New ways of thinking about autism

Two innovative studies of autism get to the heart of the matter, finds Iain McClure

Autism has become a major phenomenon of our time. These two books, in their different ways, explore why this curious condition seems to be becoming commoner, why popular Western culture is almost obsessed with it, and why it is still a shameful diagnosis in many cultures. Furthermore, by considering autism both books address the fundamental question of what it means to be human. A common springboard for the books is that each author is the father of a child with autism. Each has searched for a meaning within his child’s condition, so generating two different but similarly innovative and moving accounts.

Roy Richard Grinker is a professor of anthropology who happens to be the son and grandson of eminent American psychiatrists. This background has contributed to his highly readable yet authoritative survey of how autism has become the hot topic that it has, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom. His book is also one of the first serious attempts to survey what autism means to other cultures.

In one of the best studies I have read of this whole field, the first half of Unstrange Minds picks its way through the history of autism, considering famous cases such as the 18th century wild boy of Aveyron, through to the 1940s case reports of Kanner and Asperger, and then on to more contemporary authorities, such as Rutter and Wing. In this journey Grinker thoroughly exposes the misguided approach of Bruno Bettelheim. Writing statements such as “the only real difference between the SS guard and the mother of the autistic child is that the mother gets to the child much earlier in life,” Bettelheim, with his massive authority (which was based on minimal experience), is a chilling example of charisma clouding integrity.

Grinker goes on to explain in detail the story of the development of autism classification and why the rise in prevalence is almost certainly due to explicable factors, such as better assessment and wider diagnostic classifications. In this way Unstrange Minds serves as a powerful counterblast against those who pursue evidence that environmental insults are the “cause” of autism.

In the book’s second part Grinker explores autism’s cultural relativism, telling us fascinating true life stories. For example, we learn that even in 2008 raising a child with autism in many Hindu communities in India is “an act of resistance,” that most Navajo families “believe that autism is the manifestation of some kind of spiritual dis-harmony,” and that the Haredi ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel believe that children with autism “are former sinners reincarnated.” Although parenting a child with autism in the UK or US is still an ordeal, it seems to be even worse in South Korea. There, as soon as a diagnosis is “made public,” the value of one’s house (and possibly those of one’s neighbours) “drops a few per cent.” Crushing stigma means that marriage prospects even for siblings of autistic children are instantly “diminished, for who would want to marry into a family with autism?” Intriguingly, Grinker also shows that, even in the West, major discrepancies in the perception of autism still exist. So, in the US, autism is regarded as a neurodevelopmental condition that is amenable to drug treatment, while in France many child psychiatrists still understand it as a psychodynamic disorder arising between parent and child. “Mother blame” in autism is, it seems, still big in France.

Providing an overview of the increasing cultural prominence of autism in less detail than Grinker, Stuart Murray is more interested in how cultures (mainly British and American) perceive and represent the condition and what this tells us about these cultures themselves. For this reason Representing Autism is probably less relevant to the medical reader, but it still generates many important points. For example, considering true cases in which a desperate mother has apparently killed herself and her autistic child, Murray exposes the chronic double standards of consequent media coverage, which emphasised the suffering of the affected parent above the unexplained experience of the child. Murray explains how much of our popular culture’s consideration of autism—the film Rain Man, for example—works mainly in a melodramatic genre, aimed at showing how someone with a disability changes a “normal” person for the better. In such treatments autism is used as a prosthesis rather than being genuinely explored. The one exception to this trend, for Murray, is Mark Haddon’s novel The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, which, he believes, has uniquely achieved huge public interest while allowing its hero’s autism to appear normal “within the created world of the fiction.”

Both books are important additions to the autism canon. A key element in their success is the authors’ sensitive portrayal of their own autistic children. Isabel and Lucas become powerful offstage presences who remind us that everyone with autism is—first and foremost—an individual, whom we should all try harder to see and hear.

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