

NEWS

# Community newsletter: A double dose of ‘double empathy’ studies

BY CHELSEY B. COOMBS

21 MARCH 2021

Hello, and welcome to the Community newsletter! I’m your host, **Chelsey B. Coombs**, *Spectrum’s* engagement editor.

This week, we’ve got two papers that discuss the ‘double empathy problem,’ a term coined by **Damian Milton**, lecturer in developmental and intellectual disabilities at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. It describes the difficulty two people with different life experiences have empathizing with each other. Many non-autistic people blame the problems they have communicating with an autistic person on the autistic person, but in fact the difficulties can come from both parties.

The first paper in this week’s double-hitter, called “**Autistic adults may be erroneously perceived as deceptive and lacking credibility**,” prompted a lot of discussion on Twitter.

The researchers recorded interviews with both autistic and non-autistic people and then measured qualities such as gaze aversion, repetitive body movements, literal interpretation of figurative language, poor reciprocity and flat affect. They showed the video interviews to 1,410 participants, recruited using an online crowdsourcing platform, who then rated each person’s truthfulness or credibility.

“The hypothesis was partially supported, with autistic individuals perceived as more deceptive and less credible than neurotypical individuals when telling the truth. However, this relationship was not influenced by the presence of any of the target behaviors, but instead, by the individual’s overall presentation,” the researchers wrote.

**Noah Sasson**, associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Dallas, tweeted that the paper is “relevant to double empathy.”

New paper relevant to double empathy: autistic adults telling the truth are more likely to be misperceived as deceptive and less credible than non-autistic adults. <https://t.co/fhvEC6P4xJ>

— Noah Sasson (@Noahsasson) **March 18, 2021**

Milton replied to Sasson's tweet, saying, "No reference [to the double empathy problem in the paper], sigh - but another to add to growing list for a possible symposium."

No reference, sigh - but another to add to growing list for a possible symposium. Who might fund such an event?

— Damian Milton (@milton\_damian) **March 18, 2021**

In a critique of the study, **AutisticSciencePerson**, a pseudonym for a neuroscience graduate student, wrote, "Seems like they could've looked at a lot more in those videos."

I really want to know about tone of voice, prosody, and the general length of the interview (varied between 95 seconds to about 325 seconds) and if that correlates with anything. Seems like they could've looked at a lot more in those videos.

— AutisticSciencePerson (@AutSciPerson) **March 18, 2021**

**Kieran Rose**, founder of The Autistic Cooperative, also suggested the study should be "replicated with Autistic children and non-Autistic adults."

Would love it if this were replicated with Autistic children and non-Autistic adults

— TheAutisticAdvocate (@KieranRose7) **March 18, 2021**

**Fiona Kumari Campbell**, professor of disability and ableism studies at the University of Dundee in Scotland, said she believes the findings could be more broadly applied to how disabled people in general are perceived.

Interestingly I also suggest more generally disabled people are viewed as characterologically suspect and narcissistic

— Prof Fiona Kumari Campbell FRSA?? (@f\_k\_campbell) **March 18, 2021**

The next thread comes from **Nathan Caruana**, a postdoctoral researcher in cognitive science at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He discusses his new paper, “**Autistic traits and loneliness in autism are associated with increased tendencies to anthropomorphise.**”

????New Paper????: Autistic traits and loneliness in autism are associated with increased tendencies to anthropomorphise <https://t.co/IMt2kgFG5I> w/ @annaremington & Rebekah White: an @MQCogSci - @CRAE\_IOE - @OxExpPsy collaboration! 1/6

— Nathan Caruana (@NateCaruana) **March 16, 2021**

The researchers found that the more autism traits people report having, the more likely they are to anthropomorphize non-human entities, and the more people anthropomorphize, the more likely they are to say they are lonely. Caruana then connects these findings to the double empathy problem.

“Our findings are consistent with the idea that the increased tendency to anthropomorphise amongst many autistic individuals – and those with autistic traits – unlikely reflects a reduced motivation or drive to connect with others, but perhaps reduced opportunities to do so.”

5/6 Our findings are consistent with the idea that the increased tendency to anthropomorphise amongst many autistic individuals – and those with autistic traits – unlikely reflects a reduced motivation or drive to connect with others, but perhaps reduced opportunities to do so.

— Nathan Caruana (@NateCaruana) **March 16, 2021**

**Anna Ciaunica**, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Porto in Portugal and a research associate at the Institute of Cognitive Neurosciences at University College London in the U.K., replied, “So this means that the need to relate/bond with an 'other' is present, but under a different form.”

Very interesting! Congratulations ! So this means that the need to relate/bond with an 'other' is present, but under a different form

— Anna Ciaunica (@AnnaCiaunica) **March 16, 2021**

Caruana responded, “It suggests the need to form social connection with another is there. Perhaps it takes a different form due to less opportunities for meaningful interactions with other humans.”

**Maki Rooksby**, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, connected the paper to her own research on hikikomori, which is characterized by a person’s prolonged social withdrawal. “Important implications for **#hikikomori**- links to the population group’s autistic tendencies and amenability/proneness to online activities/addiction.”

Super cool, congrats ????? and hats off to super-parenting! Important implications for **#hikikomori**- links to the population group’s autistic tendencies and amenability/proneness to online activities/addiction.

— Maki Rooksby (@rooksby) **March 16, 2021**

Our final tweet this week comes from our own account. If you're an autism researcher and *Spectrum* doesn't follow you yet, like this tweet and we will make sure to do so. We want to see what you and your labs are up to. You may even end up in our next Community newsletter.

If you're an autism researcher (anyone from undergrad to full professor) and we don't follow you, like this tweet so we can ????

— Spectrum (Autism Research News) (@Spectrum) **March 16, 2021**

That's it for this week's edition of *Spectrum's* Community newsletter. If you have any suggestions for interesting social posts you saw in the autism research sphere this week, feel free to send an email to me at [chelsey@spectrumnews.org](mailto:chelsey@spectrumnews.org). See you next week!