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Prejudicial stereotypes and testimonial injustice: Autism, sexuality and sex education

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ABSTRACT

Autists frequently confront prejudicial stereotypes that they are asexual, hyper- or hypo sexual, child-like and dependent, and/or uninterested in sex. Further, their sexuality is posited as being problematic, in need of being 'treated' or managed in some way. These stereotypes are fed by common autistic characteristics that autists for example, do not like being touched, and that because they are 'unemotional' they are uninterested in romantic relationships. Autists are less likely than their non-autist peers to receive sex and sexuality education, or an education in sex and social relationships that addresses their needs. Using Amanda Fricker's (2007) analysis of testimonial injustice, I argue that autists are candidates for injustice in their capacity as knowers of their own sexual experiences, and because their testimonies are rarely solicited or granted credibility in sex education, research, or the medical literature. As a result, ignorance or discrediting of different ways of being and doing may conduce to testimonial injustice by means of identity power, credibility deficits on the part of the hearer and prejudicial stereotypes. I conclude that schools need urgently to provide sex and sexuality education that acknowledges autists as sexual beings and acknowledges the existence of alternative sexualities, thereby helping to instate epistemic virtue in educational settings.

Always being the last one chosen or knowing that no one really wants to sit beside you leaves you vulnerable to predators in any form who recognise this isolation and are able to zone in on it. This is further complicated by the lack of understanding of social sayings, slowness in processing, gullibility and tendency to take things at face value without questioning other's motives which I have learnt they usually have.

'Maeve', 42, gay/bisexual, female

I was nineteen, he was thirty four and he started being really creepy like, em, when I was almost in compromising positions, like ... my dress was being put on for the first time just to see if it fit and it started opening at the side and I was hiding that but he was, like, why would I want this character [in a play] ... when I could have this one who already fancies me You know he was just gross and if I had of had an advanced warning I would of, I don't know ... you know, just worn higher cut tops, or something.

'Lily Snowball', 21, asexual, female, describing an unwelcome advance during a drama class.

As someone with ASD it's very hard for me to read hints about whether she's interested in me or just being friendly. And to know at what point she wants me to 'make a move' My ASD gives me a big disadvantage on the dating scene I feel. And I'm certain most male ASD's feel the same. When your social skills are limited, it's much harder to take the lead....

'Martin', 28, heterosexual, male

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1. Introduction

In *The Reason I Jump* (2013), Naoki Higashida, a thirteen-year old non-vocal autistic, is at an age where thoughts about sex and sexuality will be predominant. His body, like all teenagers, will be changing: he will be growing body hair, his sexual organs will be developing, and it is probable that he will be experiencing (frequent episodes of) sexual arousal. However, as an autistic teenager, who has, no doubt, been ‘diagnosed’ with ‘special needs’, it is highly likely that his sexual needs will be seen as problematic, and as needing to be suppressed or managed in some way. Further, in school, it is also unlikely that he will receive a sex education that addresses his needs as a teenager with ‘special needs’: pupils identified as being on the autism spectrum receive less sexual education than their non-autistic school mates (Ginevra, Nota, & Stokes, 2016).

Autistic people, and individuals with disabilities in general, face significant stereotyping and negative societal attitudes with respect to their sexuality: they are perceived as being asexual, hyper-or hypo-sexual, child-like and dependent, and unable to express their sexuality in appropriate ways (Henault & Attwood, 2006). These stereotypes are fed by common perceptions that autists do not, for example, like being touched, do not maintain eye contact, and because they are ‘unemotional’ they are uninterested in romantic relationships. Further, the lack of qualitative research soliciting autistic points of view concerning their sexuality limits opportunities to challenge these stereotypes.

Discomfort with, or ignorance about, autistic sexuality may have a number of negative consequences. When we do not understand, or seek to know why autists tend to avoid touch or avoid eye contact, behaviours that, in many cases, contribute to the stereotypical belief that autists cannot be sexual beings, we may be causing epistemic and social harm. The ascendancy of the ‘normal’ mind and body in ableist discourses, and the hegemonic idealisation of the neuro-typical mind and behaviours, risks segregation and disrespect for people with disabilities by virtue of their being viewed as ‘deficient’ in some way, or as having ‘anomalous’ functioning. Prejudicial stereotyping and assumptions may inhibit autists from embracing their own spatial experience and orientation, and induce them to eradicate or diminish their gestures and movements by forcing eye contact and being told to sit still. Such intervention, which, if handled insensitively by a teacher or therapist, can be injurious to their sense of self and wellbeing. People whose cognitive ‘anomalies’ impede them from arriving at, and articulating, complex accounts of their own good, are very often not accorded full status as persons – and can be marginalised from their communities – and from themselves.

There is a further and distinct claim: that all members of society, as members of an epistemic community, stand to benefit from a more fully informed understanding of the lives, ways of knowing, experiences and qualities of autistic individuals. Once we know why some autists tend to dislike being touched, our knowledge of what this means for them surely changes: ‘being touched means that the toucher is exercising control over a body which even its owner can’t control’ (Higashida, 2013:56). And for Naoki (2013:56), feeling that loss of control means that autists ‘lose who [they] are. Think about it – that’s terrifying!’ (p.56) Here, in addition to the testimony of Naoki, I will draw on the empirical testimonies of three adult autists, ‘Maevie’, ‘Lilly Snowball’ and ‘Martin’,¹ who have experienced difficulties dating, been victims of abuse and prejudicial stereotyping; and who express those lived experiences with acuity. I will use these testimonies to illustrate my proposal that epistemic injustice, whereby autistic people are wronged in their capacities as knowers of their own sexual and lived experiences, is an obstacle to providing appropriate sex education, and that epistemic virtue, giving credibility to autistic accounts, must be sought in order to inform that process. My further aim is to explore the ways in which we exclude and marginalise people with autism on the basis of what we think we *know* about them and their sexuality. More specifically, I will draw on Miranda Fricker’s (2007) account of testimonial injustice to explore how ignorance or discrediting of alternative ways of being and doing may result in testimonial injustice by means of identity power, credibility deficits and prejudicial stereotypes.

As young people with autism mature, their social and sexual ‘anomalies’ may present them with significant problems in developing and maintaining intimate relationships, in engaging in socially appropriate behaviours, and in being accepted as valued members within their community. These problems may be compounded by inappropriate, inadequate, or non-existent sex education. If, further, individuals with autism are marginalised from being fully accepted as social and sexual beings due to ignorance, aversion or prejudicial stereotyping, depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, and low self-esteem may result. Stereotypical views and simple ignorance about autistic sexuality may also result in invisibility, isolation, and increased risk of sexual victimisation and offending (Henault & Attwood, 2006). Attentiveness, therefore, to perspectives on the world of marginalised groups entails asking questions about *whose* ways of thinking about things are likely to be unheard or misinterpreted; and *whose* interests are likely to be ignored or dismissed. Autists’ perceived poor communication skills and ways of seeing the world are too often ‘obscured from collective understanding’ due to gaps within the interdependent epistemic resources themselves (Fricker 2007:155). Autists are strong candidates for epistemic injustice.

I will argue that autists are particularly likely to be victims of testimonial injustice inasmuch as their own accounts of their sexual nature are ignored even though these accounts are now available, and that sex education of autists should acknowledge, and be sensitive to, their sexual nature. To do so, I will proceed in four parts. First, I will briefly discuss the medical definition for autism. The language used to diagnose and describe autists is contestable and generally based on deficit assumptions, such as ‘anomalous’ or ‘low functioning’, which many autists now reject (Kenny et al., 2015), and which is why I surround most deficit words in inverted commas. However, it is a difficult, and complex, business to avoid using deficit language when the majority of the literature is saturated with such terms. I will then describe some of the difficulties that autists confront in the non-autist world. Next, I will apply Fricker’s (2007)

¹ The testimonies are drawn from interviews of adult autists on their experiences of love, sex, sexuality and sex education in a small-scale research project in the UK conducted by Marley (2015).

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