

# Autism: A Dissociated Self

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# Objectives

- Understand what we mean by autism, autism and psychotherapy, and psychotherapy and self
- Begin to bridge the gap between the autistic, the psychotherapist and the theoretical perspective, and discuss briefly with preliminary doctorate findings.
- Autistic testimony that focus on the relationship between autism & anxiety on several levels that may lead to autistic experiences of a dissociated self.
- Explore dissociation from autistics perspective findings in context of neuroscience and more established psychotherapeutic and trauma dissociative literature
- Briefly explore how we adapt our practice to the individual's needs who happens to be autistic.

# Defining Autism in relation to Self

- Autism derived from Greek word 'autos' which means self and 'ismos' meaning state of being. Bleuler (1912)
- Difficulty maintaining constant self-concept while being fragile to changing environments. Kanner (1943)
- Disturbance and a weakness of the self. Hans Asperger (1974).
- Lack an 'experiencing self. Powell & Jordan. (1993)
- An absent self. Frith.(2003)
- Theory of Mind. Baron-Cohen
- Impaired intersubjectivity. Hobson (1990)

# Defining Autism In Psychotherapy

- Psychoanalytic theories of Autism:
  - Unstable internal representations of themselves and of others.  
Lyons & Fitzgerald (2013)
  - Bettelheim (1967) Refrigerator mothers: *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self.*
- ‘Psychoanalysis as a treatment for autism has a limited value’ ... anecdotal evidence suggests that unless therapy is combined with direct practical advice on how to deal with problems, the outcome may be disastrous Campbell et al. (1996)
- ‘One cannot conclude with certainty that it does not work, nevertheless, there is little evidence ... to suggest that it does’  
Howlin & Rutter (1987)

# Bridging the Gap between the Autistic, the Therapist and the Theoretical Perspective of Autism.

# Doctorate Question

- An Intersubjective Analysis within a Co-Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology.
- Intersubjectivity and Theory of Mind within the same theoretical family.
- 5 participants: Research-practitioner experts in field of autism.
- Intersubjective mechanisms of the method partially mirrored the intersubjective between a therapist and an autistic client.
- “Self-awareness expanding to an intersubjective space to enable experience of, self, other and environment within disconnected systems.”
- Re-engaging the intersubjective process from infancy

# Understanding Intersubjectivity

# The Journey of the Neurobiological Self

- Interdependence between Mother-Infant pair as a self-selfobject unit. Schore (2003)
- Synchronized interdependency of “mutually attuned selective cueing (Bergman, 1999, p. 96)
- Psychobiological attunement Schore (2003)
- Co-creation of intersubjective resonance as an amplified biological mirror Schore (1994)
- Psychobiological attunement and social engagement organise limbic circuitry of early developing RH of brain, while acting as containment.
- Disengagement enables infant to regulate both together and alone.

# The Development of Self in RH

- Winnicott (1971) Infant expression true self and mother giving back own self through motheres.
- Motherese critical for RH development that processes prosodic emotional functions. Schore 2014
- Hsu & Xu (2014) Autistic individuals may have a reduced ability to perceive emotional prosody
- Emergence of emotional development, regulatory systems occur in first 3 years of maturing RH of brain. Schore (2014))
- Right Hemisphere impairment leads to a dysfunctional self-development in autism. Lyons & Fitzgerald (2013)

# Defining Dissociation

- DSMV: disturbance in the ongoing continuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotional, perceptual, body representation, motor control and behaviour.
- Continuum ranging from non-pathological or normal to pathological.
- Instinctively created to carry unwanted material so can service intolerable circumstances.

# An Insider's Perspective

“Now your mind is in a room where twenty radios all turned to different stations are blarring out voices and music. The radios have no off switches or volume controls, the room you are in has no door or window, and relief will come only when you’re too exhausted to stay awake .”

(Higashida, 2013)  
p2 The reason I Jump.

# An Autistic Sensory Self

- Autistic people can fluctuate between Hyper and Hypo from the same stimuli. Bogdashina (2016).
- Like an FM radio station going in and out of tune as you drive along a motorway. Freeman (1993).
- The seesaw of autism is when in the middle get a glimpse what it may feel like to not have autism. Williams (1994).
- Is the regulation of sensory system connected to developing a sense of self?

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# An Autistic Sensory Self

Bogdashina (2016) Fascination may be the opposite of disturbance but are two sides of one coin.

Williams (1994) The beautiful side of autism.

Bogdashina (2016) There is a resonance between fascination and loss of sense of self.

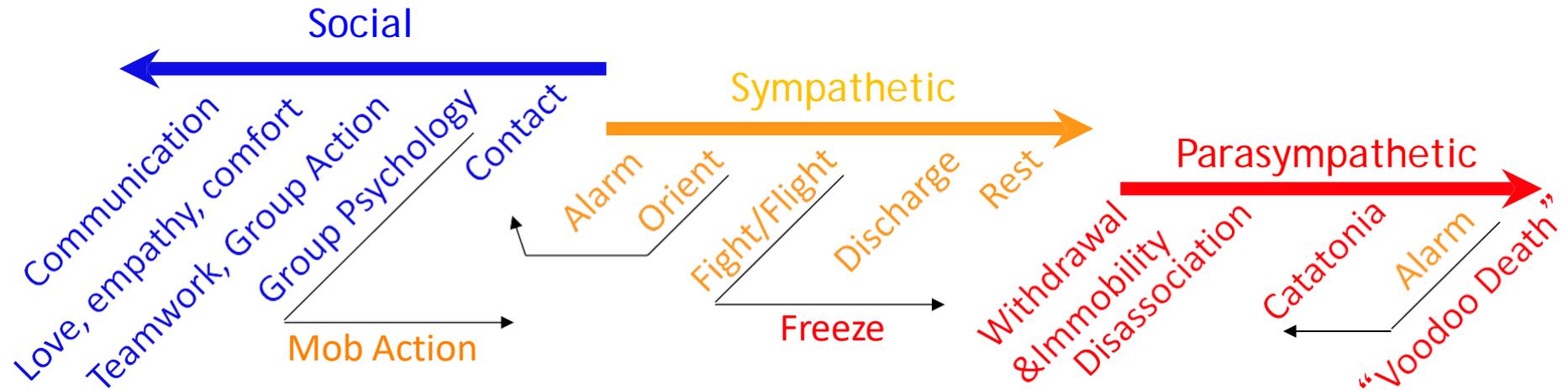
Lawson (1998) When colours are vibrant, she can feel them.

Kana et al (2007) Inhibition circuitry activated atypically in autism where inhibition may be a strategic control rather than automated

# Jackson's Theory of Dissolution

"The higher nervous system arrangements inhibit (or control) the lower, and thus, when the higher are suddenly rendered functionless, the lower rise in activity."

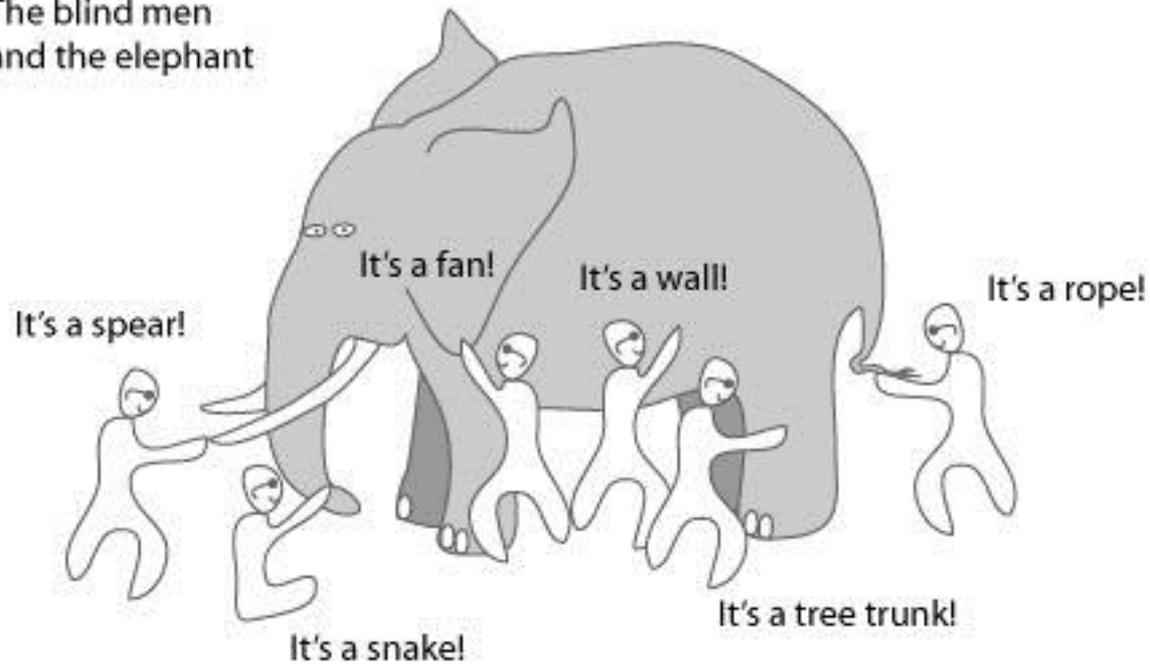
-John Hughlings Jackson (1835-1911)  
Father of English Neurology  
Quoted by Stephen Porges 11/01



We play our **newest, best card first**, if that doesn't work (or has not worked in the past as determined by the amygdala), we try our **older, second card**. If that doesn't work, we play our **oldest, last card**. If that doesn't work we are in extreme danger of death.

# Explain Autism from an Autistic Perspective

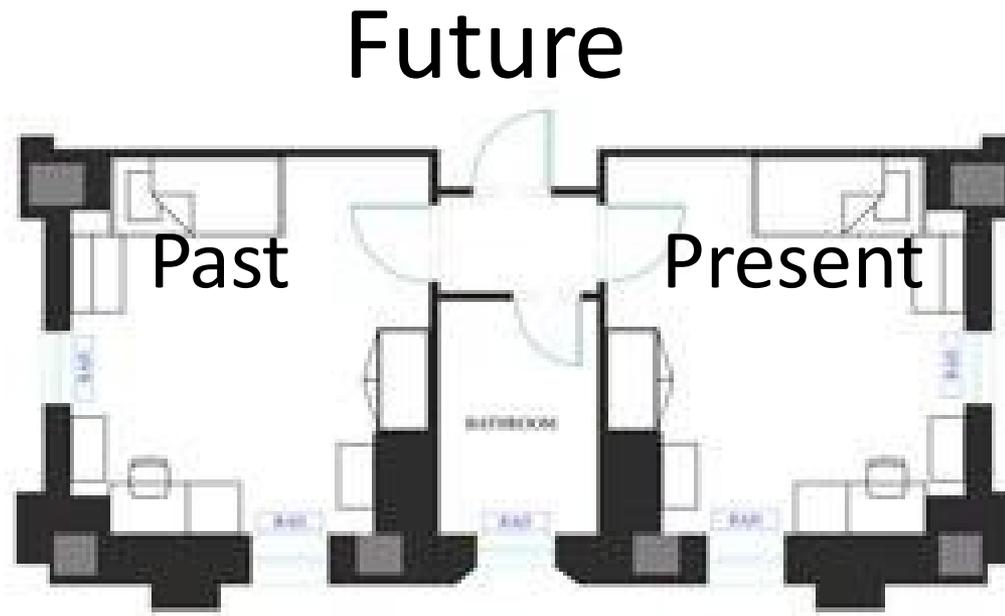
The blind men and the elephant



# An Autistic Sensory Self

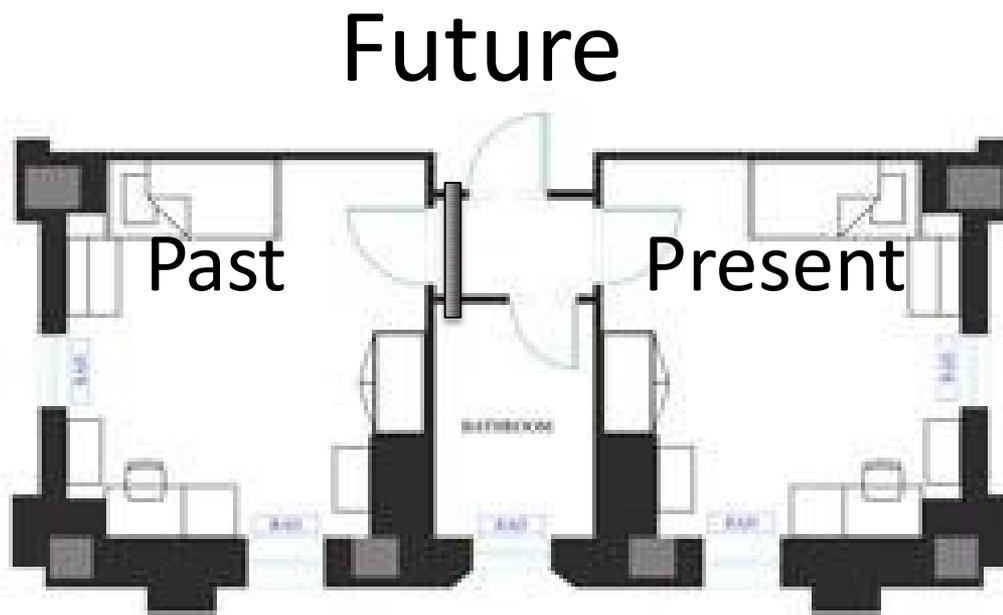
- Pelicano & Burr (2012) 'hypo-priors' - may be responsible for the unique perceptual experience of autistic people, perceiving the world as it is, rather than modulated by prior experience.
- Caruana & Brock (2014) Autistics less influenced by contextual information.
- Hurlings Jackson (1835-1911): Doubling: holding two models in the mind, where one is held in the past and one is held in the present.
- Turi et al (2015) Inability to predict sensory environment = less habituation = symptoms of sensory overload.
- Meares (1999) People who dissociate have a remarkable inability to habituate.

# The Two Room Metaphor



# Two Room Metaphor

CounsellingRooms



# An Insider's Perspective

“They seem to have **no sieves in their brains** to select the information that is worth being attended to. This results in a paradoxical phenomenon: sensory information is received in infinite detail and holistically at the same time. It can be described as ‘**gestalt perception**’<sup>1</sup>, i.e. perception of the whole scene as a single entity with all the details perceived (not processed!) simultaneously. They may be aware of the information others miss, but the **processing** of ‘holistic situations’ can be overwhelming.”

Donna Williams (1994)

# The Disintegration of Self

## Mollon (2015) Disintegration Anxiety

- Effort to ward off disintegration anxiety renders environment predictable and unchanging.
- People may become anti-selfobjects (Kohut), as people may trigger anxiety and environment soothes it.

Nason (2015) Difference between social ability and social interest.

Attwood (2006) Unable to remember a time without anxiety.

Mollon (2015) Override anxiety by creating split between outward socially performing persona and the inner state of chronic intense anxiety combined with shame.

# Reducing Autistic Traits

Vs

# Reducing Coping Mechanisms

# An Insider's Perspective

“once I’ve made a mistake the fact of it starts rushing towards me like a tsunami, and then the trees and houses being destroyed by the tsunami, I get destroyed by the shock. I get swallowed up in the moment and can’t tell the right response from the wrong response. All I know is I have to get out of the situation as soon as I can, so I don’t drown. To get away, I’ll do anything.....Finally, finally I’ll calm down and come back to myself. Then I see no sign of the tsunami attack - only the wreckage I’ve made. And when I see that I hate myself, I just hate myself”.

Higashida (2013, p65) The reason I Jump.

# Dissociation from a socially acceptable Autism

- Shakespeare (2006) disability defined as complex interaction between Self and society
- “People with autism are ‘differently abled’ rather than ‘disabled’ has not yet sunk in among the ‘neurotypical’ majority” Tito cited in Thielmann & Kern-Stahler (2008 p227).
- Autists have tried to pass for neurotypical Kapp (2012).
- Females with ASD - more social pressure to cope with Zahn-Waxler (2006).
- Mollon (2015) Feeling shame from feeling different.
- Winnicott (1966) Theory of false self.
- Mollon (2015) Concealing the authentic self and presenting an apparently normal self = structural dissociation
- When we say all parts are welcome, do we mean this?

# sider's Perspectivex

“One day I dream that we can grow in a matured society where nobody would be ‘normal or abnormal’ but just human beings, accepting any other human being—ready to grow together”.

(Tito (2000), p58 Beyond the Silence)

# An Insider's Perspective

## The Story of Alan

# Autism experienced as a disembodied self

## Insiders Perspective

“There are times when I can’t act even though I really badly want to. This is when my body is beyond my control. I don’t mean I am ill or anything. It’s as if my whole body except for my soul, feels as if it belongs to somebody else, and I have zero control over it. I don’t think you could ever imagine what an agonizing sensation this is.”

Higashida (2013) p68

# Autism experienced as a disembodied self

Tito (How Can I Talk p212)

“fragmented sensory experience” inhibits him from forming a coherent body image. ....experiences a sensation of losing his body.

Describes himself as a disembodied being; at other times, his body seems to be scattered and uncontrollable.

Tito The Mind Tree, p19.

“the boy refused to accept the existence of his body, and imagined himself to be a spirit”

NY Times Interview cited in Thiemann & Kern-Stahler

“My senses are so disconnected, I lose my body. So I flap. If I don't do this, I feel scattered and anxious.” New York Times Interview

# Dissociation as a defence mechanism

Putnam (1997) Discrete State Model of Dissociation

Putnam (1997) p67-75 defines dissociation as a defence mechanism with three major tasks:

- Automisation of behaviour in the face of psychologically overwhelming circumstances
- Estrangement of self in face of potential annihilation.
- Compartmentalisation of painful affects and memories

# Dissociation & Memory

Liotti (2004) Dissociation = deficit in integrative functions of memory.

Bogdashina (2016) Memory becomes distorted from our past experience.

Mollon (2015) 3 reasons for impaired perception or memory:

- Scattered attention means information not coded accurately
- Internal disorganisation
- Filling in the gaps with what favours our own self image

# An Insider's Perspective

“We do remember what we did .....but these memories are all scattershot and never connected in the right order “

“The trouble with scattered memories is that sometimes they replay themselves in my head as if they had only just taken place - and when this happens the emotion I felt originally all come rushing back to me like a sudden storm. This is a flashback memory“

(Higashida, 2013)  
p62

# An Insider's Perspective

“the memory of a person with autism isn’t like a number scale from which you pick out the recollection you are after: it’s more like a jigsaw puzzle, where if even just one piece is mis-inserted, the entire puzzle becomes impossible to complete. What’s more a single piece that doesn’t belong there can mess up all the surrounding memories as well. So it’s not necessary physical pain that is making us cry at all, quite possibly its memory.

(Higashida, 2013)

p88

# Dissociation, Memory & Autism

- Derealisation: a consequence of mismatching memory and experience. Meares (1980)
- This disconnection experience involves unlinking of bodily feeling to core self. Meares (1980)
- Impaired episodic memory along with semantic autobiographical memory and self trait knowledge reported in autism Zalla et al (2015)
- Brown et al (2014) PTSD retrieve autobiographical with less episodic specificity.
- Liotti (2004) tendency towards dissociative states on mental operations during autobiographical memory task.

# Dissociation, Trauma & Autism

- Suggesting a link between autism and trauma is not new.
- Schore (2001) Dissociate from the internal world as much as from the external world.
- Shortage of Purkinje Cells in 50% of Autistic brains examined. Caldwell (2014)
- Meabon et al (2016) Purkinje cell loss in cerebellum associated traumatic brain injury.
- Reid (1999) Autistic Post-traumatic Developmental Disorder.
- Jovasevic et al (2015) How traumatic memories hide in the brain: Glutamate & GABA amino acids which control excitation and inhibition
  - Glutamate stores memory
  - GABA has calming effect
  - microRNA, miR-33 may be the regulatory mechanism
- Mir-33 as a regulatory mechanism in experiencing stress from trauma is also associated with gene SCFD2 which has been identified with autism. Doyle (2016)

# Pilot Study Categories

Initial experience of autism impacted how they work today

Prior knowledge as a point of departure to meet the person:

Impact of family as an active system and how it is connected/disconnected to the person:

Parallels between the various disconnected systems or relationships between the various systems that work within the field of autism:

Joining the person's frame of reference without changing it:

Co-constructing an intersubjective space where genuine meaningful relationships between self, other and environment evolve within the person with autism:

The relentless isolating loop from a divorced self and a non-accepting society:

# Follow up on research

Explore an autistic's sense of self, other and environment and how these relate when interacting with a therapist.

Explore differences between the art and science of psychotherapy (Rueve & Correll 2006) when working with autism from an autistic, a Psychotherapist and a theoretical perspective.

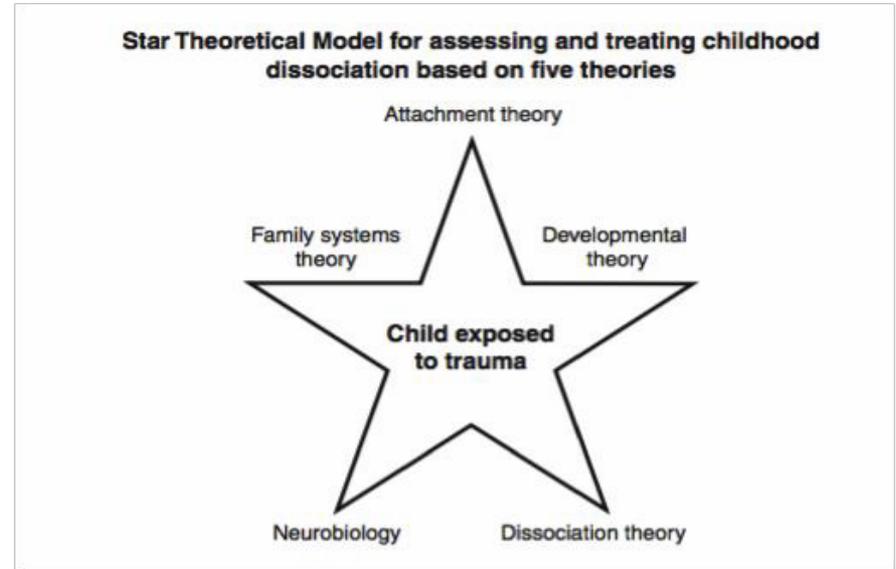
Explore the inner subtleties between Psychotherapists when working with autistics, from both an autistic and Psychotherapist perspective.

Explore how Psychotherapists encourage contact with the autistic within an intersubjective experience.

Further develop method.

# Star Model of Dissociation

- Attachment
- Family System
- Developmental
- Neurobiology
- Dissociation Theory



Waters (2016) Healing the Fractured Child:  
Diagnosis and Treatment of Youth With Dissociation.

# Conclusion

- Intersubjectively connect using theory around autism as a point of departure.
- Working with a dysregulated sensory system.
- Work with shame.
- Assist the individual to access their room of prior knowledge.
- All parts are welcome.
- Explore how to work with sensorimotor in working with disembodiment.
- Introduce how to adapt our own theoretical approach.