

Stereotypical and peculiar

- on understandings of autism and positioning of autistic subjects

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INTRODUCTION

Current scientific and interventional approaches towards autism deal with individual cognitive impairment, leaving out the matter of *subjectivity*.

At the same time, however, these understandings seem to influence the lives of persons diagnosed with autism in aspects pertaining to their subjectivity (e.g. counselling, self awareness, and choice of job, school and living arrangements).

In the light of this paradox I ask: What effects do scientific and interventional understandings of autism have on the conditions for living one's life as an autistic subject in Denmark in the early 21st century?

METHOD

In my study I analyzed the ways in which two central sources contribute to the positioning of autistic subjects:

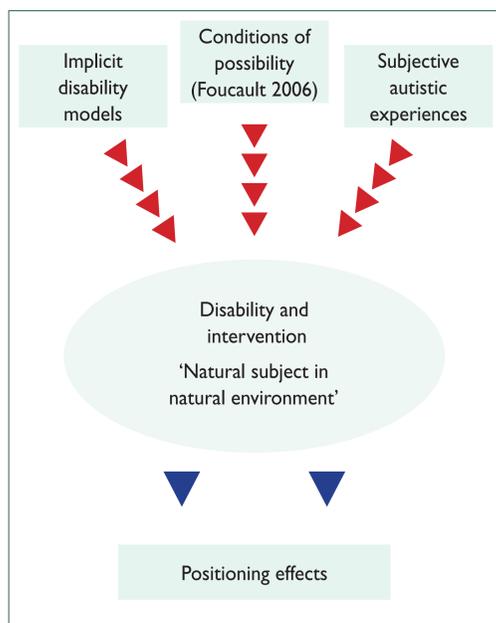
National Autisme Plan
The Danish recommendations regarding autism screening, diagnosis and intervention (Jørgensen et al. 2006)

Scientific literature on autism
My main source was Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders in which I focused on three prominent models for cognitive impairment (Volkmar et al. 2005)

I developed a method aimed at:

- theorizing autistic *subjects*
- destabilizing current knowledge on autism and current ideas of the 'natural subject'

Destabilizing subject centred positioning analysis



The destabilizing steps ▶▶▶▶ made a subject centred focus ▶ possible, i.e. a focus on the effects that ruling discourse may have on particular subjects

FINDINGS

Implicit disability models in 'National Autisme Plan'

The plan claims adherence to an environmentally related disability model but explains most problems in terms of individual deficit.

In the plan, cognitive impairment stands as central to the understanding of autism. Impairment is left unrelated to societal, historical or cultural contexts.

Conditions of possibility for and effects of cognitive impairment models

Theory of mind-deficit	Executive dysfunction	Weak central coherence
Conditions of possibility The 'natural subject' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • functions according to general, rational principles • can be reflected and reflects other subjects objectively 	Conditions of possibility The 'natural subject' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responds flexibly in a 'natural environment', which is ever changing in response to the intentional strategies of natural subjects 	Conditions of possibility The 'natural subject' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively constructs itself, its knowledge and abilities
Claim from literature Autistic people are deficient in their ability to "...conceive of mental states: that is, knowing that other people know, want, feel or believe things." (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985)	Claim from literature Autistic people are lacking in their ability to monitor flexibly their cognitive processes and actions leading to "...primitive stereotyped behaviors..." (Ozonoff et al. 2005)	Claim from literature Autistic people lack a natural tendency to form coherence from the full amount of data available. "There is a fault in the predisposition of the mind to make sense of the world." (Frith 1989)
Potential positioning effects Autistic subjects' personal understanding positioned as <i>objectively wrong</i>	Potential positioning effects Actions of autistic subjects positioned as primitive, stereotypical and <i>unintentional</i>	Potential positioning effects Autistic subjects' thoughts, perceptions and views positioned as <i>meaningless</i>

Positioning effects of the use of scientific understandings in 'National Autisme Plan'

Interventional recommendations favour objective knowledge on autism over subjective and intersubjective experience of and with particular persons.	With recourse to cognitive impairment, autistic subjects' perspectives are positioned as peculiar, deviant and incomplete. Autistic subjects' perspectives are seen as relevant <i>insofar</i> as they are deviant.	Positioning the very words and actions of autistic subjects as stereotypical or less meaningful makes it difficult for these subjects to reject negative positions through words or action.	A professional understanding of autism is recommended in nearly every aspect of life. Hence, the positioning effects are validated across time and space.
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CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The conditions for living one's life as an autistic subject are influenced by the positions offered through professional understandings of autism.

In research, current ideas of 'natural' work together with positivistic scientific discourse to position autistic subjects as lacking in self understanding, intentionality and meaningfulness.

In the interventional recommendations the 'atypical' is mainly perceived as an impairment to be handled by objective knowledge and general techniques.

When impairment is isolated as an entity fit for investigation and compensation, a more adequate understanding of autistic subjects as subjects-in-context is difficult to achieve.

I suggest three questions to be asked in future autism research and intervention:

- Where? *In what local practice is this research or intervention to take place?*
 - Why? *What problems does this research or intervention seek to solve?*
 - For whom? *To what particular autistic and non-autistic subjects does this research or intervention matter?*
- Asking such questions will help us develop understandings that are:
- *more peculiar* to the concrete and embedded contexts; peculiar to the participants of such contexts
 - *less stereotypical* in the sense that we refrain from determining abstractly how and what a real subject can be

Literature cited

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 Foucault, M. (2006). *The archaeology of knowledge* London: Routledge.
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 Jørgensen, C.H., Isager, T., Sørensen, V.B., Pedersen, L., Jørgensen, B.H., Jensen, B.B., Jørgensen, M.H. (eds.). (2006). *National autisme plan* (vol. 1-5) Copenhagen: Videnscenter for autisme.

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