

Narrative Means, Enaction and Autism: Alternative Ways of Being

Alexandre Leurs Massart

Louvain, Belgium

Jan De Mol

Louvain, Belgium

Abstract

Contemporary approaches in psychology focus on agency and meaningful action. Narrative therapy promotes dialogical practices while embodiment supports the body as an alternative means of meaning. When revisiting autism through these contemporary lenses, practices of power are exposed. These practices of power invite us to revisit autism from a phenomenological perspective to uncover interpersonal stakes. As interventions in autism remain essentially corrective and overlook such practices of power, alternative realms for alternative interventions are explored using both Social Relational Theory and Child Family Narrative Therapy. By recognizing an autistic embodiment, autism becomes an alternative way of being in the world instead of an inherent inability.

Key Words: *deconstruction; autistic embodiment; enaction; participatory sense making; social relational theory*

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Kanner (1943) first described autism as an “innate inability to form the usual biologically provided affective contact with people” (p. 250). Today, it is considered the most severe neurodevelopmental disorder in the world (World Health Organization, 2016). Consequently, different theoretical models and interventions have been proposed (Smith, 2016). Nevertheless, they remain products of a modern epistemology which hampers alternative accounts on autism. Most importantly, modern epistemology is based upon a dualistic account on mental health: healthy or not. On the other side, postmodern epistemology legitimizes alternative ways of being in the world.

Narrative therapy and enaction represent theoretical-thinking frames that emerged as modern epistemology was challenged (Pérez Cota, 2015). Bringing new considerations on reality’s nature, means of meaning and interpersonal domains, new hypotheses regarding autism’s nature are enabled. This in turn may impact how interventions are conceived. As the world and society change, new realms of inquiry are exposed: online autistic communities challenge the modernist account on autism that focuses in their inabilities (Davidson, 2008).

Given the significant increase in autism prevalence in the last decades (World Health Organization, 2016), alternative accounts of autism must be explored in order to have a more holistic approach. These approaches may set the basis for new interventions paradigms whose main goals are not essentially corrective.

Both authors are driven by personal and social engagement in de-pathologizing mental health as well as atypical development. First author is a clinical psychologist working privately. His

approach to Autism and Asperger from different psychological perspectives in different cultural contexts (Mexico and Belgium) have led him to be concerned about the idea that there is no space for alternative ways of being to fully become. He is convinced that merging research from a constructive and collaborative perspective as well as embodiment and phenomenology in atypical developmental contexts will provide important insights regarding human nature. Second author is a professor of clinical child and adolescent psychology and a family therapist embracing social constructionist approach. He sees agency as a crucial matter since it can contextualize mental health as a social diagnosis while at the same time focusing on its strengths. Focus on agency and social constructionism is coherent with collaborative and dialogical practices where the therapist uses a not knowing stance driven by curiosity in order to empower clients. This is one of the main reasons for having this article submitted to IJCP. A second reason is that it is an open source journal.

Narrative Means

Narrative psychology embodies the materialization of an alternative approach on human psyche. Encouraged by significant epistemological changes, it offers a dynamic account of reality instead of a mechanical one (Pérez Cota, 2015). Consequently, individuals are given an active role in the creation of reality -conceived as a social construction- (Gergen, 1985 ; Holzman, 2006). People then become agents given their active engagement in the construction of reality (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Specifically, narrative psychology focuses on language's creative functions. Language has previously been identified as carrying meanings at different levels (Derrida, 1967 ; Foucault, 1966). As such, it also became a means of carrying specific versions of reality. In order to share life experiences, lived events must be organized to fit a narrative structure. Specific events can be told in different ways to enhance or diminish some traits. Narrative therapists aim at deconstructing rigid views on life events promoted by "problem saturated narratives" (Gergen, 1985). These narratives focus on negative life events and obliterate alternative versions of a life story giving the illusion that problem saturated narratives represent reality. But there is a difference between life experiences and what agents create when sharing/narrating.

To understand the influential source of narratives, it is important to consider that agents are open systems with a bidirectional influential process (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Bateson (1987) stated that any given system's shape can be understood as the consequence of a restrictive influence that doesn't allow alternative shapes. In this sense, with a psychological focus, Dennett (1998) encourages us to consider agents as centers of narrative gravity.

Bringing these theoretical elements together offers a comprehensive account on narrative perspectives of human psyche. Human beings, considered as agents, are meaning generators having particular ways of being in and relating to the world, others and themselves (Limon Arce, 2012). Agents are dialogical systems constantly becoming, exposed to particular cultural narratives carrying preconceived conceptions of reality (Ansay, 2015). As language is interiorized (Vygotsky, 1975), specific representations of reality are transmitted. Even further, internalized representations are experienced as inner traits instead of cultural ones (White, 1993).

Narratives become problematic when rigid but also, when they corner agents in narratives opposed to their values and desires (White, 1990; 1993; 1995). More specifically, when

dominant stories are problem saturated. Narrative therapists work with consulting systems (Andersen, 1992) because they recognize that narratives are embedded in specific (cultural, familiar, economical, etc.) contexts. Agents' social conditions situate them in different systems that influence reality, perception, interpretation and comprehension through specific narratives.

Similarities between texts and narratives led to the hypothesis that problem saturated narratives could be deconstructed in order to promote less constraining ones (Epston, 1992). In therapy, agents present problem saturated narratives shaped and entertained within their influential (significant) contexts. Those narratives implicitly entertain cultural prototypes that may not be explicit to agents. By making them explicit, narrative therapists encourage problem exteriorization which situates the agent as facing a problem instead of having one (White, 1993). By tracing narrative's history, social representations are recognized and exteriorized. Agents are then given the opportunity to either accept or rebel against those cultural traits.

Exteriorization is one of a two-step process promoting narrative's deconstruction (White, 1993). Using questions as dialogical tools, narrative therapist exteriorizes problems and, afterwards, encourages the (re)appearance of life events that contradict dominant problem saturated narratives (Tomm, 1988; 1989). When structuring life events into narratives, an editorial process must take place (Epston, 1992). This process selects from memory events that are coherent with the dominant story told letting aside other life events. Unique outcomes enable agents to have a different view of themselves and their lives by challenging the dominant version of their narratives. Once unique outcomes are identified, they are historicized to shape an alternative story that is coherent and congruent with the influential systems in which agents are embedded.

The deconstruction of narratives entails a dialogical process in which two agents actively explore the consequences of implicit internalized cultural traits. This process is essentially dialogical and requires an important dimension of cooperation and equality between the members of any therapeutic system. Indeed, narrative therapy procedures require particular settings for the therapeutic dispositive. In this sense, we ascribe to the following account of deco-construction. "I refer to a conversational therapeutic process that we have called deco-construction, mainly to take more explicit the idea that when we analyze the layers of meanings of a narrative or a 'text', additionally we are building a different perspective, amplified and presumably more flexible" (Limon Arce, 2012, p.55).

With deco-construction, Limon Arce invites therapists to remember that therapy is a phenomenon in which agents must not submit to others' view/influence. To successfully build alternative stories likely to be adopted by the agent's influential systems (for example family, friends, school), these must be authentic. Deconstruction can take place not only upon narratives but also upon practices of power (White, 1990; 1995). In order to promote authenticity, practices of power must be challenged by the therapist using for example a not knowing stance (Larner, 1994 ; 1996). Driven by curiosity, narrative therapists free themselves from a hierarchical relation in which they are perceived as experts. Ideally, the expert is the consulting agent (Andersen, 1992). This is an important element in narrative

therapy since it acknowledges that agents are editors of their own narratives and , that each agent is free to be as he wants to be (Limon, 2005).

Narrative therapists are conversational experts who create an optimal environment through dialogical tools for problems to be externalized and outcomes to be historicized to restrain dominant problem saturated narratives consequences. Problems are no longer fixed but rather re-analyzed given that the problematic feature is not inherent to the events but rather, a consequence of rigid frames of intelligibility (Limon Arce, 1997; 2012). That suggests that problems result from restrictive views of reality.

For narrative therapists, problems restrictive traits rely in language and the way it is used. In the following segment we will explore this idea.

Autism and Enaction Status Quo

Critical disability studies consider autism as a bio-political category restrained by both disembodied and focused on disabled research paradigms (Smith, 2016). Disembodied because theoretical models explaining peculiarities over focus on cognition and disregard the body. Disabled because intervention programs aim at repairing, developing or improving impaired functions instead of recognizing strengths, potential and legitimacy.

Autism -as any other developmental disorder- is considered a clinical scenario of abnormal development. A recent review on research on autism demonstrates that children are mainly described as lacking embodiment given their less efficient original encounter with stimuli, motor deficits and different attention foci (Eigsti, 2013). A child with autism is thereby regarded as disabled (Smith, 2016). This is coherent with theoretical models explaining autistic peculiarities through experimentally objectified cognitive deficits: Weak Central Coherence hypothesis (Frith, 2008), Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Raste & Plumb 2001), and Executive Functions hypothesis (Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991). Consequently, interventions to either diminish damages or correct disruptive behaviors are developed. Alternative interventions have been proposed like Movement Based Interventions (Lee, Lambert, Wittich, Kehayia, & Park, 2016 ; Movahedi, Bahrami, Marandi, & Abedi, 2013 ; Wilbarger, 2015), Reciprocal Imitation Training (Ingersoll, 2008), Narrative interventions (Cashin, 2008) as well as family interventions (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012 ; Kaslow, Robbins Broth, Oyeshiku Smith , & Collins, 2012). Nevertheless, these interventions remain focused on training, correction and improvement (Smith, 2016). Together, these stances create and entertain a “disabled focus” perspective which permeates research on autism.

Some authors defend the idea that beyond those assumed limitations, autism can be understood as an alternative way of being in the world (De Jaegher H. , 2013 ; Riviere, 2003). Autism could then be regarded as an atypical development given that children present different starting points compared to neurotypical ones resulting in an alternative way of approaching reality (Riviere, 2003 ; Westermman, Mareschal, Johnson, Sirois, Sprattling, & Thomas, 2007). Enaction as a paradigm provides theoretical tools to explore this hypothesis considering that different bodies think differently (Casasanto, 2011).

Inactivism states that the ways in which bodies are used carry different meanings (Di Paolo, 2005). Different bodily ways determine different ways of relating and therefore different salient worlds: “‘The world’ is moreover that of a specific agent –not that of an external observer” (De Jaeger, 2013, P.9). Agents’ bodies are thought of as a vessel through which significant reality is enacted. For example, Overton (2008) proposes three guidelines to analyze the body; as a form the body refers to its biological structure; as an experience it refers to the psychological integration of the person; and, its active engagement refers to its socio-cultural context.

Upon these considerations an autistic embodiment can be described to recognize alternatives ways to be in and with the world. Atypical development appears then to have its own logic and, within this logic lies an also logical experience of the self and the world (Riviere, 2003). Enaction gives us the theoretical tool to explore atypical experience of a self without being limited to utterances analysis (Shotter J. , 2011).

Enaction conceives a continuity between living and cognitive processes (Fantasia, De Jaeger, & Fasulo, 2014). Cognitive phenomena are thought to be rooted in the body and, most importantly, resulting from the interaction with other agents and the world: mind and world arise together as the body engages in action and inter-action (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993). Accordingly, Di Paolo (2009) describes perception as the “mastery of lawful sensorimotor contingencies” (p. 2).

Embodiment as a paradigm situates the body as a tool to know the world and make sense of it (Wilson & Foglia, 2011). Beyond their biological structures, bodies became an interrelated organic, cognitive and social self (Di Paolo, 2005). Early experiences shape bodily ways of being in the world. Social context structure orientational understanding in terms of embodied anticipation and expectations which represents the first tool to cognize the world: “I want to explore the possibility of there being for us, as living beings, a much more immediate and unreflective bodily way of being related to our surroundings ...” (Shotter, 2011, p.439). Embodiment embraces the first person experience and recognizes that pre-verbal agents cognize the world through and within the limits of their bodily ways (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993). Embodied bodies perceive possibilities so that agents know where they are and what to do next (Todes, 2001). In this sense, cognition is perceived as an embodied action through which agents make sense of the world (Di Paolo, 2010).

As a social species, the way agents enact reality cannot be separated from their social condition. Participatory sense-making (PSM) explores the interactive nature of meaning by observing bidirectional influences between interacting agents (De Jaeger H., 2013 ; De Jaeger & Di Paolo, 2007). Social encounters require coordination between agents for the interaction to have autonomy and therefore to influence agents back (Di Paolo, 2005 ; 2009 ; Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015).

Social interaction involves both verbal and non-verbal coordination (Fantasia, De Jaeger, & Fasulo, 2014). Typical and atypical agents become meaningfully engaged when their perception-action systems are coupled or, in other words, when there is a non-accidental correlation of their body movements as well as their utterances (Di Paolo, 2009). Given

children's with autism particular way of perceiving (Riviere, 2003), it has been proposed that they decode in different ways than other's bodily anchored stances which has a profound effect in the way they infer other agents' subjective experience (Hobson, Lee, & Hobson, 2007).

Because children with autism appear to have different access to language, conceptual tools using the body as a means to enact reality may be insightful as they offer new realms of inquiry in autism (De Jaegher., 2013; Shotter, 2011). Recognizing an autistic embodiment is to recognize that agents can enact differently the same world resulting in a different world. Children with autism, although engaged in the same physical world, do not consider relevant social cues that are essential to neurotypical children (De Jaegher, 2013). Indeed, in autism, orientational understanding and sense-making processes follow an alternative logic which results in a different salient world. Ergo, having a different developmental logic, different rhythm, tempo and ways of decoding (interpreting) the world exposes children with autism to more frequent breakdowns in social encounters (De Jaegher, 2013).

Coordination requires meaningful engagement which in turn depends on interlocking bodies (Di Paolo, 2005; 2009). If two bodily ways respond to a different logic enact different worlds (and neither of them adapts) then coordination and cooperation are at stake. Without coordination and cooperation, agents' interactions cannot become a source of meaning nor construction.

Children with autism appear to enact the world in ways that may be strange to neurotypical agents because they might be appealing to a more immediate and unreflective way: a bodily one.

This is an alternative approach for children with autism (not autism). What is usually perceived as disruptive behaviors (echolalia, restricted interests, peculiar cognitive patterns ...) may actually represent alternative ways to enact the world that neurotypical agents fail to recognize (Stribling, Rae, & Dickerson, 2005/6).

Overall, social constructionism and narrative therapy situated language are means through which reality is entertained. While these approaches have led to conceive human beings as agents they remain over focused on language. As a result, deco-construction remains essentially linguistic whereas embodiment may open the door for application to other means of meaning such as the body. This implies that bodily ways may be deco-constructed which requires tools to seize an atypical logic entertained through particular bodily ways. A phenomenological account on autism can provide clues to access such logic and therefore expose an autistic agency expressed through the body. This access should lead to the validation of particular ways to enact the world, not to interventions aiming at correcting it (Goodley, 2011).

Autism's Phenomenological Account

To properly sketch a phenomenological account of children with autism it is essential to consider an ontological view of agents' socio-cultural conditions. In other words, an understanding of the individual's environment and its dynamics is necessary given that living

systems are shaped through and within the interaction with their environments (Bateson, 1987 ; Shotter, 1993 ; 2013).

Social Relational Theory displays a dialectical account of social transactions (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). It considers that all human beings are potentially agents in that they are actively engaged in the social transactions “as parts of a complex dynamic system” (p.12). Interactions are represented as transactions in order to make more explicit the idea that something is being interchanged. Consequently, in the end, both agents have been influenced by the interaction itself (Sameroff, 1975). This is consistent with internalization as a process of socialization (Vygotsky, 1975). From this point of view, family is conceived as a socialization system in which two agents (parent and child) are inscribed in long term relationships characterized by bidirectional influence (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Consequently, agents’ relationships become the context of their transactions which gain a certain autonomy. Considering children as agents enables the possibility of both parents and children to be influenced by their transactions whose meaning depends on the dyad’s interactional history (Di Paolo, 2009).

Indeed, when considering atypical development scenarios, consequences as well as therapeutic possibilities cannot be thought of outside of the socialization system in which children exist (Guyard, 2012). Children are normally born in families where they engage in long term relationships with their parents that mainly aim at socialization resulting in specific narratives (White & Epston, 1990) and bodily ways (Shotter , 2011). Here, socialization must be understood as transmission and internalization of both cultural and social cues that guide agents’ interactions with others and the world. These are the codebooks of a particular culture (White, 1993). Now, this process results from the interaction between agents influencing each other as new meanings are derived from both verbal and nonverbal behavior (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). This is most important because it gives us the opportunity to consider socialization not only from the narrative perspective but also from the enactive one.

Children with autism present behavioral, cognitive and linguistic peculiarities (Riviere, 2003). Following De Jaegher (2013), these children enact the world differently: they use/prefer other means than language to signify their presence and comprehension of reality. Because orientational understanding is shaped in early developmental stages and within a particular socialization system, autistic embodiment and enaction are directly linked to the environmental and relational circumstances. Therefore, what is perceived as disruptive behaviors may actually have an interactional function (Fantasia, De Jaegher, & Fasulo, 2014). For example, Stribling et al., (2005/6) describe how for a specific child with autism echolalia can be a means to signify both its presence and engagement in a social situation such as play. In other words, behaviors that are disruptive are not necessarily senseless but neurotypical agents fail to recognize such actions as meaningful ones. De Jaegher (2013) argues that behavior’s disruptiveness is linked to the environment’s lack of flexibility which hinders the recognition of meaning (or intention) behind not typical behaviors.

Family is a system of agents who have the capacity to influence each other. Agents within a familiar system may feel either connected or isolated depending on their interactional history. Isolated agents present feelings both of a diminished significance regarding their

contribution/value to the family system as well as less differentiation from other agents (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Because children with autism enact the world in ways which are at risk of not being recognized, they may be more inclined to feel isolated as their environment doesn't offer proper responses to their actions (De Jaegher, 2010; 2013). Considering that "... children derive their sense of relational influence from the way their parents respond to their actions" (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015, p. 61), not recognizing autistic enaction may promote feelings of isolation which has an impact on both disruptive behaviors and family members well being (Guyard, 2012).

Isolated agents can be linked to a diminished feeling of agency considering that both are rooted in the interactional history of a specific familiar system. This is particularly true in autism where specific ways of enaction are overlooked. "Agency of family members reflects the meaning or significance of the family members within the relationship and consequently implies the existential nature of being an agent in the relationship" (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015, p.60). In other words, other agents' recognition of influence is necessary for agency to be experienced. Having two agents recognizing each other's stances and intentions reveals the interpersonal domain in which reality is constructed (Cashin, 2008 ; Kuczynski & De Mol 2015). Children with autism are not characterized by cognitive deficits, limited access to language nor by disruptive behaviors. They are characterized by a particular way of comprehending, acting, enacting and influencing their physical and social environment. Autism then becomes a clinical scenario that sheds some light at the complex and profound stakes of interpersonal dynamics. It reminds us that there are different ways of being human and that societies (and their systems) should be more flexible when receiving agents that use other means to enact the world.

Following the negative explanation principle, autism as we know it today has a particular behavioural, psychological and bodily structure resulting from circumstantial settings in which agentic manifestations tend to be overlooked (Bateson, 1987 ; De Jaegher, 2010 ; 2013). As we see it, reimagining interventions so that they can adapt to these unraveled core elements of autism, helps to address the question about how to work with bodily ways must be raised. This is essential because for enactivism, the body is the site and root of agency. If bodies cannot be heard then autistic agency may be at stake. Accordingly, we can wonder "how to create a space with the atmosphere that positively transforms the way in which bodies can be thought of ?" (Hickey-Moody, 2007, p. 87).

Alternative Ways of Being and Intervening

Human beings are actively engaged in the construction of reality and therefore, are agents. Although narrative psychology has coined the term of narratives within the linguistic domain, this is in our view, a restrictive interpretation. By enabling the body as a form of meaning, enaction pinpoints narrative hypothesis' core: reality is built as it is signified. In other words, as agents becoming engaged with both their world and their peers through their actions, they are also creating and entertaining their reality.

Earlier we referred to Dennet's (1998) conception of agents as a center of narrative gravity. Like narratives, this conceptualization is constricted to a linguistic domain. It would appear that the expression center of meaning gravity may be more accurate considering the enactive

paradigm. Because utterances as well as bodily ways represent meaningful actions, we propose to redefine narratives for them not to be limited to a linguistic domain. Consequently, in the following discussion, narratives refer to an individual's specific ways to enact the world keeping in mind that there are different means and ways to enact it. It is a matter of meaning attribution and construction. This differentiation is fundamental for an alternative account of autism.

Critical disability studies expose a disabled focus narrative surrounding autism in today's societies, research and intervention paradigms. These narratives implicitly entertain significant practices of power that permeate different levels of our society. Following the negative explanation principle, these practices of power may be understood as forces that both shape and restrict the autistic way of being as we know it. As stated earlier, these narratives are not solely linguistic: practices of power cannot be described exclusively as ways of talking. We must question whether our bodily ways can entertain such practices of power and, if so, explore how to dismantle them. This represents a new reality for imagining interventions. A phenomenological approach of agents' socio-cultural condition is a powerful ally to identify and counter such narratives.

Family, children's primary context for socialization, both influences and is influenced by their socio-cultural context. Within it, social transactions take place. More specifically, meaningful interactions characterized by agents' active engagement become the source for agency to be recognized. Families having children who've been diagnosed with autism represent systems with an atypical agent: having a different embodiment and enacting logic should not deprive atypical developing children from their agentic status. Nevertheless, this is exactly what critical disability studies denounce when identifying autism as a bio-political category.

As a consequence of disabled focus approaches on autism, children's agentic status is denied since their meaningful actions are neither recognized nor understood. Given that agency is rooted in the interpersonal domain, not recognizing alternative ways of enacting reality puts at stake the recognition of agency and therefore the sense of agency. This represents an implicit practice of power that operates within the most intimate and relevant system of a child: family.

Participatory sense making exposes risks of an interactive breakdown history when agents enacting the world differently engage in interaction. For children with autism, most social transactions take place with agents using the same means of meaning in different proportions. Autistic agents appear to rely essentially on bodily ways while neurotypical agents rely essentially on language.

In this sense, autistic agents are exposed to more frustration given that despite their active engagement in the transaction, the other does not recognize it. This means that children with autism are less exposed to social situations out of which their agency is appreciated.

By no means are we identifying family as the source of the problem but rather, as a source for change. If family is influenced by and reproduces social narratives within their unfolding dynamics, it can also become the site to counter those narratives. Practices of power can be deco-constructed (in different levels) within the meaningful system of an atypical agent.

Families have been included in autistic interventions for different reasons: better outcomes (Leef, 2005), to target parental stress symptoms related to their child's handicap (Guyard, 2012) or to have them as co-therapist (Schopler, Mesibov, & Baker, 1982). Although these interventions report positive outcomes, they remain disabled focused aiming at changing something of the atypical agent way of being in the world. Implicitly this represents an aggressive rejection of their autistic embodiment, their alternative ways of enacting the world and therefore of their agentic status.

We do not ascribe to the idea that autism requires a corrective intervention but rather, an intervention that allows the family system as well the atypical agent to either identify or co-construct his embodiment and enacting ways. This might free the family from the implicit practices of power and open the possibility to build an interactional space where autistic enaction can be identified. Narrative therapy tools might open new possibilities to reconsider therapeutic interventions with families having atypical agents. Overall, autism as a clinical scenario should not be understood as an impairment of social interaction or cognitive functioning but rather, as a case scenario in which an inactive quid pro quo takes place between typical and atypical agents, restricting (entertaining) the family within a disabled focus dynamic.

Larner (2000) sees the narrative child therapist as a “messenger taking the child's symbolic communication to the family” (p.75). Based upon his Narrative Child Family Therapy (NCFT), therapist working with children diagnosed as autistic may consider having assessment sessions with the children to expose his meaningful ways of engaging in social interactions. Afterwards, sessions with the family could serve as a “narrative container” (Larner, 1996. p. 12) where exteriorization and historization might take place within a deconstruction process of the families' bodily ways.

Research should focus on how to adapt narrative means to the body because after all, it is the “phenomenological framing of shared bodily, lived experiences (that) allow the recognition of the body's capacity to be a source of self and society” (Smith, 2016, p.6). We consider that the recognition of an autistic embodiment, enaction, and agency are the first means to counter dominant disabled narratives shaping research and interventions. Autism, as any other atypical development scenario, reminds us that there are different ways of being.

Conclusion

Both narrative psychology and therapy rely upon contemporary theoretical developments promoting the idea that reality is socially constructed. Indeed, people considered to be actively engaged in the construction of such a reality and therefore, become agents. Social representations are internalized, reproduced and entertained through narratives, some of which are problematic given their restrictive focus on specific life events. Deconstruction and deconstruction represent conversational means aiming for alternative ways of being to emerge.

When considering these theoretical developments in autism, practices of power are exposed. It appears that for autism both theory and interventions are permeated by a “disabled dominant” narrative. Consequently, interventions remain essentially corrective and disembodied. Enaction offers a theoretical paradigm in which the body becomes a means of meaning. Considered as the root of both cognition and agency, the body becomes a “more immediate” tool to be actively engaged in this world and with others. It offers autism an alternative to disabled dominant narratives. Based upon a phenomenological account of life, an autistic embodiment becomes conspicuous. Using Participatory Sense Making conceptualizations as well as Social Relational Theory, we expose practices of power that diminish interpersonal experiences for agency to be recognized within family dynamics.

Family as a socialization system is considered as a necessary ally to counter dominant disabled narratives regarding autism. This is because on one hand it reproduces cultural narratives (wider sense) and, on the other, it represents the context into which children’s agency emerges. Inspired upon narrative and enactive accounts, and as an alternative to corrective interventions, we argue in favor of a therapist who helps the family to recognize or build the autistic embodiment to create new spaces of becoming. Deconstructing the bodily ways of a socialization system can create new spaces in which atypical bodily ways can be listened to.

As agents, we are not beings of language but rather, beings of meaning. And as we’ve seen, the body has been disregarded as an alternative means of meaning. Regarding autism, research on interventions should focus on generating experiences of engagement in order for an autistic agency to become conspicuous. As spaces for alternative bodily ways are encouraged, autism may be seen as an alternative way of becoming instead of an impossibility of becoming.

We hope that this reading may inspire you to question and imagine how is your therapeutic (or research) setting creating (or hindering) spaces for alternative becomings. This thought itself would already represent a major turning point in the way we approach not only autism but also, human nature.

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Author's Note:

Alexandre Leurs Massart
Université Catholique de Louvain
leusalex@gmail.com

De Mol, Jan
Psychological Sciences Research Institute (IPSY)
Jan.demol@uclouvain.be