

For a case study of your choosing, critically examine how barriers in communicating can lead to social exclusion (Your discussions must refer to the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism).

This assignment will critically examine how barriers in communicating can lead to social exclusion. Analysis will seek to show that ethnocentrism (in its broader sense), along with cultural relativism, can impact communications between autistic and neurotypical people. The focus will predominantly be on autistic adults' interactions with neurotypical people. It will use some established theories and models of communication to give context to how communication should work. In addition, there will be a limited exploration of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles and Ogay, 2007) and its merits, along with Expectations Violations Theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 2016). Important issues in this examination will be the intersectionality of disability and the economic and social exclusion (Levitas *et al*, 2007) faced by autistic people. Before proceeding further with this discussion, it is important to define ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, autistic and neurotypical.

Ethnocentrism is centred around the belief which regards our own culture or group (ingroup) as superior to others or decides people that are not in our group (outgroup) are less valid. However, a deeper understanding of ethnocentrism includes making untrue assumptions based on our (ingroup) life experience and thinking it is relevant to their (outgroup) experience (Barger, 2019). It is argued by Schopmeyer and Fisher (1993) that ethnocentrism leads to a sense that there is only one way to do things correctly and that our own culture has the best methods and customs to get things done. Schopmeyer and Fisher (1993) also argue that this perpetuates a culture that devalues the way others do things. People from other cultures are ignored, frowned upon, or have their ways of doing things disregarded as unnecessary and are therefore marginalised or misunderstood, giving rise to the social exclusion of minority groups (Sachev, 2007).

Cultural relativism maintains that all cultures are equally valid and that the standards of one culture cannot be used to measure another (Sanderson 1988, p.34, cited in Schopmeyer and Fisher, 1993). A criticism of cultural relativism is that it does not recognise that people may have an inability to recognise that our culture and therefore our way of seeing the world may not be relevant to or within another culture (Barger, 2019). Hofstede (2010, p.2) argues that

culture can be examined on a national level, but warns against using his cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) for studying the values of individuals.

Weaknesses of much cross-cultural research is not recognizing the difference between analysis at the societal level and at the individual level; this amounts to confusing anthropology and psychology (Hofstede, 2010, p6.).

This is an acknowledgement that individuals have their own values and beliefs that may be inconsistent with the societal values and beliefs surrounding them. Autism has been defined as:

Conditions on the autism spectrum that refer to a set of neurodevelopmental conditions that are characterised by impairments in social interaction and communication, and by an atypically restrictive and repetitive repertoire of interests and activities (DSM-IV, ICD-10) (Sucksmith *et al*, 2011).

This is a medical definition, based on a deficit model that is rejected by autistic people, therefore a neurological description will be used:

Autism is a developmental phenomenon, ... begins *in utero* and has a pervasive influence on development, on multiple levels, throughout the lifespan. Autism produces distinctive, atypical ways of thinking, moving, interaction, and sensory and cognitive processing. One analogy ... that autistic individuals have a different neurological “operating system” than non-autistic individuals (Walker, 2014).

Walker’s description embraces the neurodiversity paradigm, based on the social disability model (FPLD, 2021), meaning that society itself can be constructed in such a way that does not support individuals to overcome the barriers they face and that such a society can be a hindrance rather than a help, as the structures within a society can be a bigger barrier than an impairment itself. Silberman, (2015) describes neurotypical people as ‘people without a diagnosis of autism’. Neurotypical people will be cognitively and socially typical, cope with changes in routine and hit developmental milestones at the expected times. Neurotypical people will be considered ‘the norm’ within a society that does not embrace the neurodiversity paradigm.

Kenny *et al.* (2016) surveyed over 3000 UK residents to ascertain their preferred way of describing people with an autism diagnosis, and ‘autistic person’ was one of the preferred terms indicated by the autistic adults, parent carers and other family members/friends of autistic

people. On-the-other-hand, professionals preferred the ‘person first’ identity of ‘person with autism’, a term rejected by many autistic people who prefer autistic person. Using the term autistic person is seen as desirable by autistic people as autism is an integral part of them and is not something to be feared or that should be viewed as ‘something bad to be’ (Kenny *et al.*, 2016). The insistence by some professionals of using person first language is an example of professionals being unresponsive to service users and can be viewed as a power imbalance between service users and professionals (Kumar, 2000).

Research by Benford (2008) acknowledges that autistic people feel misrepresented in being unable to ‘advocate for themselves or on behalf of other autistic people’ and points to an analysis of online discourse (Brownlow & O’Dell, 2006) as providing evidence of autistic identity which is regarded as ‘at least equal to’ neurotypical people by autistic people. Benford also speaks of neural plurality and assorted neurological configurations (operating systems), where neurotypicality holds power, but is not viewed as superior by autistic individuals themselves. Craine (2020) provides further insights into the wider Autism/ Neurodiversity paradigm with the battle for autistic people to be recognised for what they can do, rather than being defined and confined by the medical model, which some autistic people view as a problem.

The observations made by Schopmeyer and Fisher (1993) that ‘cultural relativism appears to address only the distortions of the outsider while leaving unaffected those of the insider’ is of relevance to this discussion as it is possible to be an ‘outsider’ within your ‘in-group’. Craine (2020 p.260) points to the huge differences between different groups that fall under the neurodivergent umbrella and gives a good example of ‘insider’ tensions that can emerge between factions within the same broadly connected group and refers to being criticised because their autism was ‘different’ to someone else’s, and that therefore they should not be allowed to ‘advocate’ on behalf of others that experience autism differently to them (Craine, 2020, p.267). Before exploring power differences in a deeper way, it is important to understand what communication is.

Models of communication can be linear (Shannon *et al*, 1949, cited by Dicks 2021; Tutorialspoint, 2021) or interactive (Schramm and Wilbur, 1971 cited by Dicks, 2021; Tutorialspoint, 2021). These models outline processes that take place during an exchange of information. The linear model is considered a ‘one-way’ model and the interactive model acknowledges that the role of ‘receiver’ and ‘sender’ is exchangeable as communication goes back and forth between people. Both models describe the process of sending (source) a message (encoding), receiving a message (decoding), and responding (feedback). The linear model also refers to a ‘channel’(method) and ‘noise’ (interference). In this discussion ‘noise’ ‘encoding’ ‘decoding’ and ‘feedback’ will be focus points.

Communication between people is much more than just a set of words that are spoken, there are social niceties (norms) that are expected and subtle signals of belonging/not belonging that can be picked up on. As subtleties are picked up on (or not), then this is where communication can break down. Communications between neurotypical and autistic people could be termed ‘interability communications’ (Byrd *et al*, 2019). Interability communications refer to people without disabilities and those with disabilities interacting with each other. However, they could also be seen in terms of ‘transmitting information to someone of a different neurotype’ (Crompton and Fletcher-Watson, 2019) and some argue that issues of understanding stem from the ‘Double Empathy’ relational and reciprocity aspects of communication (Milton, 2012).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles and Ogay, 2007) examines how ‘Convergence’ (similarity emphasis), ‘Divergence’ (differences emphasised) and ‘Maintenance’ (usual style is maintained) occurs as people, picking up on cues from each other and the social context, adopt different communication strategies. Convergence can move upwards or downwards, depending on one’s social position. Coupland and Jarwoski (1997, pp.241-242) propose that CAT has expanded into an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” that includes several ways in which people symbolically signal their identities. CAT has been used to examine interability communications and may be useful as a lens to explore autistic and neurotypical interactions to examine how interability communications between autistic individuals and neurotypical individuals are problematic.

Intergroup contact theory (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998) and various studies (Byrd *et al*, 2019; Heasman and Gillespie, 2018) record difficulties between different groups due to negative stereotypes and perceptions. Byrd *et al* (2019) argue that interability communications can be improved through communication accommodation and state that ‘interventions should focus on educating people without disabilities on how to competently communicate with people with disabilities’. This is an important step forward in easing misunderstandings between interability groups, autistic people are often subjected to ‘social skills training’ (Autism. Org.uk, 2020), yet neurotypical people receive little training on how to communicate effectively with autistic people.

CAT is not the only theory that seeks to explain problematic communication issues. Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Jones, 1976, cited in Burgoon, 2016) may be another useful tool. EVT argues that violations of expectations or norms can work out better than we would instinctively think that they would, but it depends on how the violation is received or perceived as to whether communication is affected in a positive or negative way. This theory was born from proxemics (personal space), it now includes other non-verbal behaviours, such as conversational distance and has been used in research on body lean, eye-contact, touch (haptics) and body language (Burgoon, 2016). It could be argued EVT is particularly relevant to autistic and neurotypical interactions as ‘personal space’, eye contact and haptics expectations could be vastly over and underestimated in this interability communication interaction. Burgoon (2016) notes that ‘Expectations are enduring cognitions about the behaviour anticipated of others’. For example: ‘I had communication issues with each therapist because they expected me to be neurotypical’ (Camm-Crosbie *et al*, 2019 p.1436, participant 4F), is pointing out that trained mental health professionals did not seem to understand the needs of autistic people. If highly trained professionals ‘expect neurotypical behaviour’ from autistic people, then it could be argued that the public could also be expecting this neurotypical behaviour from autistic people. These expectations can impact autistic people across the lifespan and lead to social exclusion.

The most recent Office for National Statistics (ONS) report on outcomes for disabled people recorded an employment rate of 21.7% for autistic people, the lowest rate for all impairment groups (ONS, 2021). They also recorded that disabled people were more likely to be in part-

time employment and lower status jobs (ONS, 2019). On average, disabled workers' wages are 12.2% less than the non-disabled worker and for every 88 pence a disabled worker earns, a non-disabled worker earns £1 (ONS, 2018). This disparity occurs despite anti-discrimination laws and policies being in place and the UK being in the lower rankings of Power Distance Index (PDI) i.e., a society that believes in minimising inequalities (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Therefore, there seems to be a disparity between the belief about fairness within society and the lived reality of those that need society to be fair.

One explanation for these figures could be the recruitment process itself. An important component of the employment process is the interview, and it is this process that will be used to further explore the subject of 'interability communications' (Byrd *et al*, 2019), with a focus on autistic and neurotypical interactions.

An employment interview where the interviewer finally meets a real-life autistic person but is unaware of how the communication style of an autistic person will differ from a neurotypical person can be a difficult process for both the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview process itself consists of several requirements that are regarded as positive things to portray. Within Western culture, for example, this includes: eye contact, mirroring, taking turns, answering of open-ended questions or questions about the future, a firm handshake (Reed.co.uk, No Date; CIPD, 2021). It could be argued that all of these are neurotypical as well as Western expectations, all of which make it harder for autistic people to shine during the interview process as these are all aspects that autistic people could struggle with.

The interviewer will expect the candidate to give eye contact (not easy for autistic people and impossible for many, as noted by Riby *et al*. (2013), interpreting eye-cue gaze is an essential requirement of socio communicative function), whereas the autistic person may look anywhere except at the interviewer. This 'noise' between the interviewer and interviewee can have a negative effect on the interviewer's opinion on whether the candidate is interested in the job, particularly if the interviewer has no understanding of autistic people or is unaware that the interviewee is autistic. Interviews can and do go wrong for autistic people, as autistic behaviour can be misunderstood by those who are interviewing candidates. Interview culture tells us that body language is a crucial aspect during an interview. This is seen by Doodle's comment (2017) on the LSE blog discussing employment opportunities (Viera, 2017), when Doodle was told at

an interview: “within 5 minutes I knew you wouldn’t fit in here. I can tell from your body language”. Stereotyping and social norms (EVT) can prevent convergence (CAT) being successful and mistrust of motivations between communicators can make or break accommodation attempts and lead to further misconceptions. Of note to this discussion is that ‘SAT and CAT have theorized the role of norms as constraints to accommodative processes, but social and situational norms and pressures have not yet received the attention they deserve’ (Gallois, Ogay and Giles, 2005). Interviews could be considered a ‘situational norm’ that is full of pressure.

Shaking hands can also be a flashpoint during an interview situation. The interviewer may expect a handshake on meeting and leaving (norms), but the autistic person may be feeling anxious, meaning their sensory responses are heightened and that they may not wish to, or be able to shake hands at the appropriate times for the interviewer (Autism Guide, 2021). This is another example of ‘noise’ and ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ difficulties within the communication process that can impact inter neurotype interactions. Currently, accessibility seems to concentrate on physical adaptations to the environment, such as ramps and lifts, rather than adaptations to personal space, lighting and noise reducing adaptations that would enhance the environment for autistic people making it more comfortable. CG142 (Section 1.1.8) describes optimum adaptations for a clinical environment (NICE, 2016) and it could be argued that all public spaces should be adapted in this way to increase accessibility to autistic people. It could be that the environment in which an interview takes place is challenging to the autistic interviewee in terms of lighting, décor or that the interviewer has drenched themselves in a strong-smelling perfume or aftershave (Autism.org 2020), eliciting an overwhelming sensory response for the interviewee.

Many people would consider dressing in a formal way to attend a job interview, signalling that this employment opportunity is very important to them (Reed, 2021). However, a criticism of the advice on the Reed site could be that it advises interviewees to research company social media sites to gain ideas of acceptable dress codes. This advice is rather vague and could be taken literally by some autistic people and they may spend a lot of time researching outfits or end up looking at ‘away day’ company events and so still end up in the wrong clothing for an

interview. Additionally, it is well documented that autistic people can have sensory difficulties with clothing (Kyriakou *et al.*, 2019) and they may have taken advice to “dress comfortably” as a literal instruction to dress in what they find comfortable and not what is comfortable and appropriate for a formal interview. Evidence from Flower *et al.* (2018) shows that autistic candidates are less likely to be hired than neurotypical individuals and that even after disclosure while hire rates would improve marginally, they do not meet the same level as neurotypical people. However, there is evidence that some employers and institutions are beginning to gain knowledge of how to make employment more accessible to autistic people (CIPD, 2018; NAS, no date).

The dilemma of sharing an autistic diagnosis adds another complication to the interview process. Disclosing information about a disability is a potentially stigmatising experience for people with disabilities as it touches on a person’s self-concept and self-esteem (Charmaz, 1991, cited in Byrd and Zhang 2020, p. 24). If the recruitment process could be improved in such a way that autistic differences were naturally accounted for without the need to reveal a diagnosis to get adjustments, that would level the playing field a great deal. It is encouraging to see collaborations between organisations like the CIPD and Uptimise who provide support to employers seeking greater inclusion of neurodivergent individuals and to neurodivergent individuals themselves (CIPD, 2018).

Misunderstandings between autistic and neurotypical people begin at an early age, Sasson *et al.* (2017) note that neurotypical peers are less likely to interact with autistic people. Heasman and Gillespie (2018) also note that there is misunderstanding between family members and autistic people within the same family unit. Sucksmith *et al.* (2011) studying the Broader Autism Phenotype (BAP) found that studies suggest some parents and siblings of autistic people share challenges in the social use of language including ‘spontaneous narrative discourse’ (unplanned conversations/exchanges). This suggests that some family members will have difficulties building or maintaining the social networks that can be gained from casual conversations or small talk and therefore limit the social capital that can be gained from informal social encounters.

Heasman and Gillespie (2017) comment that family members lacked significant traits as ‘they were employed and living independent lives’, yet they also noted that family members could possess traits of autism. This seems to acknowledge that family members have autistic traits,

yet at the same time re-enforce a stereotyping of autistic traits being incompatible with independent living and employment. Furthermore, it is important to mention the intersectionality of gender and inequality. Until recently many autistic women and girls were undiagnosed as the diagnostic tools used were not sensitive enough to capture the subtleties of autism in females (Rivet and Matson, 2011). Finally, it is well documented that autistic people often have co-occurring conditions that include Dyslexia, ADHD, Tourettes Syndrome, Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder, and other neurodiverse conditions (Matson *et al.*, 2013). These co-occurring conditions will translate into deeper challenges to autistic people gaining inclusion in a neurotypical world.

As Levitas *et al.* (2007, p.9) observe, deep exclusion signifies exclusion that crosses more than ‘one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being, and future life chances’. If neurotypical people continue to think that there is only one way to communicate and the neurotypical way is the ‘right’ way, then autistic people will remain marginalised by the cultural values of the majority. This analysis has sought to include some perspectives from autistic people by including some of their lived experiences, allowing a brief opportunity to see the world through different eyes. As Bonaccio *et al.* (2016) note, nonverbal communication is “an elaborate secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and used by all”, an observation by made Sapir in 1949. Communication mishaps occur, it is up to all receivers and senders to improve the process.

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