

Autism Spectrum Disorders as Context Blindness

Session #23 - Part 2: Getting the point: Impact of Context blindness on social skills development

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Introduction:

In the two sessions on *Context Blindness*, we will present ***a new cognitive theory*** on autism¹, developed under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Uta Frith. Context blindness can be seen as the common pathway of the three main cognitive theories on autism (Theory of Mind, Executive Functions and Central Coherence). We will describe the concept of context blindness, how it explains the behavioral triad of autism characteristics and, in the second session, its impact on social skills development and how we can support people with autism in their struggle to survive socially.

Key take-away message of the two sessions:

The biggest problem for people with autism spectrum disorders is: there are no absolute meanings in our world. The meaning of almost every stimulus in life is context dependent. People with autism are context blind: they give meaning in an absolute rather than a contextually sensitive way. We should clarify the context of stimuli so that people with autism can find their way “blindly” in a world full of relative meanings. *This contextual clarification is the core of autism friendliness.*

Part 2: Getting the point: Impact of Context blindness on social skills development

In this session we will explore more in detail the impact of the reduced contextual sensitivity in autism on social cognitions and social skills, such as face perception, emotion recognition, theory of mind abilities, and social problem solving abilities.

Topics that will be covered are:

- *The role of context in emotion recognition*
Why traditional emotion recognition training programs are of limited use for people with ASD.
We should teach them to recognize contexts, not emotions.
Emotion recognition
 - We never see facial expressions out of context
 - Relation expression –emotion is not fixed

¹ In this abstract, the term “autism” is used as synonym for Autism Spectrum Disorder. So, it also refers to Asperger Syndrome and PDD-NOS

- Context influences emotion recognition (Da Fonseca e.a. 2008)
- Labelling an emotion vs understanding where the emotion comes from
 - The explanation of emotions can be found in the context
- *Theory of Mind requires contextual sensitivity:*
 why ToM-training is useless without attention to the role of context in understanding other people's mind.
 Understanding mental states is dependent upon contextual processing
 - Strange Stories (Happé, 1994; Joliffe & Baron-Cohen, 1999)
 - They can do it if we cue them (Begeer et al., 2006):
 the attention for emotions is off-line and must be switched on-line through contextual cueing
- *Context and socially appropriate behaviour and social problem solving (social skills)*
 - They can learn a lot of scripts and skills...
 - But have difficulties with contextual changes in scripts and situations
 - Socially appropriate = contextually appropriate
 The biggest problem in autism is not social skills (knowing what and how to do)
 The biggest problem in autism is knowing where and when to do it and where and when not
Social competence requires contextual sensitivity

How clarification of context and pushing the “context button” can overcome social misunderstanding and social faux pas in ASD:

- *How to make people with ASD more independent and flexible in their social skills:*
 - clarifying contexts, so they can find their way ‘context blindly’
 - contextualized social skills training: start from contexts, not from skills
 - making context-sensitive Social Stories and scripts
 - making scripts for certain contexts

Clarifying social contexts, pushing the context button and contextualized social skills training do not ‘cure’ the context blindness, but they offer compensation strategies that help people with autism to understand the social world and cope with it, so they will become better (social) survivors.

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