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RECONSIDERING THE DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM: A SOURCE OF EXCLUSION AND STIGMATISATION OF AUTISTIC PERSONS¹

abstract

As Damian Milton has argued in several papers, autistic individuals face what he has called the “double empathy problem”. On the one hand, autistic individuals often have difficulties in understanding emotions, social cues and expressing their own emotions. On the other hand, neurotypical individuals and institutions often project their implicit normative rules of behavior and assumptions onto autistic individuals, ascribing to them a lack of empathetic understanding that is frequently inaccurate, resulting in their exclusion, stigmatisation, and even traumatisation. In this paper I employ a range of embodied-phenomenological perspectives to analyse how this double empathy problem is constituted and institutionalised, and explore which forms of empathy or lack thereof are involved in the exclusionary mechanisms directed towards autistic individuals. The paper concludes that a combination of phenomenological research perspectives enhances the understanding of the double empathy problem and indicates potential solutions to it.

keywords

autism, empathy, affective arrangements, stigmatisation, oppression

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1. Introduction According to the ICD 11, the symptoms of autism spectrum disorders include deficits in communication as well as deficits in understanding the emotional-expressive behavior of others and in the ability to express one's own emotions. These supposed limitations on the part of autistic individuals relate, for example, to the understanding and expression of gestures and facial expressions in a social-emotional context, as well as to their integration with symbolic language. In general, these social challenges are often associated in the literature with impairments in empathy or empathic access to other people (Jones et al., 2010) and it is widely agreed that these symptoms are at least partly rooted in a functioning of the brain that is different from that of "neurotypical" individuals. There is strong evidence, however, that there are also socio-emotional barriers and mechanisms which contribute or even *co-constitute* how autistic persons' expressive behavior and emotional life are triggered, structured, and developed in the social realm (Krueger, 2021). Damian Milton (2012) has termed this challenge the "double empathy problem" – a challenge to explain how and why these barriers operate. One central idea is that neurotypical individuals project their own implicit normative rules of empathic behavior onto autistic individuals, with the result that the latter are found wanting. Yet the view of autistic persons as lacking empathy is very often highly inaccurate and applying neurotypical norms to them can result in their exclusion, stigmatisation, and even traumatisation (Milton et al. 2022, p. 1902).

In what follows, I use a range of phenomenological perspectives to analyse how this double empathy problem is constituted and stabilized, and which forms (or deficits) of empathy are involved in the mechanisms of exclusion applied to autistic individuals. It is my thesis that embodied phenomenological approaches and critical phenomenology mutually elucidate dimensions of autism which remain unexplored when applying them separately to topics such as the double empathy problem. These different phenomenological accounts share many assumptions and insights. But what has hitherto been missing is a systematic explication of their enhanced explanatory power when used in combination to deepen our understanding of autism in its embodied and institutional constitution.

To justify this thesis, I first give an outline of phenomenological-oriented accounts of autism and show how they explain the challenges of socio-emotional interactions and empathetic understanding from the perspective of autistic individuals. Second, I draw on critical phenomenology and empirical research on autism to complement these findings by elucidating how the double empathy problem is socially co-constituted and contributes to the challenges, stigmatisation, and traumatisation experienced by autistic individuals, especially

during their school life. I also refer to first-person reports of affected persons and qualitative studies to analyse how neurotypical norms, emotions and social arrangements exclude autistic individuals from participating in social interactions. Finally, I indicate how non-autistic individuals and restructured educational arrangements could contribute to overcoming exclusionary mechanisms by a deepening and enhancing of empathetic skills and by a re-arrangement of the autistic person's socio-emotional position in social institutions. This will also elucidate how the systematic applications of distinct phenomenological approaches strengthen the exploration and understanding of the double empathy problem.

Even if it is undisputed in neuropsychological research that the symptoms of autism spectrum disorders are related to the functioning of the brain, they cannot, from an embodied phenomenological perspective, be reduced to them. A core conviction of an embodied oriented phenomenology is that mental and behavioral phenomena do not simply reside inside the skull of an individual person but are the outcome of intersubjective relations and interactions with others (Fuchs 2015, p. 193). An embodied phenomenological account moreover rejects the view, common in cognitive science, that interactive encounters are normally facilitated by “mind-reading” or mentalizing capacities based on a “theory of mind” (Gallagher, 2008, Krueger 2018). The latter term has been coined by Premack and Woodruff to specify the ascription of mental states – such as beliefs and desires – to others and oneself, thereby allowing inferences and predictions of behaviour (Premack & Woodruff, 1978, see also Leslie et al., 2004 for a similar but more nuanced view). Instead, proponents of the phenomenological tradition, drawing on works by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Max Scheler, hold the view that one can *directly* perceive the basic intracorporeal emotions, expressions, moods, and affective states of the other. In facial expressions, gestures, bodily movements, postures and eye contact, mental processes and states are directly disclosed and become accessible; they are not merely the outcome of personal or sub-personal inference. As we will see, this is not to say that embodied accounts reject the theory of mind (ToM) entirely. Rather, they point out that the representational processes pointed to in the ToM come into play at *later* developmental stages, in particular when the natural flow of interaction is disturbed. Giving up core cognitivist assumptions such as *representationalism* and the *computational model of the human mind* (Thompson, 2007), it comes as no surprise that embodied phenomenological approaches diverge in important respects from standard research on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) too.

2. Embodied-Phenomenological Approaches to Autism

2.1 Cognitivist Assumptions in Research on ASD

Almost thirty years ago, Baron-Cohen et. al. (Baron-Cohen et al. 1995) established the highly influential hypothesis in autism research that deficits in the individual's ToM can explain “...in even computational terms” the different symptoms of social impairments of autistic persons (p. 38). Now, one can appreciate the scientific rigor involved in such attempts to find a functional mechanism that might explain a variety of symptoms associated with ASD. Likewise, the empirical findings of such research – based, for instance, on the Sally and Anne false-belief task – have proved to be both replicable and robust and to confirm that autistic persons experience challenges in applying mental states to other individuals (Tager-Flusberg 2007, p. 311). However, highly problematic presuppositions are built into this explanatory strategy, not least the ascription of a supposed “absence” of empathy to autistic persons, and in the way it conceives emotional and socio-emotional cues (see also Tager-Flusberg 2007, p. 312).

The first problematic assumption made by the proponents of ToM in autism research is that one cannot have a direct experience of others' mental states but need in each case

a meta-representational system and set of processing mechanisms to gain access to other people. Such mechanisms are supposed to be internally realized by the brain through the ascribing of mental attitudes, their content, and interrelationships to oneself and other agents (Leslie et al. 2004). But these assumptions rest on a “disembodied stance”, combined with an internalist neurocentric view of the human mind – a wider feature of the cognitive sciences today. Starting with a reductionistic and internalist picture of the human mind, this approach to ASD thus misses the *social intertwinement* of the challenges that autistic persons face in the lifeworld. What Baran-Cohen et. al. looked for in their early studies was a *defect*, an *impairment* of a meta-representational function, with the result that they fundamentally neglected the complexity of ASD and how it manifests itself in social interactions and institutions.

A second problem is that the complexity of ASD is already underestimated in the researchers’ findings and interpretation of their early studies, since there had always been autistic persons who can pass false-belief tests, even if they experience similar challenges in social interaction as other autistic persons.

These two problems considered together, the danger of a *stigmatisation* was already lurking in early ASD research. Following Ervin Goffman (Goffman 1963), I consider a “stigma” as an attribute that has a discrediting effect on the stigmatised individual and is also regarded as a failing or shortcoming embedded in a relational web of social ascriptions (p. 3). Starting with a reductionist, disembodied picture of the human mind, autistic individuals were then measured against an impoverished cognitivist standard and diagnosed as lacking the supposed “essence” of the normal-functioning human mind. Such prejudices have played a major role in creating a picture of ASD, both in medicine and public opinion, that regards autistic individuals as entirely lacking empathetic skills, a prejudice and stigmatisation which contributes to their marginalization and exclusion in social institutions, as will be explained below.

2.2 Embodied-Phenomenological Concepts of Empathy in Autism Research.

Joseph Parnas and Pierre Bovet have inspired and established a phenomenological approach to ASD that stands in contrast to conventional medical models which base their diagnoses and explanations on a complex of symptoms. Attempting to provide an objectivist descriptive medical model of autism leads, according to Parnas and Bovet (Parnas & Bovet 1991), to the disintegration of the entire phenomenon, since autism cannot be captured in any definite operational or clinical formula (p. 17). From an embodied-phenomenological standpoint, the existential dimension of ASD is only revealed in relational processes and is thus “...a phenomenon *in-itself for-us* ...” (p. 16). Reduced resonances in interactions within the lifeworld are a significant aspect of the appearance of autism. But why are the relations among autistic persons and their social environment affected in multifaceted ways as described in clinical definitions of ASD? This is an urgent research question in phenomenological psychopathology, given that the lack of a ToM on the part of autistic persons cannot be the decisive reason for the well-documented challenges they face, such as sensorimotor integration, initiating movements, emotional expressions or understanding social cues.

In response to these problems, Thomas Fuchs has developed the view that basic embodied dimensions of interactions and interaffectivity are disturbed at a very early stage of development in autistic individuals, long before an explicit ToM is established. Why and how might this approach contribute to a deeper understanding of the double empathy problem? As we have seen, for the phenomenological tradition, basic empathetic understanding of individuals is accomplished by focusing on embodied expressions such as gestures, facial expressions, or by encountering the gaze of the other. These expressions are primarily constituted during the preverbal development of the infant, within the first year, which is typically characterised by the formation and differentiation of imitative skills, establishing

inter-affective relationships, and sharing emotions. Such capacities are at the root of empathic skills and social understanding (Fuchs 2015, p. 193). There is evidence that at least some facets of autism – such as reduced emotional resonance and imitative expressions and a reduced or delayed interest in social stimuli – have their roots in early infancy. According to Fuchs (Fuchs 2015), there are at least three basic dimensions of embodied capacities which are already disturbed at a very young age in autistic children, namely the aforementioned (a) *imitative skills and affective attunement*, (b) *sensory-motor integration* and (c) *holistic perception* (Fuchs 2015, p. 196).

That difficulties with deeply embodied forms of sensory-motor integration can lead to challenging situations for autistic persons is underlined by the following self-report by Dietmar Zöllner, a well-known German author on the topic of ASD who is himself autistic. In the following excerpt from his fascinating and moving autobiography, Zöllner describes an incident when he came very close being run over by a car:

Walking in the field. A car is coming towards us. It still seems far away. I hear mother calling. I am irritated. What I see and hear does not fit. I see mother far away. Her voice is very close. The sound of the car is also close. I stop and do not react ... My problem is that I get the sensory information partly distorted ... So I have to sort out the sensory information via the intellect, which takes time. The reactions then come late or not at all because I can't cope with sorting them out or I panic (Zöllner 2001, p. 84, my translation).

In this scenario, various intertwined reactions hint at the aforementioned embodied capacities. Clearly, it is a challenge for Zöllner to form the different sense stimuli, such as vision and sound, into a fully-fledged *Gestalt* perception. Lacking the required capacity for integration contributes to or causes his disorientation, since the relation among the different sense stimuli is embedded in an entire spatial context where the estimation of *distance* and *proximity* is affected.

It is not only the perception of phenomenal space in its different sense modalities that lacks integration in Zöllner's case; the *social meaning* of the scenario as threatening is not directly perceived either. Thus, as Zöllner further reports, his mother runs towards him, shouting his name and gesticulating, but this does not result in any immediate reaction on Zöllner's part. As Oren Bader and Thomas Fuchs (Bader & Fuchs 2022) point out in a recent paper, autistic persons not only have recurrent difficulties in creating a holistic intermodal *Gestalt* perception but also in grasping the *context* and *meaning* of a social situation and social space (p. 212).

A further significant aspect of Zöllner's self-report is where he specifies his "reflexive" or "intellectualist" strategy for coping with the delayed sensory and social *Gestalt* perception. In consciously sorting through the sensory information, Zöllner applies a capacity which is a necessary precondition of a ToM and which helps him compensate for his incompletely developed *Gestalt* perception.

In sum, the embodied phenomenological approach contributes in a number of ways to a deepened understanding of the double empathy problem. In particular it shows that the cognitivist account of ASD involves a one-sided and stigmatizing model of ToM as the supposed central mechanism for empathetic understanding of other individuals. The assumed absence of ToM and empathy is then projected onto autistic individuals with the aim of explaining a wide range of their symptoms.

This said, however, one must note that, in response to widespread criticism of the thesis that autistic persons have "zero degree of empathy" (Baron Cohen, 2011), the classical

cognitivist model has recently been refined. Thus, current research on autism differentiates, for instance, between cognitive and emotional forms of empathy. According to this view, the former specifies the ability to recognize other persons' mental states and the latter the ability to react appropriately at the emotional level to such states (Shalev et al., 2022, p. 1918). As has been shown in various recent studies, autistic individuals can lack the former capacity while possessing the latter. At the same time there are also cases where autistic individuals show an *excess* of emotional empathy (Shalev et al. 2022, p. 1918). Nevertheless, this refined but still dualistic picture of the human mind does not go so far as to trace the symptoms of ASD back to challenges in embodied forms of primary intersubjectivity. What it does achieve is a more nuanced and less stigmatizing account of the challenges autistic persons face in empathetic understanding.

What is missing in this approach, however, is a deeper analysis of the role non-autistic persons and concrete social institutions play in the manifestation of ASD. For instance, the role which interaffective processes (such as difficulties in understanding social cues, emotional expression, or ambiguous language) play in the development of autistic symptoms, a role which might even be causal for some of them. This insight in the phenomenology-inspired research on autism is a significant advance in understanding the challenges autistic persons face in social interactions. Nevertheless, this is only one side of double empathy.

As we have seen, Parnas and Bouvet developed their phenomenological account of ASD together with a deconstruction of the predominant medical model of the disease. This demonstrates a general awareness and socially critical attitude towards the biomedical discourse on this type of neurodivergence. It indicates, at least, a *socio-critical potential* to explore the role social and institutional conditions might play in the manifestation of ASD. But it would be misleading to assume that most embodied-phenomenological accounts of ASD analyse systematically the various ways in which social arrangements influence and even co-constitute autistic behavior and experience. How *exclusive* and *stigmatizing* mechanisms shape autistic individuals in their identity and social expressivity is typically not discussed in the embodied phenomenological accounts set out above. But the methodological turn to rigorously include and explore first-person experiences of autistic persons is a key precondition for critical phenomenology broadening the analysis of ASD's possible social determinants. The role social mechanisms play in the constitution of autism is explored instead in critical phenomenological accounts of ASD, which I will consider in what follows.

3. Critical Phenomenology, Affective Arrangements and Autism Research

What critical phenomenology brings to the table in autism research are frequently neglected dimensions of ASD, such as exclusionary mechanisms towards autistic persons, how autistic individuals experience stigmatisation, and how this affects their social, psychical, and physical life and the constitution of their bodies. As Lisa Guenther (Guenther, 2019) puts it, critical phenomenology has the task of giving a rigorous account of how social patterns and historical structures such as “patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity” shape and reproduce natural attitudes of the lifeworld (p. 12).

Joel Krueger has recently applied insights from critical phenomenology – in particular from Sarah Ahmed's work – to ASD. Ahmed explores, among other themes, how the possible orientations of bodies in space are enabled and affected by social ascriptions such as “whiteness”. A body ascribed this quality, for instance, is invested with a freedom, effectiveness and institutionalized privilege that has historical roots and is systemically entrenched (Ahmed, 2006). By contrast, individuals who are socially recognised as non-white experience social restriction, forms of uncertainty and blockages in many social contexts. Such persons are not allowed to take up space or indeed to be in the world in the same way as white individuals, which can result practically in their existential negation (Ahmed 2006, p. 161).

Krueger's (Krueger, 2021) insight is to relate these and similar considerations to autistic bodies and how they are integrated or excluded in social space. Autistic individuals are often hindered and excluded because they inhabit social spaces that are shaped by neurotypical "affective arrangements" (p. 123), i.e. a type of material-discursive formation connecting multiple actors in a dynamic orchestrated way. Such formations consist of affects and relations which organise heterogeneous elements such as human beings, language and space into a composition (Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wünschner, 2017). These affective arrangements can alter the spatial extension of bodies by vesting powers in individuals – fields of affordances – that allow or forbid them to enter particular social settings. Moreover, affective arrangements have, alongside their organisational set-up, an atmospheric tonality of "affecting and being affected" by their socio-material constituents (Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wünschner, 2017, p.3). Defined in this way, one can explore, as Krueger does, how affective arrangements can amount to "atmospheres of inclusions and exclusions." Autistic individuals frequently report experiencing neurotypical social spaces as functioning in exclusionary ways. They have the overall impression of not fitting into social arrangements, often resulting in their social alienation and disorientation (Krueger, 2021, p. 123). Let us analyse these experiences and mechanisms in more detail.

If we relate these insights to the example of Dietmar Zöllner's near-miss with the car, one sees no obviously *intentional* exclusionary social mechanisms at work. But there is a hidden *structural exclusion*, because Zöllner is confronted with a traffic environment designed around neurotypical individuals and which may be unsafe for people who struggle with the sensorimotor integration of their body and with semi-automized interactions with the environment. Certainly, Zöllner's dangerous situation arises primarily because of his difficulties with sensory-motor integration and holistic perception – something that supports the embodied phenomenological analysis given earlier. Yet, from the vantage point of critical phenomenology, one can add that Zöllner is overwhelmed by the situation because, for him, spontaneous bodily movements have to be undertaken "intellectually", i.e. reflexively, and this does not fit with the cultural requirement of *habitually* synchronising one's actions with the socio-technical affordances of a dynamic traffic situation at every moment (something, it must be admitted, even non-autistic persons sometimes struggle with). That scenarios like this create an atmosphere of danger for the person with ADS and can negatively affect their quality of life is underlined in Zöllner's description of the panic attacks they induce.

3.1 Schools as Affective Arrangements of Exclusion and Inclusion

That autistic persons face not only structural but also *intentionally* exclusive affective arrangements in social institutions is highlighted in a further self-report, this time written by Regine Winkelmann, an autistic person who speaks in particular of the reactions of her classmates and teachers to her autistic behaviour at school:

The older we got in our class, the more diffuse the social rules became to me. Nothing ever really seemed to add up. I could never be sure that I had understood a remark, a joke, a statement correctly. My reactions and responses were usually "the hoot" for the others. I had the feeling that I never really fitted into the usual mold (Winkelmann n.d., my translation).

Winkelmann starts her description with common challenges faced by autistic individuals. She talks about her difficulties in grasping social rules, the complexity of symbolic language use, its understanding and concrete interpretation. To grasp the ambiguity of a joke, rhetorical exaggeration or irony, one needs to have an immediate access both to the meaning of co-

present socio-emotional cues in a specific context and the multifaceted embeddedness of meaning in a social semantic web. As we have seen in the research, autistic individuals are often struggle with such demands. How challenging these processes are for Winkelmann is directly revealed when she reports a feeling of permanent uncertainty (“I could never be sure”). This is only one striking aspect of the quoted passage, though. What is particularly relevant for the “double empathy problem” is that Winkelmann’s perplexed reactions meet with laughter from her classmates: in their eyes she is failing to react in accordance with expected neurotypical rule-governed behavior.

Such stigmatizing social reactions had a devastating effect on Winkelmann’s life in the social institution of the school, where exclusionary atmospheres for autistic individuals are frequently reported and attested. When she describes a feeling of “not fitting into the usual mold”, she indicates the existential dimension of her experiences and how traumatizing these instances of bullying were. In further autobiographical passages she describes how these experiences led to depression and psychosomatic disorders. In other words, the classroom’s exclusionary atmosphere exerts an emotionally oppressive power upon her, literally forcing her out of social space. In her case this was sometimes accompanied by strong bodily reactions, including “severe headaches and vomiting.” On a school trip her symptoms even became so serious that teachers eventually gave her official exemption from activities and she “crawled gratefully into bed.”

How impactful social environments are for the exclusion or inclusion of autistic individuals has been explored and confirmed in a study by Brede et al. In this interview-based research, nine autistic individuals (along with their parents and schoolteachers) were interviewed with an initial focus on the experiences which led to them being excluded from their respective schools. At the time of the interview, the students were attending an “Inclusive Learning Hub” especially designed to re-integrate them back into school life (Brede et al. 2017, p 1). In evaluating the main reasons for the exclusion, Brede et. al. identifies in particular (a) the children’s difficulties in adjusting to the school and (b) the failure of staff to respond adequately to the students’ special needs (Brede et al., 2017, p. 7). When one looks at the details of the students’ experiences, oppressive and disrespectful mechanisms of exclusion, as in Winkelmann’s descriptions, come to the fore:

Rather than them giving any warning whatsoever, this random woman dragged me out of the classroom. So even being put into the other classroom in the first place, after being told that I wouldn’t, would have been annoying enough, being dragged out by someone I have never met before is even worse [young person] (Brede et al. 2017, p. 8).

What this passage describes is intrusive and all-but abusive behavior on the part of teaching staff, violating the personal integrity of the student in various physical and psychological ways. The autistic student is “dragged ... out of the classroom” without warning, physical violence used to displace his body from the social learning arrangement and any possibility of autonomous response denied. The shocking incident not only compromises his dignity and social position in the class but broke a former agreement that no exclusion would take place – a painful erosion of trust. That the exclusion is carried out not by a familiar teacher but a random member of teaching staff only makes things worse.

How traumatic these and similar experiences must be for autistic individuals is revealed in the following statement of another autistic student interviewed by Brede et al.: “It was a very depressing time for me because it was just, I was ill, as in the way of, not as in coughing all the time, just in who I was. I wasn’t right’ [young person]” (Brede et al. 2017, p. 8). The short self-report emphasizes the deterioration of the student’s mental health during her school years:

deepening depressions that reached a point where the school arrangement affected her entire being at an existential level. What the study exposes is the woefully inadequate arrangements for autistic students, for instance a lack of personal space to retreat to in stressful situations, or a lack of experienced teachers trained in the special needs of autistic individuals. Such events amount to an institutionalized injustice towards autistic students, as their later successful re-integration at the “Inclusive Learning Hubs” underlines.

These self-reports already shed light on the second side of the empathy problem. Not only are neurotypical settings sometimes dangerous for autistic individuals, such as the challenges of modern traffic (which frequently erect barriers to the physical and mental needs of autistic individuals). But there are also powerful exclusive strategies that are deeply entrenched in affective arrangements such as school classrooms or other social subsystems, which embody a lack of empathy towards autistic individuals at many levels. By encountering autistic persons in these settings, non-autistic individuals sometimes have difficulties in understanding and interpreting autistic behavior. The reason is that they do not know, or at least do not know well enough, what it is like to struggle with, for instance, specific forms of sensorimotor integration, controlling one’s movement, being overwhelmed and stressed in overcrowded noisy situations or having problems grasping irony or ambiguity in speech. There are, however, different options for non-autistic individuals or groups to react to autistic individuals’ problems, not least to try to *establish empathy*: to try to imagine what the other is experiencing and how this affects his or her behavior.

In this sense a further second dimension of empathy – sometimes labeled “sympathy” – is revealed as a form of *feeling-with*, which follows once one has realized the emotional states of another person and allows one to develop a form of co-joy, co-sadness, or co-compassion (Breyer 2019, p. 434). The latter aspect in particular points to a further dimension of empathy that non-autistic people are lacking in the social situations described above. Being dragged out of the classroom or being laughed at by fellow students reveals a deep lack of sympathy and ethical concern, the absence of an ethically based empathetic engagement. It is this absence of sympathy that makes possible the exclusion of autistic persons from social arrangements, reinforces the manifestation of autistic symptoms and further comorbidities such as anxiety disorders or depression.

As has been pointed out in educational research on how to re-integrate excluded students back into schools, the classroom is the key interface where student’s educational connections or disconnections take place (McGregor & Mills, 2012, 847). Within these constituted spaces of affective arrangements, pedagogical interventions are decisive for establishing or re-establishing engagement and trust (McGregor & Mills 2012, 848). How strongly these processes of re-integration depend on ethically based empathetic engagement with autistic pupils is confirmed in Beede et al.’s study. They point out that successful re-integrating of autistic pupils in the “Hub” is accomplished above all by establishing trusting relationships between teachers and pupils. As the authors also show, this is only possible with a strong empathic engagement which takes a range of forms. In particular, the feeling of being taken seriously marks a decisive step towards establishing trust in the interpersonal relationship and the institution:

The staff is really good. They take school seriously and they also can be a bit fun and crazy at times and they understand us or try to understand us and they try their hardest to communicate in meltdown and just they’re the best at doing that sort of stuff. They should get a super badge [young person] (Brede et al. 2017, p. 10).

But this is only one aspect of how empathetic engagement can be applied within schools for the successful integration of autistic students. Further forms of engagement include teachers

helping establish a smooth transition to daily school life by considering autistic student's anxieties, by accepting how autistic individuals are in the first place, or creating affective arrangements in class which incorporate their special needs. Examples of the latter are the use of preferred colors, use of visual rather than just verbal teaching methods, opportunities to retreat in difficult situations or the removal of distracting items (Brede et al. 2017, p. 11). All these examples make clear how empathetic engagement is *the key for social integration* and how autistic individuals can profit from a re-arrangement of affective institutions.

4. Concluding Considerations

The rejection of purely cognitivist approaches to ASD is the crucial starting point for an embodied phenomenological exploration of autism as a type of neurodivergence and its individual manifestations. The reigning paradigm in autism research which assumes a complete lack of empathy on the part of persons with ASD has turned out to be a social prejudice, one that is unsupported by empirical findings. As this paper has shown, phenomenological approaches can bring to light that these prejudices are in part the result of classical cognitivist assumptions which fail to specify important roots of autistic symptoms in social interactions

According to the embodied-phenomenological approach, difficulties in creating a holistic intermodal Gestalt perception or grasping the *context* and *meaning* of a social situation are not the result of a lack of ToM. Those difficulties are rather the result of embodied capacities being disturbed at a very young age. What and how social affective arrangements contribute, for instance, to the emerging difficulties of affective attunement in the dynamic development of ASD is then a further research question that supplements and extends embodied phenomenological accounts of ASD.

As we have seen, critical phenomenology has the analytic and explanatory resources to bring together insights of embodied-phenomenological oriented research to comprehend how institutional constraints engender or perpetuate autistic symptoms. Winckelmann's self-reports elucidate how these two research perspectives mutually inform each other. They enable a better understanding of ASD and can guide interventions. As Winckelmann points out, she has difficulties in grasping social rules. Her situation is made worse by the stigmatizing behavior in her classroom, which results in distress and psychosomatic symptoms. Embodied-phenomenological research offers new perspectives on how and why empathetic access and behavior is differently constituted in people living with ASD. With the further perspective of critical phenomenology and additional empirical research on autism in the educational context, it becomes clear that the institutionalized lack of empathetic engagement is the motor for stigmatisation and exclusion of autistic individuals in social spaces such as schools.

While these arrangements contribute significantly to the manifestation of autistic symptoms and comorbidities such as anxiety and depression, it is also the case that, with strengthened empathetic engagement, ethical commitment and additional knowledge, the integration of autistic individuals into social institutions can be achieved and improved. These findings suggest that the double empathy problem has potential solutions in improvements in the quality of life of autistic persons and the restructuring of affective arrangements to their specific needs.

These findings return us to the original thesis of the paper. Embodied-phenomenological approaches take seriously the first-person perspective and experience of autistic individuals, Critical phenomenology can integrate the results of this approach and widen the scope of analysis to the socio-political realm. Stigmatizing and excluding mechanism towards autistic individuals are ingrained in their everyday experiences and contribute to autistic symptoms and to further psychosomatic diseases. Once stigmatizing behavior towards

autistic persons is recognized as systematically entrenched, e.g., in schools, one can consider it a form of institutionalized social injustice and begin to find ways to overcome it. Such normative considerations are then based on ethical concepts that imply a transformation from a descriptive phenomenological stance to an interventionist one. Thus, bringing both phenomenological research perspectives together not only enhances our understanding of ASD, but it also broadens the space for practical interventions at a socio-institutional level.

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