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A neurodiverse theory of mind approach towards empathy: Assessment and intervention**Christine K Duff**

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Theory of mind (ToM) differences alleges to explain the “impaired ability of people with autism to attribute mental states (beliefs, knowledge) to other people, due to lack of perspective taking, mindreading, mentalizing and mind blindness”. Matching emotionally descriptive words to pictures of another person’s eyes (The Mind’s Eye Test) is typically used to provide evidence of “gaze abnormalities in autism resulting in failure to comprehend eyes convey information about a given mental state, and that individuals with autism spectrum disorder are specifically ‘blind’ to such information”. If one successfully matches an emotionally charged word to the correct representative facial picture - they are deemed to exhibit ToM and empathy for others. This assertion however, presents difficulties in determining whether ‘match-match’ responses are the result of an internalized process of ‘self’ and ‘other’ awareness; or an external, conditioned, and/or memorized response. Moreover, social algorithmic stories and responses learned via repetitive discrete trial teaching can produce anxiety and frustration when rehearsed social situations are not ‘played out’ in real life. In response to shortcomings, this presentation introduces a Neurodiverse ToM and empathetic paradigm approach towards positioning ToM social skill interventions for individuals with ASD, based upon student awareness of ‘self’. Guided understanding of “what, where and when”; empathetic response appropriate for neurodiverse individuals will be discussed, in addition to delineation of when it may be inappropriate for neurotypical individuals to make response demands.

Biography

Christine K Duff is a PhD candidate in the exceptional education track, at the University of Central Florida. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, and she has presented her research on increasing self-awareness in individuals with ASD, and ‘at risk’ students. She has worked in a wide variety of settings including; mental health, social service, education and criminal justice. Holding several professional teaching certifications in the USA and Canada, she has teaching experience at K-12 and college/university levels. She served in numerous committees in addition to peer reviewing and judging peer manuscripts, dissertations, conference proposals and presentations.

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