

Roy Grinker, *Unstrange Minds: Remaping the World of Autism*

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Deborah Hilibrand

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Roy Grinker's book, *Unstrange Minds*, will change the way you think about autism. This is a well written, easy to read treatise that challenges the whole notion that there is an autism epidemic. "This book argues that the newer, higher, more accurate statistics on autism are a sign that we are finally seeing and appreciating a kind of human difference that we once turned away from and that many other cultures still hide away in home or institutions or denigrate as bizarre. The results of the new rates is that we are fortunately seeing more research, more philanthropy, and more understanding of how families struggle to cope" (p. 5).

The book really begins with the Introduction as Mr. Grinker explains the role of an anthropologist and social scientist. He previews the chapters of his book to give the lay reader some historical context for the mental health profession. In 1975 in Lima, Peru children and adults with autism were kept in cages. By 2005 Peru's largest corporations were hiring autistic adults to facilitate their integration into local communities.

Some of the stories are grim and may not be suitable for parents who recently received a diagnosis of autism. I would also advise some discretion in recommending this book to parents based on the emotional resilience of the family. However, this book is clearly a must-read for everyone in the medical profession, as well as educators.

One of the flaws of *Unstrange Minds* surfaces in the first chapter when Grinker makes a somewhat strange remark that autism is a liberating experience. "I remember that during my childhood one of my cousins described having a child with a severe disability as 'a prison sentence.' It

doesn't seem that way to me because I cherish the idea of being with Isabel forever. Joyce and I are free of the stressful ambition of having Isabel go to a high-status high school or college, free of the anxiety about a child leaving us to live somewhere else or marry" (p. 24). This is a somewhat bizarre view of autism that may put Mr. Grinker in an epidemiology category of one. Autism is not a romantic journey. Autism is brutal on the whole family. That 80% of families with special needs children experience the trauma of divorce and its cultural implications is never really addressed by Grinker. "I'm comfortable enough now to write a book about her and about autism, something I never expected to do." Autism is very personal to Mr. Grinker. Isabel is lucky.

Other than the one lapse into romanticism about autism, the personal approach in describing his life with his daughter's autism adds a warm-hearted tone to the book. Grinker's life with his daughter, Isabel, is interwoven throughout the book, helping animate what some people might think is a dry topic. Isabel's story is a particularly poignant contrast to the core chapter, *Autism by the Numbers*. Behind every number is a real person and family that is impacted by autism. Mr. Grinker never lets you forget that. A balanced perspective of the profound impact that autism has on a family is presented in later chapters. "Autism shatters many lives, and it changes everyone. But many turn the hardship of raising a child with a disability into something positive, even if it means their futures are different from what they expected, or from what their families and cultures wanted" (p. 198). These stories are memorable.

The middle chapters of *Unstrange Minds* are a detailed chronology of the development of the mental health profession. Mr. Grinker takes you back in time where asylums and mental institutions were the norm and considered

D. Hilibrand (✉)
Yale Child Study Center Associates, 230 South Frontage Road,
New Haven, CT 06520, USA
e-mail: Ticklelesly@aol.com

humane and state of the art medicine. *Theme and Variation* has a fascinating narration of the lives of some of the noble leaders of the mental health field such as Leo Kanner. Mr. Grinker's grandfather founded the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Chicago in 1935, and was a leader in utilizing quantitative measurements of psychiatric illness. There is a bit of historical irony as in a subsequent generation, Bruno Bettelheim, of the same institution, would blame parents for inflicting autism on their children.

"If there is no autism epidemic, then where were all the autistic children before now?" (p. 51). Grinker answers this question in Chapter 3, *Stigma Shame, and Secrets*. Even Grinker, who's grandfather and father were leaders in the psychiatric profession, was raised in an era where psychiatric patients were invisible. "I thought that childhood mental illness and learning disabilities were shameful and embarrassing" (p. 77). There you have it. The philosophies of generation after generation led to the expectation that the mentally disabled should be shunted into institutions.

The Rise of Diagnosis details how child psychiatry grew as a medical specialty. "Two crucial and interrelated contributing factors were the rise of biological treatments for psychiatric illness during the 1940s and 1950s, and the standardization of psychiatric diagnoses through the publication of various editions of DSM" (p. 107). ADHD, and later in the book, brain trauma, are examples of how a diagnostic label, itself led to increased patient identification.

The cornerstone of the book is *Autism by the Numbers*. Grinker gives a robust argument that autism is not an epidemic but a new cultural phenomena based on a broadening of the diagnostic criteria, changes in epidemiology methods, and the increased awareness of autism that makes it more socially acceptable to be a parent of a child with autism. What does Grinker think about the "Evidence of Harm" manifesto, which asserts a rise of incidence of autism due to vaccinations? Unfortunately, that topic is the elephant in the room. The book gently skirts around the issue instead of dealing with it head on, almost as if by avoiding the confrontation the ferocious lobby will not knock on Mr. Grinker's doorstep. "The difference between this and other anti-vaccine movements is how effectively the anti-vaccine message can be communicated today: It is spread all over the world via the internet and finding receptive ears, not among scientists or doctors, but among parents and families, the people most responsible for their children's welfare" (p. 144). This is an argument that the MMR cult uses asymmetric warfare to win the hearts and minds of the populace. Why does Mr. Grinker shy away

from calling it propaganda? The central argument is really that the anti-vaccine movement is not grounded in evidenced-based science.

Grinker makes a secondary argument that the anti-vaccine groups base their assumptions largely on the evidence that the incidence of autism is increasing. But, Grinker is only able to hypothesize that it is not increasing based on the preponderance of evidence. Even if Grinker is mistaken and autism's incidence is rising, there are many potential non-MMR explanations, which the book does not address. Eventually, it will be an epidemiologist and not an anthropologist who will champion the final chapter on the MMR debate.

Part II of Mr. Grinker's book is a page turner. Like a trip through Disney's "It's a Small World", Grinker describes what life is like with autism in countries such as India and South Korea in a series of inspiring stories. Attitude makes all the difference. Visiting a South Korean mother he notes, "The moment a diagnosis of a developmental disability is made public is the moment the price of her apartment, and possibly her neighbor's, drops a few percent. Its marriage prospects for their other children would be diminished, for who would want to marry into a family with autism?" Dramatic social change recently occurred in Korea with the popular story of a marathon runner who was autistic. Now the Ministry of Defense allows men to fulfill their required 2-year military service by working in a school as a "shadow" aide for a child with special needs.

There are a few missed opportunities. Grinker overly focuses on the medical community. Where are our silent heroes? Teachers are often the first responders. They are the professionals that frequently have the first sustained time with young children. While Grinker has a refreshing attitude about inclusion, perhaps the years of struggle with his own school system has blinded him to the observation that teachers, through a variety of eclectic strategies, have replaced the Freud's psychoanalytical clinic with a structured classroom. This begs the question, what are the cultural implications of the cottage autism industry that is emerging from the media blitz on autism? Perhaps I can entice Mr. Grinker to a sequel with another revolutionary thinker from the University of Chicago, Steven Levitt, author of *Freakonomics*.

This thought-provoking book may have its own impact on society if it is widely disseminated and enters the required reading list beyond the ivory tower. The ultimate effect of *Unstrange Minds* may be to change what society *does* about autism as well.