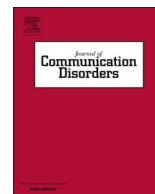




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Glimpses into the blind spot: Social interaction and autism



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ABSTRACT

A primary feature of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is marked difficulty in social interactions. Despite the centrality of social interaction differences to the clinical presentation of ASD, only a small portion of research in this field characterizes interaction in everyday social contexts. This theoretical paper reviews the growing corpus of interactional research on ASD, including discourse analysis (DA) and conversation analysis (CA) approaches. DA and CA are micro-analytic methods aimed at understanding the organizational structure of, and actions pursued within, social encounters. These methods are aligned with *enactive* theories of social interaction. The bulk of current ASD research construes social interaction as involving isolated individuals who represent and/or theorize about the minds of an interlocutor. Enactive approaches posit that achieving intersubjectivity does not require theories of other minds, but instead a propensity for coordinating social actions with others. Through the complementary lenses of enactivism and interactional research, I offer an account of autistic social interaction as involving differences in interactional coordination, interactional priorities, and the enactment of meaning across conversational turns. This characterization challenges the explanatory role of cognitive processes such as Theory of Mind, and points to new avenues for conceptualizing, measuring, and supporting social interaction.

1. Introduction

“...a focused treatment is needed of a surprising blind spot in autism research: the social interaction process itself. Once we do that, we will be better able to understand both the difficulties and the capacities that people with autism have in this domain.” (De Jaegher, 2013, p. 14).

Atypical social interaction profiles were recognized as a central feature of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from the very first descriptions of the condition (Kanner, 1943; Wing & Gould, 1979). Social-communication impairments are a diagnostic feature of ASD, which interface with social interaction difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Despite this, only a very small proportion of research on ASD focuses its lens on the social and linguistic processes involved in autistic interaction that occurs within everyday contexts. In recent years, rigorous social interactional methods, including *Discourse Analysis* and *Conversation Analysis*, have been applied to the study of ASD in efforts to fill this gap.¹ A major strength of these approaches is that they are underpinned by robust empirical evidence and theory regarding the organization of social interaction and language-in-use (Goffman, 1967; Sacks, 1987; Schegloff, 2007). A central assumption of these approaches is that the organizing force behind social interaction is not an individual’s cognitive architecture, but the social-interactional system itself. Interlocutors display an orientation to this social

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¹ See for example the February 2016 special issue in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* dedicated to discourse and conversation analytic approaches to ASD, and the forthcoming edited volume on this topic, *A practical guide to doing social interaction research in autism spectrum disorders (ASD): Communication, discourse, and conversation analysis* (O’Reilly, Lester, & Muskett, in press).

‘apparatus’, resulting in coordinated, orderly, and analyzable social encounters (Sacks, 1987).

Interactional methods are qualitative procedures for examining naturally occurring interactions. Their purpose is to describe the language practices that constitute and organize interaction, and the social actions and activities pursued within interaction. Conversation analysis (CA) seeks to uncover sequential systems of talk; how turns at talk project and constrain subsequent turns at talk (Schegloff, 2007). Talk-in-interaction is viewed as a collaborative endeavor, with units of meaning organized and accomplished across multiple turns and participants (Goodwin, 1981).² Discourse analysis (DA) is broader in both scope and method, and can involve the examination of face-to-face and other discourses (e.g., speeches, advertisements, political documents, etc.). Forms of DA that are concerned with face-to-face interaction seek to understand what people *do* or *build* with language in interpersonal contexts, and how they go about the doing and building (Gee, 2014). In practical terms, these methods involve video or audio recording natural interactions, generating detailed transcripts, and systematically analyzing transcripts on a turn-by-turn basis. Natural interactions generally refer to everyday, mundane encounters between two or more people. In studies of children with ASD, these have included contexts such as mealtimes, therapeutic settings, and conversations with researchers.

Interactional research traditions are well-aligned with enactive theoretical accounts of social interaction (described in detail below) that are beginning to replace the more widespread social cognitive accounts of ASD (e.g., the ‘theory of mind’ view of ASD) (De Jaegher, 2013; De Jaegher, Peräkylä, & Stevanovic, 2016; Klin, Jones, Schultz, & Volkmar, 2003). Both interactional and enactive approaches have philosophical roots in phenomenology, a tradition that prioritizes the body as a locus of first person experience, and centers its inquiry on the structure of significance and meaning in everyday life (Maynard & Clayman, 1991). However, interactional methods are far from mainstream within ASD research, and have not yet been fully leveraged for advancing an understanding of the condition. In this paper, I extend and join recent scholarship promoting an understanding of ASD grounded in enactive theories of social interaction (most notably De Jaegher, 2013 and Klin et al., 2003), and in interactional methods for (Sterponi, de Kirby, & Shankey, 2015). Through these complimentary lenses, I offer a characterization of autistic social interaction derived from current interactional research on ASD.

1.1. Limitations of social cognitive accounts

In traditional social cognitive accounts, social interaction is underpinned by ‘third-person’ social cognition, whereby a disembodied mind is positioned as an observer of social interaction rather than a participant. Cognitive resources are deployed to represent or theorize about the (disembodied) mind of an interlocutor. This view is what De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) refer to as the *Rear Window* position.³ Given these assumptions about how social interaction works, ASD is conceived of as a breakdown in third-person social cognitive mechanisms. Failure to detect and apply social rules, predict others’ behavior, and ‘mentalize’ about other’s feelings and beliefs, are offered as explanations for difficulty aligning interactional goals with others (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1985; White, Hill, Happe, & Frith, 2009). These frameworks have led investigators away from examining contextualized social interaction in favor of delineating intra-individual cognitive processes thought to underlie social interaction (Kennedy & Adolphs, 2012).

Social cognitive paradigms have provided crucial insight into social processes that do rely on third-person reasoning about the social world and others in it, such as when individuals attempt to discern why an interaction has broken down after it has occurred (Gallagher, 2004). However, they have yet to provide useful explanations for more general social and linguistic practices involved within ordinary face-to-face interaction and the difficulties encountered by individuals with ASD. Explicit mentalizing is not aligned with the phenomenological experience of mundane social interaction, and there are no convincing accounts as to how ‘implicit mentalizing’ would guide real-time social behavior (Gallagher, 2004; Schilbach et al., 2013). A particularly salient counterpoint for the utility of social cognitive explanations is that many individuals with ASD do quite well on explicit social reasoning tasks, but continue to have significant difficulty in face-to-face interactions (Green et al., 2016; Klin et al., 2003). Indeed, current work in neuroscience suggests that *observing* and *participating* in social interactions are quite different processes, and should not be conflated with one another (Konvalinka & Roepstorff, 2012; Schilbach et al., 2013).

Interactional researchers who study ASD caution that sole reliance on research paradigms that do not give appropriate attention to interaction in context leaves us vulnerable to under-nuanced or even misleading conceptualizations of ASD (O’Reilly, Lester, & Muskett, 2016; Sterponi & De Kirby, 2016; Sterponi, de Kirby, & Shankey, 2015). While there have been many calls to move past a so-called ‘theory of mind’ view in order to recognize a fundamental role of affective and interpersonal processes (Frith & Happe, 1994; Hobson, 1991; Klin et al., 2003; Schilbach, 2016; Tager-Flusberg, 2007), social cognitive theoretical accounts of ASD remain entrenched (see for example, Sinha et al., 2014). This may stem from commonly used assessments that are implicitly aligned with and reify this framework, but may have questionable ecological validity. In order to accurately describe and build tenable theories of autistic social interaction, more research is needed that analyzes *actual* social interaction.

1.2. Enactive accounts of social interaction

An alternative to social cognitive explanations are *enactive* approaches to social interaction (for specific applications of these

² This is in sharp contrast to a long tradition in autism research of examining social communication at the speech act level.

³ *Rear Window* is a 1954 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, starring Jimmy Stewart. Throughout the movie, Stewart’s character, Jeff, is immobilized by a broken leg. He occupies his time by spying on his neighbors from the window of his apartment complex, when he witnesses what he believes to be a murder. The subsequent plot revolves around Jeff’s theorizing about his neighbors’ actions and motivations. He never interacts directly with the characters about whom he speculates, making this an ideal illustration of an observational understanding of others.

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