



Autism spectrum disorders, autism and the myths surrounding it

Coffee Beans

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Autism spectrum disorders commonly called autism is a complex of disorders involving sensory perception of the world around us. The term autism was coined and first used in 1911 by Swiss psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939) who, like Sigmund Freud, believed that complex mental processes could be unconscious. Bleuler used the word "autism" to describe a state of isolation from reality so complete that he excluded other human beings from it. For him, autism meant a detachment from reality along with a relative to absolute dominance of the inner life [1].

Today, autism is defined as a developmental disorder manifested by abnormal social interaction, persistent repetitive patterns of behavior, and impaired communication skills, and is classified as an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) [2]. The problem with understanding autism as an ASD is that a number of myths and unsubstantiated claims have been introduced into a relatively well-defined condition.

The first of the unsubstantiated claims is attributed to Leo Kanner (1894-1981), who stated in a newspaper article that childhood autism was the result of inadequate care by "cold" mothers. He later rejected this view [3, 4]. However, a similar view was later held by Bruno Bettelheim, who believed that autism was not innate but was the result of maternal rejection [5].

Another myth that is often repeated is the claim that autism used to be rare, whereas nowadays autism spectrum disorders are more or less common. This myth is based on a published CDC statistic that states that in twenty-one years of the twenty-first century, the number of children diagnosed with ASD has increased from six per thousand children in 2000 to nearly twenty-eight per thousand children in 2020 [6].

The rise in the number of children diagnosed with ASD has been linked to vaccinations against infectious diseases (one [Coffee Bean](#) article has already been written on this topic). The trivalent vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella (the so-called MMR vaccine) is the most blamed. The MMR vaccine accusation was based on a paper by Andrew Wakefield (*1956) and his colleagues [7], which made a link between the MMR vaccine and a hypothetical intestinal disorder called autistic enterocolitis. The claim in this publication was shown to be false, later rejected by Wakefield's co-authors and retracted by the Lancet.

So, what is the cause of the increase in diagnosed cases of ASD in children? Until the 1980s, there was no diagnostic category for ASD and therefore the misconception that autism was rare prevailed and discouraged doctors from making this diagnosis. It was not until the work of the Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger (1906-1980) that a definition of so-called autistic psychopathy was possible [8], which was then renamed autistic spectrum disorder and elaborated by the British physician Lorna

Wing (1928-2014) [9-11]. While it cannot be said unequivocally that autism is not on the rise, what is certain is that the increase in autism is not due to vaccines [12] but due to diagnosis.

There are other myths, autistic people are often seen as "automatons without emotions, incapable of compassion". A number of studies have been devoted to this problem [13-15], the results of which demonstrate that the problem lies elsewhere; there is a misperception of autistic people by the neurotypical majority. This perception of autistic people is not only problematic for the development of autistic people but also goes to the detriment of the wider society when it comes to their inclusion in the neurotypical majority [16]. Both autistic and non-autistic people have difficulty in viewing the world from the other's side, and mutual interpersonal interactions can avert many of the problems. However, the possibility of remaking the autistic person into a neurotypical so that they are indistinguishable from their neurotypical peers is another myth. It has also been theorized that mind training will help autistic people to integrate into mainstream society, but this has not met with the desired effect [17, 18].

Thus, it can be summarized that there is a problem for people diagnosed with ASD, it is a very serious disability that affects almost all aspects of life. Yet, it is possible to live with this diagnosis. A BBC session on autism reports that billionaires such as Mark Zuckerberg and Marissa Meyer, if they do indeed have autism, can document that autism diagnosis conveys a "difference" rather than a handicap [19]. By acting sensitively, considerately, and with an effort to understand, we achieve more for autistic people than by creating myths and misinformation.

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