

Neurodiverse Minds and Ethnographic Practice

By Molly Paechter

Earthling and Autisman

Once upon a time on a small, green quiet planet.

Autisman: So – welcome to my home world.

Earthling: Don't you feel weighed down? It feels as if I've got weights strapped to my arms and legs.

Autisman: Ah, but on your planet, I always feel as if I'm swimming around in space, weightlessly.

Earthling: Okay. Now I understand you. I really understand.

(Higashida, 2007:74)

This piece of work started almost accidentally – My hopes of a participant's observation style fieldwork were dashed following the worldwide Covid-19 outbreak. While under lockdown it was rather difficult to engage in dense theoretical texts. I read Naoki Higashida's text 'The Reason I Jump' (2006) as a way of trying kick my head into gear and start reading again. What I found was a very anthropological text – written by a non-verbal autistic boy. As well as challenging my own perceptions and expectations of a person with non-verbal autism, this text showed me a possible new understanding of autism; autistic people as 'anthropologists', immersed in

a neurotypical culture. After Naoki's book I read 'Thinking in Pictures' (1995) by autistic author Temple Grandin. She too gave me an insight into a different way of thinking worlds away from my own, and worlds away from Naoki's too. The following is an ethnographic analysis with these texts as my 'data.'

Approaching these texts, I thought that would be given insight into a completely different way of thinking, and I was. But what I didn't expect to find was a portrait of my own social life starting back at me. This realisation reinforced my understanding of the value given by an outside perspective. This idea has been inherent to anthropology since its inception. For this piece of writing, my idea of the anthropological imagination is rooted in Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle's book *How to Read Ethnography* (2007), where *comparison* and *models* are described as key building blocks for anthropological understanding.

There is a small, and growing body of literature on autism and anthropology. However, something not written about in anthropological research on autism so far, is the understanding and depiction of *neurotypical sociality* which can be found in neurodiverse voices. Naoki describes what he perceives as our differences with regards to communication.

'Making sounds isn't the same thing as communication, right?... Isn't there a belief out there that if a person is using verbal language, it follows that the person is saying what they want to say?'

(Higashida, 2006: 37)

He muses on this in further works too

‘Exchanges of thought are to a large degree, reliant on this thing called language. Thanks to it, human beings – and we alone – can truly enter and explore the feelings of others. What an extraordinary skill...Obtaining items just by using words is a pretty amazing thing to my mind.’
(Higashida, 2017: 86 & 92).

In both examples we see parts of our own ‘neurotypical’ sociality laid out bare in front of us, that are so embedded that they are not always plain to see – unless you are an anthropologist, unless you think differently.

Likewise, in the first few pages of her account, Temple Grandin can be seen to give a depiction of how neurotypicals might think;

“Some people think in vividly detailed pictures, but most think in a combination of words and pictures. For example, many people see a generalised generic church rather than specific churches and steeples when they hear or read the word steeple. Their thought patterns move from a general concept to specific examples’
(Grandin, 1995:11).

She is offering us an example to try and show how the way she thinks about the world may differ from the reader’s way of thinking.

Moving on from this initial starting point we can start to identify specific parallels between how anthropologists perform their task and how the autistic authors perform theirs. Throughout her account Temple Grandin refers to herself as a ‘scientist trying to figure out the natives’ (Grandin, 1995: 153). In fact, Oliver Sacks named his book ‘Anthropologist on Mars’ after her way of describing how she felt in the neurotypical world. Reading her text from an anthropological background allowed me to see that this assertion was not just a catchy title, but true in a very tangible sense.

Here I explore the specific practice of model making to aid interpretation and

understanding of human behaviour. Temple describes how she created and utilised analogies in order to ‘stay out of trouble’ in her teenage years. She developed a system of rules which she called ‘The Sins of the System.’ Temple described how she would observe her peers and teachers to find rules which she could designate as sins of the system - in order to be classified in this analogy a rule would have to be so important that if broken it would result in expulsion. (Grandin, 1995: 108). The ‘sins of the system’ model covers rules that have ‘very stiff penalties for seemingly illogical reasons’ (Grandin, 1995: 105) So, this example neatly shows us what Temple can show us about what seems to her the weird – ‘illogical’ nature of our social world whilst simultaneously outlining the methods she uses to understand the social world. In many senses this can be seen as ultimate reflexivity within anthropology.

Temple described another tool which helped her decipher behaviour. The tool was utilised is the hope that it might lead to a deeper understanding of social norms and better models she created, such as the ‘Sins of the System’ model. She categorised behaviour she did not understand as an ‘Interesting Social Phenomenon’ or an ISP (Grandin, 1995: 153). ‘When other students swooned over the beetles, I called their reaction as ISP’ (Grandin, 1995: 153). So, here we can see the uncertainty present in Temple’s understanding – she is always looking to evidence to improve her models and has quite complex ways of organising the ‘data’, as she calls it, which may help to this end.

Taking both examples above, we can situate Temple’s methods closely with

anthropologist Christine Hugh-Jones who spoke of the process of ethnographic writing ‘To make presentation as clear as possible, the model is described first and the extent as to which it is an accurate reflection of social groupings is discussed afterwards’ (Hugh-Jones, 1979: 13 & 14, in Gay Y Blasco & Wardle). Temple too, is drawing up a basic model first – ‘The Sins of the System’, and is later tweaking and reworking the model based on subsequent observation of ISP’s.

In their book ‘How to Read Ethnography’ Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle describe how widespread the use of diagrams is in ethnographic writing (Gay Y Blasco & Wardle, 2007: 99). They also explain how ethnographic argument can range from a ‘flexible style’ to a ‘much more structured one’ (Gay Y Blasco & Wardle, 2007: 102). I perceive clear parallels between the texts written by Naoki and Temple the two approaches to constructing theoretical models of society and culture that Gay Y Blasco and Wardle identify, Temple representing the more structured approach and Naoki representing the more flexible approach.

In Naoki’s second book, written at the age of twenty, his methods for understanding the neurotypical world seem to be much more fleshed out than the first. He describes the differences between how he differs from his family when it comes to time management.

‘Listening to my mother and my sister discussing how they handle time; I’ve come to understand that there are things they do that I don’t. These are, first, deciding by what time a certain job needs to be completed; Next, working back to the present time to see what the available time frame is; And then, working on the job to ensure it’s done by the target time. These calculations, I imagine, are key to turning plans into reality.’

(Higashida, 2017: 59)

In this example, we can see comparisons between Naoki’s means of understanding behaviour around him and anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s notes on how to convey the chaos of real life into ethnographic writing;

‘I shall first present the ceremonial behaviour, torn from its context so it appears bizarre and non-sensical; and I shall then describe the various aspects of its cultural setting and indicate how the ceremonial can be related to the various aspects of culture’
(Bateson, 1958 [1936]: 3, in Gay Y Blasco & Wardle).

In Naoki’s case we can understand the same kind of process happening – he recognises their behaviour and at first it seems bizarre, unfathomable, but by slowly piecing together the context, he can understand the behaviour. He goes one step further by presenting it in this way to us – he is trying to describe himself, but instead describes those around him.

Anthropologist Joyce Davidson also identifies the anthropological and ethnographic approach many autistic people take. She starts with gender; Davidson argues that we can approach the social construction of gender through exploring autistic minds. She quotes a blog written by an autistic woman ‘(Gender) is probably the single most intensively socialised thing humans do, and the one whose ‘rules’ are least explicit. Since autistic people are notoriously resistant to socialisation, it just makes sense that we wouldn’t pick up as much of the gender programming as neurotypicals do’ (Lindsay, 2008: August 12, in Davidson, 2016: 62). Davidson argues that, because notions of gender are not inherent to

autistic people, they approach it like anthropologists. She argues that this understanding is advantageous for autistic people, as fitting in with their assigned gender allows for them to be more accepted in the neurotypical world (Davidson, 2016: 62). Through this assertion Davidson discusses a unique opportunity for anthropology to study minds which are removed in usual ways from social contracts, understanding and obligation. In this case autistic understanding of gender, Davidson argues, generates 'discontinuity and dissonance' in academic understandings of gender, so profound that they are capable of 'significantly advancing the feminist project' (Davidson, 2016: 62).

Another anthropologist, and autistic woman Dawn Eddings Prince described herself as a 'natural anthropologist' from birth because of the way her brain worked. She refers to neurotypical people as 'primates' as she felt this was the only word that could evoke her feeling of estrangement from most neurotypical people. She also describes how her anthropological process is inherent to her social life with neurotypicals. She was constantly 'trying to make sense of the primates around me, so different to me in many ways' (Prince, 2010: 57.) Furthermore, she believes her anthropological insight as greatly enhanced by her being autistic 'what has been labelled symptoms of autism in the context of my culture are inherited gifts of insight and action' (Prince, 2010: 57). Eddings Prince account gives us a nice example of how there can be a dialectical relationship between anthropology and autistic minds – the former providing a disciplined framework and collective

methods for understanding other people, and the latter providing raw, natural ways of being anthropological.

The Davidson and Eddings Prince examples leads us to a significant difference between autistic authors and anthropologists. While there may be similarities in how the authors and anthropologists conceive of their task, the end point is different – Temple and Naoki may be constructing models in a similar way to anthropologist but the difference is that the models they create are absolutely paramount to them engaging in social relations. This is not often true for anthropology academics who usually have social engagement out-with their anthropological task.

Moving on we must explore other ways that Naoki and Temple differ from anthropologists. Alongside the insightful examples given, there is also evidence of misunderstanding of neurotypical thinking in both authors accounts. For both authors there seems to be an assumption that for everyone else the world is predictable, like a line or a grid –when I would argue that in actually it isn't like that for anybody. Take for example Naoki's musings on memory:

'I imagine a normal person's memory is arranged continuously, like a line. My Memory, however, is more like a pool of dots. I'm always 'picking up' these dots – by asking questions – so I can arrive back at the memory that these dots represent' (Higashida, 2006: 24.)

But do 'normal' people think in a line? I'm not sure... This gives us a starting point for looking at the depiction of neurotypicals in the author's minds.

We can start to explore the mechanisms by which each author understands themselves. Temple seems to make sense of herself through two sets of symbols: animals and science. The two seem very entangled for her, she speaks of her job:

'I have to imagine what experiencing the world through a cow's sensory system is like. Cattle have a very wide panoramic visual field, because they are prey species... Similarly, some people with autism are like fearful animals in a world full of dangerous predators... Their fear of change may be an activation of ancient anti predator systems that are blocked or masked in most other people.'
(Grandin, 1995: 168.)

Here we can notice how Temple's notion of self is defined by her experience with animals and is rationalised by her knowledge of bodily systems, evolution, and genetics.

In a similar vein, Naoki also associates autistic minds with the distant past, but this time not with our natural ancestors but outside of humanity all together:

'We just want to go back. To the distant, distant past. To a primeval era before human beings existed...We are a different kind of human, born with primeval senses. We are outside the normal flow of time, we can't express ourselves, and our bodies are hurtling us through life.'
(Higashida, 2006: 104-5)

He seems to understand himself through metaphors in the form of prose and makes clear distinctions between 'outside and 'inside.' He goes on to meditate on his 'purpose'

'I think that people with autism are born outside the regime of civilisation...We are like travellers from a distant, distant past. And if, by our being here we could help the people of the world remember what truly matters for the earth, that would give us quiet pleasure.'
(Higashida, 2006: 151)

Personal narratives and means of understanding the self have been explored by anthropologist Karen Gainer Sirota who understands narratives such as Naoki and Temple's as a 'technology of the self', conceptualised by Michel Foucault (Sirota, 2010: 95). Foucault said that the definition of a technology of self is a mechanism which

'Permits individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality'
(Foucault, 1988: 18).

Sirota extends this, arguing that specifically, narratives offer a 'template for living' as well as guides for action, relationships, thinking and feeling (Sirota, 2010: 95). This is certainly true for both Naoki and Temple with both explicitly stating the importance of these narratives for their engagement in the world.

Examining the difference between the autistic anthropological process and the academic anthropological process alongside Sirota's extension of Foucault's conceptual framework gives us space to understand Naoki and Temple's process in a more complete way. The deploying of anthropological techniques only takes them so far, they must also integrate what they have learned to create a narrative which preforms as a 'technology of self' and gives them a 'template for living'. We must now ask the question; Why are autistic people so adept at understanding certain aspects of neurotypical sociality, when neurotypical's are so poor at understanding autistic sociality? Perhaps it because of the number's

imbalance – autistic people are forced to live permanently in a neurotypical social world - we can dip in and out of their social world as we choose. The whole concept of deep participant observation, and extended field research in anthropology supports the fact that one must be *completely immersed* to fully understand a culture – and that's what autistic people are, immersed in world full of unfamiliar 'primates', 'natives' - neurotypicals.

This ethnographic analysis opens up new possibilities for the future of anthropology, one that embraces neurodiversity, reaping the benefits of viewing sociality out-with neurotypical culture and enriching our understanding of people who think differently.

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