

Introduction

For decades, autism has defied explanation. It has been described as a puzzle and an enigma. The autistic child has been called the “ultimate stranger”. For unlike the mentally handicapped child who is not autistic, who interacts with us to the extent that his limited intelligence allows, the autistic child possesses intelligence that he is not applying to social interactions. His behaviour in other, non-social areas attests to this. He is thinking, but he does not share his thoughts with us. Whether it is the intelligent Asperger’s child who can discuss volumes of scientific information, but does not know how to say hello or good-bye, or the child who is mute and oblivious to other human beings but can assemble thousand-piece jig-saw puzzles, his is not an empty world. It is full, but it is a fullness from which we are excluded. It is a world apart from ours.

During the latter part of the twentieth century many theories were proposed to explain autism, but all ultimately failed. Continual failure led to discouragement, and research turned instead to genetics and brain chemistry. But, while these have begun to yield solid correlations, we must ultimately go back and face the problem of understanding the dynamics of the autistic mind and how it develops. For however reliable hard-science approaches may be, they fall short of answering essential questions. They cannot tell us what is going on in autism or why. Nor can they provide guidance for therapy or education. No medication or treatment has been found that can cure or prevent autism. Those that are being used address only symptoms and secondary conditions. So in spite of all past failures, if we are to understand autism and help those autistic individuals among us, we must confront and answer the soft-science questions.

My own involvement with autism began naively. Having no basis upon which to judge whether a theory was correct or not, I accepted whatever I read. But as I studied and worked with autistic children and adults, I gained first-hand knowledge, and saw the flaws both in the older theories and in the newer ones as they were presented. Still, though I had amassed a vast and diverse collection of facts about autism, I had no unifying theory or explanation. I didn’t understand it any more than anyone else. My developmentalist background inclined me against nativist theories, but did not provide me with any more satisfactory explanation. I just knew that none of the theories could be correct, because none of them were consistent with the facts.

The turning point came when I began to focus on causal relationships between the traits that I had learned to recognise. At the time, I was not thinking of this as an attempt to understand the cause of autism, or even to gain a deeper understanding of the syndrome in general. All I was trying to do was understand which aspects were primary and which were secondary. I wanted to know which were not essential traits of the syndrome but were being caused in some way by the others. It was a practical question. If something is not an essential part, it might be prevented, or, if already present, might be alleviated. Whatever could or could not be done about autism itself, it might be possible to address secondary problems.

Earlier research had sometimes discussed how traits were caused, but only after having arrived at a theory. As I worked on this problem, the question of cause and effect in autism began to become central. It became the starting point. This led to an insight. I realised that in human development, and indeed in nature in general, there are sometimes things that seem to be separate, but are actually interrelated, connected in tight relationships. Though they seem to be independent, in fact they comprise a system. Within the system, each affects the others, so no single one can be understood independently - they can only be understood when taken as a whole. I also realised that understanding autism was a matter not only of understanding the abnormal, but of understanding the normal. To understand autism, it was necessary to understand certain systems in human cognition and cognitive development, and until we understood them correctly, we would not be able to understand autism. For this reason, the new explanation at which I eventually arrived was essentially different from earlier ones. It was also considerably more complex. The three articles in which it was originally published covered the main points, but much of the finer

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detail was necessarily left out. This is no doubt a disappointment for those who have been hoping for a quick and easy answer, but the world is complex, and there is no reason to expect this to be an exception.

Because taking a new perspective and re-examining assumptions play such an important role in the development of this explanation, I have begun this book with a meta-study, a study not of autism itself, but of how researchers have approached it in the past and the assumptions they have made. My purpose is not only to point out their mistakes, but to learn from their insights as well. I also feel that those readers who are not already familiar with earlier research should gain some appreciation for the excellent and sincere efforts that have been made trying to solve this difficult problem.

The approach to human intelligence upon which my explanations are based is developmental, and specifically, Piagetian. So pervasive is the influence of Piaget on my own thought that anything vaguely resembling his ideas can be reasonably assumed to have its source in his writings. On the other hand, in many ways I have modified and developed them myself, so to make reference to them explicitly might be misrepresentation. This statement of credit will, therefore, have to suffice.

Of the many explanations I am presenting here, there are some of which I am relatively certain and others which I consider hypotheses yet to be proven. Although I rarely state this explicitly, it is generally clear from the manner of presentation. Ultimately, as in all scientific inquiry, time will sort them out.