

Autism and the Search for Need Fulfilment

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Introduction

There is a basic structure to human beings and to the self. From within that structure we create infinite variety. One variation is people on the autistic spectrum. Spectrum is a good word because it points to the immense variety among human selves. We will start with exploring some of the theory of the Self and then apply it to Autism.

Theoretical Considerations

Let's establish some theoretical groundwork with the following definitions:

- Human Needs (seven categories): Survival, safe/security, belonging/loving, self-esteem, to create/produce/know, self-actualization and beauty/mystery/transcendence. Everyone has strategies to satisfy these needs.
- Stages of the life cycle: Infant/Toddler (0-3), Child (3-12), Adolescent (12-18), Young Adult (18-26), Adult (26-65), Senior (65-80) and Elder (80 to the end of the life cycle). Each stage has developmental tasks.
- Aspects of the developmental Self (capitol "S"): Infant/toddler, Child, Adolescent, Young Adult, Adult, Senior, and Elder. Each self (small "s") has abilities and skills that we use to accomplish our developmental tasks [1].
- As we accomplish our developmental tasks we fulfil our needs.
- Thinking and feeling precede behavior (acting), though we may act without being aware of what we think and feel.

All human behavior is designed to fulfil our needs, though this behavior is sometimes confused, distorted and ineffective. Ordinarily we do not live thinking about how we will fulfil our needs. Since we rarely think about satisfying our needs, how do we fulfil them? Our developmental self uses our abilities to accomplish the developmental tasks of our stage of life. As we do this, we satisfy our needs without focusing on them directly. In addition, we have a strategy for fulfilling our needs. Our strategy is a plan composed of ideas about what we will do to satisfy our needs. We are rarely aware of our strategy, but it has existed since we were a small child. The child asks: "Am I being, doing and having enough to satisfy my needs?"

Applying this to Autism

We can apply the above considerations to autistic individuals by asking the following questions. These questions can be guidelines for clinical work and research.

- How successful is a person with Autism at accomplishing the developmental tasks of life?

- In the face of (what might be considered) poor task accomplishment, what alternative strategies for need fulfilment can be developed? For example, if social skills are poor, how can a person with Autism feel that they belong?
- What does an autistic individual think is his or her way of accomplishing need satisfaction?
- How can we help him put his or her ideas into practice?
- Are certain needs more pressing for an autistic individual than for a person without Autism?
- What do autistic people think about themselves? A poor self-image results in poor self-esteem. Since good self-esteem is tremendously important, how can we help autistic people feel good about themselves?
- How do autistic individuals fulfil their needs?
- What is their strategy, conscious and unconscious?
- Do people with Autism tend to seek fulfilment of certain needs making other needs less important? For example: Is experiencing beauty more important than being productive?
- What are our usual strategies for fulfilling a need? How can they be adapted for autistic individuals?
- What happens when an autistic person (or any person) does not accomplish certain developmental tasks? How can we work with these kinds of failures to correct them and to reduce their effects?

Strategies for Need Satisfaction

This strategy can be very useful in helping autistic individuals (or any individual) fulfill our human needs.

- Understand what the needs and developmental tasks are.
- You can start with a developmental task or with the need itself [2].
- Ask: What behavior will lead to accomplishing a developmental task or to need fulfilment?
- Ask: What is the thinking and feeling that will give rise to the behavior?
- Review, clarify and refine the thinking and feeling.
- Develop a specific behavioral strategy for accomplishing a developmental task or for fulfilling a need.
- Put the strategy into practice.
- Review the results; repeat this process as necessary until successful need satisfaction has occurred.

Since human beings are driven to satisfy our needs, alternative strategies are extremely important for autistic people. If you study Autism from the point of view of how an autistic person (the autistic Self) fulfils his or her needs, you will also learn about the Self—yourself. Satisfying our needs brings us fulfilment and happiness.

References

1. The operating manual for the self-lists five components to the self: Ego, developmental self, personality, conscience and identity/image.
2. The operating manual for the self, International Institute for Self Development.