

# Autistic social communication: “a minefield of problems”, or “a difference in typical values”?

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## Background

- The DSM V describes autism as characterised by “persistent deficits” in social communication.<sup>[1]</sup>
- Despite this, communication between autistic people is both effective at transferring information<sup>[2]</sup>, and more enjoyable than talking to non-autistic people<sup>[2]</sup>.
- This aligns with the double empathy problem, which recasts autistic social communication difficulties as a mutual misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic people.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Some researchers have suggested that this implies an autistic social communicative “style”, understood by and shared between autistic people but not by non-autistic people.

## Objectives

1. To look for evidence of a shared social communicative “style” in autism.
2. To understand what the features of this style might be.

## Participants

Zel, AppleFrog, Pumpkin, The Laird, Barney, Owain, Bert, Lily, Alexander

- Gender: 4 women; 1 nonbinary; 4 men
- Ethnicity: 8 white; 1 mixed race/other ethnicity
- Mean age: 45yrs (SD ±15yrs; range 23-70yrs)
- Additional conditions: AD(H)D, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia.

## Method

- Online, asynchronous, forum-style focus group, run for two weeks.
- Preregistered at <https://osf.io/84vqw>
- Thematic analysis of the data.

## Topics

- How do you socially signal things to another person?
- What feels rude, polite, natural, and unnatural during communication?
- How does communication feel different with other autistic vs. non-autistic people?
- What makes a social interaction a positive one?
- Anything else?

## Results

Theme	Components	Quote
Different experiences of self & environment	Conversations cost a lot of energy; self-monitoring and self-managing is difficult; fragmented attention/distractibility; different versions/experiences of “self”.	“[Active conversation] requires effort, presence and energy. [...] Sometimes it feels like a battle to stay focused and not zone out.” –The Laird
Different ideas about how communication should work	Every person/relationship is unique (no assumptions); mutual respect and accommodation is important; boundaries and routines are liberating; interactions should have a purpose or be meaningful; being honest and direct is important.	“There is a difference of typical values that determines what happens in a conversations. NDs [neurodivergent people] seem more preoccupied with information, accuracy, solutions, truth, correctness, substance. NTs [neurotypical people] seem more preoccupied with status, power, appearance, gathering allies, defining groups.” –Bert
Autism-hostile social & physical environments	Communication is potentially dangerous; neurotypical people are inflexible about social communication protocols; people are “socially dishonest” (e.g. white lies, empty reassurances); environmental misfit (e.g. sensory issues, auditory processing).	“All social interactions are a minefield of potential problems. If I add on sensory sensitivities then it just gets worse. I am just grateful if they do not go horribly wrong, such low expectations!” –Barney
Self-knowledge & understanding peers	Knowing you’re autistic, and understanding what that means; having autistic (or other kinds of neurodivergent) friends; having understanding and accommodating friends.	“Now that we all know I’m autistic they [non-autistic friends] don’t mind when I accidentally interrupt and I feel like I can relax and play with my hair or whatever when I’m talking to them and that I don’t have to make eye contact if I don’t want to.” –AppleFrog

## Key Points

- Neurotypical people and neurotypical environments make communication difficult for autistic people.
- Difficulties with executive functioning have a major impact on social communication.
- Autistic people identify different barriers to social communication than those found in the literature.
- The autistic interactional ‘style’ is characterised by honesty, directness, strong boundaries, and a lack of making assumptions about others.
- Understanding and acceptance of difference, both of self and from others, is vital.

## Different experiences of self & environment

## Different ideas about how communication should work

## Self-knowledge & understanding peers

## Autism-hostile social & physical environments

## Conclusion


Autistic people experience their internal and external worlds differently. This leads to different ideas about how communication should work. When society is autism-hostile and inflexible, problems occur; but, when armed with self-understanding and supportive friends, mutual understanding can be reached.

## What’s next?

- We ran a second focus group with the same method but slightly different questions, informed by the themes from this focus group. Thematic analysis is ongoing.
- Results from both groups will inform an ethnographic study at two Scottish Autism services, looking at staff and service user social communication.

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