

## ARTICLE

# The Autistic Art of Failure? Unknowing Imperfect Systems of Sexuality and Gender

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Research and anecdote dealing in autistic sexual and gender identities present the picture of a group of people who may not conform to (cis)gender binaries, (hetero)sexual norms, or discrete sexual categories of a 'heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual' nature. Considering that the 'over-representation' of sexual and gender diversity amongst autistic people requires attention, research in the field largely emphasises perceived autistic deficits to explain this phenomenon. In this way, the authenticity of autistic sexual and gender subjectivity is called into question, while both deficit readings of autism *and* assumptions of a stable, binary reading of sexuality and gender are left untroubled. Leaning on Halberstam's use of failure, I challenge the grounding of autistic sexual and gender diversity in deficit, considering instead autistic experience of gender and sexual identity as valid and authentic. This approach offers epistemological, ethical, and ontological opportunities and turns the research gaze away from supposed autistic deficit, interrogating instead the often unquestioned assumptions of the 'imperfect systems' of sexual and gender norms. I briefly present three alternative and emergent theoretical approaches with the potential to question both what we think we know *about* autism and what we may be able to know about sexuality and gender *through* autism.

**Keywords:** Autism; Sexuality; Gender; Imperfect systems; Critical autism studies; Neurodiversity studies; Bayesian theory; Queer theory

## Introduction

Literature in the field of autism and sexuality consistently notes that autistic people are significantly more likely to reject hetero-normative sexual identities and behaviour than their non-autistic counter-parts (Pecora et al. 2020; Rudolph et al. 2018), and considerable proportions of autistic people endorse 'none of the above' type answers when asked to identify as either homo-, hetero-, or bisexual (Byers and Nichols 2014; Strunz et al. 2017). Further, both anecdote and research indicate that many autistic people reach beyond binary gender readings to identify as transgender, non-binary, or otherwise gender diverse (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale 2015; Brown, 2016; Kourti and MacLeod 2018; Strang et al. 2014; Walsh et al. 2018).

The research environment in which autism is considered overwhelmingly takes as its starting point a conceptualisation of autism as a series of behaviours compared to and diverging from presumed (and assumed to be desirable) norms (Dinishak 2016): the history of autism is the history of a group of people characterized in the majority of scientific literature as 'the disordered and damaged other' (Milton and Moon 2012: 5). The limited research at the intersection of autism, sexuality, and gender generally follows this tendency, lacking qualitative input from autistic people, leaning almost entirely on reports by non-autistic carers, and emphasising dysfunction, deficit, and behavioural inappropriacy (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2014; Coleman-Smith et al. 2020). Much of this research 'assumes that the (autistic) respondents will be unable to provide adequate insight into their own behaviour' (Mehzabin and Stokes 2011).

I am as much concerned here with the discourses to which autistic people are subject as to the qualities considered to be inherent to some autistic people. While they may share certain characteristics with other autistic people (as is of course true of *all* people), being autistic or non-autistic are also discursively produced positions (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Chown & Stenning 2020; Nadesan 2013), to the extent that it can be a challenge to extricate what we think we know about autism, 'the so-called facts...from the social and discursive worlds in which they are embedded' (Orsini and Davidson 2013: 14). The reflections that follow do not imply that all autistic people are the same, any more than that all non-autistic people are the same: one of the few 'facts' about autism, however it is defined, is the heterogeneity of those so identified and/or diagnosed. However, one factor autistic people undeniably *do* share is that of being subjected to deficit discourses in much of the scientific literature, including in the area of sexual and gender diversity.

Here, I critically analyse and challenge these notions of autistic sexual and gender diversity as being rooted in deficit. I first consider the ‘problem’ of autistic sexuality and gender diversity, or rather the problem of its representations in much of the literature in this area, paying particular attention to the question of authenticity—an important casualty of the deficit view—in perceptions of autistic sexuality and gender. I then turn to Halberstam’s notion of ‘failure’ to consider what might be gained by observing questions of autism, sexuality, and gender otherwise than through a prism of deficit. Before concluding, I briefly present three theoretical approaches, Bayesian theory, bottom-up processing, and imperfect systems. While tentative in discussions of this nature, these approaches open up avenues of reflection around neurological, sexual, and gender diversity which are foreclosed by *a priori* assumptions of deficit.

### The ‘Problem’ of Sexual and Gender Diversity amongst Autistic People

Autistic sexual and gender diversity is broadly conceptualised as having its roots in deficit or disorder: after all, as Yergeau (2018: 20) asks rhetorically, ‘isn’t every statement about autism a statement about its diagnostic criteria?’ Gender diversity may, for example, be hypothesised as being the result of an imbalance of prenatal androgen in autistic people or of autistic ‘rigidity and repetitive and obsessive behaviors’ (van der Miesen et al. 2018: 8) or an expression of the ‘extreme male brain’ theory of autism (Baron-Cohen 2002). Variance from perceived gender norms may be considered by researchers as representing ‘manifestations of the cognitive inflexibility inherent to ASD’ (George and Stokes 2018: 9) whereby autistic people’s ‘rigid views of what it is to be male or female’ (Holt, Skagerberg & Dunsford 2016: 116) is considered to lead them to identify in defiance of the sex used to define them at birth at any signs of apparent non-conformity to that assigned sex. Literature in the field suggests that the much-touted ‘impairment in empathy’ ascribed to autistic people ‘might facilitate them “coming out”...transitioning to their experienced gender, without being prevented by societal prejudices or without being influenced by what other people think about their decision’ (Glidden et al. 2016: 11).

Diversity in sexual attraction or orientation is similarly hypothesised as being psycho-social or cognitive. Bisexuality in autistic adolescents is seen as reflecting the ‘immature state’ of their orientation (Hans Hellemans et al. 2007: 267). Autistic people who show higher than expected asexual, bisexual, or homosexual interest, it is suggested, might have insufficient access to partners of the opposite sex to allow them access to heterosexual identities and behaviours, lack understanding as to what sexual orientation ‘is’, or be unaware of the normative heterosexual bent of most of their non-autistic peers (Pecora, Mesibov & Stokes 2016). Put differently, this reading suggests that non-heterosexual autistic people either cannot access straight sex, don’t know what it is, or don’t understand that it is what they are meant to be aiming for in the first place.

In sum, research discussing the apparently higher proportions of sexual and gender diversity amongst autistic people as compared to their non-autistic counterparts potentially functions on at least three levels. Firstly, it reduces autistic sexual and gendered happenings to being ‘successful’, or intelligible (albeit rooted in deficit), only in as much as they can be compared to non-autistic sexuality and gender. Just as Halberstam (2011) notes that queer success is measured by heterosexual standards, autistic people, who are ‘not doing it properly’, are positioned in opposition to the imagined cognitive normal counterpart, the one who is ‘doing it right’ (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist and Jackson-Perry 2020: 14).

Secondly, any identities other than heterosexual and cisgender<sup>1</sup> are positioned as being contingent, mediated by social constraint, biological exceptionalism, or cognitive limitation. Only heterosexuality, in Jonathan Ned Katz’s (2007: 181–82) words, ‘just is’, it does not require interrogation or justification but by default holds the status of being an ‘objectively existing fact of male and female flesh’. While autistic sexual and gender diversity requires explanation, even *autistic* heterosexuality, apparently, requires none.

Thirdly, much of the research in this area negates autistic people’s gender identity experiences by interpreting them as ‘symptoms’ of autism’ (Coleman-Smith et al. 2020: 2). These autistic people are, in other words, ‘not-really’ transgender just, for example, inflexible: their sexual and gender identities are unintelligible except as manifestations of autism and, by extension, of deficit. If Katz’s (2007: 181) ‘just is hypothesis’ applies to heterosexuality, then the ‘not-really hypothesis’, the assumption of inauthenticity of gender and sexual presentation and experience, can be said to apply to autistic sexual and gender diversity.

### Gender, Sexuality, and (In)authenticity

‘...a monogamous genderqueer bisexual happily living in a straight marriage who generally feels like a gay man in a woman’s body.’

(Williams, cited by Davidson and Tamas 2015: 63)

This quote from autistic writer, artist, and advocate, the late Donna Williams, on the one hand confirms notions of bi- or hetero- or homo-identity by claiming them. On the other, it ‘queers’ them, in the sense that it serves ‘to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up’ (Sullivan 2003: vi), rendering them so fluid and incongruent as to

<sup>1</sup> Whereby gender identity conforms to sex assigned an individual at birth.

empty them of sense. This quote also appears to continue the work of some feminist and queer theorists (Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 2008) to unhook sexuality from gender: a 'gay man in a woman's body' who is 'happily living in a straight marriage' is like the famous Koan 'the sound of one hand clapping': the more one tries to think it through, the less intelligible or recognisable it becomes.

Quotes like Williams' are far from being exceptional when autistic people discuss sexuality and gender (Jack 2012; Kourti and MacLeod 2018). Both anecdote and research paint the picture of a group of people inclined to reach beyond binary gender readings in various ways and across diverse settings (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale 2015; Bumiller 2008; Cooper, Smith & Russell 2018). Davidson and Tamas (2016: 59) note that many first-hand accounts by autistic people 'describe meticulous attempts to seek out and solidify gender's troubling manifestations in their social worlds only to find, of course, that no such thing as gender exists'.

Perhaps the most spectacular failure here (although not in the productive or creative sense of the word used elsewhere in this article) is of the ways in which sexual and gender binaries have been thus far delimited and how possibilities to do them differently have been foreclosed. Discussing transgender bodies, Halberstam (2017: 1.25.10) suggests that they are 'bringing the news' of indeterminacy, exposing fault-lines in the monolith of binary understandings of gender. This can be read as an echo of what Butler (2007: xxiv) suggests, that by questioning the categories through which one distinguishes gendered bodies:

the reality of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion on which we come to understand that what we take to be "real", what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality.

Transgender bodies, according to Butler, reveal what is perceived as 'real' to be contingent and potentially always fluid. In this way, they redefine what is possible. What, then, of transgender autistic bodies that are considered in some research as *inauthentically* 'not-really' transgender but are rather assumed to represent symptoms of autism, such as 'inflexibility' or 'extreme male brains'? When autistic transgender people are posited as not-really transgender they multiply existing levels of indeterminacy. They could be said to further revise the revision of reality that Butler already suggests takes place within (non-autistic) trans bodies. If transgender bodies can put gender into crisis, making the 'real' and the 'unreal' uncomfortably difficult to distinguish, what of the autistic transgender body that is so hard to recognise that it is considered to be not-really transgender? How can these bodies, these people, be understood as legible, recognizable, or authentic?

This is important, for elsewhere Butler (2004: 31) reminds us 'that to persist in one's own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition', without which 'we have been foreclosed from possibility...(and do) not count as recognizably human'. By definition, a deficit view reduces the recognizability of a person or a group as human by pre-supposing the lack of qualities that are considered to be inherent to a definition of humanity, such as 'empathy' or 'theory of mind' (Dinishak 2016). This assumption of autistic deficit paves the way for calling into question the authenticity of autistic transgender bodies and minds, for positioning them as being 'not-really trans' but rather a product of autistic symptomatology.

Autistic sexual and gender diversity can therefore be considered as just so many 'examples of failure'. These may be failures of biology. They may be failures in accessing social environments in which appropriate (read 'heterosexual') partnerships could be established. They may be failures of flexibility, of subjectivity, of intelligibility, of understanding what sexuality and gender 'are', and of grasping the effects that deviation from expected manifestations of these objects might provoke in others.

In what follows, while I briefly jostle this notion of failure (and rail fleetingly against the dominance of the norm against which all other ways of being must be compared), I do not necessarily seek to refute it. 'There are', as Judith Butler (2004: 3) reminds us, 'advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms'. In wondering what some of these advantages might be, I consider the epistemological and ethical value of failure in the context of autism, sexuality, and gender, as I now ask, following Halberstam, what the rewards of failure might be.

### The Rewards of Failure

In the preceding hypotheses for autistic sexual and gender diversity, heterosexuality and gender conformity maintain their unchallenged status as the 'natural state of things', deviation from which requires explanation, and anything other than heterosexuality or cis-identification is intricately linked with, and indeed *positioned as*, a quality of disability, a not unusual state of affairs (McRuer 2003). Discussing the medical model of disability, (Kafer 2013: 3) notes that 'disability is cast as a problematic characteristic inherent in particular bodies and minds'. Here, the word 'disability' could be meaningfully replaced with 'sexual or gender diversity'.

It is tempting to engage with and refute these hypotheses of perceived sexual and gender diversity as representing manifestations of deficit. While sexual behaviour may indeed vary depending on access to partners, to 'explain away unsettling and fluid sexualities' on this basis, while it may, for example, 'mitigate the anxieties associated with ... lesbianism (or) unstable sexuality' (Simpson, Hardiman & Butler 2019: 368), it is also a way of rendering those sexualities

invisible and reconfirming the perceived essential reality of the heterosexual norm. Seen otherwise, however, the very notion of homosexual behaviour not-really being homosexual but rather 'situational' or 'opportunistic' cannot stand without at least considering the possibility that heterosexual sex may *also* be situational: there certainly appear to be more heterosexuals around to choose from.

That the direction of sexual attraction needs understanding or learning at all could lead us to consider that heterosexuality is not 'an automatic human effect' (Ward 2015: 29). If so much energy must be given to this process, then the 'natural nature' of heterosexuality, which makes it necessary to investigate those who do not achieve this state of grace in the first place, is fragile at best, as has been suggested by critical sexual and gender theorists for many years (Butler 2007; Katz 2007).

The theory of autistic gender diversity as a manifestation of inflexibility is no less tempting to engage with. There are indications that many autistic people, far from being fixated to a rigid binary conception of gender, reach *beyond* gender binaries (Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale 2015; Davidson and Tamas 2016; Jack 2012) that they 'both navigate and move beyond the constraints of their conferred identities...to inhabit new identities *of their own making*' (Kourti and MacLeod 2018: 6). Were autistic manifestations of gender not considered as *de facto* confirmations of deficit, then researchers would be freed up to consider alternative hypotheses, for example that inflexibility may be a predictor of gender and sexual behaviour and identity on the part of non-autistic cisgender heterosexuals.

However, as David Halperin reminds us, engaging with these theories needs resisting. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Halperin (1997: 37) incites us to hold out against the 'temptation to play what is ultimately a mug's game of refuting the routine slanders and fantasies produced by the discourses of homophobia'. This 'mug's game', according to Halperin, cannot be won, not because its hypotheses are irrefutable, but because refuting them individually does not go to the heart of the problem: the strategic bases on which 'the game has been set up, on what terms most favourable to whom, with what consequences for which of its players' (1997: 37). Refuting individual claims maintains the status quo, that cisgender heterosexuality is the point of reference—to recall Katz's words cited earlier, it 'just is'—which in turn validates interrogating and ultimately pathologising any variation other than this configuration.

Thus, rather than countering these routine slanders on sexual and gender non-conformity, and indeed on autistic subjectivity, I return to the 'failure' of autistic people to conform to sexual and gender norms. Rejecting 'autistic deficit' as a point of discussion, I paraphrase Halberstam to embrace 'autistic failure', on the basis that 'under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (Halberstam 2011: 2). Failure—when success is measured by neuro-, hetero-normative, and cisgenderist standards—might indeed be the only reasonable way to go.

The circumstance rendering this project appropriate and possible here—paradoxically, the opportunity presented—is the stifling hold of assumptions of deficit in research concerning autism, sexuality, and gender. These disciplinary assumptions 'signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy' (Halberstam 2011: 6). In seeking to understand what is 'wrong' with a group of people who do not appear to 'get' (hetero)sexuality and (binary) gender in comparison to their non-autistic counterparts, research, however unintentionally, risks both pathologising the sexual behaviour and identities of that group and shoring up assumptions of the stability and rectitude of sexual and gender norms. Embracing autistic failure may take us on a road less travelled, with an end point unknown. 'To be autistic', says Yergeau (2018: 18–19), 'is to be neuroqueer', which involves 'lurching towards a future that imagines "incommensurabilities of desires and identities and socialities"', thereby moving away from comparison to an imagined 'mythical norm' (Lorde 2012: 116), be it neurological or sexual, and opening up other ways of knowing.

Considering failure's epistemic value permits a re-evaluation of the models in which so many people (autistic or otherwise) fail so impressively. Failing to do gender and sexuality 'properly', at a time when sexual and gender categories are themselves increasingly failing so spectacularly, functions as a mirror held up to those categories. '(N)ot knowing, unknowing, and failing to know' (Halberstam in McRuer and Johnson 2014: 152) how to perform, for example, gender and sexuality, failing to tick a box, not understanding what sexuality or gender 'is', or responding 'none of the above' or 'unsure' when asked to self-identify as hetero, homo, or bisexual may well be a manifestation of failure; it may also be a particularly creative way of unknowing an imperfect system, a point I return to below.

The 'rewards of failure' then, in the context of autistic accounts of sexuality and gender, are multiple. Rather than addressing the 'problem of deficit', embracing the 'potential of failure' holds epistemological and ethical interest, including:

- Providing a way of exploring autistic sexual and gender happenings that does not fall into the trap of attempting to refute individual claims concerning autistic sexual and gender diversity, but rather provides an alternative starting point for discussion;
- Centring the voices of those who fail, rather than relying on existing (largely deficit-driven models) disciplinary theories. To borrow again from Halperin (1997: 57) when discussing homosexuality, this shifts autistic subjectivity 'from the status of that which is spoken about while remaining silent to the status of that which speaks', a much-needed gesture when autism, like homosexuality before it, 'is frequently talked about, but it is rarely listened to' (Murray 2012: xiii);

- Acting as a mirror: rather than reconfirming sexual and gender norms, it destabilises them. Rather than the autistic person being the 'object' under study, it is normative views of sexuality and gender that are observed. This allows for flights of fancy, taking us away from what we think we know about autism—and indeed sexuality and gender—and thus perhaps allowing other knowledges to emerge;
- Acknowledging the authenticity of experience, thereby troubling both the 'not-really' and the 'just is' hypotheses.

In fact, the not-really hypothesis is not limited to autistic people. There is no scientific (objective) measure of heterosexuality, for example, for the simple reason that it is not a scientific category (Blank 2012). However, the 'we all know what we mean' school of sexual identity runs into trouble when considering the multitude of reasons that, for example, straight men use to justify sex with other straight men that in no way calls into question (and indeed may bolster) their heterosexual identity. These reasons run from the situational discussed earlier, to getting into university fraternities, being a military recruit, and take in 'dude I was so drunk' on the way (Ward 2015). Homosexual sex is clearly not always 'gay': if we are not homosexual, then neither (really) is our (homosexual) sex. However, while the examples in this paragraph and the questioning of the validity of autistic sexual and gender diversity both function as 'a means of stabilizing heterosexuality' (Halperin 1997: 43), there is an important difference: in discussing autistic peoples' sexual happenings, their sexuality and gender experience is routinely conflated with deficit. If an assumption of deficit is rejected, and if the not-really hypothesis is set aside, what might be made possible? What other frameworks for considering autistic sexual and gender diversity offer alternative narratives to those relying on deficit?

### Bottoms Up: Flattened Priors and Directions of Processing

Halberstam's (2011: 2) theorising of 'failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing' as a path to knowledge perhaps finds a formal echo in an alternative story to the failure to understand, let alone fit within, existing binary heterosexual cisgender models: Bayesian decision theory. This is a 'relatively new approach to understanding the brain' and is 'fiendishly hard to understand in detail' (Fletcher-Watson and Happé 2019: 130).

Bayesian theory suggests that when faced with a situation an individual's 'past information generates predictions about the likely content of future stimuli' (Walsh et al. 2018: 5). This use of past experience or knowledge to assess what is possible in any given situation is known as a 'prior'. The more an individual assumes that past experience is a valid predictor of present and future possibilities, the 'steeper' that prior is and the less likely that person is to be able to make sense of current experience that contradicts past knowledge.

A prior, then, dictates to a large extent what *seems* possible in the present based on what has happened or been learnt in the past. For someone assigned male at birth this might look something like this (if highly simplified): 'People with penises are men: I have a penis: I can therefore only be a man'. The steeper that prior (i.e., the more this past experience is assumed to be valid), the more difficult it will be to process new information that contradicts this assumption. Considerable evidence exists indicating that non-autistic people are more likely to have steep priors than autistic people (Powell et al. 2016; Skewes and Gebauer 2016). This implies that non-autistic people are more obliged to rely on past experience to make sense of new information than autistic people: thinking 'outside the box' of what is assumed to be 'true' or possible may be a challenge for many non-autistic people.

Leaning on Pellicano and Burr (2012), Walsh et al. (2018: 5) consider the idea of 'flattened priors', whereby autistic people possess a 'cognitive system that does not assign as much significance to past knowledge as to present experience'. This could result in a sensory and social world that is 'too real', to borrow from the title of Pellicano and Burr's (2012) article, whereby even stimuli that have previously been encountered may be lived as new, as surprising and unexplained. Walsh and Einstein (2020) suggest that gender may also be met on an experiential basis. Seen in this way, those (such as autistic people) who do not *necessarily* rely on past experience or 'knowledge' are better positioned to overcome the social conditioning that incites us to regard gender as fixed, binary, and directly related to genital anatomy.

This line of thought can be considered along with reflections on bottom-up processing, whereby situational details—rather than over-riding concepts or beliefs—may be prioritised in analysing a situation. Bottom-up processing has been shown to be enhanced in autistic people, while research indicates that non-autistic people have a tendency for enhanced top-down processing (Soulières et al. 2007), whereby a deduction is made in a given situation based on an already accepted concept. This will drive how a situation is perceived and allow for rapid decisions as to what that situation represents and how to respond to it. However, it might also limit individuals' capacities to accurately perceive and analyse new information. Concretely, for example, autistic participants in Mitchell and Ropar's (2004) study demonstrated higher accuracy in judging shapes than non-autistic participants in the absence of contextual clues as to what the shape represented, indicating that they were less inclined to categorise and adjust perceived shapes to correspond to what a shape 'should' look like (Soulières et al. 2007). Autistic people in this study in a sense failed to categorise, favouring precision in the task at hand; in doing so, they created more accurate representations of stimuli than their non-autistic counterparts.

We could transpose this idea to the earlier discussion of heterosexual men whose pre-defined self-concept of themselves as heterosexual is not shaken or jeopardised by having sex with other men (under certain conditions). That is to say, their top-down processing of their own sexual identities as belonging to the category of heterosexual trumps their experience of homosexual behaviour. It is conceivable that someone processing their intimate world from the

bottom up—as autistic people appear to be more capable of doing—would hold off from categorising themselves, or would self-identify more loosely, until sufficient data was available, if at all.

Finally, Kristensom and Broome (2015) suggest that autistic people may be more likely than their non-autistic counterparts to be systematic in considering theories or ideas, rejecting those that they consider to represent ‘imperfect systems’. Walsh et al. (2018: 5) draw on Kristensen and Broome’s (2015) proposition that this tendency toward analytical or systematic cognitive approaches could result in autistic people bringing a critical perspective to bear on the ‘imperfect system’ of, for example, rigid gender binaries. This is echoed in much anecdotal discussion within autistic communities on this theme: as Brown (2016) puts it, many autistic people ‘can’t make heads or tails of either the widespread assumption that everyone fits neatly into categories of men and women or the nonsensical characteristics expected or assumed of womanhood and manhood’. Autistic people then might not be so keen to adhere to a system they perceive as inherently flawed. This collides with Bayesian theory, whereby, to return to Pellicano and Burr (2012), the distinctive perceptual ways of knowing of autistic people may produce a more accurate representation of the world than one leaning heavily on prior experience. In this way, possibilities of gender expression are dictated not by what has been *learnt* to be possible but by what is *experienced* as real.

In summary, the apparent over-representation of trans and non-binary persons in the literature may be an artefact. Rather than ‘autistic deficits’ explaining this finding, considering these alternative explanations opens up a quite different path of enquiry. Non-autistic trans people may not be revealed (to researchers, but also, perhaps, to themselves) as a result of the limited gender options that ‘prior knowledge’ and social conditioning would indicate to be possible and that non-autistic people might struggle to resist. This leads Walsh and colleagues (2018: 5) to the intriguing hypothesis that ‘being autistic doesn’t make people appear trans – being typically developing can make people appear cisgender’.

While the applications of these approaches to social perceptions, including sexuality and gender, has not to my knowledge been demonstrated, they offer an intriguing, if speculative, glimpse into other ways than deficit of considering autistic approaches to these social objects. Pleasingly, they also distance discussion of sexuality and gender from asking why so many autistic people may manifest diversity in their intimate lives, to show that it is equally valid to ask why so many *non-autistic* people do not. Heterosexual and cis-gender identity, here, is not left unquestioned as being the self-evident default but is subjected to the same treatment as any other intimate orientation.

## Conclusion

Autistic failure to conform to imagined sexual and gender realities may well create social and epistemic unease. This failure exacerbates the crisis of gender—and of sexuality—noted by Butler. However, to confuse failure with deficit is to do it an injustice. Failure, here, is the mark of survival. It is this failure that makes self-recognition possible, albeit at a price:

If I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends on escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction. Indeed, the capacity to develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from them, an ability to suspend or defer the need for them, even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live (Butler 2004: 3).

This critical relation to norms is an ‘autistic quality’ often noted by autistic commentators (Angry Autie 2013; Davidson and Tamas 2016; Oolong 2019; Theindigo06 2016). On considering the flattened prior, the bottom-up processing, and the imperfect system theories briefly discussed here, it is possible that autistic subjectivity may be particularly well-placed to carry out the project proposed in the introduction: to question both what we think we know *about* autism and what we may be able to know about sexuality and gender *through* autism.

When deficit models of autism are conflated with sexual and gender diversity, resisting deficit and resisting sexual normativity become inter-related projects. Distance from an assumption of deficit, be it neurological or sexual, concerning those who learn and know (or ‘unlearn, unknow’) their sexual and gender selves not from conformity to imperfect systems, or from prior learning as to what is ‘possible’, but from their experience of their own bodies and desires, opens up fields of enquiry that would otherwise remain obscure. Notions of Bayesian theory put forward by Walsh and colleagues (2018) as potentially applicable to autistic gender identity construction, and an autistic rejection of ‘imperfect systems’ proposed by Kristensen and Broome (2015), were drawn upon here as theorising that shifts discussion away from an assumption of deficit when discussing autistic sexual and gender diversity. This has the further advantage of not leaving norms unquestioned but positioning autistic sexual subjectivity as experience with broad political potential. As Butler (2004: 29) says about transgender people, ‘(T)hey make us not only question what is real, and what “must” be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and how new modes of reality can become instituted’.

There is risk to this approach, particularly when, as here, we are looking in a sense to autistic experience to also provide a ‘lesson’ about sexuality and gender more broadly. Kulick and Rydström (2015) worry that looking to disability

in this way could deflect attention from the very real violations visited daily on disabled people. This is a valid concern, perhaps all the more so when discussing sexual and gender groups that are themselves particularly vulnerable to injustice, violence, and oppression.

However, one of the daily injustices to which autistic people are subject in the scientific literature, in the popular imagination, and in ‘therapeutic interventions’ is just this: that they are required to *learn*, not *teach*, that they are described and considered as imperfect versions of non-autistic selves, construed as lacking capacity ‘to be volitional, to be social, and to be selves’ (Yergeau 2018: 12). If one agrees with Dinishak (2016: 2) that the deficit approach in effect calls into question an individual’s very humanity, then positioning autistic subjectivity as holding ethical and epistemological value and ‘talking back’ to dominant deficit discourses is, as both critical autism and neurodiversity studies suggest, an ‘imperative’ (Jackson-Perry et al. 2020: 126). This same proposition, acknowledging the authenticity of autistic subjectivity and refuting the assumption of deficit, brings more than the possibility of a closer understanding of autistic ways of being. Again echoing suggestions from critical autism studies that ‘the social worlds of autism are revealing of nonautistic worlds’ (Orsini and Davidson 2013: 6), this process turns the gaze away from assumed autistic deficit and re-directs critical discussion towards the imperfect systems of sexual and gender norms more broadly.

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