The Autistic Personality as a Socially Patterned Developmental Defect of Humanity: The Conceptual Application of Erich Fromm’s Socio-Anthropological and Socio-Characterological Theories

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Introduction

With regard to the possible difference between clinical-level autism and its personality type in respect of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), ASC (Autism Spectrum Conditions) and AS (Asperger Syndrome), it is considered: first, that from Erich Fromm’s socio-anthropological and socio-characterological perspectives, it is possible to discern the ‘autistic personality’, which is separate from autism as ‘psychogenetic disorders’ (e.g. those of emotion, communication, cognition and sociability), as ‘organically caused developmental disorders’ and as a ‘brain dysfunction’ in the categories of ASD, ASC and AS; and which is rather generated to a large extent by a mixture of environmental, adaptive and genetic factors; and second, that from Fromm’s socio-anthropological perspective of a ‘socially patterned defect’ (Fromm 1956) in conjunction with his socio-characterological concepts of ‘necrophilous orientation’ (Fromm 1964) and ‘monocerebral orientation’ (Fromm 1973), the autistic personality is essentially described as a socially patterned inhumane defect and a socially patterned developmental defect of humanity, based on ‘shared, socially relevant psychic attitudes’ (Fromm 1991 [1970]: 149). The insensitive and aloof aspects of the autistic personality, which is supposed to be rooted in both environments and genes, is characterised particularly by difficulties with human interactions which one interemotionally and intercommunicatively constructs, showing a great deal of interest in active human life on the basis the biophilous orientation (productive orientation).

1 And it should be noted that it is also different from that as ‘antisocial personality disorder’.
2 It will be possible to conduct this research, excluding genetic factors, while counting them as an important influential ingredient of the autistic personality.
3 Concerning the concepts of humanity and inhumanity, for Fromm the former means the human conditions under which human beings can develop their individuality to the maximum on the basis of productive activity (productive orientation), keeping a firm grip on love and reason (Fromm 1971 [1947]). It is expected that this research will use the word humanity in this sense.
The status quo of autism research: a focus on its sociological context

The concept of autism has recently been treated almost exclusively in line with ASD, ASC and AS under the category of PDD (Pervasive Developmental Disorders), primarily in the subject areas of psychiatry, psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, pedagogy and social work, and the pivotal sociological aspects of autism have thereby been largely disregarded, particularly by taking less notice of a grey area between clinical-level autism and its personality kind (e.g. Happé 2001) and autistic characteristics at both individual and social levels. This means that many fields in this subject have not drawn attention to its social developmental processes based on the dynamic adaptation of individuals to environments by seeing autism exclusively as an extension of psychogenetic disorders, organically caused developmental disorders or a brain dysfunction at the individual level with a pathological focus on the disability of ‘autistic patients’ on the basis of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) criteria – although the possible socio-cultural diversity of autism has gradually been recognised, researches’ focus is simply on ASD and AS at the individual level, rather than on the personality type of autism at the social level (e.g. Bauer et al. 2016; Ennis-Cole et al. 2013; Fong and Lee 2017; West et al. 2016). It should be noted, however, that with respect to ways of individuals’ personality development, in Frommian sociological terms taking account of both environmental and genetic influences on human behaviour it is possible to regard the autistic personality as posteriori and priori personality traits acquired in accordance with a degree of the active adaptation of individuals to certain social conditions which require individuals to live in an autistic way of life and of the completion of social conditions under which the majority interact to a large extent on the basis of the monocerebral orientation and the necrophilous orientation.⁴

From this perspective, it is expected, by way of Fromm’s socio-anthropological and socio-characterological approaches with a focus on his concepts of necrophilous and monocerebral orientations and socially patterned defect, to clarify a personality aspect of the notion of autism as a social product containing an inhumane defect which comes into existence as a result of dynamic adaptation to social conditions under which individuals rather undergo individual cognitive processes via autistic human behaviour. This investigation enables us to consider that the inhumane defect of the autistic personality as a by-product of social processes and social interactions is rather the result of a course of socialisation and personality development.

⁴ As we will see later, although the discipline of sociology has also addressed issues of the concept, the field has nevertheless raised the topic exclusively by categorising the signification of it as abnormal ‘autists’ not being in the normal condition in a social context, following the DSM manual, as the medical and behavioural sciences have done. For this reason, it has not succeeded in describing a pivotal sociological aspect of autism as individual and group personality traits.

⁵ It is particularly important to note that behavioural genetic research rather shows that ‘heritability’ implies that environmental factors are also important components determining personality development (Promin et al. 2001).
The concept of autism in Fromm’s sense

In *The Heart of Man* (1964), Fromm pointed out the possible effect of the necrophilous orientation, based on Freud’s concept of ‘anal character’, on society, while theorising its character features. According to him, it has developed the ‘bureaucratic-mechanical’ way of thinking and acting in modern industrial society (1964: 59). Indeed, this has specific meanings to the character structure of ‘cybernetic industrial society’ (1979).

Later, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), Fromm, in conjunction with his new concept of monocerebral orientation, applied the concept of necrophilous orientation to the issue of autism. Significantly, in this context he defined the 6 characteristics of autism, referring to the physician Margaret S. Mahler: ‘a loss of primordial differentiation between living and lifeless matter’, ‘an attachment to lifeless objects ... combined with the inability to relate to a living person’, ‘an obsessive drive for the observation of sameness’, ‘the intense desire to be left alone’, ‘[t]he use of language (if they speak) for manipulative purpose, but not as a means of interpersonal communication’ and ‘decreased significance of the “anal” complex in the monocerebral man’ (1973: 353). To put it simply, the disorder can be described as extreme indifference to the existence of human beings and active human life (core aspects of the necrophilous orientation) and intellectual abstract on an extreme level (core aspect of the monocerebral orientation).

It is expected that this research will essentially be based on these two orientations, from which perspective it will attempt to define the multi-layered character structure of the autistic personality at the social level by utilising his socio-anthropological concept of socially patterned defect.

What can we see from this research perspective?

At this point the three following questions arise. First, is it impossible to see autism in line not with ‘social impairment’ but with Fromm’s socio-anthropological concept of a ‘socially patterned defect’, which explains ways of acting shared by all members in a society? Second, isn’t it possible, in terms of Fromm’s theory of character orientations in conjunction with his concept of socially patterned defect, to discern shared autistic characteristics which can’t be reduced simply to autism recognised in existing ways of understanding, as seen in social processes of personality development including genetical aspects, by rigorously distinguishing between autism at the clinical level and at the personality level, and between socially impaired and socially patterned types at the latter level? Third, isn’t it possible to consider that one of the reasons for countries with low percentages of ASD and AS patients is rather because their symptoms are simply invisible behind their common personality features, shared by all members in a society, that are classified as the categories of those symptoms?
What can we expect to understand from this research?

From these perspectives, it is hypothesised: first, that the autistic personality is largely the result of not cultivating a positive sense of humanity that enables one to willingly interact with others in a way that cares about their lives and health conditions on the basis of the biophilous orientation, and instead, developing a way of acting that is extremely indifferent and insensitive to them, and that is interested solely in abstract things on the basis of the necrophilous and monocerebral orientations; second, that the autistic personality is essentially generated by interacting to a long period of time with others with a social character in which the majority’s lives and raison d’être are based on necrophilous and monocerebral ways of acting, and therefore that they are not troubled by their own AS or ASD in their lives, or rather many of them are not even aware of it, on the grounds that the problem is not considered problematic per se at the level of social life, or rather it is supported by others in this social context; and third, that the number of autistic patients has been less estimated in socio-cultural contexts in which the symptoms of ASD and AS are more frequently disregarded, while their number is overestimated in socio-cultural contexts in which the symptoms of ASD and AS are more frequently recognised.

What can we do in this research?

Finally, I want to clarify the research’s important aims as follows.

(1) The demonstration of the conceptual validity of the sociological autistic personality in Fromm’s socio-characterological and socio-anthropological terms by showing a socially shared personality aspect of autism to be neither a disorder nor a dysfunction but a lack of humanity which is rather cultivated through actively adapting to environments and interacting with others in an extremely abstract way that is careless about human beings and active human life.

(2) The definition of the sociological concept of autism with a focus on socialisation and personality development in Fromm’s terms.

(3) The demonstration of the possibility that the number of autistic patients can be less estimated than their actual number by unconscious rough diagnoses in social contexts in which the features of ASD and AS are more frequently ignored due to societies’ character traits that largely disregard both autistic/Asperger and autism/Asperger-like ways of acting in terms of their diagnostic criteria on the one hand, and their number can be overestimated by severer diagnoses in social contexts in which the features of ASD and AS are more frequently found due to social characters that easily recognise autistic/Asperger and autism/Asperger-like ways of acting in terms of their criteria on the other.

(4) The demonstration of the necessity of revising the diagnostic criteria for ASD and AS by focusing on social characters as well as individual characters in order that they may be more suitable for respective socio-cultural frameworks.
(5) The integration of a socio-anthropological personality approach into research on autism, and vice versa, thereby extending the relevance of the concept into other social science and humanities fields, such as history, political theory, political science, international relations, anthropology, linguistics, economics, business administration, cultural studies and media studies.

Conclusion

As we have seen, it is quite possible to discern the autistic personality in Fromm’s socio-characterological and socio-anthropological terms. This research, above all, should be conducted by way of distinguishing between clinical-level autism and its personality type and focusing on the latter at the social level. What is most meaningful in the research is that it aims to show not only conceptual significance but also clinical relevance, thereby contributing to clinical research on autism in a broad sense, including Asperger Syndrome. It must be stressed, in this respect, that Fromm still has great potential not solely to shed light on contemporary social phenomena, but rather to lead us to give significant clinical criteria from his distinctive socio-characterological and socio-anthropological perspectives.

References


