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Mélissa Fox-Muratton

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Alexithymia and Neurodivergence: A Wittgensteinian Deconstruction

Mélissa Fox-Muraton (Clermont-Ferrand, France)

Abstract

This paper examines the pertinence of concept of alexithymia and the assessment tools used to screen for alexithymia (notably the Toronto Alexithymia Scale), especially with regard to the neurodivergent population. Defined as a personality trait involving difficulties identifying and describing feelings and externally orientated thinking, alexithymia is currently thought to affect 55% of Autistics and 41,5% of ADHDers (as opposed to 10% of the general population), and is often referred to as a deficit, impairment or disorder when related to neurodivergent populations. This paper focuses more specifically on autism, and suggests that assessment tools fail to take into account the neurosensory and communication differences in Autistics. It proposes alternative explanations as to why Autistics may score highly on alexithymia evaluations. Drawing on Wittgenstein's reflections from later works on the philosophy of psychology as well as the notion of language-games, it seeks to offer a reframing of the challenges encountered by neurodivergent individuals regarding the communication of feelings and sensations.

While Autism Spectrum Condition has long been associated with difficulties in emotional recognition and reciprocity, new research suggests that these difficulties may in fact represent a specific subset of individuals with co-occurring alexithymia (Kinnaird 2019). More specifically, a recent study suggests 55% of Autistics have some degree of alexithymia (Milosavljevic 2016). The trait is also widely found among other neurodivergent populations, notably 41,5% of ADHDers (Kiraz 2021). Defined in psychiatric literature in the 1970s (Sifneos 1973), alexithymia is technically not a diagnosable condition, rather a personality trait concerning 10% of the general population. However, alexithymia is often referred to as a 'disorder' presenting pathological 'symptoms' or 'impairment,' and more popularly as 'emotion-blindness' or a 'world without emotions,' especially in contexts where this trait is associated with persons with disabilities. The consensus in research today defines alexithymia as a multidimensional personality trait involving difficulties identifying one's feelings, difficulties describing feeling, and externally orientated thinking (Preece et al 2020). While some research does show differences in brain activity, alexithymia is most often diagnosed using self-reports through verbal assessments, where individuals are asked to respond to a series of questions about their ability to understand and express their emotional states. The most-used tool for this is the Toronto Alexithymia Scale, a twenty-question Likert-scale test providing possible response choices ranging

from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This tool includes statements such as: “It is difficult for me to find the right words for my feelings”; “I have physical sensations that even doctors don’t understand”; “I prefer to analyse problems rather than just describe them”; “I have feelings that I can’t quite identify”; “Being in touch with emotions is essential.”

In this paper, I aim to offer a Wittgensteinian exploration of the problems related to the use of such tools and concepts regarding the neurodivergent, and more specifically the Autistic, population (although many of the arguments may also apply to other forms of neurodivergence). This is particularly important insofar as alexithymia assessments are becoming more widespread in autism evaluations, and impacting the understanding of profiles and support needs (Ferguson 2023). While both in research and within neurodivergent communities it has become common to speak of alexithymia, the notion of alexithymia may however not do justice to the particular neurosensory (Daniel 2023) and communication differences of neurodivergent individuals. Notably, the concept of alexithymia fails to take into account the fact that emotions are socially constructed concepts (Feldman Barrett 2017) that rely heavily on the language-games through which we learn their how to use expressions of sensation or feeling. Neurodivergent individuals, however, may have both different sensory experiences of the world, and different ways of processing these experiences, leading to differences in the ways in which they play language-games. As Wittgenstein points out, we are all *taught* how to use expressions of feeling in meaningful ways within the context of shared language games—that is, we are taught what constitute understandable expressions and situations in which these should arise (Wittgenstein 2001, §244). There are ‘appropriate’ contexts in which it makes sense in our language-games to use expressions such as ‘I am in pain’ or ‘I am sad.’ The death of a loved one would constitute a generally recognized acceptable circumstance for the latter, where both the linguistic expression, and other non-verbalised expressions of grief, such as crying, would be perceived as comprehensible and expected.

Problems arise, however, when our language-games do not match up. What happens if a person says ‘I am sad’ or begins to cry after losing a pencil? Or if a person fails to cry at the funeral of a loved one, and *claims* not to *feel* sadness? In these contexts, one might assume that the person does not understand the

concept of sadness and the way in which they are supposed to be playing the language-game. Alternatively, the person may be seen as demonstrating a pathological reaction to the situation, an expression of inappropriate emotions.

Both the pathologizing view and the lack of understanding view fail to take into account, however, that there may be substantial differences in the ways in which individuals experience the world, process information, and communicate verbally and non-verbally. They presume either a lack of competence or a lack of emotional intelligence/regulation on the part of the individual, rather than taking into account the specificities of the ways in which neurosensory differences impact both experience and expression for neurodivergent individuals. These models deny neurodivergent experiences and communication, rather than exploring the possibility that neurodivergent individuals may be playing very different language-games than those used in neuronormative settings. They presume that there is a single, ‘right’ way to relate to and express events and emotional states. This can be particularly detrimental to neurodivergent individuals, especially regarding suggestions to tailor ‘therapeutic’ approaches to neurodivergents based on recognizing and mimicking ‘typical’ emotional expression, as this could further contribute to alienating individuals from the reality of their lived experience, forcing them to ‘mask’ rather than to understand their own experiences and advocate for their needs.

While the concept of alexithymia was initially described in relation to patients with diagnosed mental health conditions in whom observable, measurable physiological responses were attested, while patients reported not feeling anything, it is now used regarding a broad range of very different contexts. These include: 1) absence of reported or observable emotive responses; 2) individuals who dislike *speaking* about emotions or have difficulty doing so using verbal language; 3) individuals who tend to describe their experiences in factual terms rather than use emotion-based vocabulary; 4) people who report difficulty clearly identifying their emotional states (such as determining, when one is upset, whether one is sad, angry, scared); 5) people who have difficulty identifying the *cause* of their emotional states (i.e.: determining why one is angry or sad). Is alexithymia then a difficulty in putting words onto something ‘inner’ that is really there, and if so is this the result of an impairment or difference within the individual (such as difficulties with interoception or

metacognition)? Alternatively, does alexithymia result from real differences in the ways in which emotion or sensation are experienced and expressed, leading to a difficulty playing specific expected language-games? The concept of alexithymia, as it is currently used in psychology, seems to presuppose that there are ‘inner’ states that *should* be *universally* experienced, and imposes a deficit-based model of understanding on individuals who do not demonstrate or relate to expected expressions, behaviours and contexts of feeling. It assumes that feelings and sensations are all experienced and expressed in a universal way, without taking into account individual variation.

Wittgenstein’s late writings on psychology evoke issues of how we should interpret differences in perception and communication. He asks what notions such as blindness and seeing can mean to different individuals: “I can teach human beings the meaning of the words ‘blind’ and ‘sighted’, and indeed the sighted learn them, just as the blind do. Then do the blind know what it is like to see? But do the sighted know?” (Wittgenstein 1992, 75). Wittgenstein suggests that it is not an issue of learning concepts, but rather one of life: “the lives of the blind are different from those of the sighted” (1992, 75). One may very well be able to understand concept of ‘sight,’ but this does not entail that these will be used in the same ways, or even in the same language-games, for individuals navigating the world through different experiences.

The challenge that this poses, as with the case of alexithymia, suggests that it is not so much a problem of a person’s inner experiences or mental states, but rather one of communication. Wittgenstein notes that regarding expression of feeling, the difficulty arises when expressions do not concord with expectations: “Someone smiles and his further reactions fit neither a genuine nor a simulated joy. We might say “I don’t know my way around with him. It is neither the picture (pattern) of genuine nor of pretended joy.” Mightn’t his relation to a person with normal feelings be like that of a colour-blind person to the normal-sighted?” (1992, 61). Expressing feeling in such a way that the other does not know how to interpret the expression (in this case, through a smile) leads to *communicative* difficulties—we do not know how to react, how to interpret this particular behaviour. We might assume indeed that it is a type of emotion-blindness, a different or impaired way of experiencing and interpreting the world. However, Wittgenstein is cautious about this type of interpretation. As he notes, when we “can’t figure...people out,” we should

perhaps rather question our own belief that we can and should always be able to determine someone's mental state, and instead understand that what is posing a problem for us is our own set of beliefs: "Isn't it their reactions that I can't figure out? That for instance I cannot foresee; that keep on surprising me?" (Wittgenstein 1992, 69).

I would suggest that there are a number of reasons for which neurodivergent and especially Autistic individuals (like myself) may have high scores on alexithymia tests, which do not reflect the individual's actual ability to accurately identify their own feelings and sensations. Importantly, Autistic people do have different neurosensory profiles, which means that we experience the world differently to non-autistics: the touch of a certain fabric, or a particular sound or colour might be experienced as intensely painful, or to the contrary as a source of intense pleasure, where to non-autistic individuals these are just more or less neutral aspects of the environment. From birth, the Autistic person's reactions (cries of pain or expressions of joy) are however interpreted through the lens of non-autistic experience—a particular expression will be greeted by those around them with the normalizing aim of instructing the infant or child in how to (re)act or interpret certain situations, very often through negative and invalidating feedback—disregarding and shaming autistic reactions as over-reactions, being dramatic or oversensitive, acting out, making things up for attention, etc. Autistic individuals may be repeatedly informed that our crying or laughter is inappropriate, that our expressions of pain are unfounded, that our non-verbal expressions of emotion (facial expressions, posture, etc.) are inappropriate for the situation. As Wittgenstein notes, the "belief that our concepts are the only reasonable ones consist[s] in [the fact t]hat it doesn't occur to us that others are *concerned* with completely different things, and that our concepts are connected with what interests us, with what matters to us. But in addition, our interest is connected with particular facts in the outer world" (1992, 46).

Every Autistic person has their own unique sensory profile, yet neurosensory differences are an integral part of autistic experience. The difficulties we encounter with communication, especially around feeling and sensation, may to a great extent be linked to the lack of understanding on the part of those around us, and of specific language in which to express our experiences. This is not to claim that our experiences are private sensations that would only be

expressible through a private language; rather, that the shared public language of non-autistic individuals (neuronormative language), relating to the ways in which those individuals experience the world and the objects in it that they are concerned with, may not provide us with the concepts and means of expression to adequately convey our experiences. Moreover, the spontaneous reactions that we may have to certain situations (e.g. being in a noisy environment, being forced to sit still, etc.) may lead to expressions which are interpreted by others as irritation, anger, disinterest, boredom, apathy, etc., when in fact they are merely a response to sensory stimuli. Without the knowledge that our experiences are different to those of others, or other means of interpreting the situation, we will likely take on the concepts that others project upon us and our outward behaviours. Unlike other types of perceptual differences, such as colour-blindness, which can be tested for to ascertain whether disagreement about colour is the result of such a difference (Wittgenstein 1992, 24), there are no specific tests to establish sensory processing differences, and communication is particularly difficult for non-speaking or pre-speaking individuals. If my lack of eye-contact is described by others as disinterest or boredom, or my sensory discomfort interpreted as irritation or anger, I may very well end up with a very different contextual understanding of the use that these terms play in language-games. If I am instructed to smile and say I am happy despite being in pain and distress, because it is socially acceptable or expected, how am I supposed to learn to use expressions in ways that correlate to my experience? Even if I do recognize the dissonance, I may have no specific language in which to communicate my experiences.

Both neurosensory differences and the process through which we learn feeling and sensation concepts can provide important clues as to why Autistic individuals might struggle with expression of feeling, and especially why we might respond in particular ways to the types of questions asked on alexithymia questionnaires. Hyper- or hyposensitivity can certainly lead one to have multiple experiences of physical sensations that doctors do not understand, especially if one does not have the knowledge or ability to communicate that these are common autistic experiences. Difficulties finding the right words to express feelings can arise from years or decades of being told that one's spontaneous expressions of pain or joy are inappropriate for a

given situation. The constant invalidation one might encounter, as well as an obligation to mask one's spontaneous reactions, could also easily lead a person to suppress feelings, or to consider them inessential.

It is not merely neurosensory differences that need to be taken into account, however. Autistic individuals also communicate differently, generally with a tendency to favour more direct, information-based communication. Wittgenstein reminds us that “we not only fail to understand someone else when he hides his feelings, but frequently also when he does not hide them, indeed when he does his utmost to make himself understood” (1992, 28). And here again, it is a divergence in language-games that may provide an explanation. Although neuronormative language-games are based on following socially acceptable scripts, such as demonstrating and expressing sadness at a funeral, an Autistic person might not follow the social script, and might give an honest response. When asked if they ‘feel sad,’ they may very well say no, because that would not be an adequate description of their state at that time: perhaps what they are feeling at that precise moment is numb, or heavy, or lethargic. Perhaps they are experiencing sensory overwhelm due to the lighting and echoes in the church, and *feel* itchy and restless. While this type of response challenges the neuronormative language-game, it should not be necessarily interpreted as indicative of an inability to identify emotion and even less a lack of empathy. Rather than dismiss such responses as a lack of emotional awareness, should we not rather assume that perchance “exactly the same thing is going on within him as within me, only it is expressed differently?” (Wittgenstein 1992, 28).

Communication differences can also explain why Autistic individuals may have difficulty responding to direct questions about feeling and emotion, as these questions are often framed in broad, general terms: i.e., ‘how are you doing/feeling?’ While these types of open questions appeal to non-autistics, Autistic individuals tend to struggle with these questions, and a typical (although not always articulated) answer can be ‘I don’t know,’ or ‘What aspect of my life are you enquiring about?’ Theories about autism developed by Autistic researchers offer convincing arguments as to why this may be the case. “Monotropism” (Murray et al. 2005), the first theory of autism developed by Autistic researchers, convincingly suggests that the distinguishing feature of (at least some) autistic profiles is the way in which attention is focused on a

single task or topic at a given time, as opposed to the more frequent split attention among the general population. While a monotropic mind is able to focus more intensely, this also entails difficulties with transitions, or changing contextual situations. When asked to respond to questions about how one feels, a monotropic thinker might have difficulty getting out of their immediate point of focus, leading to seemingly incongruous remarks from the perspective of the person asking the question, such as a monologue on the person's current topic of interest, or a remark on the sensory experience they are currently focused on (e.g.: 'it's too hot in this room'). While from the perspective of a non-autistic person these might appear to be evasive responses or to convey an inability to get in touch with emotions, from the perspective of the Autistic person they may be very accurate depictions of their current state, and be communicating the information they wish to communicate. As Damian Milton has argued, conceptions of Autistic individuals as incapable of empathy or unable to understand emotions relied on judging Autistic communication with neurotypicals; Autistics are however no worse at empathizing and communicating with other Autistics than neurotypicals are with other neurotypicals. Problems occur in cross-neurotype communication; this is now commonly referred to as the "double-empathy problem" (Milton 2012).

I am of course not claiming that alexithymia cannot be a helpful term for certain individuals in clarifying their challenges and finding solutions. My contention is, however, that evaluating neurodivergent individuals' understanding of and expression of our emotional states and feelings based on neuronormative patterns can undermine the reality of neurodivergent experience. Rather than require that neurodivergent individuals conform to neuronormative expectations, we should learn to expand our language-games, and recognize with Wittgenstein that indetermination and variability are the foundations of both human life and language (1980, §626-627). As Wittgenstein notes: "the main difficulty arises from our imagining the experience (the pain, for instance) as a thing, for which of course we have a name and whose concept is therefore quite easy to grasp...What we don't see is that the *concept* pain is only beginning to be investigated" (1992, 43).

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