

# Autistic objects, autistic subject

## A critical phenomenology and de-subjugation of autistic knowledge

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the psychological approach to autism, which is framed as objective and conceives of it as limiting and deviant from a neurotypical norm. I argue that this results in an exertion of epistemic power over autistic subjects, in the sense that their experiences and knowledges become subjugated in a process of structural epistemic violence. Turning therefore to critical phenomenology, I analyse specific autistic experiences in order to generate an alternative view of autism, namely as transcending the subjectification. By centring these experiences as a form of situated knowledge, the autistic subject can be de-subjugated and thus counter harmful epistemic norms .

### Keywords

autism; neurodiversity; critical phenomenology; epistemic violence; autistic knowledge

There is political value in saying “I am autistic,” or in that regard also “mad;” to reclaim that term politically is powerful. However, there is also power in saying “autistic subject” with regards to a Foucauldian analysis of “subject” as both the Subject and the subjectification to power. (Schöndube, 7 March 2022, personal communication)

This is how Fabius described themselves when I interviewed them a few months prior to writing this paper. I was struck by their ability to encompass a complex medical, political, and experiential identity in these three terms, which led me down the path of exploring how knowledge about the self can be positioned towards normative or institutionalised knowledges. As autism is a both widely researched and complex topic, I found myself interested in this very question of knowledge itself: what kind of epistemologies lie at the basis of discussing and researching autism (or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in psychiatric terms), regardless of what it actually *is*? For this, I focus on the notion of the “autistic subject” that Fabius brought up, which consists of a duality of autistic people as social subjects and the subjectification of autistic people in the context of autism research and diagnosis. Combining the pathological, social, and knowledge-based aspects of autism, a definition of the autistic subject emerges as consisting of a specific medical, social, and epistemic position that is both subjected *to* psychiatry and psychology, as well as creating its own subjectivity. In order to better understand this position, I will be contrasting the mainstream psychological model of ASD as deviance from a norm with the experiential knowledges of autistic subjects. I will draw from insights about normativity and violence from disability and queer theory, situating autism within the framework of neurodiversity.

Before I can start my analysis, however, I feel I should mention my own entanglements with autism, and neurodiversity more broadly. Firstly, the majority of my interest in this subject comes from my friendships with autistic people, both in experiential and theoretical terms. Furthermore, while I am not diagnosed with ASD, nor experience the stigmas that come from such a diagnosis, I do relate to many of its characteristics, such as sensory sensitivity, and thus consider myself neurodivergent. My embodied position of writing this paper is thus situated in my experiences as a neurodivergent person, which leads to my use of the framework of neurodiversity, where all such experiences are considered as being part of human existence.

Due to the centrality of experience in my analysis, I make use of critical phenomenology, which offers a philosophical and political understanding of the meanings of our experiences and the structures they are intertwined with (Guenther 2020, 11-12). Critical phenomenology here serves as a method for discussing autism as a social category that consists of marginalised experiences and is created through the power relation between autistic individuals and psychological narratives of autism. In this sense the experiences of autistic people are produced by these narratives, which in turn produce autism as a category and identity. These are based on a norm of ability that autistic people are perceived to deviate from, which in a culture that requires ability means that autistic people cannot “live normally” (Ruer 2020, 62). However, being outside the norm also allows for a questioning of this requirement, which makes the position of autistic knowledge particularly important to investigate.

The aim of this critical approach is thus to counter positivist psychological understandings of autism and instead offer an alternative epistemological basis for autism research. This will primarily be linked to the ethnographic methodology of anthropological research, which foregrounds on-the-ground knowledge and experience and situates this in relation to larger social structures. Especially anthropology that centres first-person experiences is relevant for the phenomenological study of autism, since it, as anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly (2017, 251) argues, adds the ability to generate new conceptualisations as an alternative to third-person “objectivity.” I contend that this third-person approach, as it is applied in psychology, constructs autistic people as objects of study and thereby reduces the knowledge of autistic subjects to such an extent that it becomes structural epistemic violence. To counteract this subjugation of the first-person knowledge of autistic subjects I will let their experiences speak for themselves as a form of alternative knowledge. For example, Monique Botha (2021) as an autistic academic and activist emphasises the importance of being entangled with and reflexive about her research, echoing Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988).

By bringing this argument into dialogue with Fabius's words, I endeavour to (or at least start to) de-subjugate autistic subjects' knowledges from the subjugating power of psychology and psychiatry that have put in place harmful epistemic norms. Instead, I propose we place autistic knowledge in a framework of neurodiversity where categories are analysed as part of the power structures that (re) produce them, and the heterogeneity of autistic experience is forefronted as a valid and welcome form of knowledge.

## AUTISTIC PEOPLE AS OBJECTS

I would learn these two-dimensional, seemingly objective accounts of autistic people on one day, and on the next work with these three-dimensional autistic children who were all together more complicated, and more real. (Botha 2021, 3)

The tension laid out here by Botha between knowledge of autistic people and actual autistic experiences, is central to understanding the position of autistic people within psychological narratives of autism. To investigate this tension, I will start by laying out a brief history of its conception in psychiatry and psychology. The term autism was first used in psychiatry to describe a symptom of social disengagement linked to schizophrenia, and was developed in the 1940s by Doctor Leo Kanner into a syndrome mainly seen in children (Grinker 2007, 44- 45). It only became more established as a diagnosis, however, in the 1970s, with the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) listing it as a "pervasive developmental disorder" (Grinker 2007, 110). In the current edition of the DSM (DSM-5), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities, currently or by history" (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The choice of words here reflects a tendency in medicine to define things as deviation from or limitation of a certain norm, which in this case can be summarised as lacking "theory of mind" (Botha 2021,

3-4). This deficit in theory of mind is one of three theories that attempted to describe the perceived limitations of autistic people when in the 1990s the “core deficit question” was researched in cognitive psychology (Solomon 2010, 250). Next to the “theory of weak central coherence” and “impairment in executing function,” a deficit of theory of mind was seen as lacking an inherent human trait, namely that of understanding other people’s minds through their behaviour (ibid.). While new research and theories have countered this narrative (ibid., 251), the language of deviation and limitation still persists, as is clear from how ASD is defined. Autism in the mainstream understanding is thus not merely a set of cognitive characteristics but a permanent pathology that is different from a “healthy norm.”

My aim here is not to fundamentally challenge this definition or discuss alternative categorisations, but to critically examine its epistemological foundations and the implications thereof. Firstly, by defining autism as a disorder, it is medicalised and thus regarded as something to treat or prevent (Botha 2021, 3). Additionally, in the creation of a category of diagnosis, ASD has become more prevalent and has therefore been referred to as an epidemic, although this is, as Mattingly (2017, 252) points out, “a diagnostic epidemic rather than a biological one.” The language used as well as the framing of autism as deviant further point to the positivist epistemology that is prevalent in psychiatry and psychology. A positivist epistemology as used in psychology is characterised by the notion that objective knowledge can be reached by distance from the studied object, which is achieved by applying the scientific method (Botha 2021, 3). By framing the study of autism as objective, however, the assumptions of what constitutes the norm, as well as the complexities of the human experience are overlooked.

By analysing this positivist framework, it becomes clear that autistic people take in a particular position with regards to research about them. As autism came from the field of psychiatry, it is useful here to look at how medicine more generally regards those it studies. Central here is the notion of “the gaze.” As medicine studies disease through

the body, a medical practitioner is trained to look at their patients as a body with deviation from a certain healthy norm, thus making the patient an “object” of study (Good 1994). Moreover, because of the goal of objectivity, the gaze is disembodied, as the practitioner is constructed as passive yet powerful in their knowledge (Solomon 2010, 245). This results in a position of power for the psychiatrist (in the case of autism) that allows them to decide who are “unhealthy” and thus “clinically relevant types of subjects” (Solomon 2010, 246). Combining the notions of “objects of study” and “clinically relevant subjects,” autistic people thus become people that knowledge is produced *about*. I will therefore from here on out refer to autistic people as “autistic subjects,” to signify the duality between their subjectification to psychology and their social position as Subject, the latter of which I will return to in the next section.

Due to the way psychiatry (and thereby psychology, which I will focus on for the rest of this paper) produces knowledge about autism as a disorder, there is a disconnect from the actual, embodied experiences of autistic subjects, as Botha also states in the epigraph of this section. I argue that this is caused by the way these disciplines position themselves towards autism, or rather, the way they attempt to remove their own position. This “god trick,” as Haraway (1988, 582) calls it, is how positivist researchers aim to reach objectivity, whereby they take up a position of power over the objects they study.

The reverse of this position, that of the autistic subject, is thus one that power is exerted over. Disregarding for a moment the medical and social position inherent to autism, I will here focus on the epistemic (although all three construct each other). Autistic subjects’ knowledge of themselves is often not taken seriously, or more precisely, the knowledge autistic subjects produce is dismissed on the count of them being autistic (Botha 2021, 6). On an individual scale this epistemic injustice keeps out those who challenge the mainstream understanding of autism, thereby reinforcing it. When applied to

a wider social scale, however, a pattern of dehumanisation arises. As autistic subjects are defined by their limitations and deviance, and are said to lack the “essentially human” trait of self-determination, they are denied the full status of humanity, whereby (epistemic) violence against them becomes justified (Botha 2021, 4).

By considering the position of power of psychology and this notion of epistemic violence in conjunction, there emerges a pattern of violence that is directly situated within the history of autism and that limits both individuals and communities in their agency, which corresponds to Farmer’s (2004, 40) definition of structural violence. I therefore argue that the position of autism within psychology is one of structural epistemic violence. Finally, to return to the level of power structures, autistic knowledges can thus be seen as subjugated, as they are as a whole disqualified as inferior (Foucault in Stryker 2006, 13), with psychology producing the subjugating knowledges that create that position.

## THE AUTISTIC SUBJECT

A conference delegate asked, “why did you do this research?” [...] I asked the delegate what they meant, and they explained further that they are not necessarily sure that an autistic person would be best placed to talk about autism [...]. I was discounted again. (Botha 2021, 5)

Using the concepts of structural epistemic violence and subjugated knowledges I now direct my focus to their effects: how is that violence experienced? And what do these knowledges contain? To examine these questions, I take up the lens of critical phenomenology, which allows me to analyse the embodied, first-person experiences of autistic Subjects, a method that my discipline of anthropology lends itself well to (Mattingly 2017, 254; Solomon 2010). With critical phenomenology, I not only look at what the experiences of autistic subjects mean, but also at how the creation of those meanings is shaped by social

structures (Guenther 2020, 12), such as the psychological narrative from the previous section. Additionally, in this process, the norms that are upheld by this process become visible. That reveals that the dominance in society of able-bodiedness (Ruer 2020, 62) is a norm that dictates the position and thus the experiences of autistic subjects. Since autistic experiences are placed outside the norm accompanied by violence, they offer a particular vantagepoint from which to view the norm critically (ibid., 63). The autistic epistemic position is therefore not only useful to understand autistic experiences, but also to understand the structures that create them.

For the first of the experiences that will exemplify the relationship of the autistic subject to their epistemic position, I return to Fabius. Since they were diagnosed relatively late in life, being in their early twenties, their story does not resemble the typical narrative of children who get diagnosed at an early age. What is particularly noteworthy is the autism education they started after their diagnosis. For them this consisted of several tests and lists they had to fill out, as well as learning more about autism and how it works for them. While Fabius did appreciate the increase in self-understanding, they also noted how it felt like this education was trying to move them towards a particular norm, meaning that their deviations and limitations were seen as obstacles to overcome. However, as a reaction to this push, they have started philosophically examining the same power relation that I discuss here, which helps them position themselves as an autistic subject. They stated that “university makes things easier, because philosophers are weird.” In the end, therefore, the label “autistic” allows them to embrace their “deviance” and push back against the power structure that labelled and subjectified them in the first place.

Similarly, Monique Botha’s (2021) experiences as an autistic academic doing autism research also reflect a pattern of subjectification, subjugation, and a reaction of academic resistance. As a student and PhD candidate she constantly dealt with her knowledge being dismissed directly because of her being autistic, which was perhaps



most explicit during her first conference, as she describes in the epigraph of this section. Aside from that instance, attaining her degree and researching autism during her master's confronted her with psychological knowledge about autism that did not only not correspond to her own self-understanding, but was also violent and dehumanising (Botha 2021, 4). She presents a few excerpts of texts she had to read to become an autism researcher, several of which explicitly describe autistic people as not-human (*ibid.*, 5). Despite being continuously confronted by this violent framework, she has remained in academia (although she frequently considers leaving) in the hope that pushing for an entangled and reflexive approach that embraces values can change autism research and society at large for the better (*ibid.*, 9).

Both these experiences exemplify how the mainstream psychological understanding of autism as deviant and limiting holds power over autistic subjects and thereby, at times violently, subjugates their knowledge. Moreover, they show how particular knowledges, especially those of the self, are overlooked. Particularly in the case of Botha this presents itself in a lack of academic recognition, which positions her as subjectified rather than Subject. By requiring the Subject to possess certain cognitive traits, those who do not possess these cannot be fully politically recognised as such (Taylor 2008, 325). In order to recognise first-person experiences and the knowledge they generate, I contend we must politically and academically recognise different cognitive experiences, which, as Taylor (2008, 326) argues, requires developing a different view of "the Self."

While this quest would be too great for me to grand for me to take on by myself, I do want to take a moment to consider how autistic subjects are positioned in society as individuals. As I have posited, defining autism in relation to a cognitive norm as limited and deviant produces a particular understanding that considers autism a disorder. An alternative view however, namely that of neurodiversity, views autism as part of all human cognitive diversity, thereby dismissing

the idea of a norm (Kourti 2021, 2). This alternative way of looking at difference also views the problems that autistic subjects face in a different light, namely as social phenomena. This further stems from the political/relational model of disability, where “the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in-built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being” (Kafer 2013, 6). Thus, Fabius using autism education to increase their self-understanding yet at the same time reject cognitive norms and Botha using her experiences of epistemic violence in her improvement of autism research each in their own way transcend the norms that limit the autistic subject and instead make apparent the limitations put upon them by the psychological understanding of the category.

#### DE-SUBJUGATING AUTISTIC KNOWLEDGES

The more I think about getting diagnosed, the more I think about people who aren't getting diagnosed, which is why I'm working in mad studies. [...] It's the way [autism] is framed as a disability, and not as a neurodiversity that really pisses me off, and I'm hoping to at least with my writing inspire some mad pride or at least some mad criticism (Schöndube, 7 March 2022, personal communication).

Here Fabius too points to the opposition of the understandings of autism as a disorder and as part of human diversity. Additionally, they further connect this difference with their own writing and knowledge production, where they aim to challenge the inequalities that are caused by the mainstream view. In this, they thus propose alternative knowledges that stem from the autistic subjects themselves. In the rest of this section, I will consider several of these alternatives, with the aim of moving away from autism as limiting and deviant and towards autism as transcending the mainstream framework it was conceived in.

The first of these possible alternatives deals with the question of consolidating psychology with the experiences of autistic subjects. Botha (2021) and Kourti (2021) argue for the possibilities of this within Critical Realism, which aims to approach objectivity by way of making statements about objects without dismissing the structures and values that shape such objects (Kourti 2021, 1). While I in principle align with this aim, I do see here a danger of affirming the existence of autism as a definitive object, rather than a complex set of characteristics and experiences. Mainly because, by saying that autism is an object that can be studied, there arises a possibility of maintaining its psychological conception without considering the less tangible notion of neurodiversity as an opportunity to produce a new, contradicting view of reality. In this, I mainly disagree in the possibility of bridging the two understandings of autism, as the psychological one is highly un-situated and thus repeats the “god trick” that gives it power over the autistic subject.

This tension of different views of autism as an object requires more thorough examination. The object “autism” in my view refers to a set of characteristics that are interpreted by human beings to be a pattern that is found in a significant amount of people. However, not only do these characteristics manifest differently and in different combinations in each individual, the characteristics themselves are often not exclusive to autism. High sensory sensitivity, for example, and its resulting sensory overload are present in other psychiatrically defined conditions such as ADHD, Alzheimer’s, and Tourette syndrome. I do not mean to argue here for a completely individualised system of thinking about these neurodiverse characteristics. On the contrary, categories such as autism can function as a means for collective political action in the face of social stigma, inaccessibility, and structural violence. I merely want to emphasise the crucial difference between the social use and medical use of categories. While both create autistic subjects, the former allows for the creation of an autistic identity which in turn makes collective political action possible. The latter, on the other hand locates the struggles autistic subjects face solely within the individual

without acknowledging the disabling structures it itself is a part of. The object “autism” to me thus exists insofar the characteristics and experiences it describes are real *and* through how the social category is used by autistic subjects in social and political struggles.

The alternative epistemological approach that I thus propose is similar to Kourti’s (2021) in that I do want to retain some notion of objects rather than completely relative subjectivity. I hereby turn to feminist theory, specifically Donna Haraway’s (1988) concept of “situated knowledges,” which she conceives of as “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (ibid., 584). Here knowledge consists of a coming-together of situated, embodied experiences that does not privilege one subject over the other. This, I maintain, has the power to de-subjugate autistic knowledges, as situating them posits them as equally legitimate as psychological “objective” knowledge and actively examines their power relations (Stryker 2006, 12). Situated knowledges thereby counteract psychology’s privilege and open up new ways of conceiving of and producing neurodiverse realities.

This brings me to my final consideration, which is how this de-subjugation through situated knowledge comes about in academic research. I see here a significant potential for anthropology to highlight these alternative knowledges, as its ethnographic methods lend themselves well to experience-oriented, dynamic, and emic knowledge production (Solomon 2010, 242). This mode of knowledge production is furthermore reminiscent of Botha’s (2021, 7-9) suggestion for entangled and reflexive research, preferably by autistic researchers. Especially the focus on experience is taken up by Mattingly (2017), whose phenomenological approach generates conceptual knowledge of autism that cannot exist in the mainstream psychological framework. Finally, by taking the emic and experiential, knowledge can be generated as a form of care, with love as analytical tool (Silverman 2012). Care, love, and experience are therefore the

main elements that I intend to take with me in my future de-subjugating and situated knowledge production. Autistic knowledge would thus, in this framework, be produced with autistic subjects centrally involved, focused on experience and always aware of the societal elements of categorisation of neurological traits. With this, I propose that working with neurodiversity as starting point and focusing on the disabling structures autistic subjects live within, a collective, situated, and generative pool of knowledge can be produced.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of this paper, I have considered how the psychiatric and psychological conception of autistic subjects as limited, and deviant subjugates their knowledge about themselves. Because psychology holds power over the autistic subject, I argued that this subjugation and dehumanisation can be considered structural epistemic violence. By engaging with critical phenomenology, I offered an alternative view of autistic subjects as transcending, in order to de-subjugate their knowledges and take into account their situated, embodied experiences. Despite this intention, I must emphasise that autistic subjects will politically still be subjugated for as long as the psychological norm (and its view of normative knowledge) is in place. However, academically, I echo Botha (2021, 9), in that I am hopeful that there are possibilities for change that aim to de-subjugate autistic subjects' knowledges and let their experiences speak from their situated positions. I aim to, by using these insights, at the very least conduct my own future research with care for those in subjugated positions, so that I do not repeat the violence present in other epistemological structures. By foregrounding the diversity of autistic experiences, as well as their place in neurodiverse experiences, I hope research can turn away from the autistic object and instead see what knowledges autistic Subjects have to add to our understanding of society.

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