



Autism and Spiritual Experience

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“I went forward by going backward. I went backward in time into the most primal and ancient part of myself. Back into the quiet recesses of the mind, where evolution has paused to breathe, bringing its people with it.” (Prince-Hughes, 2004, p. 3)

The Dichotomies

Static

Autism-inside-
the-person

Medical Model

Fluid

Humanist

Critical Theory Studies

Neurodiversity

Static View

- Rooted in the work of Kanner and Asperger
 - “an innate inability to form the usual, biologically provided affective contacts with people” (Kanner, 1943, p. 250)
- Deficit-oriented
- ASCs are illnesses that must be corrected or cured.

Fluid View

- Understand ASCs as a type of neurodiversity
- There are no global deficits with ASCs.
- Individuals with ASCs are growing and developing beings
- “Presumes that ideas about autism derive from many sources, always reflect power relationships between the defined and those who do the defining, and shift over time in relation to social and cultural contexts” (Biklen, 2005, p. 46-47)

Issues Surrounding Spirituality and Neurodiversity

- Spirituality touches upon areas contested in Autism Studies
- Those on the spectrum who consider themselves spiritual or who have deeply held convictions that might reasonably be considered spiritual
- Individuals on the spectrum could benefit from a developmental, wellness-oriented approach as much as neurotypicals

Definition of Spirituality

“Spirituality is the universal human capacity to experience self-transcendence and awareness of sacred immanence, with resulting increases in greater self-other compassion and love.” (Young & Cashwell, 2011, p. 7)

Contested Areas in Autism Studies

- Meditation is used by neurotypicals to filter or silence sensori-experiences.
 - “The Buddha and his present-day representative, the lama guru, or meditation teacher, is someone who has ideally gained a degree of mastery or control over these potentially overwhelming processes, which face us all, the neuro-normals included, in one way or another.” (Samuel, 2009, p. 91)
- The various types of prayer as language.
- The moral agency of individuals among the neurodiverse

Identification with Spirituality

- Striving for connection
 - “Without a doubt, I have been the most blessed with parents who support and drive me to be successful at anything I do. They far surpassed warm-heartedness in everything they have given me, not material but emotional.” (Rubin, 2005, p. 108)
 - “What would a school of my dreams look like? Good soft seats and desks that held wonderful books that told of love and kindness. Kids would need to behave in the most kind manner and teasing would be a detention time. Everyone would be asked to join all clubs... and pleasing music would play everywhere. I would be able to tell my thoughts and choose, not when others desire...” (Burke, 2005, p. 250)

Identification with Spirituality

- Empathy for other beings
 - “I understand why kids scream. It’s frustrating not being able to speak and feeling as a mostly invisible being.” (Burke, 2005, p. 251)
 - “I always tell people: whenever you’re having a problem with an animal, *try to see what the animal is seeing* and experience what the animal is experiencing.” (Grandin, 2005, p. 23)
 - “Through this process I learned that persons are more than chaotic knots of random actions; I learned that they have feelings, needs for one another, and valuable perspectives, and that as people we are reflected in *one another*. Because the gorillas were so like me in so many ways, I was able to see myself in them, and in turn I saw them – and eventually myself – in other human people.” (Prince-Hughes, 2004, p. 3)

Identification with Spirituality

“And to my mother, I say this: Will I ever be able to express to you how grateful I am for all your support? Will I ever be able to fully appreciate the challenges and fears you experienced when I was a little girl? Will I ever grasp the gravity of your frustrations, and constant fears when you were walking knee deep in the unknowing of it all? How many tears did you cry when you did not understand why I struggled at the slightest touch, or when I screamed non-stop even when you attempted to comfort me; and how can we forget the almighty meltdowns! Mother, there are no words to express the love and gratitude that I feel in my heart for the support and acceptance you continue to give me each day. Will you ever know the warmth I feel in my soul, and the happy tears I cry as I drift off to sleep each night, because my heart is overcome with the knowledge that I have your acceptance, love, and support in all that I do as a proud member of the Autism/Neurodiversity Movement?” (daVanport, 2011)

A Wellness-Oriented Approach

- Recognize individuals with Autism have the capacity for spiritual experience
 - “Tracy’s biggest hope life with a purpose, and my greatest anguish not having a purpose in life.” (Tracy Thresher, 2010)
- Recognize neurodiversity
 - “Mostly, it’s my autism. I am still someone knowing God’s values.” (Larry Bissonnette, 2010)
- Provide support across the lifespan
 - “I think Austim, while having it’s challenges like many other things, is a very beautiful part of humanity. My Autism is the route through which I experience the world, and it’s the way I love it. ” (Tina Jones, 2011)



“I want the things a cure could give me. I want to have the leading role in my own story, and parts in others’. I want to be able to do the same things everyone else can do in the same way without any extra effort. I want to not feel like a freak. I want to feel safe. I want to be someone my parents can love. I want to know I have a future, and I want to not have to blaze that trail by myself. I want to have worth. I want other people to not think they have a right to me and my space, or else I want it to stop bothering me. I want my words and experiences to make sense to other people, and I want their words and experiences to make sense to me. I want to have to work just a little less hard. I want to have a college degree, a job, and a house of my own, and I want to be able to live wherever I want. I want to be able to assume I’m a person. I want to not have a month out of the year dedicated to my brokenness. I want to be able to assume that it’s not me, it’s them. I want to wake up and not be terrified or already tired.” (Julia Bascom, 2012)