

Episode 5: Autistic Communication Part 3: The Double Empathy Problem

Hello Jeanne: Welcome back to another episode of Actually Autistic Educator - quick reminder that transcripts for this and all episodes, provided by InterACTT, are always posted as a link in the show notes and shared on Twitter and Facebook if that's easier.

We're finally wrapping up our three-part series on autistic communication today, focusing on looking at it through the lens of the double empathy idea.

So, I've mentioned this in passing in prior episodes, but a major new way of looking at autistic communication has been seen in recent years. Instead of the deficit model seen in most clinical and educational descriptions of autism, where all differences between autistic and non-autistic communication are seen as flaws or lesser in autistics, and which underpins most writings on autism by non-autistics in any field, a 2012 paper by Dr Damian Milton titled "On the ontological status of autism: The 'double empathy problem'" reexamines difficulties in communication between autistics and non-autistics as being due to differences of what he calls "reciprocity and mutuality" - that autistics tend to view and interact with the world in certain ways, and non-autistics often view it differently, causing problems on both sides regarding communication.

This is actually a pretty simple concept and makes a lot of sense, communication relies on both people having a similar understanding of words and what seems "normal." I'm from the US, but I lived in England for my junior year abroad, and despite us both speaking English there were language differences. I asked if a friend had what they thought meant a baby's pacifier when I meant heavy blanket, I had no idea why anyone would put food in a boot till I learned it was the trunk for me, and many other differences.

Likewise, my students who are learning English often express frustration that a concept that makes perfect sense in their heads they don't have the vocabulary in English to describe and are then made to feel unintelligent. I always validate that yeah, that it's not fair that they are being judged when they are having to do 200% of the work to be understood by someone who likely can't speak any other languages. It's not a reflection of the quality of your thinking just because someone else can't understand the ways you communicate. I think if we consider autistic as another language or at least dialect it becomes a lot easier to understand the ways we communicate as being different, but not wrong.

I love this quote from an article from 2020 titled "Facial Expression Production and Recognition in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Shifting Landscape." "Autism research is now shifting towards an emphasis on the differences in certain abilities between autistic and neurotypical people. In the example of facial expression, when feeling sad, an autistic person might move their face into an expression that is not the downturned mouth expression that most neurotypical individuals would adopt. One consequence of this is that, because this expression is different from the norm, a neurotypical person might not recognize that the autistic person is feeling sad. Similarly, because the neurotypical person expresses their sadness in a different way from the autistic person, the autistic individual might not recognize the neurotypical individual's sadness. This "bidirectional" approach to evaluating social interactions leads to a consideration of both sides of the interaction." This is so in-keeping with my own experiences. After 11 years together my fiance has finally learned to read my signals when I'm not intentionally masking and it's incredibly weird that for the first time in my life someone non-autistic can

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correctly identify my emotions consistently. Every so often I think I'm not showing my emotions because I'm carefully not masking in ways that would help people correctly interpret my mood because I don't feel like dealing with something just then and then he jumps in with "why are you upset?" and I'm like, excuse me, I did not give you permission to accurately interpret my emotional state! Also a good chunk of his close friends now are autistic and it's so lovely watching him interact with them and the ease of communication in both directions now that he learned to meet us halfway. So to be clear, this is something that non-autistics can learn to do, it just requires them to be willing to put in the work partially too, and accepting autistic traits, mannerisms, and preferences as genuinely being equally valid, rather than demanding autistics take on 100% of the communication burden due to differences.

A new study titled Mutual (Mis)understanding: Reframing Autistic Pragmatic "Impairments" Using Relevance Theory by Gemma L. Williams, Tim Wharton, and Caroline Jagoe, actually identifies some specific hallmarks of this autistic language and provides evidence to support this understanding of autistic communication through the double-empathy lens.

In past episodes we have seen extensive research showing that autistics actually communicate very effectively with each other, the breakdown in communication only occurs when the goal is communicating between autistics and non-autistics, such as Crompton's "Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective" and we have also looked at studies regarding prejudice by non-autistics based on mannerisms of autistics and not our actual words, such as Sasson's "Neurotypical Peers are Less Willing to Interact with Those with Autism based on Thin Slice Judgments," but what I love about Williams' article in particular is it went beyond just noting that effective communication between autistics exists, the results here give us a great set of some autistic preferences for communication, which non-autistics

should certainly be aware of and work to learn to adapt to if they want to communicate effectively with us as students, clients, patients, and coworkers. If you work as an educator or therapist, I strongly recommend you read the article, but the most interesting theme to me was the connection between autistic monotropism - our intense and deeper focus - and the preference of autistics to speak in longer chunks rather than short more cursory sentences, as well as being understanding of pauses and helping other autistics find words or ideas to finish their larger messages.

Past guest Morgan actually recognized and commented about this in my first recording with them - they appreciated that as a fellow autistic I don't interrupt or seek to jump in when Morgan is still working on phrasing and not finished a full thought even when paused after having spoken several sentences, and it's probably one of the reasons why we often can recognise each other unconsciously in groups before even having a diagnosis ourselves - we have found other people who communicate like us in all these small different ways and it is just so wonderful. I will admit to some audio editing for this show by the way, between long pauses and the fact that I say "completely agreed" after every time someone speaks I do edit for flow, but I have to say I love recording these interviews just because we are all so aware that this is an explicitly supportive space where we can be as monotropic as we like without judgement. Some say autistic monologuing is a deficit, I say it makes me a podcaster.

We have two guests today, first I'm speaking with my sibling Katie Clifton, a licensed biology teacher whose pronouns are they/them. A quick note, we do mention our brother Nicky. I am the oldest, he was the middle child two years younger than me, and Katie was the youngest at another two years behind him, at least for much of our childhood before more siblings came along. Unfortunately Nicky passed away several years ago, but our perspective of him and his communication skills has a lot of differences

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compared to how non-autistics viewed him.

So Katie, thank you very much for joining me on the podcast. I know we've had a lot of conversations informally about ease of communication that we've experienced with fellow autistics. And I was wondering what your experiences have been on that topic?

Katie: Sure. My experiences have probably lined up very much with a lot of autistics. I find that communicating with fellow autistics just feels simpler, because you don't have to mask, you don't have to worry that you are using the wrong eye contact or something of that nature. And, uh, when I communicate with non autistics, I don't necessarily have to do that with all of them that know who I am and are comfortable with me, but it is so ingrained from years of having to do it. That even with the people who I am comfortable with, I end up masking if I wouldn't normally even have to.

Jeanne: Yeah. That's definitely something I run into where I've had friends who I've talked to about autism and they've said, oh, you don't have to worry about masking around me. It's okay. And I'm like, that's, that's cool. I appreciate the thought. But the problem is it's so ingrained in us socially that this is something we have to do all of the time. It's not like I'm consciously thinking, oh yes, I shall now mask. It's just on autopilot of like, oh, I am in public. People are seeing me, therefore, here's the list of things that I need to make sure I'm doing of oh yeah. Facial features. Those are a thing. Um, how, how much have I been talking? Have I been talking too much? Oh, wait. Um, I'm not sure now, what am I supposed to say to them? They've been talking, should I interrupt to show I'm paying attention, but that feels rude, but at the same time, that's what they do. So it's, it just creates a very stressful situation that...even around people who I didn't know were autistic. There've been so many of my friends who have since gotten autism diagnoses and we've been friends for like a decade. And it's like, ah, yes, this makes sense. In retrospect, you have always just been like, ah, you are soothing

to be around. I don't necessarily know why, but you are just soothing.

Katie: You - it's less exhausting.

Jeanne: Exactly. And I know we've spoken on the podcast in the past about several studies showing autistics can communicate easily and effectively with each other to the same degree that non autistics can (calling that whole autistics are better communication into question), but what's interesting is a lot of the discussion around that usually focuses on autistics who are speaking and who aren't viewed as having various impairments. But what's interesting is our brother was labeled as non-speaking, which is not the correct label, in my opinion, as he spoke extensively, just only spoke through movie lines and was classified as having an IQ, unable to be measured. I remember as a kid adults not being able to understand him and vice versa, but I can't remember ever actually struggling myself. I could always get him to understand me and I could always understand what he thought. And I was curious to hear your perspective and thoughts there too.

Katie: Yeah. We communicated through movie lines. I remember having very little difficulty, even from a young age of picking up on the fact that. He was expressing more than just what he wanted to say. It was, it was deeper than that. It was the emotional context within the quote that he was saying. So the quote wouldn't necessarily have anything to do with the situation. But if you looked at the context within the movie of what that character was feeling at the time, you could very clearly tell what Nicky was feeling. And that was always very obvious to me, I found it so interesting growing up that people would say that he was nonverbal because I was like how he's communicating deep, emotional concepts to us in what is frankly, a very simple way to get across that concept.

Jeanne: It really, honestly, I think it's probably why so many of the autistics I'm friends with were very into

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the concept of memes. Because they let you take a very often complex situation and break it down and describe it in something as short of, when you're getting into like repeated phrases and whatnot, even just typing the word "mood." It immediately, if you know what that means you go, ah, you're empathizing with my current situation. You're saying that you've had the same circumstances happen to you and that you know where I'm coming from and you're sharing both your support for me. [Katie: Yeah] And also your acknowledgement that this is a very real way to feel all in just that one word. If everyone knows the references, you can get them through super fast. So it's a very, and again, that's very autistic where I feel like we often are very effective at communicating, but when we're speaking with other autistics,

Katie: Autistic communication is just objectively better.

Jeanne: It really is.

Katie: You can cut that if you want, but you can leave it in to, I don't care.

Jeanne: I might keep some of this. So I know we make jokes about autistic communication being superior, but I will point out that. In a lot of ways because we rely on explicit verbal check-ins or other non-verbal check-ins as well, such as adding an emoticons to our text, thumbs up or down, different other things. But we tend to like having explicit concrete check-ins occasionally, and it's a very effective method for finding out, are we on track or not?

As a result, it's very easy to avoid some of the simple miscommunications that make up ...well, based on what sitcoms have shown me, 90% of non-autistic communication is just people not correctly mind reading each other and would massively benefit from just learning to verbalize their feelings or state them in other ways. So I do really think there's some serious advantages and that's one of the big pushes that a lot of autistic advocates are saying. It's not

that social skills training as a concept is inherently bad. The problem is the vast majority of time what they mean is we're going to teach autistics how to pretend to communicate like non autistics, which as we've talked about before, can cause all sorts of serious mental health concerns and reduce your mental capacity for understanding other things.

If we actually had social skills training for everyone that taught things like understanding your own emotional state, asking people explicitly, rather than trying to rely on them understanding what you're hinting at, which can vary depending on language use, if someone is speaking in a language that is not their native tongue it can be a lot harder to pick up on these things.

So I think as, as much as it's funny to joke about autistic communication being superior, I do genuinely think that non-autistics could really learn from our focus of, Hey, let's double check. Let's just check in on this explicitly rather than getting upset that someone didn't read our mind.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely.

Jeanne: Thank you so much for joining me today for this short chat, looking forward to speaking with you again for our upcoming episode about autistic food and eating issues.

Next we're talking again with previous guest Amanda. So this episode is talking about the double-empathy problem versus the prevalent idea in autism research by non-autistics that autistic communication is inherently deficient, and also that our personal empathy is deficient.

Amanda: Please tell my hyper-empathy that, that we do not have empathy.

Jeanne: Yes. I'm like, if anything, we tend to have very strong, empathetic responses, but it often gets triggered by things different than people expect. And

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sometimes people do things where I'm like, but you were, you were the party harming someone else. The fact that you felt uncomfortable because it was pointed out to you, does not in fact make you the injured party. Like I get that you're my friend, but I'm not going to give you emotional validation. And people have looked at that and gone, well, you're just not understanding you're not being empathetic. And I'm like, well, but they, they were very mean to that other person. And then when it was pointed out to them, they cried and said that that was the mean part.

And I'm like, that's, that's not. And the argument is always, but they're our friend. I'm like, yes, I know. But for our, my friend can be wrong about something that if I'm going to be helpful, I shouldn't just validate when they're being hurtful to other human beings, but that goes outside the empathetic social model that neurotypicals often favor.

And I'm like, that's not... Like if we want to pathologize something, I feel like that's a much more concerning behavior to pathologize than being too logical.

Amanda: It is. I fully feel like there, and this is not the greatest one to one comparison, but there is a neuro-typical version of white women's tears where you will be like, Hey, don't know if you know this thing that you did hurt me a lot. And they're like, but that wouldn't have hurt me. Why, why are you coming at me about this thing? It's like, I'm not trying to come at you about the thing necessarily, but just so you know, this thing is hurtful, but this thing can't really get into "this thing can't be hurtful because it wouldn't hurt me and I'm a good person. So I wouldn't do hurtful things" and you get caught up in a spiral of you, don't worry. You're a good person versus addressing.

Jeanne: I've had this conversation with several other autistics this week. Not understanding because we often have a very strong sense of, I would like to not be wrong. So like, if my friend tells me, Hey, um, the way you phrased that is hurtful to me, my immediate

response is to go, oh my goodness. Okay. How can I fix it?

So I am no longer being hurtful to my friend because they are my friend and I care about them. I would like to not hurt. And that seems like a very easy to understand concept. But when we actually look at a lot of these social models, you, we see it with trans and nonbinary people, very politely correcting the pronoun and someone making it all about themselves, of like, well, this is just so hard on me. You don't understand what it's like. And I'm like they're putting the emotional energy out there to tell you, Hey, this is what you should use for me. That's them being nice. Like if they're telling you this is how to make this better, that's a very positive thing for me to hear from someone, because it means they care enough to want us to have a good communication.

Amanda: If someone feels enough of a connection with you to bother correcting you, that bodes well for their feelings towards you versus being like, well, I'm going to write this person off because, obviously.

Jeanne: Yeah. And that's, it's one of those things where I, I get that there are definitely some differences and I'm not going to pretend that like, I've never felt defensive.

Of course I have, you know, we all do, but I think that there's a lot of things that are strengths because of the way the autistic mind processes certain information. And I think also, probably because we've had, you know, the vast majority of us have had to deal with people, misunderstanding us or hurting us and claiming that it couldn't be [Amanda: Yes] that we don't want to do that to other peoples.

And again, it's not everyone, there's definitely, some people care more others, as you said, there's also, sometimes there's definitely some gender things at play regarding the socialization that different people have had that probably factors in here. But it's just a good reminder that when we automatically

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pathologized differences, we could really be missing an opportunity, look at some of these things and say, Hey, what are some things that autistic people do that maybe we could be better about?

Amanda: Yeah. I feel like it's such a mistake to treat everything of autistic culture and the neurotype as like, this is a deficit and there's nothing of value here because it's different. Where like, yeah, there there's some things that don't work super well for me and like this modern industrialized age, but that doesn't necessarily make them a deficit.

Jeanne: I think that's one of my biggest frustrations with the ways autism is talked about and viewed by non-autistics who have then taught "this is how we should interpret autistic behavior" is it's so centered on this idea you mentioned about "this thing that works for you hurts me" and the utter disbelief non-autistic parents, teachers, and therapists have that our needs and preferences are so different. I think it's what draws many of us to each other even without a diagnosis or formal understanding, we just feel right and safe with others who aren't so rigid in what they think communication needs to be.

That was one of the conversations I was having with Gigi, when we were recording where, I've known her for quite a few years. And when we met, we both had this thing of like, you were a cool person. I like you. I would like to spend more time with you. I feel slightly awkward about this. Like maybe am I being weird or stalkery, but just. You seem cool. And that's also how I felt when I first saw you. I'm like, oh, she, she just seems cool. And there's all of these different people who I've connected with. And, you know, we spend all this time together, online through social media and sometimes in person, but text is also so soothing. I love communicating with people online, through texts.

Amanda: Text is wonderful. I love that emojis exist. That can just be like, just to clarify.

Jeanne: Yes, exactly. Uh, and as a result, it's been funny watching how many of these people over the last 10 years have suddenly been getting autism diagnoses and I'm like, oh, which, I mean, there's many reasons about these people. I like them other than the fact that they're autistic. They're also very cool human beings, but I feel like there's something that just feels incredibly soothing and right when we're able to have these connections with each other. That is just so important for, for us. It's it really is.

Amanda: Yeah. It honestly, really, really is. And that's why it makes me sad when I hear other people talk about how they're like, yeah. I connected with the only other autistic child in my class and they deliberately separated us because they were like, nope, must be able to socialize with us. While it is important to learn socialization skills, taking away someone's one close friend doesn't seem like that reinforces that people are something cool that you want to hang out with.

Jeanne: Yeah, that's again, I think it's, it's really important for, for professionals to, you know, who are working in early childhood ed, uh, either as an educator or, you know, as a support person to understand that our priorities and our comfort might be very different.

Thank you so much Amanda, it's always a pleasure to get your thoughts and perspectives here.

I want to wrap up with reading a poem written by autistic activist Jim Sinclair called *The Bridge*, as shared in the 1991 article "Exploring the experience of autism through firsthand accounts." I first read it several years ago and it just felt like it encapsulated so much of my life as an autistic, trying to build ways to communicate with others, and where they were willing to meet me.

I built a bridge
out of nowhere, across nothingness
and wondered if there would be something on the
other side.

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I built a bridge
out of fog, across darkness
and hoped that there would be light on the other side.
I built a bridge
out of despair, across oblivion
and knew that there would be hope on the other side.
I built a bridge
out of helplessness, across chaos
and trusted that there would be strength on the other
side.
I built a bridge
out of hell, across terror
and it was a good bridge, a strong bridge,
a beautiful bridge.
It was a bridge I built myself,
with only my hands for tools, my obstinacy for
supports,
my faith for spans, and my blood for rivets.
I built a bridge, and crossed it,
but there was no one there to meet me on the other
side.

To the autistics listening, you are amazing, no one should have to work so hard to be understood, your ways of thinking and sharing are just as valid as any other, and you deserve to be appreciated exactly as you are. For non-autistics, please...we are reaching out in so many ways to build these bridges of communication, but so often we are met only with non-autistic frustration that we couldn't span the gulf entirely on our own, so we end up falling instead. Thank you for listening to us, and I hope you will think on ways that you can help build bridges of your own to meet us at least halfway.

As always, I'd love to connect with you on Facebook or Twitter to talk about this episode or other aspects of autism, especially on Twitter I tend to post the

most there, both serious stuff along with fun autism memes and satire. I seriously live for autistic satire, it is utterly delightful.

New episodes drop first of the month with mini-episodes in-between, and likes, shares, reviews, and subscribes are always appreciated.

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