

Classify

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"Individuality outruns all classification, yet we insist on classifying every one we meet under some general label" (William James, 1842-1910, a founding father of modern psychology).

Over the last 15 years there has been a sharp increase in the number of diagnoses of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Last week we came to the baffling conclusion that there is a completely different problem behind this increase: an even greater, largely unnoticed increase in the number of people who seem perfectly normal, but who are unintentionally shaped by globally available smart technology, education and social media. Individuality and authenticity are subordinate to this globally emerged standardized person, closely monitored with standardized tests and digital surveillance from the cradle to the grave. Although an increasing number of people seem to fit in this emerging standards ("neurotypic spectrum disorder", NSD), there is also an increasing number falling outside (hence the increase in ASD diagnosis). Time for nuance now.

No person is completely 'typical'. Every talent is a-typical, otherwise everyone would have that talent and it wouldn't be distinctive. However, our society requires generalist competencies (service focus, teamwork, communication, etc.). Though not necessarily, very often authenticity and generalist competencies are at odds, unless someone has a specific talent in connecting people and/or ideas. Of course, many non-autistic people do become unique and authentic persons. There are also people who have been diagnosed with ASD at some moment in their lives but have grown up into completely "normal" (integrated active and participant) citizens. Also severely limited and isolated patients can be found. The dividing line between normal and autistic can't be established as unambiguously as is too often suggested.

People classify to make sense of their world. By labelling (repeating) patterns, we learn to navigate through our world and through our lives. Often, classifying is more important for the person who classifies, than for the classified. This is all the more true if the classified cannot be clearly defined, as is the case in our subject. Only if a disorder can be established indisputably (for example, after infection with x disease y arises) the "benefits" are for both the person who classifies (who can earn a living, eg as a doctor) and the person that is classified. In all other cases the "merits" of the classification are difficult to determine.

I challenged the reader by classifying a large crowd of people with a "disorder" (NSD). In fact, it could be argued that we are all disturbed. If we extrapolate the average consumption behaviour of Western Europeans to the world's population, almost 5 earth globes are needed. Despite the fact that we all try to live more sustainably, our comfort level is still rising; every person uses more energy every year. Most of us don't deny climate change and the consequences for the entire ecology. Nevertheless, we continue, with a mortgage on the future, which scientists in laboratories have to redeem by inventing more efficient energy conversion. We know that this technological miracle thinking always proves to create another version of Pandora's Box. This is why the term "disorder" actually fits us all, autistic, or neurotypical. However, psychologists and psychiatrists classify people with regard to other aspects. But in classifying, in pointing at someone else, we also point at ourselves with the other fingers!

With this I certainly do not want to exclude myself. I travel 180 miles every day and I am surrounded by all kinds of comfort. Social media and other globally available technology also form my thoughts and feelings. Moreover, by pointing at people with terms such as autistic, or neurotypical, I am guilty of exactly the same classifying behaviour I reproach other psychologist/psychiatrists. But I know a few things for sure. Some people develop differently than others, and in education there should be at least two methodologies, one based on thinking fast (wordless understanding, mimicking), and one based on thinking slow but formal! On the work floor we need people with general skills and also specialists, even if some of the latter lack some social skills. Diversity is a necessity, and growing in authenticity gives our lives direction and meaning, regardless of whether we are neurotypical or autistic.