The Discovery of Autism

**by Attwood and Gray**

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Some of this century’s best discoveries were creative and determined efforts to answer “What if…?” questions. What if people could fly? What if electrical energy could be harnessed to produce light? What if there was an easily accessible, international communication and information network? The answers have resulted in permanent changes: air travel, light bulbs, the Internet. These discoveries have rendered their less effective counterparts to relative extinction from use: gone is the stagecoach, gas lighting, and multi-volume hardbound encyclopedias. These improvements remind us of our option and ability to experiment, re-mold, re-think, and imagine. In that spirit, this article submits a new question: What if autism was defined by its strengths? What changes might occur?

## Moving from Diagnosis to Discovery

Making any diagnosis requires attention to weaknesses, the observation and interpretation of signs and symptoms that vary from typical development or health. Certainly it would be a little disarming to visit a doctor for a diagnosis, only to have her inquire, “So, what feels absolutely great?” The DSM 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) assists in the identification of a variety of disorders. It is used by psychiatrists and psychologists to match observed weaknesses, symptoms and behaviors to text. In DSM 5 Autism Spectrum Disorder is identified by specific diagnostic criteria, a constellation of observed social and communication characteristics. Once diagnosed, a child or adult with the diagnosis is referred to with politically correct “people first” terminology, i.e. a *person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.*

Unlike *diagnosis,* the term *discovery* often refers to the identification of a person’s strengths or talents. Actors are discovered. Artists and musicians are discovered. A great friend is discovered. These people are identified by an informal combination of evaluation and awe that ultimately concludes that this person – more than most others – possesses admirable qualities, abilities, and/or talents. It’s an acknowledgment that, “…you know, he’s better than me at….”. In referring to people with respect to their talents or abilities, politically correct “people first” terminology is not required; labels like *musician, artist,* or *poet* are welcomed and considered complimentary.

If autism was identified by observation of strengths and talents, it would no longer be in the DSM 5, nor would it be referred to as a syndrome. After all, a reference to someone with special strengths or talents does not use terms with negative connotations (it’s *artist* and *poet,* not *Artistically Arrogant* or *Poetically Preoccupied*), nor does it attach someone’s proper name to the word *syndrome* (it’s *vocalist* or *soloist,* not *Sinatra’s Syndrome*).

New ways of thinking often lead to discoveries that consequently discard their outdated predecessors. It could result in typical people rethinking their responses and rescuing a missed opportunity to take advantage of the contribution of those with autism to culture and knowledge.

Figure 1: Discovery criteria for *autism* by Attwood and Gray

1. A qualitative advantage in social interaction, as manifested by a majority of the following:
2. peer relationships characterized by absolute loyalty and impeccable dependability
3. free of sexist, “age-ist”, or culturalist biases; ability to regard others at “face value”
4. speaking one’s mind irrespective of social context or adherence to personal beliefs
5. ability to pursue personal theory or perspective despite conflicting evidence
6. seeking an audience or friends capable of: enthusiasm for unique interests and topics; consideration of details; spending time discussing a topic that may not be of primary interest to others
7. listening without continual judgement or assumption
8. interested primarily in significant contributions to conversation; preferring to avoid “ritualistic small talk” or socially trivial statements and superficial conversation
9. seeking sincere, positive, genuine friends with an unassuming sense of humor
10. Fluent in autism, a social language characterized by at least three of the following:
11. a determination to seek the truth
12. conversation free of hidden meaning or agenda
13. advanced vocabulary and interest in words
14. fascination with word-based humour, such as puns
15. advanced use of pictorial metaphor
16. Cognitive skills characterized by at least four of the following:
17. strong preference for detail
18. original, often unique perspective in problem solving
19. exceptional memory and/or recall of details often forgotten or disregarded by others, for example: names, dates, schedules, routines
20. avid perseverance in gathering and cataloguing information on a topic of interest
21. persistence of thought
22. encyclopaedic or digital knowledge of one or more topics
23. knowledge of routines and a focused desire to maintain order, consistency and accuracy
24. clarity of values/decision making unaltered by political or financial factors
25. Additional possible features:
26. acute sensitivity to specific sensory experiences and stimuli, for example: hearing, touch, vision, and/or smell
27. strength in individual sports and games, particularly those involving endurance, visual accuracy or intellect, including rowing, swimming, bowling, chess
28. “social unsung hero” with trusting optimism: frequent victim of social weaknesses and prejudices of others, while steadfast in the belief of the possibility of genuine friendship
29. increased probability over general population of attending university after high school
30. often take care of others outside the range of typical development

Perhaps we have discovered the next stage of human evolution?