

Double Empathy Theory

Whilst it is true that some autistic people may struggle to understand some social interactions, when we listen to the accounts of autistic people, it helps us to understand that the problems lie in both directions.

The Double Empathy theory was devised by Dr Damien Milton and offers an insight and an explanation into the disconnection that often occurs between autistic people and non-autistic people when communicating. The theory suggests that when autistic people with different experiences of the world interact with non-autistic people, a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding can occur. This can make it difficult for the two groups to empathise with each other.

These differences don't mean that autistic people can't communicate or lack empathy, however because they may make it difficult for autistic people and non-autistic people to understand and empathise with each other it can therefore create a divide. The problem with this divide is that autistic ways of communicating and empathising are often seen as incorrect or wrong and can often therefore lead to social stigma, exclusion and victimisation of autistic people and a belief that we need to change the autistic person's communication styles.

The value of this theory is that it removes the belief that communication difficulties are solely due to the autistic person, but actually due to a lack of understanding and insight into each other's experiences. So, in the same way that autistic people may not understand non-autistic communication, non-autistic people do not understand autistic communication, creating the 'double' problem.

'Autistic empathy is no less compassionate, no less thoughtful, no less 'human' than non-autistic empathy: it is simply different.'

Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883-887.

To find out more visit

- <https://youtu.be/qpXwYD9bGyU>
- https://youtu.be/YWUsnT1c_5I?feature=shared