Moving Beyond Metaphors of Difference: Belonging as Inclusive Practice

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In this thoughtful article, the potential for exploring different life experiences, such as those of disability, is explored through the use of an illustrative metaphor for autism that is both poignant and often-used – that of the autistic person as alien. The author shows how this metaphor provides an opportunity to consider different understandings of Heidegger's use of the concept of *belonging-together*, and the emergence of a common foundation for interaction based on the mutual "world disclosing" of autistic and typically developing persons.

This discussion is thoroughly engaging, and I appreciate the author's sense of hopefulness in the increased potential for connection and communication that technology provides for people with delayed or limited verbal language. I would also like to extend (or perhaps complicate) a couple lines of thought. Firstly, I would like to take a critical look at the power of metaphorical description and its possible implications in regard to pedagogical contexts. Secondly, I would like to consider *belonging* as a pedagogical concept, and offer some additional thoughts as to how it can be closely related to the experience of disability and social inclusion.

IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENT PLANETS: METAPHORS OF AUTISM AND DISABILITY

This article presents a compelling case of the power of language, especially its role in world-disclosing between persons with very different experiences of the world, in this case persons with and without an

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis, and in fact focuses on the linguistic and conceptual processes of "wor(l)ding." The metaphor of an alien being or race is, as the author also notes, one of the most common ways of depicting individuals with autism diagnoses.[1] The starting point of his discussion is an exchange in the form of a metaphorical parable, written by Naoki Higadashi, an autistic teen. In this tale, "Earthling" and "Autisman" are described as meeting and discussing the difference between their worlds. Mr. Hudak describes the two characters as "ontological travelers … from distinct planets," who "disclose to each other new worlds with distinct modes of gravity."[2]

Alicia Broderick and Ari Ne'eman have also written about the use of different metaphors to describe autism (and other developmental and cognitive disabilities), and note the use of two general categories, those of *the alien* and those of a person *trapped or separated* somewhere (a fortress, a bubble, etc.)[3] I feel that both of these approaches maneuver the person with ASD diagnosis into a position of categorical or locational difference, either as a different type of person, or being in need of rescue or relocation in order to make connection possible.

Another issue Broderick and Ne'eman find noteworthy is the way many individuals with autism diagnoses also seem to gravitate to such metaphors as being descriptive of their lives. The experience of "otherness," or being an outsider, is unfortunately a common one for persons with social and developmental disabilities. As such, the accuracy or authenticity of this depiction is not at all in question! Furthermore, it can be very helpful in explaining the difficulty and stress of experiencing one's social and physical environment as alienating, and of not understanding – and more importantly not *being understood by* – one's peers.

It also has important implications for education, inasmuch as it reminds us as practitioners and theorists of the experience of outsider-

ness that seems common to many people who identify as autistic. In my own research interviewing youth and adults, this tends to be ubiquitous across persons who were diagnosed as children, and those who did not get a diagnosis until adulthood, which means the problem lies deeper than a debate about designations and labelling, and is indeed a matter for serious concern and further investigation. There is an ethical imperative to understand how and why schools, as a primary social context for childhood, are also a site of extreme social marginalization for youth perceived as different by their peers, and to identify and strengthen the means of resistance to such processes.

Metaphors are powerfully moving, as well as a fantastic tool for learning and understanding, which explains their extensive use in religious and philosophical works. As such, this one can help people understand an experience of outsiderness and, in some cases, isolation. It may motivate neurotypical peers to participate in world-disclosing, and perhaps even to being an accomplice to acts of resistance. In other words, all is perhaps well with the alien metaphor, as long as it remains descriptive, and does not extend to the assumption of its being *prescriptive*.

Unleashing such a metaphor for general use carries within it exactly that possible implication. What is a valuable descriptive analogy can quickly become a dark prescriptive prophecy: the two types of beings in this portrayal are inherently different, come from different places, and – by definition – *will never* inhabit a context in which one of them is not an outsider. There will always be a space where, ultimately, one *belongs* more than the other. The metaphors we use to make sense of the experience of such youth are important for our own perceptions of community building and social interactions, as well as the perspectives we pass on to the youth with whom we work. We must be constantly critical of the ways in which we seek to understand and communicate the experience of

exclusion, while not unintentionally increasing or crystalizing difference into something categorical or determinative.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG?

The metaphor of individuals from different worlds brings to light, as mentioned in the previous section, the problem of *belonging*. This essay describes Heidegger's use of the idea of belonging-together, which can be contemplated in two different ways: with a focus either on belonging or together. The author suggests that in this case, it makes the most sense to focus on the *belonging* of each individual in the autistic/non-autistic duo separately, and to think of them as *together* not by definition, but through mutual respect and understanding.

This is both an important and compelling suggestion, and goes a long way toward addressing issues of social justice around disability (specifically autism), such as uncomfortable or coercive treatments or interventions, and societal disapproval or lack of acceptance of different ways of being-in-the-world. However, I feel that pedagogically, there is a risk that this stops short of a complete understanding of the complex social process of belonging, which can be illustrated more fully using the perspectives of the persons who are experiencing marginalization.

Iram Khawaja, a qualitative researcher in educational psychology, has explored the experiences of members of Muslim minority communities in Denmark. Her research participants described their processes of belonging in a context where they were often identified — and self-identified — as being different than the majority population. In her interviews, several important aspects of belonging emerged.[4] They indicated that belonging includes three main components: feeling comfortable and welcome (both emotionally and bodily), feeling acknowledged as a

legitimate subject without having to change, and being positioned as a "not too different(ed) subject."[5]

These three aspects of belonging seem to be relevant to the experience of persons with social disabilities as well, and sensory differences were some of the most common factor that could affect experiencing comfort. One of my adult interview participants (with an ASD diagnosis) described the experience of being-in-the world with an image of their own: "Imagine the floor at home was covered in marbles. I could develop a way of walking, I could manage without falling, but it would look very strange to anyone who saw me outside of my apartment!" This homegrown metaphor portrays the discomfort of navigating contexts that are organized for the sensory needs of someone with a different experience of the world with both emotional and bodily aspects.

Far from feeling acknowledged as legitimate, many persons with ASD diagnoses, in my experience, have described feeling an expectation or pressure to act differently than what feels natural to them; indeed, the bulk of interventions used for autism are based on behavioral modification, and tend to take into account the needs and wishes, first and foremost, of the persons around the individual with the diagnosis. Another of my interview participants reported feeling like they had been "educated to be normal" throughout their school experiences (all of which, incidentally, took place in mainstream educational contexts, before they had been diagnosed), and another said "one never learns to be oneself."

The final aspect of the three, being recognized as a "not too different(ed)" subject, is a multilayered process that relies on maintaining a careful balance of several aspects: experiencing a unique individual identity – which includes being part of a distinct non-majority community – while nonetheless experiencing acceptance and recognition. For Khawaja's Muslim participants, there was an important distinction be-

tween being able to position oneself as "the same" as the majority, or as "different – but not too different(ed)." The latter is what was described as the goal for experiencing belonging. This fine distinction is also clear in recurring discussions within the autism community about diagnostic descriptions and prevalent understandings about autism and empathy. Describing persons with ASD diagnoses as lacking in or having a disturbance in empathy, which is common, is to question a very fundamental aspect of humanness.[6] Many persons with ASD diagnoses, including those who are comfortable being positioned as part of the autistic community, understandably resist this type of description of autism! It clearly signifies a positioning of the individual as much too "different(ed)" for full acceptance into the larger community.

This experience-based framing of the concept of belonging refers back to the discussion about belonging-together, but also goes beyond simply allowing the defiance of certain specific social expectations regarding communication and behavior and acceptance and disclosing of different ways of being in the world. Giving space to differentness is an essential component to belonging, but still doesn't address the responsibility of both parts in the community building. Humans existing together should be expected to live up to an ethical imperative of actively working to create common ground and participate in community building, rather than accepting an understanding of belonging as something that can occur in mutually exclusive spheres. In this case, the particular focus is on how non-disabled peers can be actively engaged in these processes – or how educators can think about how to involve the whole peer group.

BEYOND METAPHORS OF DIFFERENCE

The visual metaphor of the rainbow infinity symbol, adopted by many neurodiversity groups, is, to me, a more inviting illustration of

belonging than that of aliens involved in world-disclosing. There is no color of the rainbow that does not belong in the spectrum of light, and all are vital to the rainbow's integrity as such. There are many different colors represented, but the rainbow would not be complete without any of them. In this metaphor, different members of the human spectrum may need to disclose their mutual differences to gain an understanding of one another's needs and experiences, but none can deny the equal rights of the other to be part of one unified whole.

But this, too, has a static element that I find somewhat pedagogically limiting. The difficulty with all these metaphors, in an educational perspective, is that they do not invite us to embrace the messy, nonlinear, and complex transformative process that is learning. Belonging is a constant process, requiring reciprocal movements, both from individuals and communities, and an unending network of negotiation of positions and meanings. Deleuze and Guattari offer an alternative metaphor – one that is, significantly, not a depiction of relationship, but of the spaces in which those relationships and transformations can occur. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they conceptualize the difference between striated spaces, that restrict movements to certain pre-defined directions, and smooth spaces, that allow for sudden, unpredictable, and imaginative movements.[7] These concepts are illustrated by a series of metaphors, one of which is the difference between woven cloth and felt. Woven cloth is striated: there is a distinct directionality, a right and wrong side, and the individual threads suggest movement in two pre-described and delineated directions. Felt, on the other hand, is uniformly different everywhere, is "only an entanglement of fibers," and therefore defies the duality and either/or implications of woven cloth.[8]

Deleuze and Guattari point out that such spaces do not exist separately, but only in combination, and the movements in and between

one and the other is more characterized by a certain mixture, "sometimes causing a passage from the smooth to the striated, sometimes from the striated to the smooth, according to entirely different movements."[9] This metaphor of space and movement allows for the transcendence of categorical understandings of human difference, while still acknowledging the importance of the structure of the known and predictable, and allowing the possibility of slipping between the two frameworks when appropriate.

In looking for a metaphor for belonging, it may be an idea to shift the focus from the individuals to also consider the *spaces* around the individuals, and how they do or do not allow for sudden and unexpected possibilities and different, undefined ways of being and being together. This could give metaphorical space for considering community building that includes new possibilities for positioning and negotiation of meaning that encourage even greater acknowledgement, recognition, and comfort, which are at the heart of a sense of belonging.

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1 A couple of examples: neurologist and author Oliver Sacks quoted the autistic self-advocate Temple Grandin in the title of his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (Toronto: Random House, 1996), 259. Another is wrongplanet.net, a popular autistic self-advocacy support website.

2 Glenn Hudak, "The Priority of 'Relation' over Being in World Disclosing: Autism, Identity, & the 'Gravity' of the Situation," *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

3 Alicia A. Broderick and Ari Ne'eman, "Autism as Metaphor: Narrative and Counter-Narrative," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 12, no. 5-6 (2008): 459-476.

4 Iram Khawaja, *"To Belong Everywhere and Nowhere": Fortællinger om Muslimskhed, Fællesgørelse og Belonging* [To Belong Everywhere and Nowhere": Narratives on Muslimness, Community-Making and Belonging] (PhD diss., Roskilde University, 2010).

5 Khawaja, *"To Belong Everywhere and Nowhere,"* 154.

6 Dr. Damian Milton, a researcher and author in ASD who also has an autism diagnosis, has written extensively about this, and has developed what he calls the "Double empathy problem," referring to the fact that lack of empathy can just as well describe the neurotypical population's lack of understanding of autistic expe-

rience as the lack of empathy from persons with ASD diagnoses. Damian Milton, "The Double Empathy Problem," National Autistic Society: Network Autism, March 2, 2018, https://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/double-empathy-problem.

7 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: Continuum, 1987), 524-525.

8 Ibid., 525.

9 Ibid., 524.