, the three questionnaires developed by Baron-Cohen and colleagues: the AQ, EQ, and SQ). However, there is seldom, if ever, a significant difference between the scores of male and female autistic people¹. Baron-Cohen's group takes this as evidence that autistic traits in the whole population can be visualised on a scale, with non-autistic females being at one end, followed by non-autistic males, with the autistic population (undifferentiated by gender) lying on the far side of the 'male' cluster. There are several issues at play here that I think deserve more attention – I'll outline just a few that occur to me.

- 1) Is it meaningful to think of 'autistic traits' as being distributed throughout the whole population? I find this a little odd - surely it's not an 'autistic trait' if it's experienced by someone who is not autistic? Admittedly, there might be evidence that 'autistic traits' in autistic and non-autistic people can be understood as the same thing, that I'm just not aware of! However, there seem to be few, if any, traits unique to autistic people, and I wonder if referring to them as autistic traits is obscuring important differences between how they manifest in different populations.
- 2) It's getting more common now for researchers to collect information on gender history, but this is a fairly recent development, and not very widespread. One has to wonder whether the gender categories analysed in studies of gender differences are 'carving up the territory' in a relevant way. Do these studies deliberately include only those who identify themselves as cisgender (i.e. those who describe themselves as the gender they were assigned at birth)? If there are trans people included in the cohorts, are they categorised based on birth-assigned or self-identified gender? When analysing population differences in 'autistic traits' between cis and trans people, which groups should be compared with each other, and what do any similarities and differences actually mean?

¹ I want to point out that I don't think it's straightforward to describe populations as male/female (or men/women), but I'm sticking with that language for now, purely because that's the language used by the overwhelming majority of studies, and I don't have the space here to interrogate it in much detail!

- 3) Late diagnosis is getting more common – in the UK at least, which is where a decent number of these studies come from – and researchers have suggested that this late diagnosis could disproportionately affect (those perceived as) non-males. As researchers very rarely have the resources to give every participant a full diagnostic assessment, it's possible that people without an autism diagnosis at the time of participating (who are included in the non-autistic cohort) do later acquire a diagnosis. I'm not sure what (if any) effect this would have on the statistics, but I think it's another example of participants being potentially wrongly-categorised, and could also skew our understanding of how well the questionnaires (or brain images, or whatever else is being studied) correlate with autism.
- 4) It's well-known that self-report isn't necessarily an accurate indicator of someone's experiences.

Firstly, questionnaires (especially if filled in with limited guidance) force the reporter to explain their experiences in the language of the questionnaire, which might be quite alien to their own self-understanding. There has already been plenty of discussion of the potential bias towards 'male-typical' presentations and interests in questionnaires such as the SQ, and in that case the questionnaire was revised, which reduced the discrepancy between male and female scores. More work might need to be done on addressing how much of the discrepancy between male and female participants is down to questionnaire design, though.

Secondly, if questionnaires are designed to assess skills or abilities, self-report might not be a very accurate way of getting this information. In *Delusions of Gender*, Cordelia Fine comments that people's self-assessment of their mental arithmetic skills tends not to correlate very well with their performance on mental arithmetic tasks. Self-assessment may also be biased by social factors: in the case of empathy, Eisenberg and Lennon note that women tend to report higher levels of empathy than men, but this difference is not found in 'unobtrusive' observations of interpersonal skills. There are all sorts of possible reasons for this, and it's not necessarily clear how autism and gender interact in skewing self-perception of these sorts of skills or abilities. However, it deserves to be investigated.

This is just a very brief overview of some of the things I'd like to see considered in more depth when it comes to researching gender and autism. I've only talked about the use of questionnaire responses to separate those considered male or female, but I think it's just as important (if not more so!) to think about how the construction of gender as a relevant difference influences how neuroimaging studies are interpreted. As autism is increasingly understood in terms of 'brain differences', I think it's very important to acknowledge the limitations on our current understanding of what those differences might be.

Autism-Anorexia Similarities (*Phone Notes*) by Josefina

CN: trauma, anorexia, sensory sensitivity

narrow attention focus/hyperfocus:
systematising of food works in the same way
as a special interest

find changes very difficult, e.g. bodily
changes, social transition from childhood to
adulthood, meal-based routines

heightened sensitivity: texture/stretchiness
of fabric over skin, skin against itself, bodily
changes, fullness, noises. restricted eating
dulls sensations; the only loud sensation is
hunger as opposed to everything else.

restricted eating not primarily driven by a
desire to abide by cultural ideas of beauty
but by a desire to control and quieten
feelings of anxiety

restricted eating generates routine that
makes me feel safe; the disruption of said
routine makes me feel out of control

it feels difficult to see how my disordered
eating can make an impact on other people;
i don't pick up on signs of concern that
might not be obvious. may seem ruthless or
selfish when other people try very hard to
reach out. eventually i only realise that they
get mad at me for not taking note on this
and their anger and disappointment is too
much for me to bear, so starving becomes
the only reasonable option to deal with the
intensity of my feelings despite it seeming
counterintuitive

because i find it so hard to socialise, starving
myself becomes a language through which i
can reach out to other people. but the pain

of failed social interactions makes me want
to starve myself- is it a punishment? a
survival tactic? a coded message?

i get unnecessarily hung up on small details
and channel that same autistic habit of
fixating my thoughts over something into my
disordered eating. and in both disordered
eating and autistic thinking, feelings such as
guilt or shame produced by my fixation over
pointless details lead to the same form of
punishment.

rigid, inflexible, need my own set of rules to
survive

eating in front of other people is difficult
because being around people to begin with
is difficult and overwhelming, both on a
sensory and on a social level.

transition into adulthood is difficult because
the structures that eased socialisation as a
child suddenly disappear; there is a fear of
growing older because adulthood feels
dangerous

restricted eating as means to regulate
difficult emotions

hyperfocus applied to restricting; nothing
gets in the way, nothing else seems
important

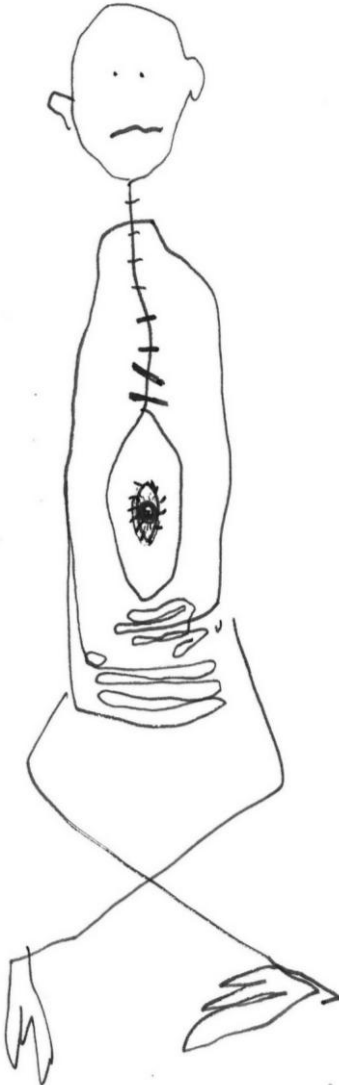
not eating as sensory stimulation

haven't recovered from anorexia because
autistic habits that allowed it to happen
have become too ingrained

On Changing Shapes by Sophie

Image first published in Varsity newspaper

CN: weight, shape, implication that putting on weight is undesired



Look how my belly goes out
When I turn to the side!
There's more of me – just a bit:
I can feel it.

My shape is different, wrong
Unfamiliar;

The angles have changed.
Can't you see?!

This body doesn't feel like *mine*:

This flesh is new
and itchy
Like an inflated rubber ring.

It's wrong.

EVERYTHING is wrong

- fights tighten, punching thighs
(under the table) -

I want to stay the same!

Exactly the same!

A woman preoccupied by her appearance
Is an expected sight

(The stress of change is denied)

You look fine! All sizes are beautiful!

But what I want is control.

Control *by Anon*

*CN for discussion of r*pe (using word in full) as a child, including description; pathologism of autism traits; discussion of not-good therapy experiences*

Attempting to recover from childhood sexual trauma with unrecognised autism was a battle. After surviving extreme controlling abuse, I was the one perceived as reticent and trying to exert control both over my therapy and other aspects of my life.

“If you don’t want to engage with therapy, there’s little I can do to help you.”

Entering trauma therapy was presented as a valuable experience that would enhance my ability to enjoy life, and in particular perhaps to become more comfortable with the idea of consensual sex as an adult. However, for me it was retraumatising, partly because the methods of CBT clashed with my autistic experience of the world. Being told to try harder with eye contact (something which I was near incapable of in *any* situation, let alone when talking about the most harrowing experiences of my life) filled sessions. If I wasn’t going to engage with therapy and confront my shame head-on, how would I recover?

I often left those sessions filled with more shame than I entered. I would walk to the station and deliberately miss my train. I would walk, crying, underground. I would sit in a tunnel and wait for the familiar sound of an oncoming train. And my shame would increase further as each train left the station. The outgoing whoosh of wind felt like a new failure each time. Autism meant CBT was more an exercise in behavioural control than anything else. Make eye contact; things will be better. But there was an even more profound effect driven by my autism: verbal difficulties.

“You need to describe what happened in words.”

I suspect that, not only had my therapist never experienced such a severe trauma as a young child, she also had little understanding of autism. PTSD crushed me in each and every therapy session. Flashbacks would grab my whole body like huge beasts, throwing me back to the floor. Spiders creeping up my thighs; knives, tearing my insides; hips, being buried. Warmth and shame spreading across my body.

The words I have now: I was raped twice between the ages of 5 and 7 years old. It has taken me a long time to be able to engage with that language, because my memories of the events are non-verbal and thus do not include words like “rape”. I had no verbal conceptualisation of what happened to me: none, at all. All I knew is that in my darkest moments huge hands would grab my tiny body and I would feel pushing, pulling, spiders and knives.

If you do not understand something verbally when it happens, your verbal descriptions of the experience will always be a post-hoc artificial construction. I feel like I am *lying* when I tell my story, because words do not capture the visceral non-verbal experience. It has taken years for me to come to terms with the fact that my verbal descriptions are factually accurate, albeit non-reflective of the experience itself.

My refusal to speak was painted as an attempt to exert control, when truly it stemmed from a fear of “lying” by speaking something that was not my truth.

“You can’t be in control all the time.”

Trust me, I know. Nothing about my early childhood gave me the sense that I could *ever* be in control of my own body or the events surrounding it, let alone the foolish perception that I could have total control. Nobody residing in my mind would have understood my behaviour as reflecting a belief that I should have total control.

The thing is that when your needs differ from the average person, you find yourself having to veto things more often. In a crowd of individuals, it will be you whose needs stand out, because they are less similar from the others. However, this does not make my basic needs any less worthy of meeting. The fact that my other family members will enjoy an impromptu trip to the beach does not make my meltdown over a change of plans any less valid. The fact that my need to find a bathroom *right now* stems from an entrenched phobia of wetting myself does not mean that my young self should be forced to wait longer than necessary for a bathroom. My needs may be different, and therefore require more frequent assertion, but this does *not* indicate that they stem from a desire to control others.

I believe that the misperception of autistic women and femmes as controlling stems from a gendered perception of personality traits. The Controlling Woman is so frequently endorsed, why would anybody consider alternative explanations?

“You are clearly autistic. I am surprised nobody has diagnosed you before; although your history is complex so perhaps that is why.”

It was clear as day. It just took multiple layers of ignorant doctors to see past their own prejudices and refer me to a specialist autism assessment team. There was no controversy, no difficulty in labelling me when the experts assessed me, just many gatekeepers to pass on the journey to a specialist team. And now, at the age of 25, I am beginning to understand that I was engaged with therapy (though perhaps not expressing it in the conventional way). I did indeed find comfort in labelling what happened to me with words, but the endeavour to make me *say it* and *feel it* at the same time was a hopeless one: my words are so detached from the emotions and physical sensations of that time.

So yet again, I must have things *my way*. I must control the things I need to control in order to understand my own experience and to function in a neurotypical world. Is control of these things not important? Perhaps if diagnosticians had spent more time listening and less time trying to pathologise my behaviours, I would have found my truth more quickly.

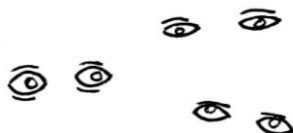


Image by Anna



Image by Emma

Figuring a New Method of Self-Exposition *by Jessica*

CN: some painful and death-related imagery

Figuring a new method of self-exposition, one in which
I can hold thoughts in my head for longer than a line length
of 8 syllables and maybe more;
develop worlds within my own writing and
as if with paint stripper
lay myself out in medusa-lengths
snaking memories across air islands
and moving with that quiet apologetic lumbering
to a quiet unapologetic place.
Being the sum of oneself is a tiring conclusion
to a tiring life, an impossible string and series
of strings of communication and of experience.
At least spider-webs have some logic to them. But
to reach for anything which might better elucidate my circumstances,
using words that hint at more than conversation –
my medusa-lengths, snaking memories across air islands –
is to force myself to think in ways I do not think. It is
to scrape along the curvatures of my bones and to snap
my own tendons and ligaments
to formulate a something which is, amongst other things,
cultured, educated, articulate, the kind of poetry we like to read,
the kind of poetry we like to publish.
I challenge with a tightening fist. I
experience your world as ‘my’ world, ‘my’
senses, haywire in a sense; closing in on myself,
I curl up within and underneath and suspended by
a silent womb.
I seek an embalming light. Within ‘my’ world
There is no such welcoming thought; I’m enclosed now, I’m
enclosed, birds circling round a tired corpse
Carefully laid out on beach rocks, a hand dragging itself
into the sea; maybe
we can lie on our backs and expose ourselves
to that which exposes us for us. Tired, weeping,
fall in and sleep.

Changing the Face of Autism *by Hannah*

First published in Hannah's blog Aspertypical (<http://aspertypical.com/>)

CN: gender stereotypes; OCD, eating disorders, personality disorders, selective mutism, anxiety, depression, phobias, panic attacks, minimisation of experience, psychosis, anti-depressants

In a survey conducted by the National Autistic Society only 1/5 of women with an Autism Spectrum Disorder were diagnosed by the time they were 11. Over half of boys had already received their diagnosis. What's going wrong when it comes to detecting girls on the spectrum, and why is there such a male bias when it comes to assessment? This is the story of hundreds of women with the disorder, taken from their personal accounts, books and blogs.

Imagine you are a 6 year old girl, you have no desire to play with the other children but you are often forced into 'play dates'. You like boys toys, climbing trees, building Lego. They like pretty dolls, styling hair and playing mum. Every birthday party you are forced into an itchy horrendously over the top patterned dressed with matching tights, you wear it for 15 mins to appease everyone then you burst into tears and it is taken off you. You quickly learn that it is going to be a bit of an endurance test 'being a girl'. Even as a six year old you have become very self conscious, studiously trying to learn how to behave and what to say; you don't understand it but it seems to work. Over the years you've become a very anxious child, too scared to say or do the wrong thing, scared of bringing unwanted attention onto yourself. The teachers say you are selectively mute, and try to force words out of you.

Not talking has become counterproductive, it is not 'normal' behavior and seems to be causing a bit of a scene. Reluctantly you utter that first word, and suddenly they all come flooding out like verbal diarrhoea, you think it is all pointless chit chat but people seem to respond and you are blending in more. However, all that nervousness has to go somewhere, you might seem more sociable with more friends but it's still meaningless to you. By the age of 10 you are experiencing full blown panic attacks and suffering from multiple phobias. The doctors call this an anxiety disorder, they tell you to expose yourself to your fears and overcome them. The medical way of telling you to 'man up'. So that's exactly what you do, you teach yourself to overcome them one by one so they are invisible to the outside world. You don't give up until you have contained every ounce of anxiety inside a locked safe deep within your cerebellum.

Unfortunately now to cope with 'normal' life and other people you have developed a few odd repetitive behaviours. Clucking noises in the back of your throat, hand twitches and a desperate need to turn switches on and off. Your friends start to ask you why you're being so weird. The school bullies start to mimic you, laugh at you. Before you know it you have obsessive compulsive disorder, these behaviours need to be reduced. So just like the anxiety you tackle it head on, one useless behaviour at a time, for Christ's sake why can't you just be normal!? Look at that girl over there, she's attractive and friendly, and everyone seems to love her, if only you could just be a bit more like her...you watch her more and more intently, every conversation you have with her is scrutinised until every thought you have is of her, and then before long as though you are her. You have successfully cloned another human being and you have the friends to prove it!

Only it doesn't stop there, there's so many people you want to be more like. So much pressure to keep it up. You begin to wish you looked like them too, so you stop eating and start exercising. At first you are complimented on your great shape but before long the admiring looks turn to disapproving. You are referred to mental health services, the doctors say you have Anorexia Nervosa. Or maybe you start to self-harm. You are in secondary school now, the social pressure has gone up a notch. Suddenly everyone's trying to impress the opposite sex and get the most drunk at parties. You just want to go home straight after school and do the same thing you do everyday; watch your TV programmes, read your books, organise your shelves and do your homework. Everyone's having 'so much fun', and you can't possibly be having fun. But you are, but now you feel bad for having fun by yourself. You make feeble attempts to hang out with your peers but usually collapse in exhaustion after an hour or two, requiring several days by yourself to recuperate. They find each others jokes so funny, you use to be the funny one but now you just don't understand them, you miss the point, they say you take them too literally.

You're so tired your mood is up and down. Occasionally you feel full of energy and take on life at an alarming pace. You can be sociable, witty and productive. Then a few weeks later you are in the pits of despair. You have tried buckets full of pills, but you've been oversensitive to them all. The hormonal pill makes you moody and depressed, the anti-depressants make you psychotic and twitchy. After assessing all your notes you finally get labelled as manic depressive or perhaps as having a personality disorder. It never quite fits but no one has ever considered you might have autism. You are a girl, you have friends, you make good eye contact, you aren't sat rocking with your collection of trains. Maybe by the time you are in your 20s someone will piece it together for you, or maybe you'll go through life never knowing, carrying the burden of multiple psychiatric diagnoses along with you.

Many females who go on to get diagnosed with autism have been referred from other psychiatric conditions. Many have co-morbid conditions, most commonly OCD, eating disorders, personality disorders, selective mutism, anxiety and depression. Fortunately researchers are beginning to address the gender divide in diagnosis. Last year the 'autism in pink' two year international programme was launched, looking at the misdiagnosis, social exclusion and stress among females on the Autistic spectrum. Hopefully this will change the way autism is perceived, erasing the male stereotypical image which biased research has created. What is vital to remember is that cognitively men and women with the disorder do not differ, they are impaired in the same core areas (Holtmann, Bolte, & Poustka, 2007). However, it is how the different sexes cope with these impairments which creates the false belief that they experience the disorder differently.

See Hannah's blog for more articles, information about her research and her documentary 'Changing the Face of Autism: Here Come the Girls':
<http://aspertypical.com/2015/09/16/changing-the-face-of-autism-video/>

Inhuman Empathy *by Emrys*

First published in 'Monsterring Magazine' (www.monsterringmag.com)

CN: terror attacks, implication that autistic people have no emotional empathy

When I googled "human empathy", one of the first results was from Psychology Today – "Human Empathy: an Essential Component for Human Society" (www.psychologytoday.com/blog/i-take-space/201108/human-empathy-essential-component-human-society). *Have you ever let yourself feel the hatred in the world? it asks. Turned off all the noise, gone to a quiet place, and contemplated how many people hate other people and the ways they express that hate?*

People generally give two different definitions of "empathy". Cognitive empathy is the ability to deduce what others are thinking, to know their mental state, to understand their perspective and thought processes. Affective empathy, or emotional empathy, is about feeling what other people feel. Emotional contagion. An infection, apparently, that is - that must be - a part of the human condition.

Immunity is unthinkable. Immunity is monstrous.

The steps that autistic and other neurodivergent activism takes towards the understanding and acceptance of different experiences of empathy are too often hampered by our feet - tangled in threads of respectability. We feel the need to insist that whatever difference or deficit may exist in our cognitive empathy abilities, our affective ability remains collectively intact, normal, normative - or that it exceeds normativity, spilling over with emotional contagion. It's alright that we might not understand what you're thinking, you see - we feel what you feel. We feel it to excess. We drip with humanity.

When personal experience becomes harmfully generalised - when our aim is to reassure rather than to disrupt, to widen the cracks humanity can slip through with tools rather than breaking down its barriers with sledgehammers - we leave people stuck outside, abandoning them to the realm of the monstrous.

I had to ask a friend - also autistic - to explain how, in their own terms, it feels to experience affective empathy. They described joy when friends are happy, sadness when friends are struggling: "as though it's happened to me, though the feelings are much less strong". They might not be able to understand or translate others' emotional state into words, but they can share it nonetheless.

Many autistic people do experience affective empathy to what we might term "normative degrees". Many autistic people struggle with an excess of affective empathy, white blood cells struggling to fight off the emotional contagion of an entire planet of hurt. Many autistic people, like me, can say

we feel glad or sympathetic when a friend tells us they are happy or sad, but cannot understand or locate this “feeling” on the same emotional level as our own happiness or sadness. Many autistic people can flip through these different states at will, switching on and off those that are helpful or harmful in context; many, instead, career from one extreme to another without wilful control.

These are categories of being that I have picked out of a swirling mess and made discrete in an attempt to name and describe something I find unnameable, as difficult for me to grasp as the concept of going to a quiet place and letting myself feel all the hatred in the world - whatever that means.

I’ve barely begun to unpack the shame tied up in admitting I don’t know what it means to experience emotions for someone other than myself. Traditional narratives of empathy, compassion, kindness, goodness - they add up and multiply in my head to tell me that what I’m (not) feeling makes me a monster.

But compassion and kindness are not passive traits. They are active choices. I could be doing more - we could all be doing more - but when my friends and communities help me see myself honestly, flaws and strengths, I am validated in the fact that I do support and fight for people, regardless of whether or not I can cry for them. Emotional responses and practical responses aren’t so disconnected for everyone; my friend said their affective empathy is a big driver of their compassion, whereas for me it’s about a purely objective sense of justice, and the knowledge - rather than the emotional urge - that it’s my responsibility to make things better for others wherever I can. Neither of these drivers is inherently better or worse.

Simon Baron-Cohen, a man known by pretty much all autistics and (at least in my circles) hated by most, responded to the recent UK terror attacks with a tweet that, whilst ostensibly sympathetic, essentially served as a plug for his book, *Zero Degrees of Empathy*”:

“Our sympathy for the victims in London today, and their families.
Terrorists have zero degrees of empathy. We all stand together for peace.”

@sbaroncohen, 4 Jun 2017

(<https://twitter.com/sbaroncohen/status/871282351908814851>)

According to his own definitions of autism, Baron-Cohen, as an allistic (a non-autistic person), has a greater ability for both cognitive and affective empathy than I do. I don’t doubt this – I’d imagine it takes a specific understanding of others’ mental state to manipulate a tragic situation into a self-promotion opportunity. Baron-Cohen is a prime example of the difference between empathetic emotions and compassionate actions, and his book - which explains violence as simply the result of a cognitive deficit in empathy - is a prime example of his ignorance with regards to that difference.

Baron-Cohen's theories of autism, moreover, centre around the idea of the "extreme male brain". There are many, many more problems with this theory than I have the space, energy, or knowledge to elaborate on, but its relation to theorizing empathy reinforces the deeply ingrained (and deeply misogynistic) societal expectation that a) women are natural empathizers and men are not, and b) this means that emotional labour, caring responsibilities, etc., must fall to women. Baron-Cohen is one in a sea of voices exempting men from the responsibility to act compassionately - regardless of how much empathy they experience, and what kind.

I stayed awake the night of June 8th, watching the UK election results map turn blue bit by bit. I tried, without getting very far, to trace a mental genealogy of the factors that guide the empathy of conservative voters in certain directions and not in others. I wondered why someone would feel the need to turn off all the noise and contemplate how many people hate other people and the ways they express that hate when instead they could turn on the news, or better - given who the news represents and who it forgets - make a commitment to not only using other channels to listen to and learn from, but also take action for those in need of solidarity against societies and governments that (whatever the cognitive makeup of the individuals within them) collectively show neither empathy nor compassion towards marginalised people.

I saw the 18-25 age demographic turn out at record highs to vote, overwhelmingly, for a party that - whilst obviously imperfect - gives me as much optimism for steps towards systemic compassion as I could dare to hope for within the existing system.

When a hung parliament was announced, I went to sleep.



image by Sophie

We're Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds

*Excerpt from CamNeurodiversity 'Autistic People, Not Gendered Minds' talk:
<http://camneurodiversity.tumblr.com/post/139681836318/talk>*

Sarra:

The really priority point about this gendered science, moving back to the title of the talk: we're autistic people, we're not gendered minds.

And science produces and reinforces this gender ratio in who gets diagnosed as autistic and who doesn't.

There are two really great findings in neuroscience recently.

One is the Royal Society paper released just this month – it got in the press – that's like 'well frankly we looked at some brains and we're not really sure what a male or a female brain is, they're all a bit different'. There's a line from it which says "Studies of humans further suggest **that human brains are better described as belonging to a single heterogeneous population rather than two distinct populations.**" So, a spectrum, then (they didn't say that, I said that).

The other thing that's come out that's unpublished so far, but people from the lab have been talking about it, from Yale, that really for me brings together all of what it's like to be an autistic woman (as I am) in all these existing social structures. At the Yale Child Neuroscience Lab they're finding that the social brain in girls with autism is kind of deliberately engaged, it's mediated through the prefrontal cortex (which is here, in the front of your head) — it's pretty much saying that **the social costs of not displaying empathic behaviour are so steep that it makes it worth doing deliberately.**

We're forced to compensate. And that's not binary either, it's not just binary gendered, but it's just about forcing compliance in anyone who can be forced, anybody who's got the capability to...be made to do that emotional labour, frankly, all the time.

[...]

Basically the realities of gender and the realities of human brain variation are really really gorgeous and complicated, and ... we've got to put lived experience to the fore in order to do really relevant, valid, ethical research into this aspect of human variation. Funnily enough **when you start to see people as people instead of defective minds you stop trying to fix them.**

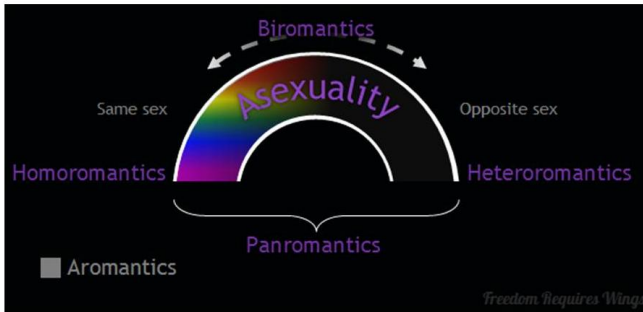
... Gender variation is natural, neurotype variation is natural. It's a lot easier to deal with people who are severely impaired once you begin to understand what's actually going on for them as real live conscious humans, which is a lot easier for people in the autistic community to understand because we can see what it's like to be dehumanized on a very everyday level and we know what it's like to live through a brain that's more sensitized to sensory input than it's 'supposed' to be.

Start by seeing us as people not as weirdly gendered minds, and we'll go from there.

Asexual and (Un)Ashamed *by Christian*

First published <https://autistryandme.wordpress.com/2016/10/24/asexual-and-unashamed/>

CN: Sex; mentions 'sexual abuse' and 'virginity'



<http://www.freedomrequireswings.com>

Today I was reading it is Asexual Awareness Week, which was fortuitous, as I was thinking about how to write about an uncomfortable subject – my lack of desire for romantic partnerships. This has not always been the case; when I was a teenager, and before I had any experience with physical intimacy, I thought I might want that, only to discover, after attempting to desire and enjoy said closeness, found I really didn't like it at all.

Naturally, this could be a result of my autistic stance of aloneness, which most autistics don't preserve into adulthood and which, though tempered with age, has never really left me. Or my sensory processing issues which make me gag at the scent of anyone other than myself, barf at the thought of a tongue in my mouth, and flinch at your touch. Anything other than a brief bear hug irritates intensely. Massages? Forget it - nobody has the strength or endurance to satisfy me. I use two tennis balls in a sock to adjust my own back when necessary. Utilitarian. Efficient.

I tried, believe me, I tried, to mold myself into the norm of being with another person, but it never worked for me. This engendered much rage when I was younger – trying to fit in and failing. Still, I stayed true to myself and trusted my instincts not to get married or breed. I was engaged five times, and called it off all five! So don't accuse me of not trying...

I was not sexually abused. My sexual experiences have been gratifying, and I know how to satisfy myself as well as the other. I have to sleep alone, so after sex, get out. I don't cuddle. Sex is only sex, not love. Romance - what's that? I hate bickering and having another person around me longer than an hour or, maybe a day, if it's a good day. People irritate me, even those I love, if present for long. I need them to go away while I recharge.

Given this attitude, I do not think it is fair to me or them to "lead them on", but, in the past, my resentment and anger let me do just that, usually wounding them. I am more compassionate now, but not to the point of responding to romantic advances.

I am not a virgin and have enjoyed sexual release since my teens – I am quite proficient at pleasing myself and actually prefer it. I am quick, efficient and no mess. I do not think of other people when “do me”. I accomplish the act in a few minutes, sometimes as little as one minute! I do not do it as often as when I was 15, but well within the norm for my age group (actually, slightly more).

I have admitted this since I knew it, around age 17, and have spent many excruciatingly long conversations attempting to explain and defend my orientation. I usually say, “I’m not gay, I’m “A”.

Now, I see there are articles online devoted to the subject, and am happy as a clam (up) about it: <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/04/asexual-aromantic-happy/>

It does not mean I cannot love or care about anyone – I do; I am a loyal and generous person who shows I care in non-physical ways, yet discussing my stance last night with a new friend on the spectrum who DOES desire romance I felt as alienated and sad as me at seventeen, anticipating the rejection which usually follows sometime – usually soon – after my description of my stance. I wrote this text today to someone else on the spectrum who does want physical closeness: “It can be even more lonely to not desire intimacy and face rejection because of it, than to desire it and be rejected for other reasons. Or at least as lonely. Because I want to remain separate is considered extremely abnormal in our society. Probably most societies. Yet it doesn’t mean I don’t crave love or non-physical affection. Sigh... Almost cried just now; this is one of my most difficult subjects. I am not a crier – except in extreme frustration – so for me to feel tears approaching is very sad.”

I do experience rejection from others who hope I will develop physical desire and who dump me altogether when I don’t. This repeated rejection still hurts and makes me feel like not attempting any relationships with anyone in any fashion.

Fortunately, I do have two people I would say I love and who I believe love me. One is female and one is male and I feel very close to them.

Don’t pity me; I am happy and actually feel sorry for you and your bickering, demanding, irrational other and squalling brats – do you detect a hint of hostility? You betcha – I am trying to get over it – not quite there yet and apologize; I am being honest – I wouldn’t want to trade places with you, your situation is repellent to me.

Love me. Just don’t touch me!



image by Anna

(Untitled) *by Sarra*

CN: shame, emotional labour, mental illness, depression, suicidality, swearing, sensory overload

The social cost of aberrance is so high that if you can at all conform, you do. It's not a choice.

I want to talk about inherited shame.

There's a list of rules I learnt from my family. There's a pattern and a purpose to them. To be honest, it's less an enumerated list and more a set of principles spun together round one unspoken centre to form a whole.

When you start pulling at the spool, the rules look like this.

- Don't do that. It looks weird.
- Don't look weird.
- Don't be loud.
- Behave.
- Be nice.
- Play nicely.
- Pay attention.
- Listen to me.
- Look at me when I'm talking to you.
- I said behave.
- Cheer up.
- Take that look off your face.
- Stop doing that.

Everyone learns social and cultural norms by evidence and injunction. Example, correction, imitation, encouragement, scolding, bullying, policing. It's not specific to the hiding of autism to have rules embedded like this in the cultures we inherit.

But in this specific set I see patterns of shame going back generations. They map onto people. The reason we have 'don't do that, it looks weird' is that we have the impulses to do the things in the first place. Those are in us as well. The whole thing is like a palimpsest. Generations of behaviour-shown and behaviour-stopped.

I can tell because I'm not very much different from my family. We're all kept in check by this programming, and how it shows is it's in our bones. I think about inherited shame because this is all a system built on what I can now see as one rule:

Don't look autistic.

Which you couldn't say. Which didn't have a name. We're all malleable enough that you can force us to pass in this way.

I've been picking my way back through these threads, undoing stitches of restraint to find autistic behaviours and tendencies underneath. I didn't at all notice they were there at first. It felt normal; I felt free.

One of the days it clicked for me was when, writing to myself as therapy, I found myself reeling off a list of *gotta* rules in operation at all times when awake and functioning. Gotta be composed. Gotta manage your outside. Gotta look interested when someone is talking to you. Gotta smile to not bother anyone. Gotta not ask anything of anyone unless absolutely necessary. Gotta not take up too much space. Gotta put up quietly with noise. Gotta be flexible. Gotta not choose routine.

It's amazing how all these point away from the same thing without naming it. They proscribe it.

You don't have to know what you're hiding in order to hide it.

It is work. It is a burden. There is a cost.

*

I am disabled in thinking, writing, speaking, doing. I'm trying to tell you what I know from what feels like another country and a language three times removed from my own.

I'm exhausted.

(continued on next page)

Emotional labour is the work done in finishing things, smoothing things over, making things okay. It normally falls to women. We have more to lose if we don't do it, because what else are we for, and who will listen to us if we don't?

Only in the past few days have I noticed that my compliant, neurotypical-passing front is work I do for other people.

*

One of the self-rating scales for autistic symptoms has the word "upset" a number of times: *I become upset if my routine is disrupted*, for example, or when there's loud noise and lots of people, or when things don't go according to plan. I can't remember exactly - the tools are copyrighted, private, marketed, and so not easy to access.

Like so many of the other questions, my native response to these was to say no, I don't get upset. I know more about why now.

It's not "upset". Upset is externalizing. Upset is making a scene. It's against the rules. So I interiorize. I switch off. I might become slightly numb, or tired, or clumsy, foggy, distracted, or feel weak and rubbish and like a failure. It's so subtle. Things build up.

Instead of experiencing upset I subsume it, in such a practised, deeply embedded way that it took years of personal archaeology for me to realise that I would even theoretically be allowed to be upset.

You're not allowed. There's no point complaining.

*

One of the ways my cognitive skills balance out slightly is that I have quite a lot, relatively, of adaptability and flexibility. I apply this to the way I do everything. I make myself cope.

I remember not thinking I had sensory sensitivities. I learned to cope so, so flexibly, so adaptably. I learned to filter and to shut up and not notice. I learned to endure things. Noise, lights, touch, taste, smell, movement.

I was so determined and so practiced that I got annoyed with other people. 'Can't you just learn not to x?'

Because it was a choice for me I thought it was a choice for everyone. I could force myself and downregulate and filter. If I didn't I was being a lazy crybaby.

*

I don't think we learn to mask just because we're told; I think we pick up on the shame that others feel when anything we do or say hints at what we culturally, ingrainedly know *is* autism but which we've not named as such. It's 'weird', it's 'rude', it's 'stupid', it's 'not nice'. Ashamed *hurts*. If you can, you learn how to stop doing the things which make others feel ashamed of you.

Masking can be almost literal. It was still a gentle shock to me when in my diagnostic assessment, two years after I'd already figured out that autistic is what I am – and a further fifteen before that of thinking that I couldn't be – my assessor pointed out that even though I'd been talking about depression and hardship and trauma my facial expression had been fixed throughout.

Normally when you think of unchanging faces you think of a neutral expression. Mine is a nonthreatening smile.

It suddenly made sense to me why others find it hard to tell what I'm feeling. The surprise and disbelief and jarring of trying to explain depression or difficulty. What was wrong with the message that meant I was so often stuck, alienated and alone, on the sender side of it.

*

I want to tell you about how enforced, involuntary camouflaging puts barriers between us and others to the extent that *of course* we experience such high rates of mental illness, depression, suicidality. It cuts you off from your emotions and your impulses. It robs you of ways to understand yourself. I have so, so, so much thought and writing about this and I just can't —

I'm –
so –
tired –

I know so much and I can't communicate it because I'm so fucking exhausted trying to survive.

(continued on next page)

Autistic can make sense of who you are the same way *trans* can, or *gay*. First you understand that other people are this thing that there's a word for. You might know straight away that it's you, or you might think *oh, no, that's for other people, the real ones.*

Force a cis person to live a wrong gender, a straight person to learn to live a different sexuality, a neurotypical person to live autistically. See the difficulty, the lack of skills, the amount of deliberate effort and construction.

It's not how the power pyramid works, in real life, but perhaps you could just about begin to imagine.

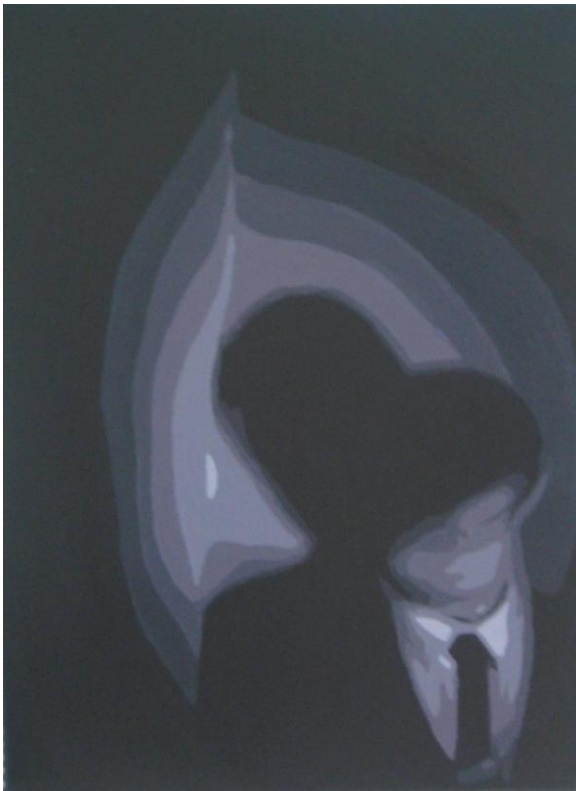


Image by Emma

Thanks to all our contributors

(in alphabetical order)

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Sophie
Sarrah

and several anonymous autistic people

Find online at www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/incamouflage

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