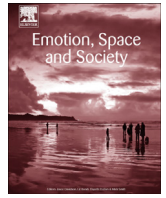




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## Autism and the ghost of gender

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines first-hand accounts of differently gendered emotional experience of the autism spectrum drawn from responses to online surveys, blogs and published autobiographies. Analysis of these materials reveals that atypical experiences and expressions of gender are considered relatively common among those on the spectrum. More literal minded than most, many describe meticulous attempts to seek out and solidify gender's troubling manifestations in their social worlds, only to find, of course, that no such thing as gender exists. However, this oddly absent presence continues to haunt autistic emotional lives; its uncanny leavings and doings persist, and most (neuro)typical others remain in its thrall, seeming to learn gender's nebulous rules as if telepathically. First-hand autistic accounts highlight the draining and relentless emotional labour that doing gender 'typically' requires, and many on the spectrum respond by explicitly rejecting or simply neglecting its confounding demands, identifying with neither side of the m/f divide in attempts to give up the ghost of gender.

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"I'm not necessarily confused about my gender. I just think that I lack one." (Brittany 2907, 2011)

## 1. Introduction

There's something very curious about the way that gender, and indeed sex, are imagined and experienced in relation to autism.<sup>1</sup> That the subjects are relevant is one of the first (and often one of the few) things that those not directly or intimately affected by autism know about it. Autism spectrum disorders (or ASDs) are almost five times more commonly diagnosed among boys than girls – 1 in 54 versus 1 in 252, according to recent figures produced by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Baio, 2012; also

see Goldman, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, autism itself, how the condition manifests or presents, is popularly and clinically defined in terms of stereotypical understandings of masculinity; so while the most commonly encountered or imagined autistic person is likely to be male (and think of fictional representations – *Rain Man*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and so on and on<sup>3</sup>) it is also the case that autistic girls as well as boys are generally supposed to be more interested in machinery than make up, and systematizing rather than socializing (Cheslack-Postava and Jordan-Young, 2012; Goldman, 2013). This view is popularly supported by autistic activist and animal scientist Temple Grandin's inventions in the field of livestock handling technology (see the recent eponymous biopic, Ferguson and Jackson, 2010; and Grandin, 1995, 2005). We also see this convergence between stereotypically masculine and spectrum traits in a recent and high-profile fictional exception: the a-social computing genius and probable aspie Lisbeth Salander of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is primarily concerned with gender, but unsurprisingly, and as we'll see, this curiosity also extends to its ghostly cousins, sex and sexuality/sexual desire. For Butler, these questionable subjects are inextricably linked; she suggests that "the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" and that "sex itself is a gendered category" (2004, p. 7). Of sexual desire, she contends it is "constitutive of gender itself and, as a result, [there is] no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire" (2004, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Readers should note that the majority of literature currently available (this paper included) tends to be US-/Anglo-centric, and such estimates of gendered prevalence may not reflect the situation in other geographical locations. Moreover, the classification of autism as a 'disease', or even a 'disorder' of any kind, is enormously problematic, and the focus of intense and ongoing debate among members of a diversely constituted autism 'community' (Murray, 2012; Silberman, 2015; Somashekar, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For extended discussion of other examples, see, for example, Baker (2008) and Osteen (2008, 2012).

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Chaffin and Fincher, 2011; based on Larsson, 2005), whose androgynous look and bisexual relationships have actually drawn much gender-related commentary from bloggers on the spectrum, as we'll see (below).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The clinical picture of gender in autism

ASDs are clinically defined in terms of challenges in social interaction and communication, repetitive behaviours, and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). All of these differences are very often characterized in explicitly gendered terms. Simon Baron-Cohen, one of the world's leading autism researchers, has taken this tendency to an interesting extreme, publishing an exceptionally influential book just over a decade ago explaining that autism is best understood in terms of an 'essential difference' between the sexes (Baron-Cohen, 2003; also see Baron-Cohen, 2002). This renowned expert<sup>5</sup> very explicitly bases his 'extreme male brain' theory of autism on a questionable model of hegemonic masculinity, stressing that people with autism typically display over-developed male attributes, characterized by 'systematizing' rather than 'empathizing'; which supposedly explains their fascination with computers and car parts. In his own words: "boys prefer constructional and vehicle toys more than girls do, and children with autism or AS [Asperger Syndrome] often have this toy preference very strongly. As adults, males prefer mechanics and computing more than females do, and many people with AS pursue mechanics and computing as their major leisure interests" (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 152). Evidence to support Baron-Cohen's claims could be found in the research on which this paper is based (as discussed below), but the gendered dimensions – and leisure interests – of those on the spectrum are of course far more complex and divergent than his statement suggests. For example, of the 75 individuals who completed an online survey<sup>6</sup> specifically designed to investigate internet use (and so arguably biased in favour of computing enthusiasts) many highlighted very different pastimes in response to a prompt for "any additional information you would like to provide about yourself, for example, how do you like to spend your time?" In their free-form answers, fifteen individuals emphasized the importance of pets in their lives, and fourteen others foregrounded their passion for crafts, including, for example, knitting, cross-stitch, and making jewellery. Many respondents chose to draw attention to a number of different aspects of themselves, for example: "Keen cyclist, gay, British, work as a civil servant, enjoy learning foreign languages" ('Aspie'/F/38),<sup>7</sup> and a great many of the other and predictably varied individual pursuits mentioned – including painting, volunteering and juggling – are not obviously gender stereotyped or associated with systematizing rather than empathizing.

Expanding on his thesis, Baron-Cohen states that "[o]n the Tomboyism Questionnaire (TQ), girls with AS are less interested in female-typical activities" (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 154). In this instance, he doesn't spell out what 'female-typical activities'

might be (and cites only an unpublished manuscript he himself co-authored in support of his claim (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 231)) but elsewhere, he expounds on such examples as girls' greater interest in playing with dolls, "typically the opposite of rule-based activity, the themes being open-ended and usually involving an enactment of caring, emotional relationships" (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 46). Such early play, and later 'female-typical' behaviour and communication, demonstrates the centrality of empathy, a feature he sees as far less prominent in 'male-typical' orientation to others, and that he argues is notably absent from both men and women with autism: Baron-Cohen does in fact characterize autism as an 'empathy disorder'.<sup>8</sup> Due to what he hypothesizes is the result of prenatal exposure to excessive levels of testosterone, autistic men and women are, on this account, less likely to engage in various forms of emotional labour, typically characterized by attempts at small talk or the kind of 'female-typical' relationship affirming exchange he illustrates with the following example of an imagined conversational opener: "Oh, I love your dress. You *must* tell me where you got it. You look so pretty in it. It really goes well with your bag" (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 50).<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast, typical male exchanges focus on systems, such that "two men's opening gambit might go something like this: How was the traffic on the M11? I usually find going up the A1M through Royston and Baldock can save a lot of time. Especially now they have the roadworks just beyond Stansted" (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 82). While clearly still involving emotional labour of a sort, men's and boys' interests and conversations tend to be more "object focused", while women's and girls' deal more closely with "feelings and relationships". Relating such gendered insights back to his theory of autism, Baron-Cohen states that girls "tend to be better than boys on standard 'theory of mind' tests (tests which involve thinking about others' thoughts and feelings), and people with autism or AS are even worse than normal boys at these tests." (Baron-Cohen, 2003: 152) His account raises a number of concerns, and as Kirsten Bumiller points out, "promotes a view of autism that reinforces cultural stereotypes of gender" and "essentializ[es] gender differences by rooting the condition in biological maleness" (Bumiller, 2008: 973; also see Jack, 2011, 2014).

Bumiller is one of very few scholars to have engaged in debates about autism from an explicitly feminist perspective, and her powerful critique demonstrates that this gender-based theory "grossly oversimplifies the enormous complexity of the autistic condition" (Bumiller, 2008: 973). Clearly, the approach makes something strange not just of autism, but of gender itself, drawing the phenomena out of the social ether to give it an oddly prominent form and place in autistic lives that, as we'll see, it doesn't quite deserve to have.

## 3. Troubling the place of gender in autistic lives

This paper looks directly to the writings of some of those on the spectrum to question predominant and predominantly gendered clinical constructions of autism. It builds on findings from previous research on autistic autobiographies (Davidson, 2010; Davidson and Henderson, 2010a, b), drawing on more recent responses to

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Narby's (2012b, January 5) post "Double Rainbow: On Lisbeth Salander" provides an informative example.

<sup>5</sup> Baron-Cohen is well known in the field of autism research; outside this field, he may be more readily recognized as the less-funny cousin of Sasha Baron-Cohen, aka Borat.

<sup>6</sup> Further details on the survey can be found below, and in Davidson and Orsini (2013).

<sup>7</sup> When quoted in this paper, participants are referred to using the identifying information they themselves provided, in the following form: ('preferred self-identifier'/gender/age). See Kenney et al. (2015) for recent discussion of self-labelling practices.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion and 'cautionary critique' of conceptualizations of empathy as they relate to autism, see McDonagh (2013).

<sup>9</sup> He suggests this might happen when "a husband and wife are visiting another couple" and the response "might go like this: "Oh thank you. You *must* come shopping with me to this new shop I've found in Covent Garden, where they have such beautiful new material and designs. You'd love the summer dresses. They'd suit your tan so well." (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 50-1).

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