AUTISM in CONTEXT

from neurodiversity to neuroharmony

Understanding autism in context

What makes the autistic brain different from a non-autistic one?

That's not easy to say, and currently science cannot pinpoint one specific difference. But based on the most recent findings of research it looks like that an autistic brain is a bit too precise and too absolute in creating a model of the world and in coping with the imperfections of its model.

The thing is, and that is more or less a Copernican revolution in our understanding of the brain, the brain does not process stimuli, it does not experience the world 'directly', it does not sit there waiting for the senses to inform the brain about the world and what's going on in it. Since the brain has no direct contact with the world and since stimuli don't have a specific, fixed and stable meaning (a tear on someone's cheek could mean sadness, happiness, a reaction to cold, proof that someone is making onion soup…), the brain does not process stimuli, it predicts stimuli based on the model it has about the world and based on the current context (in the context of onion peels, he brain will not predict sadness…). And if something is not predicted, the brain will also be flexible and using the context in figuring out whether that prediction error should be taken seriously or just ignored. So, if your neighbour one day suddenly has a pair of glasses on his nose, you will still see him as your neighbour and not as a stranger. And you will not expect all the neighbours to wear glasses now. In short: the brain is a contextually sensitive prediction organ.

An autistic brain also develops models, but it's models are a bit too precise and too absolute. And it tends to take little prediction errors a bit too seriously. So, it could be that an autistic brain connect tears to sadness. And that brain would be confused if someone who is crying is also laughing and saying positive things. And an autistic brain also pays a lot of attention to little differences that other people ignore. (For more information: see my book: "Autism as context blindness").

Based on this description of the autistic brain, my definition of autism is: absolute thinking in a relative world.

My definition of autism is not only focusing on cognition rather than behaviour, it is also neutral and it avoids terms like deficit, disorder, difficulty and shortcoming. Not that I am blind for the many difficulties people with autism experience in life, on the contrary. But autistic thinking is only a problem – or a disability – in an environment that demands flexible and contextually sensitive reactions. In other words, in conditions that demand a-contextual, straightforward, absolute and rule-based thinking, the autistic brain is an advantage. And there's another thing as well: non-autistic brains with their contextual sensitivity and flexibility sometimes are a prisoner of context, while autistic brains because of their 'context blindness' can create meanings and ideas that are 'out of the box'.

So, we need to see autism in context.
It is the context that defines whether the autistic thinking is a deficit or an asset.
The question is not whether autism is a disability or not. The question is: where and when does it prevent the person from being happy and flourishing?

Although there is a difference between the autistic brain and the non-autistic brain, we are not talking about two completely different brains. Therefore, the comparison with aliens is exaggerating enormously the differences (although people with autism often feel alienated…). Despite the differences, the autistic and the non-autistic brain have more in common that one would assume after reading all those books and articles on autism. People with autism are not so different as many people think.

Consequently, not everything that autistic people do or say can be explained by their autism. People with autism cannot be reduced to their autism. As everyone else in the world, people with autism are unique people, and their unique personality is the consequence of the unique mix of all their characteristics: their interests, their different intelligences, their personality traits, their preferences, their unique history full of personal experiences etc.

We should not make autism too big, but see it in context, namely in the context of all the other characteristics that make a person unique.

Accepting this neurodiversity, even within the autism spectrum, is a very important step towards inclusion of people with autism. However, it is only the first step. Although their

brain might work differently in some areas, people with an autism diagnosis share the same basic needs that all human beings have, from the basic physiological (food, water, rest, sensory well-being and sex) and safety needs to the higher level psychological and growth needs, such as achieving one's full potential. In short: people with autism want to be happy and have a pleasant and meaningful life. Seeing autism as part of neurodiversity is the first step in order to help people with autism thrive and flourish, but the second step is to give their special brain a place in the human community where it can also help other people thrive and flourish. This is what we mean with neuroharmony, a world where all the different brains in the world complement each other, with a harmonious society as a result.