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Autism and Anthropology?

Mary C. Lawlor[Professor]

Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University of Southern California.

The articles in the Special Issue, “Rethinking Autism, Rethinking Anthropology,” provide a ground for demonstrating substantive contributions to understandings of autism and mark the dilemmas and tensions inherent in anthropological approaches. Comments explore the ways in which authors attend to demarcation of the social world, establishment and negotiation of expertise, juxtaposition of autism as a phenomenon of interest and as an exemplar of sociality, and management of structured and improvisational approaches to the study of engagements in real life. The dilemmas and tensions that are briefly described here are only a partial list of still uncultivated spaces where autism and anthropology can--should--do meet. [sociality, autism, engagement, expertise, ethnography]

This is an interesting and broad interdisciplinary collection of articles that brings forward a number of compelling dimensions of autism research. This special issue of *Ethos* marks a substantive contribution of anthropology to research in autism, both conceptually and methodologically. It also raises a number of dilemmas and tensions inherent in anthropological understandings of a phenomenon that can be described narrowly as a biomedical, neurological, or developmental or educational disorder, or phenomenologically and experientially as a way of being in the world. As several of the contributions acknowledge, understandings of autism are contoured historically, politically, and socially. Autism has emerged rather powerfully in popular culture and as the focus of interdisciplinary research efforts that represent a remarkable array of analytic units and objectives.

When I was at the AAA meetings in Washington, D.C., in 2007, preparing comments for the panel that formed the basis for this issue, I met with a colleague about some unrelated university business. In the usual exchanges related to what brings you to Washington, D.C., I mentioned the panel on autism at the conference. This researcher visibly startled when I put the words autism and anthropology together. “Autism and anthropology?” he asked, making explicit his deep puzzlement. His efforts to wrap his mind around this coupling were transparent. As the present collection makes clear, the pairing of autism and anthropology is not completely new nor radical and is potentially highly generative.

A Kaleidoscopic View

These articles collectively provide a kaleidoscopic view of autism research. Some present an ordered pattern with tightly drawn structural images, while others reflect more the tumbling, improvisational, nuanced, and always evolving images that are generated in transitions, or turns in the kaleidoscope. The juxtaposition of images often yields startling contrasts. Similar to the ways that two colors bordering each other can react kinetically, aligning the contributions in this collection reveals energy at their intersections. These articles provide a ground for marking the dilemmas and tensions inherent in anthropological approaches to the study of autism. Several of the most striking elements of these approaches are discussed below.

Autism as Phenomenon of Interest or Exemplar

This issue quickly raises questions about the nature of autism. To what extent is autism a phenomenon that is the focus of interest and to what extent is autism a particularly fertile exemplar of sociality or other theoretical pursuits in anthropology? How is autism differentially understood by those who live with autism and others who seek to understand it? The problem is not merely, or even primarily, semantic but, rather, theoretical and methodological with much at stake. The editors address this tension in their introduction. Biomedical terms such as disorder and condition starkly contrast with more ethnographically and phenomenologically derived terms as revealed in Bagatell's reflections on autism as a way of being and her decision to adopt the preferred language of the people she came to know in the autistic community. Attempts to dichotomize biomedical and phenomenological or socially constructed views are inherently risky. Bagatell, for example, argues that a diagnosis can actually afford opportunities for transforming modes of participation in social worlds and, in essence, provides a gateway to denser experiential worlds.

The dilemmas around language, subjectivity, identity, and social locations run deep. Perhaps the issues are most clearly revealed in Ochs and Solomon's use of the term *autistic sociality*. *Autistic sociality* is a provocative term invoking both potentiality for difference making and othering, and at the same time, invoking images of mutuality and engagement, marking the repertoires for social coordination as vehicles for inclusion. Ochs and Solomon anticipate that this term might be troubling to some and argue that framing autistic sociality as a form of social coordination "does not impose a dichotomous distinction between autistic and normative sociality but rather highlights the grey areas of sociality shared by those diagnosed with autism and neurologically unaffected persons" (this issue). This stance is complex and not unproblematic as the authors tack between understandings of autism and perceiving autism as a particularly valuable exemplar of sociality. I am somewhat puzzled by their phrase "gray areas of sociality." Gray from a painter's point of view is the result of the mixing of complementary colors and is often used in an effort to make other colors appear to be more vivid. Perhaps this is the intent. Their ethnographic examples are compelling and even in textual form are evocative and certainly vivid. The authors may also be featuring the mixing element in the use of *gray* to mark dimensions of sociality that are blended. Much like a painter who may be able to look at a grey streak of paint and identify the original pigments, the authors use their ethnographic lens to identify the constitutive elements of sociality.

I realize that my focus on the term *autistic sociality* does not give adequate attention to the many ways in which the authors stress how their proposed algorithm will foster enhanced social participation and the care with which they present ethnographic examples that provide testimony to their theoretical approach. Yet I wonder what work the term *autistic sociality* does for the authors and how its use will either afford or constrain the enhancement of this intriguing and, in some ways, brave work.

Demarcating the Social Worlds

These articles also highlight the still vexing problem of how to best understand mid range social units that are well beyond dyadic but represent a collectivity that is fairly local, often intense, and evolving. Family units are one clear example, but small, circumscribed communities such as the adult support group in Bagatell's work also demand attention. The articles here point toward the need for construction of analytic units that illuminate these often complex, crafted social worlds. How can we understand the "black and white dog" in Solomon's article without a deep appreciation for the ways in which social worlds are enlivened and sustained? Prince describes and interprets her immersion in the daily life of

gorillas and their keepers at the zoo, illustrating the need for views of the social world that can more adequately capture the complexities of real world engagements. Her eloquent presentation of particularities in daily life such as her son's care of the spiders in their backyard provides further weight to the argument. Solomon's contribution, which couples ethnographic work with historical and literary analysis, provides additional evidence of what is lost when sociality is rendered too thinly to capture the complexity of real world engagements; worlds where even animals are participants and vehicles of engagement.

Most of these articles highlight interrelationships and reveal still untapped potential to examine multiple perspectives and ways in which multiple trajectories in family life and social worlds commingle. As Elder (1998), and many others, have noted, lives are lived interdependently. Resonances of the ways lives are linked and lived are found in these contributions and where they are foregrounded provide rich insights into the complexity of sociality: sociality that is simultaneously elusive and evident in fine-grained analysis of daily life and its engagements; and sociality that is also at times emergent and at times cultivated, through a rather precise calibration of solicitations and contextual constructions.

Locating Expertise

Kaufman directly addresses issues of expertise in her discussion of decisions and vulnerabilities related to evaluations of vaccination risk. This study reveals the work that many parents undertake to acquire knowledge and the doubt and vulnerabilities associated with risk assessment. And although Kaufman acknowledges that parents "need to develop and claim one's own expertise," expertise appears to be primarily located in the biomedical world, or "partially appropriated" (this issue).

What if expertise were considered to be more multiply located or distributed? Perhaps even more radically, what if the expertise of parents or children and adults with autism were foregrounded or privileged over other sources of knowledge such as biomedical expertise? Such questions also bring to light issues related to what constitutes expertise and how expertise is acquired, shared, or contested. As Crapanzano reminds us, "We tend to privilege expert knowledge without always appreciating the limitations of expertise; its narrow purview, its frequent failure to critically evaluate the way in which it frames and categorized its subject matter, the blinkers it imposes" (2004:6).

Prince's description of the activation of the resonances of mothering expertise as palpated through the "mothering memory" of a blanket; Sirota's assertions of the capabilities of children to narrate their social action and life biographies; and Solomon's observations of the ways children engage with therapy dogs are just a few examples of challenges to narrow definitions of expertise. Bagatell's research points toward the potential impact of such a reconceptualization of expertise and the ways acting on and with expertise reshape identities and support engagements in practices and social worlds. Strengthening reflections on the nature of expertise and domains of local knowledge will generate more deliberate attempts to examine multiple perspectives on understandings and events in which expertise is enacted. The "what if" questions posed above suggest a mode where the possibilities can be explored and reflect the belief that the realization of these possibilities will be hard fought.

Structure and Imagination

When this issue is viewed as a collection, one of the most striking delineations is in approach. The coherence sought in approaches that are primarily structural such as in Sterponi and Fasulo's work, or in Ochs and Solomon's contribution are in stark contrast with the deliberate efforts to foster understandings of the creative, improvisational dimensions of ways of being in the world as seen in the articles by Prince and Bagatell.

Solomon's final contribution is a particularly interesting example of this tension as within one article she manages to display the fruits of both more improvisational approaches with more structural approaches.

My point is not to privilege one approach over the other or to dichotomize them. Both clearly produce salient findings and understandings and representations of the perspectives and experiences of people living with autism, albeit in very different ways. Ethnographic approaches are particularly well suited to discovery of strengths and capacities, including the improvisational and imaginative aspects of being in the world with autism. There is a striking paucity of ethnographic work in the burgeoning field of autism research. This rather deep void is consequential. Ethnographic scholarship, as evidenced in this issue, provokes powerful reframings of understandings of autism.

Looking Forward

The dilemmas and tensions that are briefly described here are only a partial list of still uncultivated spaces where autism and anthropology can--should--do meet. Like many fairly new relationships, there is much to be discovered, understood, and cultivated. And as evident in this interdisciplinary collection, there are many other disciplines and stakeholders who are also engaged in addressing issues and creating new and better understandings of autism.

Anthropological approaches to the study of autism are contributing to better understandings of a number of understudied and under theorized dimensions, including heightened awareness of what is at stake. The dilemmas related to discourses, identity, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and demarcation of social worlds are demanding attention. Additional directions in autism related research, not featured in this issue, also call for an anthropological lens, including examination of gender, power, and social structures, to name a few.

As Jackson argues, "Each person is at once a subject for himself or herself---a *who*---and an object for others---a *what*. And though individuals speak, act, and work toward belonging to a world of others, they simultaneously strive to experience themselves as world makers" (1998:8). This issue evidences world making and in doing so, erases the question mark posed by my title. Hopefully, dialogue and research stimulated by *Rethinking Autism*, *Rethinking Anthropology* will continue to be generative and impactful.

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