



Towards applied integrationism – integrating autism in teaching and coaching sessions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 6 May 2011

Keywords:

Autism research
Applied integrationism
Methodology
Self-reflection
Contextualization

ABSTRACT

At present, Denmark counts numerous cases of youngsters with Aspergers syndrome and the implementation of separate project classrooms for Asperger-students has proved beneficial (EVA-report January 2010). Today, Asperger-students at project schools have the opportunity to receive an education whereas before they often ended up as psychiatric cases. The few participating schools offer one class of approximately 10 persons each per year. Unfortunately, this covers only a small percentage of a growing need. Indeed, some students are struck with more severe Autism than Aspergers. In 1994, autistic psychopathy was put on the list of psychiatric diagnoses as “Aspergers syndrome” by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Asperger and Kanner, 1996). For traditional teachers, Asperger-students often seem difficult to teach because they perform differently in social settings. They are often perceived as problematic and marginalized by teachers and peers when integrated in conventional classes. As a high school teacher, language psychologist and mentor, I have been closely involved with Asperger-students at schools in my hometown outside of the classroom. The Danish government has recently granted four additional project classes nationwide and is considering an expansion of the project: <http://www.uvm.dk/Aktuelt/~media/C9D15AE89C54449C9E3A325B76F2E987.ashx> (last visited June 6th 2010). Suggestions will be needed for the long term and guidance will be necessary for teachers to deal professionally with Asperger-students.

My main purpose here is to discuss the potential application of integrationism towards the design of an integrational case-study. This contribution suggests a way to analyze why teachers and Asperger-individuals experience communicational problems. Several related questions are important to consider: How does society improve the general integration of Asperger-students in educational institutions? What can teachers and coaches do to enhance the integration of Asperger-students in their daily practice according to an integrational approach? This study suggests that teachers and institutions must understand that Asperger-diagnosed students are agents in the world just as are ordinary students. They perform as anyone else in verbal and non-verbal ways. Contextualization is therefore a keyword to this investigation and its suggestions. Focusing on how to enhance integration working explicitly with self-observation in communication may be a tool for teachers to contribute to change the way people experience and face Asperger-students.

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1. Integrating psychological processes in the study of communication

Anti-psychiatrist Dr. Ronald D. Laing investigated disorders in interpersonal existential contexts and determined disease as a healthy reaction to a sick society. According to Laing the state of psychosis cannot be cured with medicine but only through speech therapy:

“Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things” (Laing, 1967, p. 24).

Ken Loach's film *Family Life* (1971) demonstrates the meaning of Laing's double-bind hypothesis showing how contradictions in dialogue-situations function as self-defense. For example, the film shows a central theme of a mother's care for her pregnant daughter that leads to an abortion which triggers a state of schizophrenia with the daughter. Laing explains that in our world alienation is a normal condition which leads to violence on one's own and the other's experience (Laing, 1967, p. 29). Laing argues that society values “normality” so highly that we as individuals fail to observe what the other's needs are. Linguistically and extra-linguistically we strive for a state of “normality” that we educate each other with following our own desires and fears of not being “normal”. This can seem invalidating to the content of the other's contextualization, violating the other instead of loving the other (Laing, 1967, p. 31). Demonstrating Laing's theory of persons and experience (1967), the mother in *Family life* (1971) thinks she acts for the sake of the good while violating her daughter's authority by forcing her to get an abortion. Laing points to the case that we do not at our present state of knowledge as modern societies have a general practice for appropriate humane response to one another Fig. 1.

This study challenges the way Autism and Aspergers syndrome is considered conventionally in academia and draws on four selected works of professor emeritus Roy Harris (1996, 1998, 2009a,b) that I consider most relevant to my study. Referring to the above one can say that signs in anti-psychiatry as well as in integrational linguistics are treated as contextualized. Signs do not exist as autonomous entities segregated from the situations in which they occur, but must be understood in relation to the local circumstances. Laing thus also considers meaning to be created continuously at all levels of the interaction – both verbal and non-verbal. As an integrational approach to the study of communication rejects the existence of language as a study object of importance in itself, anti-psychiatry rejects the study of a segregated psychology. Communication can, in both approaches, be regarded as the ongoing processes of contextualization that both contextualizes and recontextualizes meaning in the continuous birth and rebirth of the context. Signs are in both discourses stated as the products of communication as it is happening and not as structures underlying society.

Signs are only interesting to the integrationist in relation to their functions. The functions are bound to the integration of past, present and supposed future experience of what we are trying to do. This approach is relevant to the study of Asperger-students as a prerequisite for the premises of a new study. Leaving behind a structuralist approach to language and communication, communication is set free from language and can involve various sign forms linguistic or non-linguistic. An important point is the consideration of communication's creativity so that talk of “right or “wrong” interpretation evaporates. Meaning belongs only to the situation. This will help one to orient an effective approach towards an integrational study and to avoid structuralist mythologies and other systems of beliefs. An explicit discussion of the hegemonies of beliefs in study designs, research topics and perspective setting in analysis is inevitable within the field of integrationism. I will try not to start in the middle of the battlefield, but should warn that any discussion of research discourse and methodology automatically leads to the drawing of a sword following an integrational tradition (Harris, 1996, 1998, 2009a,b).

- Three fundamental questions guide this study:
 - How can we design an integrational psychology to explore how youngsters diagnosed with Aspergers syndrome integrate their understandings of learning and sociability?
 - What do we need to know more about in order to deal with an Asperger-diagnosed subject in order to examine him through texts and conversations in educational contexts so that we can state a researchable integrational approach?
 - How can an integrational approach – focusing on lack of interaction and understanding oneself contribute to analyzing the challenge Asperger youngsters face every day?
- Framework for harmonizing integrational description with an integrational case-study.

I generally question how we may apply an integrational approach and how we may address the integration of understandings in a study in order to reach for intervention sometime in the future. Knowing that the project is ambitious but necessary I work with an ongoing two-faced discussion:

- My methods, in order to discuss integrational assumptions on how to treat communication studies according to Roy Harris.
- How to harmonize integrationism with the thought of an applied field: What is science and knowledge to the integrationist?

My main questions on examining communicational premises in practice among Aspergers are:

- How do Asperger-individuals experience communication?
- How do Asperger-individuals' understandings manifest themselves in written sources and in interaction studies?

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