

The Discourse on Autism

Gary A. Mullen, PhD
Gettysburg College, USA

Abstract: The notion that autism is fundamentally a neurobiological impairment that can be treated, cured or overcome through strategies that enable successful social adaptation is becoming imbedded in popular narratives of autism, such as the life story of Temple Grandin as recounted by Oliver Sacks. This notion compromises the autonomy and flourishing of autistic persons by placing the adaptive burden largely upon autistic persons rather than institutions. Drawing on the work of Ian Hacking and Michel Foucault, I argue that we should give this popular conception an axial shift and consider the ways in which our contemporary institutions, practices and assumptions about normality are implicated in the creation of autism as a diagnostic category and the confinement of autistic persons within the inflexible norms of extant educational and public welfare practices. Understanding the social and cultural contingency of autism permits a more experimental approach toward institutions that can accommodate and be shaped by the diversity of modes of mental processing, communication and socialization that autism presents.

Key Words: autism, Foucault, Hacking

In his bestselling book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Oliver Sacks tells the story of how two autistics, Stephen Wiltshire and Temple Grandin, have discovered the hidden potential within their autism and have managed to lead interesting and fulfilling lives: Wiltshire as a budding artist and Grandin as an expert on animal behavior. The narrative frame adopted in Sacks' work is one of adaptation: autism is a neurophysiological fact that creates special challenges for the autistic person's endeavor to assimilate and adjust to the social world. While the spirit and tone of Sacks' work is progressive, his narrative glorifies the extraordinary adaptive successes of a select few autistics and tends to occlude the social and cultural influences that constitute autism. There is nothing rare or remarkable about this narrative frame in much of the literature on autism. Uta Frith, in a more scientific work, places her psychological inquiry in *The Enigma of Autism*, in a similar narrative frame. This way of framing the lives of autistic persons as stories of adaptation and overcoming has become an enduring feature of "the way we are learning to speak about autism" (Ian Hacking, 2009, pp. 499-516). In effect, such narratives accept the naturalness of the difference between norm and deviation, and fail to explore adequately the ways in which institutions and practices might change to accommodate the complexity and diversity of autistic persons and lives. This shift of emphasis away from conceptualizing autism as merely a neurobiological fact raises our awareness of how autistic persons can flourish when we adopt a more fluid, critical and experimental approach toward institutions and practices. The open and fluid communication norms and practices of digital communication and the internet offers an excellent example of an enabling and emancipatory social space for many autistic persons. Digital social space offers us some intimation of how autistic persons can flourish when practices are sufficiently supple, recognize the agency of autistic persons and cultivate an awareness of their own contingency. A dynamic co-adaptation of diverse modes of mental processing can flourish within practices that are both constituted by, and not merely constituting and confining, the fundamental plurality and diversity of autistic persons and lives.

Discourse and Niche: Has Autism Always Been with Us?

In his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Oliver Sacks begins his account of the paradoxes of autism with the news story of “Blind Tom,” reported from the Fayetteville Observer of May 19, 1862:

“The blind negro Tom has been performing here to a crowded house. He is certainly a wonder... He resembles any ordinary negro boy 13 years old and is perfectly blind and an idiot in everything but music, language, imitation and perhaps memory. He has never been instructed in music or educated in any way. He learned to play the piano from hearing others, learns his airs and tunes from hearing them sung, and can play any piece on first trial as well as the most accomplished performer ... One of his most remarkable feats was the performance of three pieces of music at once. He played Fisher’s Hornpipe with one hand and Yankee Doodle with the other and sang Dixie all at once. He also played a piece with his back to the piano and his hands inverted. He performs many pieces of his own conception – one, his ‘Battle of Manassas’ may be called picturesque and sublime, a true conception of unaided, blind musical genius ... This poor blind boy is cursed with but little of human nature; he seems to be an unconscious agent acting as he is acted on, and his mind a vacant receptacle where Nature stores her jewels to recall them at her pleasure” (Sacks, 1996, p. 188).

While Sacks would condemn this reduction of autism to a public spectacle, his use of the story about “Blind Tom” is intended to show that autism has always been with us; that it is a naturally occurring phenomenon that we have only begun to see for what it is (Sacks, 1996, p. 250). On this view, the “epidemic” of autism is a product of progress in our ability to observe what was always already there, hidden in the neurobiological folds of the brain. We need only create the right diagnostic instruments and social institutions that will allow “autism to speak” and then we will be rewarded with the jewels that nature has hidden in the “enigma of autism.”

From the time of its almost simultaneous discovery by Leo Kanner and Hanz Asperger in the early 1940s, and throughout the 1980s, autism remained a rare and intriguing oddity, with a prevalence of less than 0.5 cases per 1,000 (Craig J. Newschaffler, et al, pp. 235-58). More recent figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimate the prevalence rate of autism at 14.7 out of every 1,000 in the U.S. (U.S. Centers for Disease Control).¹ The dramatic increase in diagnosed cases of autism since the 1980s might convey the impression that we have refined our sensitivity and become adept at searching for these “jewels of nature” that have long awaited our discovery. In this article, I hope to disrupt this impression with the disquieting suggestion that autism is not a brute fact brought about merely by some neurobiological event. Multiple different axes of influence from different institutions and practices carve out a cultural “niche” within which autism appears (Hacking, 1998, pp. 51-79). When we view autism as a highly contingent category, we can begin to raise a number of questions that otherwise remain suppressed, questions that cannot be framed properly so long as we are entirely comfortable with finding

autism defined in a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* and tracked statistically by our *Centers for Disease Control*. We might begin to see the manifold phenomena of autism as a plurality of different modes of mental processing, of interpreting and living in the world, that are not well served by classification as a mental disorder or disease.

Autism is just emerging as an object of psychological study. Even as late as 2002, experts in the field were willing to admit, “We don’t know what autism is” (Lawson, 2003, p. 189). In his most recent book on autism, Stuart Murray nicely captures the paradox of autism research, “We know more about autism now than at any point in history . . . yet, at the same time, if we’re honest, the central observation we might make, the ‘central fact’ about autism with which we should probably start, is that we don’t know very much about it at all” (Murray, 2012, p. 1). The endeavor to find a language for conceptualizing autism is still in its nonage, still plodding and provisional. We have only begun to measure the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of autism’s deviation from “the norm.” At this sensitive and impressionable point in the development of a scientific discourse, influences usually deemed entirely external to science are most visible. The work of Michel Foucault was devoted to drawing our attention to these early moments in the development of the human sciences, moments when the social and political threads woven into our standards of normality and deviance are most starkly evident. In the case of autism, we needn’t look back through history to the emergence of the distinction between reason and madness in the classical age; we can see that all the contingency and uncertainty of the human sciences are at play right before us, in our schools, hospitals and state bureaucracies.

Ian Hacking explicitly and Stuart Murray implicitly embrace and modify Foucault’s thesis that knowledge is always implicated in the norms of the society in which it is generated. Along these lines, our knowledge is both affected by and reinforces the limiting conditions of social action (Lemert and Gillan, pp. 57-58). To put this differently, knowledge is always “discursive;” it is always socially and politically porous. Foucault’s approach seems especially fitting in the case of an “epidemic” marked by impairment of normal social interaction, communication and play. Much of the popular and scholarly literature on autism contains the same features as the emerging discourse on sexuality in the nineteenth century, which Foucault discussed in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1990). The emergence of scientific discourse on sexuality assumed that the relationship between sex and power had been one of repression and silencing; the emerging discourse would, it was assumed, be emancipatory by allowing the naturalness of sex to be brought into the open. Foucault shows us that the relationship between the new science of sex and human freedom is far more complicated. The relationship between sex and power had long been one of confession rather than repression. Pastoral power played a role in regulating the passions of the laity through the confessional centuries before the bourgeois confessionals provided by psychoanalysis (Foucault, 1990, pp. 18-22). In this emerging discourse, the relationship between knowledge and the individual was invasive. Knowledge expanded into the individual, inciting speech about new deviations, new threats to the maintenance of a controllable population with a stable set of sexual norms. Individuals are, thus, sexualized through a discourse on what is normal. While norms have apparently become liberalized since the nineteenth century, they have acquired a meticulous specificity, codification and appropriation by political concerns.

A similar structure is evident in the emerging discourse on autism. The exhortation popular in activist circles is to “let autism speak”- as if there were some truth about autism awaiting discovery, some truth outside the social practices and norms that have allowed autism to appear in the first place. When we consider the discursive character of the human sciences, autism will not “speak” until society has found a way of inscribing its norms, in some unified and stable way, on the minds of those labeled autistic. This would grate against the growing popular conception of “the autistic mind” as some fact apart from the practices that allow autism to appear (Grandin & Panek, 2013, pp. 16-20). Like the discourse on sexuality, the discourse on autism is invasive, not repressive but confessional and productive. Far from silencing autism, the literature on autism produces a broad range of different ways of speaking about abnormalities and deviations from the norm. And the success stories of autism are measured by normalization – integration into the market through the cultivation of some extraordinary (super-normal) capacity, not unlike “Blind Tom.”

To understand autism as a “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense is to be mindful of the institutional and cultural horizon within which autism appears. This is not to say that there is no neurobiological dimension to autism or that every attempt to make an objective claim about autism is a gratuitous and arbitrary interpretation. Instead, it amounts to taking seriously the institutional, cultural and political conditions for the possibility of making certain observations and the ways in which the meaning of our observations are mediated by these conditions. Ian Hacking prefers the term “niche” to Foucault’s term “discourse” as a metaphor for the multiplicity of institutions and practices that create a cultural space for the appearance of mental disorders. Regarding his use of metaphor, Hacking writes:

“The metaphor of niche is my own, but there are many other metaphors in circulation. Readers of Michel Foucault have deluged us with descriptions of mental illness using the linguistic metaphor of discourse, or of a discursive formation. This is undoubtedly the most popular metaphor of the moment” (Hacking, 1998, p. 85).

Hacking finds this popularity a sad testament to the narrowness of contemporary social theory, which concentrates excessively on a narrow conception of language. The term “discourse,” Hacking avers, “does not do the work,” because it leaves the analysis at the level of how we talk about and categorize the world.

“Of course language has a great deal to do with the formation of an ecological niche, but so does what people do, how they live, the larger world of the material existence that they inhabit. That world must be described in all its peculiar and idiosyncratic detail (Hacking, 1998, p. 86).”

I am entirely in agreement with Hacking’s insistence on attending to the details and complexities of material life that lie on the margins of any discourse. But I also believe Foucault would have agreed. The shortcomings and narrowness of the discourse metaphor are largely the handiwork of Foucault’s many epigones. Both Hacking and Foucault focus on the “dynamics” rather than the “semantics” of classification. For both of them, this is a question of taking the cultural situation of the human sciences seriously. If we were to arrive at the point where we

understand “the essence of autism” and would be able to claim with reasonable certainty that “autism is P” that would hardly resolve the complex question of the meaning of autism:

“How would the discovery of P affect how autistic children and their families conceive of themselves; how would it affect their behavior? What would be the looping effect on the stereotype of autistic children? Which children, formerly classified as autistic, would now be excluded, and what would that do to them?” (Hacking, 1999, p. 121)

Understanding the “looping effect” of social norms on the sciences that reinforce those norms on the society and psyches that it studies is the core idea behind Foucault’s notion of science as discourse.² A discursive approach to the question of autism raises new questions as it draws our attention to how culture and science, especially the human sciences, are intertwined. The neurobiological and psychological tools with which autism is diagnosed are woven into a larger tapestry of cultural narratives that color the perception of autism. Stuart Murray focuses our attention on how science and narrative are intertwined:

“Central to my sense of how we might understand autism is a desire to place the condition in cultural contexts, to see that the various opinions and theories that surround it are part of a wide fabric of narrative, representation, and characterization” (Murray, 2012, p. xiii).

Murray raises questions about the background cultural narrative within which autism appears. He repeatedly reminds us, “There are no biological markers for autism, neurological or otherwise” (Murray, 2012, p. 11). The MRI scans of autistics that show marked “underactivity” in the medial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala are not dispositive indications of autism. Neurobiological researchers are quick to point out that “knowing that brain structure or activity is different in those with autism does not locate this knowledge as a foundational cause of the condition” (Murray, 2012, p. 5). Autism appears through narratives, behaviors and social norms that are not reducible to some neurobiological condition alone. This is only one of the fibers woven into the tapestry of autism.

Myriad contingent influences generate the distinction between the normal and the abnormal in any given society, the contingency of this distinction is often “naturalized,” giving the current norm a privileged status in the human sciences (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, pp. 5-16).³ The background assumption regarding the naturalness of autism is accompanied by the presumed naturalness of our current social norms. When we discard this assumption, we can then raise the question of how our social norms are implicated in the definition of autism. Instead of asking how we can make autism “speak,” we might instead ask how society can speak in such a way that autism no longer appears as a disorder but as a constellation of different modes of cognition and socialization. This might reverse the usual way of framing the problem and turn the criteria for diagnosing autism back upon the society that has diagnosed it in such numbers. Instead of diagnosing autism as a qualitative impairment in communication and social interaction, we would diagnose our society as having a qualitative impairment in communicating and interacting with a diversity of cognitive and developmental processes. What is at stake here is respect for the autonomy and diversity of autistic persons in the face of a society that fails to see its own

complicity in generating this new category of persons and that fails to recognize, accommodate and adapt itself to the radical plurality of persons diagnosed under the broad rubric of “autism.” Narratives of adaptive success—of which Temple Grandin’s life story has become paradigmatic—contribute to the asymmetry of current institutions and practices and the plurality of autistic persons.

Autism and the “Repressive Hypothesis”

If we follow the narrative of Sacks or Uta Frith, we would be led to ask what happened to autistic persons in the past? The emergence of autism might be a story of ending the long suppression and exclusion of autistic persons throughout history. Frith offers her own litany of autistics from the past, including the “holy fools” of Russia and Victor—the feral child of Aveyron (Frith, 1996, pp. 16-17).⁴ According to this narrative, current psychology is liberating autism from centuries of misunderstanding and silence. Only now do we have the right diagnostic tools for identifying and remediating the disorder. The interpretation of autism as a disorder uncritically accepts and reinforces the adaptation frame I mentioned above, and it fails to see how the classification of autism as a disorder reinforces a present set of social norms and continues the work of suppressing and silencing autistic persons through a narrative of adaptation, overcoming and progress. To the extent that we think about autism in this way, we produce an elaborate discourse on a range of deviations from a norm. This kind of productive power is not repressive in relation to those so classified. It is productive on three levels: the production of a way of thinking about autism; reinforcing a set of normal behaviors—creating the institutional spaces necessary for that reinforcement—and producing a certain mode of existence or conception of the interiority of the autistic. The dynamic interaction of social norms, categories, behaviors and a sense of self is not, in itself, problematic; it is unavoidable. What is problematic is when this production takes place uncritically, through the rigid imposition of the presumed natural norm onto a population that is fundamentally plural. It is a common saying among autistic self-advocates that, “You only ever know one autistic person,” never autism as such. But if we follow Sacks or Frith, autism is a neurobiological fact that has been repressed and is only now coming into awareness and gaining the attention of our psychologists, psychiatrists, educators and the general public. The presumed naturalness of the distinction between normal and abnormal crates an asymmetric relation between the institutional norms and those classified as deviations. Individuals, institutions and practices falling within the norm needn’t adapt themselves to those deemed “deviant.” The only question for the “normal population” is how to facilitate the adaptation of the “deviants” to the norm or how to contain them and prevent them from disrupting normal practices. This narrative is not allowing autism to speak so much as it is producing the demand that autistic persons understand themselves and speak in a certain way. Foucault’s achievement in *The History of Sexuality* was to demonstrate how the scientific discourse on sexuality was not unique in its endeavor to bring sex into the light of discourse. The scientific study of sex, as it developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thought of itself as liberating sex from centuries of silence and repression. By operating under this “repressive hypothesis”, the scientific study of sexuality inadvertently effected a continuation and intensification of the confessional strategy for accessing and normalizing the desires of the subject (Foucault, 1990, p. 11). The assumption that sexuality was a natural economy of desires, which finally found a voice in the scientific study of sex, only further articulated and reinforced the power of social norms in modern society.

The tendency to view autism as “a given,” that is, as a naturally occurring phenomenon, is a salient example of what Foucault termed “the will to knowledge”— an approach to the human sciences that assumes a fixed epistemological point beyond social and political influences. The spuriousness of this position is especially evident in the case of autism, with its heavily socially laden diagnostic criteria: impairments of social interaction, communication and abnormally repetitive patterns of play (DSM V, sec. 299.00). While much of the literature acknowledges the breadth and vagueness of the diagnosis, little emphasis is given to the norms and practices of the society from which the diagnostic criteria emerge. Those authors who are especially sympathetic to the experience of autistic persons are likely to see the relationship between autism and society (or autism and power) as one of repression— in a way that reiterates the problem of the “repressive hypothesis”. On this view, normal social practices present a special challenge for autistic persons, who are faced with the Herculean task of having to internalize the complexities of social interaction one piece at a time.

In accord with the repressive hypothesis, the great success stories of autism valorize the cases of successful adaptation to society, usually through the discovery and cultivation of extraordinary abilities. While the “hidden treasure” of autism has always been with us, we are only now learning how to unearth and harness the “special powers of the autistic mind”.⁵ Autism can find a market niche, as it seems to be the primal fund of valuable cognitive oddities. If only we could free autism as Grandin has, the epidemic would lose its sting.⁶ The popular impression conveyed by the valorization of Grandin is that autism can be extraordinarily useful when we are aware of the difficulties involved in properly integrating the autistic population. Against many of Grandin’s own warnings, her story has taken on the status of a paradigm for how to be autistic, how to find a way of successfully adapting to a world that categorized you as abnormal.

Foucault’s work draws our attention to how the purportedly emancipatory discourse on sexuality served a similar paradigmatic function. Far from freeing desire to manifest itself in various ways, sexual liberation has told us how to be sexual; how to look, how to interact; how it is and what is “normal” to desire. I mentioned above Foucault’s revelation that modernity has completely misunderstood the relationship between power and sexual discourse. The mistake was to view this relationship as one of silencing and repression. Instead, the anxiety about sex required its complete and meticulous disclosure. Foucault writes:

“This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex: and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself” (Foucault, 1990, p. 23).

In this connection, Sade and the anonymous author of *My Secret Life* were misconstrued under “the repressive hypothesis” as voices of liberation opposed to the dominant impetus of sexual discourse. Instead, Foucault allows us to see them as “naïve representatives of the injunction to talk about sex” (Foucault, 1990, p. 22). While Temple Grandin and the Marquis de Sade contribute to entirely different fields of inquiry, one cannot help seeing the same naïve role played by Grandin’s narratives in the discourse on autism. Grandin’s biography is an account of how autistics can adapt to the constraints of our society as it is – the narratives hold out the hope

that other autistics can earn doctoral degrees and become independent, successful members of society with a litany of contributions to industry and commerce. The narrative risks becoming the paradigm for how autism must speak and behave in order to adapt to modern bourgeois society.

While the stories told by Grandin and Sacks are inspiring, they are not attentive to the ways in which autism reflects social practices and norms. Grandin and Sacks are salient examples of the repressive hypothesis at work in the popular discussion of autism. For all of their admirable work in drawing public attention to autism, they misconstrue the relationship between autism and power as repressive and silencing. This is hardly the case. In a way strikingly similar to the discourse on sexuality, there is an “incitement to discourse” about autism – an incitement fueled by fascination and anxiety. The fascination ignites upon the disparity between the sub-normal and the super-normal, the idiot and the genius entwined in the popular fantasy of autism (See Hacking, 2010). It is typical of both scientific and popular literature on autism to comb through historical accounts of eccentric personalities in search of the criteria in the DSM V. For example, Sacks writes, “Autism, clearly, is a condition that has always existed, affecting occasional individuals in every period and culture. It has always attracted in the popular mind an amazed, fearful, or bewildered attention” (Sacks, 1996, p. 190). This hypothesis leads us to view autism as external to society, as a condition of the psyche in the state of nature (Frith, 1996).⁷

The narrative thread woven through Grandin and Sacks contributes to a discourse on autism that construes successful integration as freedom. In the *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault writes: “in order to speak about sex, we must cleanse it in a discourse about freedom.” We might paraphrase Foucault, here, to say that in order to speak about autism, we must cleanse it in a discourse about the cleverness, resourcefulness and adaptability of autistics to our society. Less than 10% of those diagnosed with autism have exceptional abilities and a slim fraction of that group has had the adaptive success of Temple Grandin (Mesibov, 1997). Yet this fascination with exceptional abilities drives much of the discourse and the solicitousness and anxiety with which the families of autistic children are inscribed by medical and educational institutions. The tone of the literature suggests that parents ought to be ever vigilant for the appearance of superpowers in their autistic children. Anxiety over the myth of “cold parenting” as the cause of autism has been replaced by anxiety over finding the “special powers” of autistic children, powers that will ease their transition to social utility and marketability. This anxiety of integration enervates every institution touched by autism. The family, schools, hospitals and the state are all charged with the governance of autism – all are challenged to manage autism while causing a minimum of friction with existing institutions.

The Vulnerable Autonomy of Autistic Persons

The adaptation narrative that we find woven into much of the popular literature on autism prevents us from taking a more dynamic and experimental attitude toward the social institutions and practices that present obstacles to the multiplicity of ways in which autistic persons may develop and flourish. The popular narratives of autism share Sacks’ tendency to naturalize the boundary between the normal and the abnormal in a way that privileges the norm and requires

the adaptation of autistics to the smooth functioning of the existing configuration of institutions and interests. In this sense, the discourse on autism is political through-and-through. When we consider that only a small fraction of the autistic population is (possessed of exceptional abilities) capable of even the vaguest imitation of Grandin's success story, it should be a matter of concern what will happen to the other 90% who are not going to follow in Grandin's footsteps. By naturalizing autism and the boundary between normality and abnormality, the contemporary discourse serves to legitimate the current regime of institutions and practices that govern the lives of autistic persons. The "epidemic of autism" creates enormous friction within educational, medical and social welfare institutions. Advances in educational and medical testing, screening, and support that have contributed to the appearance of autism also interpret autism as a regulatory risk to the smooth functioning of our educational and public welfare institutions (Nadesan, 2005, p.3). When our educational environments fail to meet the needs of autistic students, the autistic child is considered to be "in crisis." The narrative of adaptation prevents us from reversing this interpretation and recognizing the crisis of institutions themselves in accommodating diverse modes of mental processing, communication and behavior that fall under the rubric of autism.

The need for this reversal is urgent in light of how political and regulatory thinking has evolved. While in everyday political parlance, we use the language of 17th and 18th century liberalism – rights, equality, liberty – our experience is marked by the subordination of liberal values to bureaucratic functions that follow a logic of their own. Many attempts have been made to understand this rift between the substantive values of modernity and the instrumental, seemingly value neutral reasoning that governs everyday life. Max Weber, the members of the Frankfurt School, and others have devoted their work to understanding how an enlightened and civilized world could collapse into global war and genocide. Foucault's approach to this problem focuses on the ways in which the administration of public health has invaded spheres of life that were once considered private, or at least not a matter of governmental concern, and how this mode of administration becomes more important than the lives of those it administers. This approach makes Foucault one of the first theorists of politics at the regulatory level. The level at which autistic persons and their families encounter it in their everyday lives.

Foucault's account of this trend in modern political thought helps us to understand how the regulatory approach to autism can be paradoxically both invasive and minimalist. It is invasive in its assessment of whether or not the autistic child constitutes a threat (a risk of harm to self or other) and minimalist in its approach to how much educational service or therapeutic care the autistic child should receive.

Policies regarding education and medical treatment are shaped by the overlapping imperatives of fiscal frugality, market integration, and social stability. These imperatives not only shape the policies and regulations that govern autistic persons, but also how they function in accord with their own internal limits, utilizing institutions and powers already in place, already shaped by the imperatives of utility and the market. Viewed in this way, the "epidemic of autism" is, in part, a measure of the inertia of these institutions in the face of neurodiversity, giving rise to new strategies for normalization and conformity. This is perhaps what poses the greatest risk to those who are diagnosed as being "on the spectrum." Foucault's account of the appearance of the modern homosexual in the 19th century relates how their expulsion from the

community at large allowed them to occupy a limited social space which allowed them to be studied and objectified into a type (Foucault, 1990, pp. 43, 101). In the case of autism, it is the dispersal of the autistic population that makes their specification relevant in the regulation of so many other associations, not only the medical practice, but also the school and the family.

A close administrative apparatus follows the autistic child through every institution she touches, but the different spheres of family, social welfare and education are not governed by a single, coherent administrative logic or language, as Foucault's account of biopolitics would suggest. There is a marked difference in how autistic persons appear, and are expected to "perform," within medical and educational practices. Autism appears and receives attention and services only as a set of "maladaptive" behaviors that constitute a threat to self or other (Nadesan, 2005, p.2).⁸ In this register, the needs of the autistic person are interpreted as a risk (even a threat) to the security of the community. Medications and therapy are provided to hold the most harmful symptoms of the "illness" at bay. For all of the invasive administration this entails, there is still a minimalist logic governing the medical assistance apparatus: only the services sufficient to allay the "risks" presented by autism should be provided, and nothing more. Within this vocabulary, it is impossible to conceive of autism as a difference in processing and in self-awareness that might flourish under the right conditions. This biopolitical concern about "not governing too much" is, as Foucault described it, both invasive (in its categorization and detection of autism and its "risks") and minimalist (in treating autism as a disease with controllable, remediable symptoms and nothing more). At least formally, the vocabulary of the educational institutions mitigates the interpretation of autism as a risk to social welfare. Emphasizing the particular needs and talents of each individual student drives the formal discussion. Nonetheless, the practical struggle to achieve an educational plan that is actually individualized faces the same minimalist logic that governs the medical decision-making. Greater emphasis is placed on providing the resources necessary to keep the child within the "normal" educational course. Special emphasis on strengths, especially strengths that might lead to classroom innovation, or more full-time teaching staff, has to be fought for every year with school administrators. In spite of this institutional inertia, it is possible within the educational setting to speak of autism as a neurological difference that can flourish under the right conditions. But often the administrative logic of medicalization deals with autism as something to be treated, cured, or contained, in ways that minimizes the need for institutions to adapt to the challenges presented by autistic people. Often this institutional logic invades educational decisions. On this reasoning, the educational demands of the autistic child have been met when they no longer constitute a risk to the smooth functioning of the school, or no longer engage in behaviors that constitute a threat to staff.

Autism and Political Agency

The more we accept a narrative of autism as a neurobiological impairment merely, and not also a product of institutions and practices, the more we subject autistic persons to diminished autonomy and reciprocity. The classification of autistic persons by established practice is not a one-way street, nor is in an unalterable asymmetry of governmental power over autistics, as the tone of Foucault's works often suggests. Hacking and Nadesan have explored the notion of autism as an "interactive kind":

“Interactive kinds are classificatory systems that emerge within complex matrices of institutions and practices. Once articulated, these classificatory systems engender practices and institutions, having the effect of producing what was classified” (Nadesan, 2005, p. 24).

But interactive kinds are not passive in the face of their classification; they are not merely the passive subjects of institutional power.

“The process of producing human beings is subject to effects unintended because, among other factors, of the reflexive nature of consciousness. Awareness of one’s classification as a particular kind of being, a particular kind of subject, can engender resistance and/or behavioral variation” (Nadesan, 2005, p. 24).

The resistance of autistic persons to classification as having a disorder, or a disease in need of a cure, or an essence that captures the meaning of their experience, has evolved through other practices that emerged parallel to autism. The role of the internet in the development of this resistance has been crucial.

The criticism of the NYU Child Study Center’s “ransom notes” campaign is an eminent case of autistic self-advocacy facilitated by the Internet (Kras, 2010). In an attempt to raise public awareness about autism, the NYU Child Study Center disseminated “ransom note” ads that read: “We have your son. We will make sure he will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives. This is only the beginning. – Autism”. The ads were posted on billboards throughout New York City on December 7, 2007, and were immediately met with such intense and well organized resistance from the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network that the Child Study Center decided to pull the ads on December 19. It is worth noting that while the ads appeared only in New York City, the resistance to the campaign was global. The internet facilitated a resistance that was global and also plural, offering autistic persons a way to define and interpret their own experience in all of its complexity, and to refuse the interpretation of their lives as invalid hostages of autism. By challenging long-standing norms of communication— the bodily cues that require a narrow sensory focus and range of interpretations – the internet has served as a medium for many autistic persons to communicate and to offer their own interpretation of their experience and its meaning (Hacking, 2010).

The openness of cyber space to the particularity and diversity of autistic persons and modes of communication has yet to be followed by a similar openness in the physical spaces of the social world, schools and communities. A formal legal recognition of the need for individualized accommodation for education and job-access is not sufficient, especially when this recognition is shaped by a cultural narrative of one-sided adaptation of the autistic individual to society -- rather than the co-adaptation of society and individual and the flourishing of a multiplicity of forms of processing, communication and living. The abiding inflexibilities of the basic social institutions that serve as a threshold to economic security and independence -- job application processes, interviews, networking; acclimating to new procedures and routines at work; participation in group projects; adjusting the sensory demands of the workplace; and organizing and managing tasks that require integration with a team – all present challenges yet to be remediated (Robertson, 2010). Even in the face of this inertia, there has been some success in

adjusting the workplace to the unique needs of autistic persons. This is only a very small step in the right direction. Progress in contouring the social and institutional space of higher education to allow access for autistic persons remains modest at best. Currently only a handful of universities offer specialized programs for autistics (Robertson, 2010).

I cannot conclude this article with a blueprint for the revolution; I only hope to have provided some intimation of the barriers created by an adaptation narrative and how this prevents a more dynamic and experimental attitude toward the institutional situation of autistic persons. The pace at which different scientific accounts of the cause of autism are enthusiastically and confidently generated and embraced only to be discarded with as much alacrity offers us an excellent case-study in the contingency and arbitrariness of the human sciences, to which Foucault, Hacking and a more careful reading of Grandin's work draws our attention. Ian Hacking has written of the emerging discourse on autism: "We are participating in a living experiment in concept formation of a sort that does not come more than once in a dozen lifetimes" (Hacking, 2009). Stuart Murray also sees autism as a phenomenon filled with possibility and "having the potential to renegotiate the terms of the human" (Murray, 2012, p. 104). My hope is that we face this challenge with an experimental attitude toward the contingency of our current regime of institutions and practices. We should be optimistic about what lies beyond the limits of the current discourse on autism. The frantic and failing attempt to impose a coherent etiology or definition of autism is emblematic of our growing awareness of the contingency of our social norms and the loosening of their hold on the possibilities for fashioning (and defining) the human. It is an opportunity, not to dedicate ourselves to discovering the "truth" about autism, but to recognize this failure as the opening of a space in which we can think about what is possible.

Gary Mullen, PhD is currently an assistant professor of philosophy and director of the Public Policy Program at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Prior to coming to Gettysburg, he held positions in public affairs and congressional affairs for the Federal Election Commission in Washington, DC. He holds a PhD in philosophy from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). He is the author of several articles dealing with autism, genocide and political violence.

References

- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*. Washington, DC. Sec. 299.00.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Frith, U. (1996). *Autism: Explaining the enigma*. Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Grandin, T. & Panek, R. (2013). *The autistic brain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

- Hacking, I. (1998). *Mad travelers: Reflections on the reality of transient mental illness*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Hacking I. (2009). How we have been learning to talk about autism. *Metaphilosophy*, 40(3-4).
- Hacking, I. (2010). Autism fiction: A mirror of an internet decade. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 79(2).
- Kras, J. (2010). The ransom notes affair: When the neurodiversity movement came of age. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30(1).
- Lawson, J. (2003). Depth accessibility difficulties: An alternative conceptualization of autism spectrum conditions. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 33(2).
- Lemert, C. and Gillan, G. (1982). *Michel Foucault: Social theory and transgression*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mesibov, G. (1997). *Autism: Understanding the disorder* New York: Plenum Press.
- Murray, S. (2012). *Autism*. New York: Routledge.
- Nadesan, M. (2005). *Constructing autism: Unraveling the 'truth' and understanding the social*. New York: Routledge.
- Newschaffler, C., et al. (2007). The Eepidemiology of autism spectrum disorders. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 28(2).
- Robertson, S. (2010). Neurodiversity, quality of life and autistic adults: Shifting research and professional focuses onto real-life challenges. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30(1).
- Sacks O. (1996). *An anthropologist on Mars: Seven paradoxical tales*. New York: Vintage Books.
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control. (2014) Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders- Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network.

Endnotes

¹“Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring.” U.S. Centers for Disease Control, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/addm.html>.

² This is not the place to settle scores between Hacking and Foucault. There are substantive differences between them, especially regarding the possibility of emancipatory practices. See Hacking's embrace of C.S. Peirce's notion of the community of inquirers, for instance. Hacking, *Mad Travelers*, 93.

³ Anne Fausto-Sterling offers an impressive account (largely inspired by Foucault's approach) of how social norms have affected the medical practices dealing with infants born with ambiguous genitalia.

⁴ "Autism is not a modern phenomenon, even though it has only been recognized in modern times. In view of the short history of psychiatry, and the even shorter history of child psychiatry, we know that a disorder recently described is not necessarily a recent disorder. An increase in diagnosed cases does not necessarily mean an increase in cases. There are tantalizing hints of Autism in the medical records of history." Uta Frith. *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 16-17.

⁵ Temple Grandin is almost a household name among those familiar with autism. Grandin has written two well-known autobiographical books on her successful struggle with autism: *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1996) and *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006). She holds a Ph.D. in animal science, which she teaches at Colorado State University.

⁶ Grandin is far more self-aware than many of her admirers regarding the idiosyncrasies of her personal story. Temple Grandin. *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2006), 26-31. The use of her life as a paradigm case of "overcoming autism"—a use she herself resists—is what is addressed here.

⁷ In *The Enigma of Autism* (1996) Uta Frith offers an example emblematic of this view of autism a natural and ahistorical condition. Frith applies the diagnostic criteria for autism to Victor, the famed Wild Boy of Aveyron, who was found roaming the forests of central France in 1785.

⁸ Nadesan writes of her experience with her autistic son, Kamal: "autism has a performative component, as known by every parent who struggled to meet the criteria for government and educational services for their child. For the social services agent, I must stress (and even exaggerate) Kamal's maladaptive behaviors. For his teachers, I stress Kamal's high intellect in order to avoid having him labeled as "mentally retarded."