

Challenging the Theory of Mind: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Construction, and Biochemical Explanation

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Abstract : The designation autism spectrum disorder (ASD) groups complex disorders in the development of the brain. Autism is defined essentially as a condition in which an individual lacks a theory of mind. The theory of mind, in this sense, explains the ability of an individual to attribute feelings, emotions, or thoughts to another person. An autistic patient is characteristically unable to determine what an interlocutor is feeling, or to understand the beliefs of others. However, it is possible that autism cannot plausibly be characterized as the lack of theory of mind in an individual. Genes, the brain, and its interplay with environmental factors may also cause autism. A mutation in a gene may be hereditary, or instigated by diseases such as mumps. Though an autistic patient may experience abnormalities in the cerebellum and the cortical regions, these are in fact only possible theories as to a biochemical explanation behind the disability. The prevailing theory identifying autism with lacking the theory of mind is supported by behavioral observation, but this form of observation is itself determined by socially constructed standards, limiting the possibility for empirical verification. The theory of mind infers that the beliefs and emotions of people are causally based on their behavior. This paper demonstrates the fallacy of this inference, critiquing its basis in socially constructed values, and arguing instead for a biochemical approach free from the conceptual apparatus of language and social expectation.

Keywords : autism spectrum disorder, sociology of psychology, social construction, the theory of mind

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