

Autistic Intelligence: Interaction, Individuality, and the Challenges of Diagnosis

Douglas W. Maynard and Jason Turowetz. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 2022. Pp. 1 + 275.

Autistic Intelligence: Interaction, Individuality, and the Challenges of Diagnosis by Maynard and Turowetz (2022) addresses the importance of exploring language used in interactions during the diagnostic process of autism spectrum disorder. The authors analyze interaction in order to clarify the ambiguity in understanding autism that exists across several fields of study. Drawing on their sociological backgrounds, the authors use an ethnomethodological conversation analytic approach to show that interaction has been overlooked in the autism diagnostic process. This research makes an important contribution to existing conversation analytic and psychological literature by reframing autism spectrum disorder as a difference rather than a deficit.

Organized thematically into eight chapters, this book is guided by the questions of what autism is, in what ways autism is “real,” and how social environments impact autistic children. In chapter 1, Maynard and Turowetz describe autism as behavior that “disrupts common sense” (p. 3), which they define as a measure of social competence in the world. By studying interaction during the diagnostic process, and more specifically, by taking an interactional approach to analyzing video-recordings of autism evaluations collected over a 40-year period, the authors establish that autism is not a disruption of common sense.

Chapter 2 follows with a brief history of autism spectrum disorder, including how autism has been described and studied from clinical psychology and biological perspectives. Then, to analyze interaction during the diagnostic process, Maynard and Turowetz examine the different stages that take place during an autistic evaluation for a child. They elucidate the impact that social environments, such as family and school, have on autistic children and demonstrate that analyzing autism as an interactional phenotype allows autism to be studied in terms of “how genes and behavior are related” (p. 51). The authors show how these social and environmental factors influence behaviors of autistic children and how these factors can further affect interaction for these children. By exploring what autism is, as opposed to looking at the clinical criteria of how autism has been diagnosed, Maynard and Turowetz describe the relationship of the interactional phenotype and these behaviors.

Chapter 3 introduces transcriptions of interactions that occur during the process of an autism evaluation at the Central Developmental Disabilities Clinic (CDDC). Maynard and Turowetz use these detailed transcripts to point out the “socially organized actions and responses” (p. 59) that occurred between children and clinicians. By observing this interactional organization, the authors analyze the children’s interactional participation and identify patterns of differing levels of competence. The authors show how verbal and nonverbal communication create interactional organization patterns in autistic children that might differ from interactions that clinicians would expect to see. The authors describe the importance of nonverbal interactions, including gestures, proximity, spatial patterns, and gaze, during the evaluation

process and demonstrate how examining nonverbal communication can be useful for understanding the competence levels of autistic children. Maynard and Turowetz also use an ethnomethodological approach to observe the social situations that might influence the interaction. Since the authors describe how language depends on the context in which it occurs, these methods allow the authors to explain behaviors and interactions that took place during the evaluations.

Chapter 4 commences with an explanation of autistic intelligence as it relates to children's competence levels. The authors introduce the terms first-order and second-order competences and refer to these to show how autistic children might use these competence practices differently. The authors emphasize that autistic children do not lack common sense just because they use differing levels of competence. Throughout chapters 4 and 5, Maynard and Turowetz make the case for not only using interaction to become more aware of an autistic child's environment, but also for adapting to an autistic child's commonsense patterns instead of seeing them as deficits. In these chapters, the authors reveal that the existing assessments and instruments used in the diagnostic process do not consider the differences in autistic children's competence levels, and therefore, clinicians often misunderstand the child. One example the authors provide to show how clinicians might better understand the child is for clinicians to rephrase their questions to adapt to the child's interactional level.

In chapter 6, Maynard and Turowetz focus on interactional narrative organizations used by clinicians during the diagnostic process. The authors show how clinicians use narratives to explain what occurred during the evaluations and how family members respond to these narrative structures used for delivering the results. Maynard and Turowetz argue that narrative structures explain how interaction can be organized and that appreciating different types of narrative structures can lead to a deeper understanding of the individuality of each child, which has previously been overlooked. This chapter delineates two types of narratives: tendency stories, which quantify evaluations, such as the number of times a child exhibited a behavior, and instantiation stories, which describe a single behavior that the child exhibited in social environments. By observing these narrative organizations, Maynard and Turowetz identify patterns of behaviors and interactional patterns, contributing to their argument of viewing autism as an interactional phenotype.

Maynard and Turowetz begin chapter 7 by highlighting the ambiguity that exists in an autism diagnosis and pointing out that this can lead to controversy. They also show how other disciplines such as biology, genetics, and psychology have not been able to account for the ambiguity within autism spectrum disorder. Examining this ambiguity by viewing autism as a social interactional phenotype allows Maynard and Turowetz to answer one of their research questions – if autism is real. That is, the authors provide evidence for the existence of autism by defining recurring patterns of interaction in autistic children. In addition to recognizing the importance of how autistic children participate in interaction, this chapter examines the language clinicians use to explain how children's symptoms fit into diagnostic criteria. The authors categorize two interactional sequences that clinicians use to deliver the results of evaluations to parents: cautious optimism and cautious pessimism. By illustrating how clinicians talk about autism diagnoses and how parents receive the information, Maynard and Turowetz highlight the importance of autism being well understood by people in the autistic child's life and how these

individuals can learn to adjust their language to meet the child's level. The authors end this chapter by stating that their analysis shifts the understanding of autism to look at "what ways it can be said to be real" (p. 181) rather than if it is real.

The final chapter returns to the themes of common sense, the interactional phenotype, autistic intelligence, narrative structures, and interaction in the diagnostic process. Rather than forcing common sense upon autistic children, which has traditionally been done, Maynard and Turowetz contend that neurotypicals should be informed about autistic intelligence. In this manner, Maynard and Turowetz further their argument that autism should be seen as a difference instead of a deficit. Since the authors describe common sense as an interactional feature, they show that ignoring how autistic children think and respond in interaction prevents a comprehensive understanding of autism spectrum disorder. The authors also demonstrate how common sense can present difficulties during clinical evaluations and show that these difficulties can also arise in other settings in autistic children's lives. Maynard and Turowetz's analysis provides evidence that observing and attending to minute details in interactions can be useful in redirecting a child's behavior and developing their interactional skills for use in other social environments.

By addressing autism diagnoses, which are increasingly prevalent in recent times and carry significant implications, this timely book makes a well-supported argument for finding individuality in autistic children. Importantly, the authors emphasize that neurotypical individuals should adapt to interactional patterns that were seen in autistic children's interactions. This book prompts a multitude of questions in the reader's mind from the thought-provoking concepts introduced. These questions are successfully answered throughout the book, allowing readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the authors' findings.

Although this book enables readers to see the benefits of studying interaction in autism evaluations, there are a few areas that could be strengthened to enhance the readability. The themes and concepts in the chapters are not organized into clear sections and information is often restated throughout multiple chapters, which can make the text hard to follow at times. The authors often reference concepts that they state will be explained in a later chapter, which may leave the reader wondering whether they should skip forward in the book to better understand the concept. Providing a brief explanation when a concept is first introduced may have made for a clearer presentation of these ideas. Moreover, though Maynard and Turowetz offer several transcriptions throughout the book that provide interactional patterns to support their argument, some examples of interactions do not have a transcript provided, which may have been helpful for readers to better understand these interactions. Despite these minor critiques, the overarching themes and eye-opening findings provide a valuable contribution to existing literature in the field.

Maynard and Turowetz's analysis of naturally occurring interaction contributes to our understanding of the autism diagnostic process. The authors state that while conversation analysis has been used to study primary care diagnoses, this book fills a gap in literature by examining autism diagnoses, including evaluation, diagnostic delivery, and parental reception of the evaluation. This book can be a resource for clinicians and mental healthcare workers working with patients with developmental disabilities to educate themselves on autistic children's

interactions. For teachers looking to better understand autistic children's competence levels and patterns of interactions, this book could be enriching. Even though the book does not specifically relate the implications to education, the findings could also be used to train teachers to change their ways of thinking and to use language in a way that matches the autistic child's level, rather than expecting the autistic child to change.

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