Autism och frågan om det ‘mänskliga’ – normativa subjekt och betydelsen av emotioner och social interaktion i forskning och livsberättelser

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Posthumanism

Crip theory

Critical Autism Studies
Crip theory, Queer theory and Critical Autism Studies

• The (common) focus is not on 'the deviant' (crip: disability / people with disabilities, queer: non-heterosexuals) in itself, but the 'normalcy' (crip: compulsory able-bodiedness, normates, queer: compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity) examines:
  - **Crip theory**: able-bodiedness (body normality)
  - **Queer theory**: heteronormativity
  - how certain types of physical (or mental/cognitive) / sexual expressions is presented as obvious, taken for granted, understandable (need not be explained), natural
  - Maintenance of certain subjects positions as more desirable than others, producing them as “the normate/the normal..”
  - **Critical autism studies**: neuronormality, cinstruction of “correct” communication, interaction, emotionality
Normatnormativity/normates

- The normate world as centre
- The normates rights of interpretation/perspective on the world is taken for granted
- Needs of normates is not looked upon as a "problem"
- The normate world is represented as "good" who takes care of alternative is tolerant/open-minded against people with disabilities and sexual minorities

People with disabilities & LBGTQ-people
- People with disabilities or LGBTQ-peoples needs/rights is looked upon as "problems" or "threats"
- Don´t have rights of interpretation (perspective/experiences of the world as something who disturb/irritates the normate world)
- Should do efforts to pass as normates (and recognize the normates perspective of the world)
Critical Autism Studies

• Building upon the social model of disability
• People with autism’s own voices (rather than professionals and parents/care takers)
• Neurodiversity (autism as neuro-difference rather than a neuro-deficit – a ‘strength model of autism’ rather than a ‘deficit model of autism’)
• In line with a crip theoretical thinking: a critical perspective on the ‘neurotypical’ (NT) and ‘neuronormativity’
A research agenda for Critical Autism Studies

• 1. **Citizenship and advocacy**: How can we improve access, accommodations and social acceptance for autistic individuals?

• 2. **Knowledge/epistemology**: How can we develop new analytical frameworks that position the important contributions of social science and humanities research to our understanding of autism as a complex, relational dis/order?

• 3. **Autistic subjectivities and cognitive difference**: How can we advance new (enabling) narratives of autism capable of challenging predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that are currently influencing public opinion, policy and popular culture?

Introducing animal studies

• “studies both a material entity (nonhuman beings) and a discourse of species difference that need not be limited to its application to nonhumans alone”

• Meanings of ‘agency’ and ‘subjectivity’

• Deconstructing: “the picture of the human as constituted, for example, by critical introspection and self-reflection that is, after all, a hallmark of humanism”

(Wolfe, 2009)
Crip Theory/Critical Autism Studies meets Animal Studies - > crippling notions of humanity

- (neuro)Normative meanings of "critical introspection and self-reflection" (NTs versus people with autism and non-human animals)

- Autism as 'cognitive/communication/social difference' versus 'cognitive/communication/social impairment' ('deficits in theory of mind/ability to mentalization/empathy/emotional recognition and expression/communication/social interaction')

- A possible research question: to explore, not what autism and animals 'is' (or the difference between human/NT and non-human animal and 'the autist' – the autist as 'less human, closer to non-human animal than the NT')
- but rather; what does intersecting notions of autism and animality make happening?
Stig Larsson, *Autisterna* (1979)

- Överskrider gränsen för vad som i en modern västerländsk kontext kan betraktas som "mänskligt" ➔ "monster"

- Autism som ett tillstånd helt avskuret från mänsklig kommunikation, interaktion och gemenskap, ingen moralisk kompass, inga känslor
"I’m autistic and I’m obsessed with violence. A response to Andrew Solomon’s article about his interviews with Peter Lanza in *The New Yorker*, www.autistichoya.com

Both Peter Lanza and Andrew Solomon said outright that autism shouldn’t be treated as if it’s related to Adam’s killing spree.

But that doesn’t change the tone of the article at all, which talks about Adam’s diagnosis and various autistic characteristics in a way that reminds me of a freak show, or a post-mortem zoo exhibit. If the fact that Adam was autistic isn’t related to the fact that he killed twenty-six people, then why spend so much time focusing on his autistic traits in an article that’s mostly about his father’s attempt to figure out *why* and *how* this happened?
The process of qualifying as “human” – or, phrased according to Judith Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, to gain membership in “the exclusive club of the Human” presupposes certain cognitive and emotional practices and abilities. These might include interpreting and communicating one’s thoughts and feelings in ways that are recognized by non-autistics (neurotypicals), but also to situate oneself and others in categories and contexts that are intelligible in the Western, modern and contemporary context, and interact with them accordingly.
Autistic emotionality in scientific discourse

• "Asperger syndrome is as an extreme form of egocentrism with the resulting lack of consideration for others. The self-absorption and disregard of others is not like the strategy that a normal selfish person might deliberately adopt and flexibly use according to what is currently in his or her best interest. Autistic egocentrism, by contrast, appears to be non-deliberate and not determined by what might currently be in the best interest of the individual. This egocentrism seems to present a huge difficulty in forming successful long-term interpersonal relationships. Spouses and family members can experience bitter frustration and distress. They are baffled by the fact that there is no mutual sharing of feelings, even when the Asperger individual in question is highly articulate. One obstacle seems to be an inability on the part of the person with Asperger syndrome to put themselves into another person’s shoes and to imagine what their own actions look like and feel like from another person’s point of view. Another way to describe the social impairment is as a failure of empathy, involving a poor ability to be in tune with the feelings of other people." (Frith, “Confusions and controversies”)
Affective deficit perspective of autism

- people with autism are represented as “mindblind”, which means a failure to understand other peoples mental states (see Baron Cohen, *Mindblindness*)
- or a lack of emotional understanding (Hillier & Allinson),
- as having a general inability to empathize (Travis & Sigman)
- or identifying with other people (Hobson et al), and as a consequence having problems to enter emotional relationships (Losh & Capps).
- This can be referred to as the general affective deficit discourse of autistic emotionality, which focuses is on autism as impairment (c.f. Armstrong).
Affective difference discourse of autistic emotionality

• people with autism as “anomalous” (Heftet et al)
• “atypical in processing of emotion in general and of facial expression in particular” (Clark et al, c.f. also Heftet et al).

• Instead of understanding autism as an affective deficit or even an absence of emotionality, the affective difference discourse relies on a notion of an alternative sensitivity or sensual perceptionality

…but still producing the person with autism as “other” to neurotypicals
"Autiebiographies":

"one of the most significant developments [---] in life writing in North America over the last three decades has been the proliferation of book length accounts of living with illness and disability"

Thomas Couser, "Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation", Disability Studies Reader (2010), New York: Routledge
Dawn Prince Hughes: *Songs Of the Gorilla Nation. My Journey Through Autism*
Temple Grandin: *Thinking in Pictures. My Life With Autism, Animals In Translation*

Cary Wolfe: “Learning from Temple Grandin, Or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, And Who Comes After the Subject”, *New Formations* 64:2008
& *What is Posthumanism*, Minnesota UP 2010
• “relations with non-human others constitute a significant emergent theme” in autobiographies by people with autism”

Autiebiography – a genre challenging the normative, human subject

"Autistic people can think the way animals think. [---] Autism is a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans [---] "
Temple Grandin: *The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow*

"Gorillas, like autistic people, are misunderstood. They are seen as ugly, as caricatures of fully formed humanity [---] prejudices of what it means to be a person necessarily exclude those who are not bright on the stage of common action [---]"
Dawn Prince Hughes: *Songs from the Gorilla Nation*
Swedish” Autiebiographies”:

• Gunilla Gerland: *En riktig människa*, Studentlitteratur 2010 [1996]
• Iris Johansson, En annorlunda barndom, Forum 2007 & *Ett annorlunda liv*, Forum 2013
När jag gick i terapi ägnades många timmar åt att tolka [mitt] obehag för smycken. [...] Det hade att göra med att jag inte ville bli kvinna, tyckte terapeuten. Hon undrade vad jag trodde om det.
– Alla små flickor vill klä ut sig i mammas kläder och smycken, sade terapeuten och förklarade att det måste ha hänt något som gjort att jag bestämt mig för att jag inte ville bli samma sort som mamma, inte ville bli kvinna. [...] Torpeden pratade ofta om vad alla små flickor tänkte och kände, men jag kunde aldrig känna igen mig i det hon sade.

Gunilla Gerland, *En riktig människa*, 2010 (1996), s. 252f
Iris Johansson:

• “I my world, I was together with the others [---]. I saw myself as participating when I hid under the table or in the lumber room, or when I sat on the milking stool with the other children playing around me. I my world I didn’t think of ‘participating’ as any other thing than sitting and watching what was happening in the atmosphere” (60f).

• “People didn’t exist for me in any substantial way. My existence was inhabited by all things between heaven and earth – chairs, tables, plants, animals and humans – and I had to relate to everything equally. People were harder than animals and things, because they changed all the time and wanted things from me that was incomprehensible and often painful and disturbing” (pp48)
Amanda Baggs,
http://catswhoknowtheyarecats.wordpress.com/2008/04/

But it seems like to many people there’s only one set of nonverbal cues that exist: That of the neurologically standard members of their own species in the culture or cultures they are most familiar with. [---]

They might even [---] conclude that the unfamiliar species, culture, or neurotype has no body language. Which leads to being stereotyped as mysterious, sinister, defective, deficient, or some combination of the above.
• Such a project points us toward the necessity of an ethics based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment, but on a compassion that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity – [---] In this light, the ethical force of our relation to the disabled and to non-human others is precisely that it foregrounds the necessity of thinking ethics outside of a model of reciprocity between ‘moral agents’.

• Cary Wolfe: "Learning from Temple Grandin, Or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, And Who Comes After the Subject", *New Formations* 64:2008