



“The essence of autism: face or artefact?”

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To the Editor:

In their recent article, Mottron and Bzdok [1] are concerned with whether autism’s heterogeneity is a fact or artefact. On their view, this will come down to whether it is a natural or nominal kind. They associate the former with having a natural “essence” that not only unifies but also distinguishes the condition from other psychological disabilities. Autism as a nominal kind, on the other hand, is conceived as a vague and overly inclusive construct that allows for an undue range of diversity.

They argue that research based on the current definition of autism as a broad spectrum has already ‘given up’ on finding a natural, biological basis for the condition. They express doubts that the inclusive spectrum construct will help produce knowledge about autism’s essence. Instead, they suggest that future studies should be based on a recent study on the “frank” manifestation of autism as it appears to experts. They cite research by De Marchena & Miller [2] to support their assessment that experts can often intuitively *see* a “frank” kind of autism within moments of meeting an autistic person. This “frank” autism is slightly different to the diagnostic criteria. The hope seems to be that a focus on “frank” autism will result in actual facts about autism by narrowing down the focus from the broader grouping of so-called ‘autistic traits’.

We suggest that this argument is flawed in at least two respects. First, whether experts agree on surface presentations is irrelevant to whether autism is a natural kind or not. Consider Abdulah Hussein, who became famous last year when he was captured on CCTV stealing alcohol from a shop. The news made international headlines not because of the crime itself, but because Hussein looked strikingly similar to David Schwimmer, the actor famous for playing Ross in the sitcom

Friends. As a thought experiment, imagine a scientist were to conduct such a study on which similarities people tended to first notice between Schwimmer and a randomly selected set of people. If this happened, they would surely find some set of features would be those that were noticed most regularly. We might call this cluster of the traits the “frank” manifestation of Schwimmer syndrome—a syndrome constituted by having the *prima facie* essential features of David Schwimmer. Perhaps there are many others with this syndrome, who are as yet undocumented but would nonetheless be instantly recognisable to *Friends* experts.

But of course, if this happened, it would not in any way show that Schwimmer syndrome was a natural kind. It is a construct based on accidental similarities, regardless of whether it can instantly be seen or not. Our point here is that the fact of those familiar with the prototype being able to instantly recognise cases is equally compatible with nominalism or essentialism, and thus cannot be used to settle the debate.

Second, Mottron and Bziok also overlook how social and historical mechanisms similar to those we associate with the construction of race or gender have been well detailed in relation to autism [3–6]. The issue here is thus not just that we know that autism is heterogeneous, it is also that a large body of research has shown that the various mechanisms that led to the emergence and ongoing fluctuation of its classification have been influenced more by social, political, and ideological shifts, rather than by scientific discoveries [4]. It is also notable that while the study on “frank” autism was carried out on autism professionals from the United States only, how we understand and perceive autistic traits at any given time varies depending on cultural expectations [7]. So how autism is understood, and perceived by clinicians, changes in both different times and different places.

Given such factors, some have argued that autism is not real [8]. And yet autism surely is real for autistic individuals, their families, and all who participate in the autism community [6]. Our view is that it may be real in a sense which is simply less relevant to biomedical research programmes than Mottron and Bzdok hope. Indeed, following a more general “essentialist bias” found in psychiatric

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taxonomy [9], the presupposition that heterogeneity is a bad thing is largely driven by the idea that autism is something to be controlled, fixed, or cured [10]. But for those who view autistics as forming an emerging culture [6], autism's heterogeneity is part of what sustains the diversity of that culture. From this perspective, autism itself is both a fact and an artefact—and its heterogeneity is no bad thing.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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