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The Autistic Brain: Exploring the Strength of a Different Kind of Mind

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Review

Grandin, T. & Panek, R. (2013). *The autistic brain: Exploring the strength of a different kind of mind*. New York: Random House.

Temple Grandin is one of the most well known persons with autism. Most people met her first when the neurologist Oliver Sacks portrayed her in his famous book “An anthropologist on Mars”. But Dr Grandin –BA in Psychology, PhD in Animal Science, professor at Colorado State University, and an accomplished engineer in the livestock industry- had written by that time a considerable number of scientific papers and books.

In her last book, “The autistic brain”, Dr Grandin offers an up to date review of the latest developments in autism research, providing a context to her own clinical case. She is interested in the biological roots of autism and in particular in its genetic underpinning. She shows data obtained from scans of her own brain, and compares those data with the neurotypical brain. She explains how the structure of the autistic brain is different from the average, meaning that there are certain things that an autistic person will never do like the neurotypicals. For example, to complete and organise the materials for her books she needs the help of others –in this case, a science writer-, because her deficits in short-term memory preclude her from concentrating in such a task.

Grandin recommends to educators and families of children with autism to try to understand the deficits of autistic children and avoid asking them to achieve goals that they could never achieve. However, Grandin complains that the study of autism is almost always focused in understanding the deficits. What can really make the difference for a person with autism is to turn his or her differences into strengths. It would be very fruitful exploring the advantages that autistic people have in certain tasks as compared with neurotypicals –i.e. higher attention to detail, visual thinking- and encourage the development of such abilities. In this respect, she fondly remembers her science teacher at high school, who never gave up in looking for her aptitudes, and encouraged her to pursue a career in Science. No wonder that, when she proposes a number of jobs suitable for autistic people, she lists every kind of job, from plumbing to architecture.

Grandin also complains about the danger of labels. We learn how the autism diagnosis has dangled through the different versions of the *DSM*¹, so that one individual labelled as Asperger in 1980 will be labelled in the autistic spectrum today. We discover how the cases of children labelled autistic increased after a typo in the *DMS-IV*, which read “a severe and pervasive impairment of reciprocal social interaction or verbal and nonverbal skills” instead of “and”, such that a person had to meet just one criterion instead of two to be diagnosed as autistic.

In her own case, she was born at the time when Leo Kanner’s works about autism were just starting to be known in the medical community². She guesses that her life would have been a lot different had she been labelled autistic as a young child. Thus, she encourages us to look at people with autism as individuals, rather than as a pool of people under the shade of a diagnosis.

However, most of the pieces of advice that Temple Grandin offers in her book do not apply to the most severe cases autism: those people who is not able to communicate, let alone to have an independent life like hers. Yet she is confident that we might find in the future a way in which communication with them will be easier. For example, new tablet computers offer great help to teach children with autism.

In summary, reading “The autistic brain” by Temple Grandin provides a unique opportunity for those interested in education and disability: not only she is a scientist, but also she is a person with autism writing about autism. Her perspective is thus invaluable to learn about those important matters from the inside.

Notes

¹ Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

² Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger defined independently the autistic syndrome in 1943. Kanner proposed that a main cause of autism was due to attachment problems, of which often a “refrigerator mother” was to blame. This false hypothesis probably caused a lot of pain in an unknown number of mothers.

References

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