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3 **A Different Conversation: Psychological Research and the Problem of Self in Autism**
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3 Abstract
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10 Observations about peculiarities in the autistic population concerning type and frequency of
11 references to subjective states, and lack of perspective taking, have been on the whole referred to
12 as the paradox of the autistic self, i.e. a co-presence of ego-centeredness and weak self-
13 referentiality (Lombardo & Baron Cohen 2012). Prevalent approaches in autism ascribe these
14 peculiarities to high order disfunctions caused by neurological factors, such as defective self-
15 encoding processes.
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18 Two narratives told by an adult man with Asperger during counselling are examined with
19 Conversation Analysis; the analysis identifies features that may lead to descriptions like the
20 paradox of autistic self, but also reveals competences related to perspective-taking and narrative
21 construction. Drawing on Bruner's narrative theory, as well on recent interactional research on
22 autism and the psychology of self, it is suggested that a relatively limited practice with narrative
23 co-construction might be at the origin of the peculiarities observed. A socio-developmental
24 approach to the understanding of autism not only can provide explanations compatible with first
25 and second person accounts of life with autism, but can also open new paths for researching ways
26 of self-construction that are less reliant on social interaction. The article finally challenges
27 assumptions in psychological research about the ability of humans to access their internal states,
28 and discusses how such assumptions can deter understanding of atypical populations.
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54 Keywords
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56 Autism, Narrative, Self, Jerome Bruner, Conversation Analysis, Paradox of autistic self
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3 **Introduction**
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6 The expression 'paradox of the autistic self' (Lombardo and Baron Cohen 2012) was coined to
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8 summarise findings from experimental studies according to which people with autism are at the
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10 same time egocentric, i.e. predominantly self-interested and unable to consider the perspective of
11
12 others, and with a weak self-referentiality, i.e. with scarce ability to access and express their own
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14 cognitions and emotions. A large proportion of those studies, as common for autism studies, were
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16 conducted with children or young people as participants, because autism tends to be considered a
17
18 developmental disorder, but ego-centredness and weak self-referentiality - as well as difficulties
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20 with narrative discourse – have been associated to autism without specification of age. These
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22 descriptions, however, are hard to reconcile with other sources of evidence, for example the
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24 abundance and quality of autobiographical material produced by autistic authors¹: for people
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26 supposedly uninterested in others, who have difficulties with narrating and low access to their
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28 interiority, this is no obvious endeavour.
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35 In this article I will discuss two story-telling episodes narrated during counselling by a
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37 middle-aged man with Asperger, using Conversation Analysis. In examining these conversational
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39 fragments, I will attempt to illustrate how perceptions of ego-centredness and weak self-
40
41 referentiality may arise in observers or co-participants, but also that the different levels of
42
43 interpersonal coordination and expressions of subjectivity can be identified. Jerome Bruner 's
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45 work, to which this special issue is dedicated, will guide the exploration of the problem of the
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47 self in autism.
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57 ¹ For an initial list see <http://www.researchautism.net/published-biographies-autism>. Among the
58
59 most illuminating ones for me have been Williams (2009) and Higashida (2013).
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Perspectives on the autistic self

Observations related to the paradox of the autistic self, include, for the egocentric part, autistic people occupying long stretches of conversation with topics of their own interest, not inquiring about the other person, and being unable to read and react appropriately to others' emotions, intentions and motives. Such observations are globally also referred to as an impairment in 'Theory of Mind' (Baron-Cohen 1997). For the 'weak self' part of the paradox, sometimes also called 'absent self' (Frith 2003), the key observations concern difficulties with the 1st person pronoun 'I', infrequent mention of emotional or cognitive internal states; low introspection, (Gillespie-Smith, Ballantyne, Branigan, Turk & Cunningham 2018) and limited episodic autobiographical memory (Brown, Morris, Nida & Baker-Ward 2012). Evidence for both egocentredness and weak self-referentiality often comes from narrative tasks, in which people with autism, compared to control groups, are found on the one hand less likely to include information that would help listeners, such as temporal references, thus indicating less perspective-taking work, and, on the other, to associate less complex and varied mental and emotional states to both their own or other characters' actions (see Stirling, Douglas, Leekam & Carey 2014 for a review). Lombardo and Baron-Cohen (2010), reviewing the kind of evidence reported above as well as neurological observations, hypothesise that both parts of the paradox could be explained by a single deficit in the 'neural circuitry coding for self-representations'; this would hamper the development of the self-other distinction and both self-awareness and the theory of others' minds.

Apart from criticism about the adequacy of an all-explanatory, single core deficit in autism (Roth and Rezaie 2011, cit. in Scholiers, 2019), experimental findings are contradictory when looking at either narrative abilities (Colle, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright & van der Lely 2008.) or other types of self-processing tasks (Gillespie-Smith et al. 2018), so definite results

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2
3 about systematic poorer performances in any of those areas have not been ascertained. Secondly,
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5 some of the difficulties in communication and social relations reported in children and youth
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7 have been often observed to fade or disappear with age or intervention (Vivanti, Kasari, Green,
8
9 Mandell, Maye and Hudry 2018), which is at odds with any theory of a neurologically-based
10
11 impairment in those areas. Finally, autobiographical accounts of people with autism, as
12
13 mentioned before, and research in interactional settings (see Fasulo and Sterponi, 2016, for a
14
15 review) offer evidence difficult to reconcile with the descriptions reported above.
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19 An example of a personal account challenging the idea of the weak or absent self can be found in
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21 Jim Sinclair's words directly addressing this issue:
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25 I have an *interface* problem, not a core processing problem. I can't always keep track of
26
27 what's happening outside myself, but I'm never out of touch with my core. Even at worst,
28
29 when I can't focus and I can't find my body and I can't connect to space or time, I still
30
31 have my own self. That's how I survive and how I keep growing. (Sinclair, 1992)
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40 The sense of his own self is for Sinclair phenomenologically very strong, so much that he feels
41
42 anchored by it when connections to the outside world become insecure. This example suggests
43
44 that perceptions of a weak or absent self may have to do with the the expectations on, and
45
46 interpretation of, social and communicative behaviour in people with autism from the non autistic
47
48 social environment. Dawn Prince (2013:329), for example, reports how the strive to adapt to the
49
50 neurotypical world can suppress spontaneity and the opportunity of rich social relations:
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57 'The ways we pass as normal keep us from having any of our three deepest wishes
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59 granted like heaven; we can't be loved for who we are, because we hide ourselves,
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3 knowing we are freaks; we can't give, because we are often too afraid; and because no
4
5 one knows who we are or what we can give, we are afraid to die, knowing we can't truly
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7 be remembered. [...]. It is from this unnatural hiding, hoarding, our hairless cowering,
8
9 that all regrets and shame flow.'

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15 Prince, who is an autistic anthropologist and primatologist, has also offered striking accounts of
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17 autistic diversity as such (Prince-Hughes 2004), but the words above reveal that personal
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19 annihilation came for her from the fear and lack of recognition that characterized her social
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21 exchanges.
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25 The inadequacy of theories about neurologically weak or absent selves is also flagged
26
27 within neurobiology itself:
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32 'self-referential coding is the foundation of human consciousness. [...] Impairment in self-
33
34 referential coding will also mean that autists [sic] are barely conscious and living in
35
36 peaceful state of diffused consciousness (pain is based on a sense of self, locality). It is
37
38 most likely the exact opposite of autists. They are in an extremely localized state, extremely
39
40 aware of themselves, extremely aware of others and in a battle for their life to hold back the
41
42 intensity and pain of it all' (Markram and Markram², 2012)
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47 ² Markram and Markram, who are proponent of the Intense World Theory (2010), have a rather
48
49 stark view about the deficit in 'self encoding': 'This is just another theory that is a relic of the
50
51 theories of mental retardation. It is contaminated by older theories that there is a deficit in the
52
53 ability of the brain to develop a theory of mind, the ability to see and respect others' thoughts
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55 feelings and emotions. This archaic theory has also led to gross misinterpretations of the mirror
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57 neuron discoveries' (Markram and Markram 2012)
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3 Markram and Markram's description is much more consistent with personal accounts and
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6 conversations with people of autism, who, as we have seen, commonly report an acutely
7
8 felt presence of others and simultaneously a preoccupation with one's self conduct and
9
10 presentation (see for example the interviews in Biklen and Attfield 2005). In the following I
11
12 will be re-examining concepts related to the paradox of the autistic self using data of
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14
15 interaction in counselling sessions, with a Conversation Analysis approach.
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22 23 **Method**

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25 **Method of analysis.** Conversation Analysis (CA) is a discipline born in sociology for the
26
27 understanding of natural social interaction (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), and is now
28
29 broadly multidisciplinary (Sidnell, Stivers 2012). One of its strengths is that it invites suspending
30
31 assumptions about how individuals would act on the basis of their pre-assigned labels such as
32
33 age, gender or diagnostic categories, to focus instead on how interactants produce their turns at
34
35 talk to manage the job at hand, and how they display understanding of previous turns from others
36
37 in their subsequent verbal or non verbal acts. In this way, Conversation Analysis can access what
38
39 is the current 'context' for participants, as they co-orient to it, and thereby create it, with each
40
41 successive communicative move.
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47 CA has uncovered the principles of ordinary conversation and demonstrated the robustness
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49 of its findings across different languages and settings,; it is therefore uniquely positioned to
50
51 evaluate the conformity and efficiency of interactions that might be in some way 'atypical'
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53 (Antaki and Wilkinson 2012).
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3 *Sources of data.* The two conversational fragments under examination were extracted
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6 from two different counselling sessions in which the client is a man with Asperger in his early
7
8 fifties. The client, whom we shall call Francis, is unemployed, although he participates as a
9
10 volunteer to autism advocacy and political associations, as well as being an active research
11
12 participant and collaborator. He and the counsellor met through a mental health charity
13
14 organization; they are of similar age and both British. The counsellor, here called Darren, had
15
16 worked with autism in a younger population, and offered a number of free sessions in exchange
17
18 for experience with autism in adults.
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23 Counselling is a natural environment for discursive explorations of the self. Furthermore,
24
25 it is a type of ‘institutional talk’ (Drew and Heritage 1992) that does not entail a rigid turn
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27 allocation system, allowing also the analysis of sequential coordination across turns at talk.
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30 The sessions had been filmed by the counsellor for his own and the client’s record, for a
31
32 duration of 18 months. The entire set of recordings was donated for decision of the client to the
33
34 Autism Research Network of the University of Portsmouth. Informed consent for the study have
35
36 been obtained from both³. The first and last 10-12 minutes of 20 sessions, evenly distributed
37
38 across the 53 total sessions) have been transcribed according to the Conversation Analysis
39
40 notation system (Jefferson 2004; see Appendix). The two extracts that will be used in this article
41
42 are from the initial segment of the 17th and the 3rd session respectively. All names and
43
44 references that may lead to the recognition of the identity of the participants have been changed.
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50 3: “All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with
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52 the ethical standards of the University of Portsmouth – Department of Psychology Ethics
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54 Committee (Ethics approval 29/11/2012) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later
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56 amendments or comparable ethical standards.
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8 **The shallow self-narrative**
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13 Extract 1, analysed in this section, is an example of what may be perceived as low self-
14 referentiality, what we may call a ‘shallow narrative’. It starts seven minutes into the meeting,
15 and the client is reporting on a phone call with a newly met relative.
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20 The only additional symbol to the Jeffersonian transcription notation is the bracket in italics used
21 to indicate overlap between verbal and non-verbal actions. If there is no overlap sign it is
22 intended that the non-verbal action occurred sequentially after the last transcribed verbal part.
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32 [Session 17 INI [07:27:00] FR: Francis, client. DA: Darren, counsellor]
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- 38 1. FR: ((*Sits back on his chair, eyes closed, head reclined back*))
39
40 2. I had a curious phone call last (.) Wednesday- evening.
41
42 3. ((*raises head*))
43
44 4. DA: Mhmh.
45
46 5. FR Anduh:, (0.2) it was this chap who was a relat= I don’t-
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48 6. I don’t know if I told you I had to miss a session
49
50 7. at the beginning of November because I had to go
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52 8. to a funeral down in Bristol. ((*opens eyes looks at DA*))
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54 9. DA: Yeah.
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56 10. FR: Uhm well this chara=person who di:ed uhm, his-
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- 11. some relative of his who sort of dealt with the matter
- 12. rang me last Friday.=Wednesday night,
- 13. out of the blue:, saying that he wanted my::-
- 14. to [confirm my address, >↑which ↓I did.<
- 15. *(((raise arm, points sideways))*
- 16. because he said there's a little check coming fo:r me:.
- 17. (0.6)
- 18. °it's only five pound it's js five pound°
- 19. (>by this character's estate<) so I said
- 20. well >thank you very much<
- 21. and there was also a curious invitation. (0.2)
- 22. from this chap (*pinches the top of his nose, hand covers the face*)
- 23. he a:sked, (0.5) if I'd been in touch with various uh:
- 24. (I suppose) actually
- 25. (1.8) (*rotates extended hand as indicating 'more'*)
- 26. (relatives of his) one in Cambridge, uhm
- 27. and one in ↑O::xford.
- 28. DA: Mh.
- 29. FR: And I said well quite frankly I haven't had time
- 30. DA: Mh.
- 31. FR: And he said well he wants me to go and see them
- 32. when in Cambridge and in Oxford so I'll do tha:t.
- 33. DA: Mhmh.
- 34. FR: And uhm,

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3 35. (1.0)
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6 36. So that was quite good,
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8 37. DA: So what do you think about these relatives
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10 38. you haven't seen for a while.
11
12 39. FR: °I didn't even know they existed >to tell you the truth°<=
13
14 =but they seemed quite pleased to- keen to m-
15
16 40. =but they seemed quite pleased to- keen to m-
17
18 41. continue to make contact with me so I suppose
19
20 42. I'm gonna do it.
21
22 43. DA: Yeah.
23
24 44. FR: Uhm and, ((covers his face with the hand as before,
25
26 45. pinching the top of his nose, head down))
27
28 46. DA: That's=that's nice [()]
29
30 47. FR: [I was- yes, I was supposed also
31
32 this- I didn't tell you, () this kitchen business
33
34 48. this- I didn't tell you, () this kitchen business
35
36 49. ((continues with the kitchen topic))
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42 In reading this account, we might have some trouble, just like the counsellor, getting a sense of
43 the personal meaning that the contact with this relative had for the client. In introducing the
44 event, Francis qualifies it as 'curious', a term that refers to the unexpected or slightly puzzling
45 nature of the event, but without a clear positive or negative slant. He then reconstructs the
46 episode by replaying the phone dialogue in detail, and reports his intention to comply with the
47 invitation to meet the other relatives in Oxford and Cambridge. He ends with the evaluative
48 phrase 'that was quite good', which is not framed in personal terms (e.g. the way 'I was pleased'
49 would be). The counsellor (who knows that Francis has lost almost all his family members, so
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3 discovering a new relative might have been noteworthy), solicits at this point Francis' personal
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5 take on the event (lines 38-39): Francis makes light of it, replying that he did not know of the
6
7 relatives' existence, but since they are 'keen' to meet he 'supposes' he is going to do so (lines
8
9 40-43). The counsellor then offers himself a positive characterization: 'That's nice' (line 47). The
10
11 continuation of the counsellor turn is made unhearable by Francis's introducing a different topic
12
13 in overlap, and covering his face in a gesture of concentration. An impressions of weak self-
14
15 referentiality, such as those reported in experimental observations, could thus derive from the
16
17 way this narrative maintains a factual narrative plane, devoid of explicit references to internal
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19 states.
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25 The sequential analysis of the extract, however, shows also a series of elements
26
27 documenting both personal stance and perspective-taking. As far as perspective-taking is
28
29 concerned, we can see that Francis takes into account the knowledge of the counsellor in setting
30
31 up the story, and includes discursive devices that prepare him to the fact a narrative is coming, to
32
33 help tune in to its genre, and anticipate the point. First, there is a 'story preface' (Sacks, 1992)
34
35 that introduces the story and its gist: 'I had a curious phone call last (.) Wednesday- evening.' at
36
37 the end of which Francis raises his head and waits for the counsellor 'go ahead' ('Mhmm'). Then
38
39 Francis starts introducing the caller, but takes a step back in order to place the event within the
40
41 counsellor's time coordinates (i.e. the missed therapy session, lines 5-8); he also abides to
42
43 principles of economy in person identification, using a level description suited to the counsellor's
44
45 knowledge (line 11, Sacks and Schegloff, 1979). The point of the story, i.e. the invitation by the
46
47 relative to meet up with other members of the family, is marked by the repetition of the
48
49 assessment 'curious' (line 2): evaluative marking of key points support the recipient's interpretive
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51 work and help them react at appropriate times, while also displaying 'tellability', namely what
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3 makes the story worth telling; finally, a canonical general evaluation rounds up the narrative and
4
5 exits the story world (Labov and Waletzki, 1967; Sacks 1992).
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8 A misalignment in intersubjectivity seems rather to have occurred at the sequential
9
10 juncture where the narrative ended. Here the counsellor's bid to expand on the personal meaning
11
12 of the encounter was not taken up, and his assessment of the event ('That's nice') was not
13
14 acknowledged or seconded (Pomerantz 1984), apart from the quick 'yes' embedded in the turn
15
16 that initiates the next topic. This turn covered the counsellor's continuation, and, together with a
17
18 the postural and gaze withdrawal, prevented any further comments on the phone call story and
19
20 curtailed the therapists' opportunities for using the story as counselling material.
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24 Thus, on the one hand, the better part of the work that makes for an interactionally
25
26 efficient story-telling was performed, but, on the other hand, Francis stopped short of including
27
28 elements of the 'internal landscape' (Bruner 1986), either spontaneously or as a response to the
29
30 counsellor's elicitation. The first consideration is that these two levels should be kept
31
32 analytically and theoretically separate, but we can perhaps also go a step further and inquiry into
33
34 the differences between self-initiated and other-elicited accounts of self-related contents.
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38 In terms of how the story was initially presented, it is worth considering that it was told
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40 at the beginning of the counselling session, when it is customary for this dyad to focus on the
41
42 week just ended; Francis would report episodes relevant to the shared counselling agenda,
43
44 especially in terms of how he dealt with his difficulties, many of which involve coping with
45
46 practical commitments and social encounters. In light of this, the story about the telephone
47
48 conversation can be seen as a report on how Francis managed successfully a phone call arrived
49
50 'out of the blue' from a person he had only briefly met once. Francis described how he dealt with
51
52 the situation both pragmatically and socially, confirming his address (a passage emphasised with
53
54 gestures), and agreeing with the prospect of future meetings with yet more unknown relatives.
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3 The prospect of a social occasion with strangers is not necessarily or completely positive
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5 for a person with Asperger: it almost certainly would involve the stress of travelling and its
6
7 preparation, as well as navigating the social event itself. At the same time, there are indications
8
9 that neither the relatives, nor the person who died retained a great personal significance for
10
11 Francis: the person who died was initially referred to as a ‘character’ then corrected as ‘person’,
12
13 and the relative is consistently called ‘this chap’. So, if we stay with what *is* in the story rather
14
15 than in what is *missing* from it, we may see that for Francis the tellability of this story has more
16
17 to do with the very fact of the conversation happening the way it did, and the good will he
18
19 demonstrated by agreeing with the proposed plans, rather than in the emotional resonances of the
20
21 contact with the relatives: ‘That was quite good’: *that* – dealing with a ‘curious’ social event -
22
23 went well. Francis is not going to *make more of it* than was actually there for him. So in terms of
24
25 elements of personal relevance that can be heard in the story, there could be a problem of
26
27 discrepancy between what may be noteworthy, or ‘exceptional’ (Bruner, 1991; see also Smorti
28
29 and Fioretti, this issue) enough to deserve being storified, for people with autism and those
30
31 without the condition. Autism research is starting now to explore the limitations in neurotypicals’
32
33 understanding of the autistic mind, and this could be an example of the way in which the personal
34
35 significance of mundane events is not part of the shared tacit knowledge between people with
36
37 autism and people without. This, together for the proclivity to embody stance and motives within
38
39 characters’ action description rather than with explicit psychological terms (Bottema-Beutel,
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41 Sterponi and Louick 2017) might account for the perception of the ‘shallow narrative’ in an
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43 interlocutor.
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54 If differences in shaping and interpreting stories may induce false interpretations of lack
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56 of self awareness, the relational disconnectedness evidenced in the foreclosure of the narrative to
57
58 the interactant’s contribution is of a different nature: it is a barrier stopping the merging of
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3 subjective perspectives, and also hampers the possibility to resolve discrepancies in the way a
4 story is told or interpreted in the first place. The narrative was not offered as a bid for joint
5 meaning-making but as a self-enclosed unit, comprised of its definitive meaning After the
6 analysis of the second extract we will come back this observation in light of Jerome Bruner's
7 theories of narrative and the self.
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20 **The exorbitant narrative**

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25 The second extract starts early in the 3rd session. The counsellor is proposing to discuss the
26 client's relationship with his former psychotherapist, but stops mid-sentence to ask Francis how
27 he should call her throughout. This triggers an interlocked series of short narratives, after which
28 the counsellor resumes his talk.
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35 The background of this conversation is that Francis, after a severe breakdown during his
36 undergraduate study, in the 80s, was offered by the National Health Service a psychoanalytic
37 psychotherapy. The psychotherapist was a woman doctor (here renamed Margie Burrow). After
38 about one year, the therapy was interrupted because of a change in Dr. Burrow's assignment.
39 Francis believes that his psychological well-being had been improving substantially up to that
40 point, thanks to the strong transfer he had developed for her, but that the interruption had caused
41 a major set-back. All his subsequent efforts to continue the therapy or get a similar one with a
42 different doctor were unsuccessful, hence the strong resentment with the medical authorities that
43 seeps through the second part of the sequence (Extract 2b).
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59 Extract 2a [Session 3 INI 2:47-3.50]
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01 DA: Okay so what we'r:e gonna j'z (.) talk about
02 is really y-, (0.3) your relationship with-
03 (0.8) would you call her Burrow or Ma:rgie=
04 how would you refer [to her
05 FR: [Well
06 *[(puts hand over nose bridge, covering his eyes)]*
07 *[I=I'll tell you uhm when it started off*
08 *I didn't refer to her as anyth:i::ng,*
09 DA: *[(and tha-)*
10 FR: *[then it was Doctor Burrow and then=*
11 : *=well- I >said to her in one session towards the end*
12 *that I'm< (.) when I tried to- you know*
13 *>I'd write in the diary< [the next appointment*
14 *[(looks up at DA, rotates hand,)]*
15 *[>for exam-<*
16 DA: *[°Yeah.*
17 FR: *[First of all I'd write uhm Doctor [Bu:rrow::,*
18 *[(head back on the chair, gaze up [right thumb out in listing gesture)]*
19 *Then it was Doctor [Ma:rgie Bu:[rrow:.,]*
20 *[(right index finger out)]*
21 DA: *[°Yeah.]*
22 FR: *[>Getting more and more a:ngry,<*
23 *[(smiles, left hand raises up enacting the doctor)]*

1
2
3 24 DA: Yeah.
4
5
6 25 FR: Then it was Margie Burrow- [*>↑white<*
7
8 *[((raises open hand))*
9
10 26
11 =then was Margie, can you see? *>white face<* *((raises hand))*
12
13 27
14 that was an *[indication of my fee:lings >developing<*
15
16 28
17 *[((turns head toward Darren and looks at him))*
18
19 29
20 and trying [to realise] at the time=so.
21
22 30 DA: [Yeah.]
23
24 31 FR : Uhm *>sorry<* uhm *>yeah.<*
25
26 32 DA: [Tha:t's fine,
27
28 33 FR: [Call her Doctor Burrow, whatever you like.
29
30
31
32

33 The counsellor's question about the Doctor's name is a 'utilitarian' one, within a turn that
34
35 is hearably a prelude to a longer spate of talk; the question, however, turns out not to have a
36
37 simple answer for Francis. He recalls how he changed the way he called the Doctor (within
38
39 himself) throughout the therapy, progressively using more intimate names; this was visible to the
40
41 Doctor when Francis wrote down in the diary the date of the next appointment, and he recalls
42
43 how it made her angry (see the 'white face' and hand raised to enact the therapist, lines 23- 27⁴).
44
45 The counsellor's 'Yeahs' (lines 16, 21 and 24) are an indication that he is treating this as a soon-
46
47 to be-concluded topic, after which he will take the turn again (Jefferson 1984). At the end of the
48
49 extract Francis indeed apologises, seemingly for the overabundant interlude. The apologies are
50
51 accepted ('No, that's fine'), and Francis provides a conclusive answer to the original question
52
53
54
55
56

57 4 The meaning of 'white face' was explained by Francis himself when I asked him for help with
58
59 the transcription.
60
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1
2
3 'Call her Doctor Burrow, whatever you like.' Additional recollections, however, starts to be
4 narrated at this juncture, concerning the respect attached to the Doctor's name by other medics.
5
6 A series of caustic remarks follow, played as a dialogue between Francis and the medics, around
7
8 how the latter were not able to help him in his predicament of having lost the psychotherapist,
9
10 and how this caused him later being sectioned in a psychiatric hospital.
11
12
13
14
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16
17

18 Extract 2b
19
20
21
22

23 33 FR: BUT- tell you wha- her (0.2) bosses were always so official=
24

25 35 =it was Margie this Margie tha:t, [Margie
26

27 36 DA: [Yeah.
28
29

30 37 FR: the <greatest psychothe:rapist since Freu:d,>
31

32 38 so I said well I should see her then=
33

34 39 =no answer to tha:t.
35
36

37 40 DA: Yeah.
38
39

40 41 FR: And=uh=and Freud >actually didn't run out
41

42 42 on his patients and put them in- where they put me:<
43

44 43 (.) except of course he was thrown out of Austria in
45
46

47 44 nineteen[thirtyeight hahaha
48

49 45 DA: [Yeah uh=hm
50
51

52 46 FR: They didn't like that either he[hh
53

54 47 DA: [Ye:s.
55
56

57 48 FR: Sorry hmhm? ((*leans towards counsellor*))
58

59 49 DA: No th=tha[t's-
60
61
62

1
2
3 50 FR: [()
4

5
6 51 DA: =What we're trying to do is [work on that relationship
7

8 55 FR: [°Yes:°
9

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11
12
13 The narratives in this second part proceed incrementally, and are inflected with witticism. Francis
14 begins initially associating another memory to the topic of the Doctor's name, and replaying
15 fictionalised snippets of his conversations with the medical authorities after Burrow's departure.
16
17 Then the comparison between the Doctor and Freud gives him the chance to remark on the
18 abandonment and the consequences he suffered from it, and this finally drives a more disjointed
19 comment about Freud's own vicissitudes, still performed as part of the dialogue with the medics,
20 including their hostile responses.
21
22

23
24
25 At the junction after each part, the counsellor utters again his Yeah's (lines 36, 40, 45, 47),
26 exerting some pressure toward resuming the topic he had initiated earlier. Similarly to the end of
27 the naming narrative in Extract 2a, this spate of talk ends with an apology from Francis, and a
28 more definite handover of the floor marked also by the leaning posture (although Francis utters
29 some more words in overlap with the counsellor's, so we do not yet see a completely neat
30 closure). The therapist then continues on with the initial project, which is restarted by using the
31 same words of the beginning (line 51).
32
33

34
35
36 The 'naming' episode taken as the whole (Extracts 2a and 2b) shows almost opposite features
37 to the story in Extract 1 about the newly met relative. There, the narrative seemed to suffer from
38 insufficient personal meaning; here, there seems to be an overabundance of meaning that makes
39 the talk exorbitant, causing a long detour from the conversational trajectory set out by the
40 counsellor at the beginning of the extract. Francis' response to the question about how to call the
41 Doctor went straight into the traumatic experience of more than twenty-five years earlier, as he
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3 mentioned his growing attachment to the therapist, the brusque separation, his frustrated attempts
4
5 to persuade the medical authorities to let him see her again, and his hospitalisation ('where they
6
7 put me in'). Emphasising the respect of 'her bosses' towards the psychoanalyst also adds weight
8
9 to the loss Francis endured, and is evidence in favour of his claim that the therapy had been
10
11 beneficial. These contents are all relevant to the topic the counsellor had attempted to initiate, i.e.
12
13 Francis' relationship to Doctor Burrow, and demonstrate the ability to identify feelings behind
14
15 one's conduct.
16
17

18
19
20 In terms of perspective-taking, again we have two sets of observations. On the one hand,
21
22 those stories were displaced in a way that might look egocentric vis-à-vis the therapist
23
24 conversational project: they were appended to the naming question in the middle of the
25
26 introductory turn of the counsellor and created some awkwardness, with the therapist stalled and
27
28 proffering 'yeahs' that are typically used in to curtail a speaker's production, and Francis'
29
30 repeated apologies. In any case, because of the sequential position, those contents did not become
31
32 available as counselling material. On the other hand, Francis' apologies themselves display
33
34 awareness of the oversized response, and the packaging of the narratives as asides (i.e. concise,
35
36 fast delivered self-contained anecdotes) are consistent with their sequential location. Other
37
38 indicators of collaborative (and competent) speakership can be observed in the conversational
39
40 devices that prepare the listeners to the response going somewhat off track, like the turn
41
42 beginning 'Well' (Extract 2a line 5: Heritage, 2015) and the 'I'll tell you' preface (line 6:
43
44 Schegloff 1992). The closing line finally responding to the specific question about how the
45
46 counsellor should call the doctor (line 33) complies with the initial request of the counsellor, and
47
48 the emphatic handovers of the floor displays recognition of the counsellor's speaking rights.
49
50 Similarly to Extract 1, then, intersubjectivity at the procedural level – the moment-to-moment
51
52 attunement about what is going on right now (Schegloff 1992) – is present throughout, but the
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1
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3 timing and pacing of the narratives did not incorporate entry points for the interlocutor, or an
4
5 orientation to the contents expressed having been disclosed for comment and interpretation from
6
7 the other. This is different from ordinary conversational story-telling, in which listeners'
8
9 contributions are almost always present towards the ending (Sacks, 1992), and often also at
10
11 various points throughout, especially after evaluative segments (Goodwin, 1986; Mandelbaum
12
13 2003). Francis' stories instead, again, were delivered as finished products and not as a framework
14
15 for joint problem solving (Ochs, Smith and Taylor 1989).
16
17

18
19
20 Once the orientation to the other in narrative talk is lifted, other motives can overtake, like
21
22 emotional relevance, or care for precision: for example, the counsellor in Extract 2a has asked
23
24 'would *you* call her Burrow or Margie how would *you* refer [to her]'(emphasis added), so Francis
25
26 explained the different ways in which he himself had called the Doctor over time, rather than
27
28 suggesting a way *for the counsellor* to call her.
29
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32
33 A profile of Francis as an interactional participant has emerged from the analysis of both
34
35 extracts: he displays awareness of other people's intentions as manifested in their turns at talk,
36
37 can do perspective work in including relevant information that enables listeners to follow the
38
39 story, and can provide information on internal states where relevant, although at times in ways
40
41 that may be oblique for a neurotypical listener. We also observed in both examples the story
42
43 delivery made it difficult for the co-participant to engage in collaborative meaning-making or
44
45 proffer validation for the contents of the stories.
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49
50 Turning now finally to Bruner, we will see how his theories about narrative and the self might
51
52 help us tease out the psychological layers pertaining to the different conducts.
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55 56 57 58 59 **Discussion** 60 61 62 63 64 65

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6 ***Jerome Bruner's narrative theory.*** When Jerome Bruner and Carol Feldman presented their
7
8 theories on autism (1993) there was still a strong emphasis on higher order type of deficits at the
9
10 origin of autism, and they offered hypotheses along those lines as well. However, I will
11
12 summarise in the following Bruner's theories on self based on his much more substantial research
13
14 on early development and family autobiographical narratives, which I believe offer a better
15
16 foundation for interpreting current knowledge about autistic forms of life.
17
18

19
20 Bruner ⁵, uniquely among his contemporaries in developmental and narrative psychology,
21
22 describes narrative as the exchange of intentional actions between two subjects in the present of
23
24 the narrating episode. The foundations of his narrative theory are in early play between caregiver
25
26 and infant, which consist in mirroring each other and engaging in repetitive sequences of simple
27
28 actions. Bruner views such sequences – or 'formats' - as joint sense-making practices, which
29
30 capture relationships in time: the 'who-am-I-in-relation-to-the-other' way of being in the world.
31
32 Meaning emerges – in fact coincides with - the patterning of those chains of actions, i.e. of
33
34 reciprocal intentionalities. Furthermore, Bruner argues, such early, embodied experiences of
35
36 intentionality are already informed by culture; the world as the infant gets to know it is already a
37
38 cultural world, and the inchoate self that is spun in these transactions already a cultural self.
39
40 Culture thus, in 'Brunerian' psychology, is a particular way of assembling actions and counter-
41
42 actions, a variation in the dance of intersubjectivity which is otherwise universal.
43
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49
50 Culture played out in interaction provides people with 'folk psychology' – a loose set of
51
52 theories about the world and the mind - that varies not only across broad cultural communities
53

54
55 ⁵ The synthesis below, where not otherwise stated, is based on the part written by Bruner in
56
57 Bruner and Feldman (1993). Authorship responsibilities for the different parts of the chapter are
58
59 clearly distinguished by the authors, and each section is written in the 1st person singular.
60
61
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1
2
3 but also across families and other groups (Bruner, 1987). Folk psychology is largely implicit, but
4
5 it is the psychological system ‘by which people regulate their sociality’ (Bruner and Feldman
6
7 1993: 288). Crucially, it entails repertoires of intentions. The self that is born out of this web of
8
9 cultural meanings and interpersonal expectations is therefore ‘highly sensitive to bidding on the
10
11 not so open market of one’s own reference group’. The self is ‘intersubjective, or distributed like
12
13 knowledge’ (Bruner 1991:76). Putting all the pieces together, the self would be a position in a
14
15 culturally inflected, unfolding narrative between *I* and *You*.
16
17
18

19
20 Bruner’s theory is consistent with developmental research showing the role of even very
21
22 young infants in structuring interactions with caregivers (Tronick, Als, and Brazelton, 1977;
23
24 Reddy 2008) and with language socialization research with older children showing that more
25
26 expert speakers scaffold children narratives according to local theories of relevance, and append
27
28 the appropriate internal responses to the child recounted events (Edwards and Middleton 1988;
29
30 Ochs, Smith and Taylor 1989; Miller and Moore 1989).
31
32
33

34
35 What Bruner says about the self as a bid within the circle of one’s reference group, and its
36
37 being distributed, we can see happening through story-telling in interaction in general:
38
39 Conversation Analysis studies have revealed how narrators adjust stories as they go along
40
41 depending on audience’ attention or appreciation, and that audiences can ultimately determine the
42
43 success of narrative performances (Goodwin 1986; Ochs and Taylor, 1992; Fasulo and
44
45 Pontecorvo, 1997), shaping over time the type of stories that will be most appropriated and
46
47 shared in any given group. In this way, language precipitates entire compartments of the
48
49 experience-able self (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), which are, by virtue of this process,
50
51 individual and cultural at the same time.
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57 The nature of intersubjectivity that is built through co-narration goes beyond reciprocal
58
59 tracking on a turn by turn basis to include alignment on the moral and generally evaluative
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3 perspective all narratives foreshadow (Ochs and Capps 2001). The self takes shape as the
4
5 protagonist of certain types of stories (Bruner, 1991) but needs to be continually validated
6
7 through social interaction (Pasupathi and Hoyt 2009). This is why Bruner insists that, far from
8
9 being backward-looking retrievals of experiential content, autobiographical narratives are
10
11 forward-looking interpersonal projects, affected by interlocutors and situations in terms of form
12
13 the narrative will take, what contents will be stressed, and what genre the narrative will be keyed
14
15 into. The role of joint narrative activity in the development of cultural, interactional and
16
17 autobiographical competences may help understanding the types of conduct subsumed under
18
19 formulae like the paradox of the autistic self, if we consider what may be going on in the life of
20
21 people with autism, especially if, like in the case of Francis, they were not diagnosed until late in
22
23 life.
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32 ***Autism and narrative socialization.*** Observational research on early interaction in autism
33
34 points to problems that may disrupt the natural occurring of the protonarrative interactions
35
36 described by Bruner and other infant researchers. Wootton (2002) found that children with autism
37
38 between 12 and 24 months produce fewer interactional initiations than typical children, and
39
40 hypothesised that this may deprive them of the natural corrective responses of caregivers that
41
42 contribute to communicative effectiveness. Muratori and Maestro (2007) predates these
43
44 observations in their analyses of family videos of infants later diagnosed with autism: they found
45
46 a lower frequency of ‘provoking’⁶ behaviours compared to typical infants of the same age, a
47
48 finding that the authors discuss as affecting the ‘development of the dialogical self’. Wan, Green,
49
50 Elsabbagh, et al. (2017) show that lower dyadic mutuality and infant positive affect and attention
51
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56
57 ⁶ Muratori and Maestro (2007:97) cite Nagy and Molnar (2005) about 'provocation' in human
58
59 behavior as an essential component of subjectivity and motivational processes.
60
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1
2
3 predict autism diagnosis at 3 years. Early play and proto-narratives, what Bruner called formats,
4
5 are essentially embodied, relying on body tension and movements, gaze and the melody of non
6
7 lexical vocalizations (Gratier, 2003; Fantasia, Fasulo, Costall and Lopez 2014), all areas which
8
9 develop differently in autistic children. If the continuity Bruner maintains between very early
10
11 interactions, narrative co-creation and self-making is considered in all its implications, it is not
12
13 far-fetched to hypothesize that the lower-order anomalies initially limiting autistic children's
14
15 initiative in interactions (Trevarthen and Delafield-Butt 2013) can generate down the line a
16
17 different, less socialized, less porous type of stories in people with autism, stories with an
18
19 internal, autonomous logic which is more compelling than the wish for audience validation that
20
21 inhabits neurotypicals' stories. In turn, the self that inhabits those stories may seem foreign to
22
23 neurotypicals, who bring in their cultural expectations concerning the internal states that should
24
25 come associated with certain events, and similarly conventional associations between actions and
26
27 intentions or emotions may also not be triggered in the interpretations of other's conduct from
28
29 people with autism, leading to the perception of a lack of a 'theory of mind'. The finding that
30
31 'theory of mind' tasks are also failed by deaf children born to hearing, non signing parents
32
33 (Peterson and Siegal 1999) suggests that early communication plays a significant role in
34
35 developing the intuitive pre-reflexive understanding of others that can later support conventional
36
37 interpretation of others' conduct.
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42 My hope is that the considerations above can contribute to the debate about the perceptions
43
44 of the weak self and ego-centredness in autism, at least narrowing down and separating out the
45
46 levels at which interpersonal misalignments and unmet expectations can occur; more importantly
47
48 however I wish to reinforce the growing chorus of voices urging for a clear turn in psychological
49
50 research in autism. In the last part of the discussion I will briefly point out two of the most urgent
51
52 problems that should be addressed in future studies.
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6 ***Psychology and autism research.***
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8 As mentioned earlier in the article, psychological theories on the self in autism that have
9 been summarized with the expression ‘paradox of the autistic self’ have been criticized, on the
10 one hand, because they are at odds with observations and accounts of people in the spectrum,
11 and, on the other, for shortcomings in the construct of self that is adopted in these theories.
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18 For the first part of the problem, the evidence shows it is time for autistic research to
19 dislodge itself from its normative standpoint and go meet autism on its own ground. This would
20 mean adopting research strategies that can open new vistas into the alternative paths through
21 which the autistic self is created ⁷. Experimental research should find, first of all, more
22 advantageous comparison groups than non-descript normo-gifted individuals, and secondly
23 explore in their own right what may be distinctive systems of attention, intentional interpretations
24 and self-other relations, rather than exposing deviations from standard neurotypical conduct. A
25 promising avenue is the much neglected area of sensory and motor issues (Gallagher and Varga
26 2015), which not only have been found to interfere with the possibility of interactional
27 engagement in early childhood (McCleery, Elliott, Sampanis and Stefanidou 2013; Markram and
28 Markram 2010), but also continues to pose challenges throughout the life of people in the
29 spectrum.
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47 Ethnographic and interactional studies represent another research avenue that can get us
48 closer to autism in its own right. Ethnographic research has revealed forms of autistic sociality
49 and expertise (Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik, Solomon and Sirota 2001; Mattingly 2010; Lawlor and
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54 ⁷ In a previous study, I discuss how in case of limited reliance on *in vivo* interactions for the
55 development of self, example literary and historical characters can become dialogical
56 counterparts to make sense of oneself and others (Fasulo (2014)).
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2
3 Solomon,2017). Especially when using microanalytic methods for the study of spontaneous
4
5 conduct, ethnographic studies have been able to unpick different layers of competencies and
6
7 difficulties and the role of interlocutors in their emergence (Maynard, 2005; Fasulo and Fiore
8
9 2007) and have revisited seemingly odd behavioral conducts to reveal they were adjustments to
10
11 interactional demands (Tarplee and Barrow 1999; Sterponi and Fasulo 2010, Sterponi, de Kirby
12
13 and Shankey 2015). Milton, a researcher in autism and in the spectrum himself, advocates for
14
15 ‘micro-sociological perspectives in conjunction with phenomenological and discursive methods’
16
17 (Milton, 2013) and, challenges scholars to experience autistic sociality directly by engaging with
18
19 people with autism:
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25 ‘I argue that some level of interactional expertise must be possible, as no autistic person is
26
27 completely uncommunicative. The inter-actional expertise shown by non-autistic social
28
29 researchers is, however, often clearly insufficient, [...]. Gaining expertise in what it is to
30
31 be autistic would take immersion in the culture and practices of autistic people [...] In my
32
33 view, the level of embodiment needed for interactional expertise with autistic people
34
35 remains unanswered.’ (Milton, 2014, 797-800)
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43 If Milton’s proposal seems radical, it should be noted that it has solid foundations in
44
45 phenomenological approaches, such ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), which is the theoretical
46
47 paradigm Conversation Analysis was born into, and can be seen as part of a general movement
48
49 toward ‘second person perspective’ in psychological research now endorsed also in experimental
50
51 cognitive science (Schilbach, Timmermans, Reddy et al. 2013).
52
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55 The second problem, about definitions of self in psychological research could take us too
56
57 far, but it needs to be mentioned that many studies pointing to the pitfalls of the autistic self by
58
59 implications reify simplistic views of self in typical psychological functioning. Notably, many
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3 comparative studies imply that non autistic people have immediate access to their to their beliefs
4
5 and emotions their verbal expression maps exactly their internal states ⁸. However, if we travel to
6
7 different regions of psychological theorization, we find out that the idea of a direct access to self
8
9 and internal states has been under attack for a long time. In narrative psychology the self has
10
11 long been spoken of as an ‘invention’ (Eakin, 1985) similar to fiction writing. Theories of
12
13 autobiographical memory as providing direct access to past experiences have been debunked (see
14
15 Brockmeier, 2014, for a thorough review of the evidence). Recent theories of self based on both
16
17 philosophical theorisation and experimental evidence propose that there is no content to the self
18
19 as such, our experience of an internal self being entirely virtual and processual, the product of the
20
21 way the mind works (Metzinger and Gallese 2003). Specifically, according to Metzinger and
22
23 Gallese, failing to appreciate the made-up nature of self leads scientists to become ‘naïve
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25 realists’:
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35 Frequently, the theoretical model we design about ourselves as cognitive agents is one of
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37 organisms, which, ad libitum, *direct the beam of their “epistemic flashlight” at parts of the*
38
39 *world or their own internal lives.* [...] This can lead to the kind of fallacy, which [...] can
40
41

42 ⁸ For example, a low frequency of epistemic terms (i.e. words referring to knowledge) is
43
44 explained by lack of *access* to one’s own beliefs (Tager-Flusberg 1993:151); if people with
45
46 autism use references to internal states, such as emotions, the way they use them is said to
47
48 suggest ‘a limited understanding of what they [the emotional terms] *really* stand for’ (Colle et
49
50 al., 2008: 38); the scarcity of words referring to internal states in autobiographical narratives
51
52 of 6-14 years are interpreted as ‘consistent with the possibility that children with AD *lack*
53
54 *awareness of their own reactions* to personal experiences’ (Brown et al., 2012 :44) (all italics
55
56 added).
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3 also be generated in the context of representationalist theories of mind by *mistakenly*
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5
6 *transporting what [Dennett] called the “intentional stance”* (Dennett, 1987a) *into the*
7
8 *system.* (Metzinger and Gallese, 2003: 566 , italics added)
9

10
11
12 In other words, many models of normal psychological functioning are built on the shaky grounds
13
14 of the existence of a substantial self, which is based on the phenomenal experience of having one,
15
16 thus confusing explanans and explanandum. Such confusion can lead to even more misled
17
18 theories when the idea of a substantial self becomes the basis for explaining deviations from the
19
20 norm like that of autism⁹.
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24
25 The combination of normo-centric research paradigms and unexamined assumptions about
26
27 psychological processes in typical individuals (see also Gallagher 2004)– with perhaps some
28
29 revelling in sensationalist language - has led to characterizations of autism as a natural
30
31 experiment in human sociality, a condition that can shed light on what is quintessentially human
32
33 – be it self-awareness, empathy, understanding other minds - because it creates humans who are
34
35 lacking in it. This research risks tacitly perpetuating representations of autistic people as aliens
36
37 (Hacking, 2009), and raising barriers not only to social exchange but to good science too: Mc
38
39 Donagh expresses it well, discussing research on empathy:
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45 Perhaps most important, it points to a disturbing movement in writings that use autism as
46
47 a test case for validating the concept of empathy. This strategy succeeds only at the cost
48
49 of creating *new exiles*. If empathy is seen as fundamental to humanity, those who are not
50
51 particularly empathic (according to whatever definition of the term is dominant) thus
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53 acquire identities defined by this lack and pathologized by their resistance to therapy. Like
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57 ⁹ See Scholiers (2019) for a theory of the self in autism that attempts to integrate this model of
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59 self and Makram and Makram’s Intense World Theory.
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3 the Age of Meritocratic Intelligence before it, the Age of Empathy will strive to create its
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6 *barbarians* to be placed *outside the gates*. Mc Donagh (2013 : 48, italics added)
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10 Psychology could perhaps become a better science if it examined more carefully its tacit
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12 assumptions and reconnected to its philosophical roots in order to avoid smuggling in, as a by-
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14 product of its research paradigms, disturbing and unethical ‘images of man’ (Shotter,1975).
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20 **Conclusions**

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23 Conversation Analysis was used in this study to examine in detail two narratives of a person with
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25 autism during counselling, selected because they could illustrate how perceptions of weak self-
26
27 referentiality and of ego-centredness in autistic people could arise. The analysis reveal that, rather
28
29 than from specific narrated contents, such perceptions could derive from the fact that the stories
30
31 did not embed opportunities for the co-participant to intervene in the joint realization of meaning;
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33 interactional alignment was found at the level of turn-by-turn organization and informational
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35 perspective-taking, but there was no apparent need to have the recounted experience validated by
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37 the interlocutor, as is mostly the case in story-telling of ordinary speakers.
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42 I argued that Bruner’s theories about early interaction and the development of self through
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44 narrative exchanges, if applied to such observations, suggest that early disruptions in basic
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46 coordination skills might reduce opportunities for training in intersubjectivity and gradually
47
48 learning, from within experiences of co-narration, how to structure one’s stories in conventional
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50 narrative form, and displaying a culturally recognizable self. A person with autism, with all the
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52 differences that different biographical paths entail, may thus draw on partially different resources
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54 in assembling a sense of who they are, an may develop a self more autonomous from the social
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56 environment than is generally the case for neurotypical individuals. However, this would still
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3 represent an ‘adaptive common variant pathways of human functional brain development’, as
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5
6 Johnson (2017:5) puts it, rather than evidence of a faulty component preventing people with
7
8 autism to reach full humanity. Overall, this study attempted to show that the analysis of
9
10 naturalistic data can help uncover the logic of autistic behaviour and orient autism studies toward
11
12 more fruitful research approaches.
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41 APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

- 42
43 : Colon(s): Extended or stretched sound.
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46 — Underlining: Vocalic emphasis.
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48
49 (.) Micropause: Brief pause of less than (0.2).
50
51
52 (1.2) Timed Pause: Intervals occurring within and between same or different speaker’s utterances in
53
54 tenths of seconds.
55
56
57 (()) Double Parentheses: non verbal actions, contextual information.
58
59
60 (don’t/won’t) Single Parentheses: Transcriptionist doubt (best guess) or (guess/other guess).
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1
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3 . Period: Falling vocal pitch.
4

5
6 ? Question Marks: Rising vocal pitch.
7
8

9 WORD Caps: Extreme loudness compared to surrounding talk.
10

11 [Brackets: beginning point at which current talk is overlapped by other talk.
12
13

14 [Bracket in italics: Simultaneous non verbal action
15
16

17 ↓↑ Arrows: Pitch resets; marked rising and falling shifts in intonation.
18
19

20 = Equal Signs: Latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.
21
22

23 ° ° Degree Signs: A passage of talk noticeably softer than surrounding talk.
24
25

26 > < Less Than/Greater Than Signs: Portions of an utterance delivered at a pace noticeably quicker (> <)
27
28 or slower (< >) than surrounding talk.
29
30

31 - Hyphens: Halting, abrupt cut off of sound or word.
32
33

34 .hhh: Audible inbreaths
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36

37 h h: Audible outbreaths, as for example in laughter or sighing
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40 wo(h)rd(h) outhbreaths within words, as in laughter interspersed in speech
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