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## **Aspergers Syndrome and Spaces: A Micro Geographic Exploration**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this piece of research is to examine the experiences of people with Aspergers Syndrome in the spaces they occupy. This includes an examination of how mainstream spaces are culturally created and reproduced in ways that exclude those who do not fit in. It calls into question the structure and formation of taken for granted cultural ‘norms’ by exposing the experiences of a heterogenous group who exist outside of the cultural ‘norm’. This allows for a new perspective on spaces and on the diversity of the human condition and the human experience.

**Keywords:** Aspergers Syndrome, Spaces, Social Geography, Disability.

### **Introduction**

This journal article is centred around four main research questions, which are as follows:

- How do people with AS experience public, private and virtual spaces?
- What are the primary factors which influence how people with AS experience different spaces?
- In what way do different spaces act as mediators of the identities of people with AS?

- What do societal expectations of ‘normal’ mean to the experiences of people with AS in different spaces?

The research aims to give voice to the experiences of people with AS in different spaces using first hand accounts through a focus group and interviews. The research is therefore intended as a conduit for the voices of those with AS, a voice that is often missing in literature and research around AS (Davidson and Henderson, 2010).

### **Aspergers Syndrome**

Aspergers Syndrome (AS) is a pervasive developmental disorder that is on the Autistic spectrum. This means that while most people with the condition are of average or above average intelligence they have difficulty with social interaction and communication (Wing, 1981). The condition was initially discovered by an Austrian Paediatrician Hans Asperger in 1944 who ‘noticed that some of the children referred to his clinic had very similar personality characteristics and behaviour’ (Attwood, 2007:12). The children’s ‘social maturity and social reasoning were delayed and some aspects of their social abilities were quite unusual at any stage of development’ (ibid:13).

For many adults with AS the difficulties they have with social interaction and communication have a significant impact on their ability to integrate into mainstream society. This also means that there is an impact on how people with AS experience mainstream spaces where society is culturally and socially reproduced. The inherent expectation of ‘normal’ behaviour and interaction in these spaces is often at odds with the ‘unusual’ behaviour of those with AS. The work of Hall (1999) and others has explored the individual socio spatial experiences of those with disabilities. There is a deficit of research however around the socio spatial experiences of those with AS in particular spaces, with some notable exceptions, for example Madriaga (2010), Davidson and Henderson (2010) and Ryan and Raisanen (2008). This research sets out to address this lacuna by exploring the experiences of adults with AS in public, private and alternative spaces.

### ***Geographies of Disability***

Geography as a discipline began as a way of mapping out the physical world. Over the years it has broadened its horizons to include many different perspectives on the spaces that make up our world physically, socially and culturally. Social geography examines human ecology and its nexus with space and place. This examination of human relations and how it intersects with space and place is particularly relevant for those with disabilities who are often excluded from spaces that are created and reinforced through cultural/societal norms (Parr, Philo, Burns, 2004). This journal article follows the definition of Goffman in viewing these norms as representing the ‘sharing of a single set of normative expectations’ (Goffman,1963:152) and constructing those with disabilities as outside of the norm. These normative expectations are reproduced in spaces ‘in natural, self-evident and common sense ways’ by society at large (Cresswell, 1996:16). Therefore, the notions of ‘exclusion and marginalisation which are at the core of disablement are inherently geographic, suggesting socio-spatial boundaries and margins’ (Gleeson, 1999:136). Geographies of disability as a sub-discipline of social geography explores these issues.

### ***Socio-Spatial Boundaries***

Place is not just an abstract notion or a necessary definition. It does not just signify a physical or metaphorical location, it is also a location which individuals and groups experience in a variety of ways. Places have cultural and social meanings for people (Eyles, 1985). An example of this is a Church or Mosque which has social and cultural meanings as both a physical and spiritual space for many. Through social and cultural ‘norms’ we are taught what is acceptable or not in the cultural landscape (Duncan, Ley 1993). The cultural landscape is represented most prominently through public spaces. Goffman (1963:9) defines public spaces as ‘any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community’. Valentine (1996) feels that public spaces do not just exist but are actively produced through repeated performances. Public spaces are not just physical spaces but also sites of cultural reproduction. The dominant culture in a given space regulates who is unwelcome and excluded from the space (Kitchin, 1998). ‘These societal and cultural structures impact on the experience of individuals in a specific space in a given time’ (Ryan, 2005: 391). Places and spaces are therefore created and defined through physical and

social boundaries: ‘Spatial boundaries are formed and reproduced by social action, and also impress themselves on ways of thinking’ (Tonkiss, 2005: 31).

For those with disabilities negotiating both private and especially public spaces and the boundaries they imply can be an extremely difficult, painful, and marginalising experience. This is because the person with a disability not only has to contend with the embodied manifestation of their disability but also the cultural oppression (Young, 1999) experienced by many in societies based on taken for granted social norms (Chouinard in Teather (ed), 1999). These social norms are based on what Bourdieu (1977) terms the doxa, the dominant hegemonic ideology of mainstream society. This doxa which is manifest in taken for granted social norms can create particular difficulties for disabled people in public spaces and can create spatial boundaries which people with disabilities may find oppressive, confusing and debilitating. Space is imbued and reproduced with cultural definitions of normal. This serves to create a duality of spaces; on the one hand there are spaces which are open to and include all who fit in with the cultural norms, and on the other hand there are spaces on the periphery of this, spaces which are bounded by these cultural expectations.

Ryan (2005) writes of the experiences of mothers of children with learning difficulties in public spaces and how they are allowed into, but excluded from, these spaces through the exclusionary social organisation and the responses of non-disabled people. This is arguably an interesting distinction, as in theory public spaces are based on equity in that every member of society is physically allowed into a public space. In reality however, there are a variety of ways in which they may be socially excluded from that same space.

### ***Performativity and Identity in Public Spaces***

The idea that people interact with each other through a form of performance is attributable mainly to the work of Erving Goffman who began to write about performativity in the 1950s and 1960s, (Goffman, 1956, 1963; 1967; see also Burns, 1992; Drew and Wootton, 1988). Goffman saw interaction as an exchange between individual and audience; individuals perform to an audience who, in turn, interpret their performance: ‘the self [is] a performed character ... not an organic thing that has specific location ... [the performer and] his body merely provide the peg on which

something of a collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time” (Goffman,1956:252). In Goffman’s view of interaction there is a conscious and performing self (Gregson and Rose, 2000). This view of interaction and performance also suggests that identities are categorised through social interaction and that society: establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories..when a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his social identity. (Goffman, 1963:12)

Individuals, therefore, are subject to the determinants and expectations of a space, including the expectation of ‘normal’ behaviour (Goffman, 1963). As examined in the context of socio spatial barriers, for those who fall outside of what is deemed normal or behave in a way that is aberrant from these accepted norms in a given space there is the potential for exclusion from certain spatial domains for example public spaces (Lefebvre,1991). If identities are performatively created and linked to a commonly agreed norm, which in turn deem behaviours to be aberrant or unacceptable in given spaces, then there are massive implications for those with disabilities in terms of identity formation. This is especially true in the context of spaces being created and dominated by people who do not have disabilities, which means that many people with disabilities find it very difficult to inhabit spaces, particularly public spaces, in a way that is deemed acceptable or normal by society. For many people with disabilities the home comes to represent a safe space from the expectations of society in public spaces.

### ***Home as a Sanctuary?***

The home is a space which has a vast array of meanings for those who inhabit it. The concept of the home changes temporally and spatially, as life cycles unfold in it, from the beginning of a child’s life and the expansion of home boundaries to the end of life and the gradual retraction of home boundaries. It is where most people feel their greatest sense of place, that is: a place with a unique meaning that is an important part of people’s lives (Teather, 1999, Gurney, 1990, Saunders, 1989). It has been constructed as a space of ‘domestic bliss’ through television in particular (Baudrillard, 1998).

The home also represents the structural/spatial embodiment of the womb, it is a place of familiarity and security (Tuan, 2004). It is natural and understandable for people to retreat to this space when confronted with the various difficulties that they may have to contend with in the world at large. The home represents a shrunken space whose contours physically and socially are familiar and reassuring. It represents a sanctuary and a site of safety for many.

The sense of the home as a shrunken space may have repercussions mentally and emotionally (Dyck, 1995). If an individual's life world has diminished to the point that their everyday life only takes place within the physical structures of their home it may become a space of limitation and confinement. This potential lack of independence within the home leads many to seek independence outside of the home. This desire for independence creates the dilemma of wanting to live independently outside of the home, despite the security it may provide, which means attempting to negotiate public spaces and their inherent riskiness and difficulties. This can lead many to feel oppressed both within and outside of their homes: oppressed within the home because of their lack of opportunity to be independent and oppressed outside by societal and structural barriers. This oppression can manifest itself as frustration for those who feel themselves trapped between these two spaces.

The home therefore can become a space of conflict, a space charged with a variety of competing emotions. It may become a space with multiple contrasting and often opposing meanings, a site of conflict and peace, a site of comfort and discomfort, a site which may be nurturing and stifling. In this scenario the distinction between public space as a space of risk and private space as space of security become more blurred and open to exploration (Dyck and O' Brien, 2003). One specific group within the disabled community who feel this dichotomy most actively is those with Aspergers Syndrome (Ryan and Raisanen, 2008).

### **Methodology**

The construction of this research was predicated on the goodwill of its interviewees. I am currently employed as an outreach worker working with adults with Asperger Syndrome. As a worker supporting people with AS for the last number of years I am in a position to have witnessed the difficulties that the interviewees experience in



terms of communication and interaction. I have also gained an understanding into means of communication that may be less stressful for people with AS. I therefore used this knowledge as a basis for the construction and delivery of my research. I used a focus group and seven individual interviews to inform the findings of this research piece.

A big consideration in terms of the recording of the group was its size. I chose to have four participants in the focus group as a smaller number allowed for everyone to have an opportunity to speak, and given the difficulties many of the participants have with social interaction, the smaller number also allowed people to feel more comfortable. For the individual interviews there were seven participants who were contacted through the outreach support service. A number of interviewees were selected using a non-probability sample from amongst the outreach support service client group, and using these initial interviewees as a guide, snowball sampling was used to select the rest of the interviewees. Simple coding was used to establish themes after each interview and these themes were then used to inform each new interview. When all the interviews were completed themes were coded and used for the findings section.

### **Ethics**

The National Disability Authority and Federation of Voluntary Bodies view ethics in research as: ‘respect for the human rights, dignity and, equality and diversity of all those involved in the research process’ (2005:2). These central tenets were adopted by the researcher to this piece of research. Before beginning the research a full consultation process was carried out with the participants in terms of the purpose of the research, the reasons for their participation and the process of the research. I also acknowledge the potential for bias or indeed the Hawthorne effect but it may be argued that the existing relationship with the service users and the project allowed for greater access and a greater degree of openness. In terms of confidentiality all participants read and signed a confidentiality contract and pseudonyms were chosen by the participants themselves for the interview transcriptions, ‘Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality must be ensured at all stages, including the final stage of data storage/disposal’ (Ibid:3) and this was also strictly adhered to by the researcher.

### ***Theoretical Perspective***

This thesis takes a qualitative interpretivist epistemological approach to its subject matter. The qualitative approach interprets the social world as a changing, fluid concept and is different to the quantitative approach in that the social world may not be measured in a quantifiable definitive way. Interpretivism is rooted in the Weberian notion of Verstehen meaning understanding (Bryman, 2008) and essentially looks to interpret the subjective meaning of social action. This research explores the world of people with AS in terms of their experiences of reality and the relationship they have both with the material world and the social world. This is in essence ‘an insider’s view, the definition of the situation by individuals in the constitution of their social worlds and their experience of place’ (Cox and Golledge, 1981:220).

### **Findings**

The first section of the findings and analysis arising from the research, looks at how people with AS view private spaces in the context of experiences of home. This varies from experiencing the home as a site of safety and sanctuary for some to a site of conflict and danger for others. The experience of the home space is often predicated on temporal factors and the changing nature of the home is explored in the context of temporal fluidity. The final section looks at the desire for control of the environment for many of those with AS, and the home, for many, is a primary space where this control may be exerted.

The next section looks at the experiences of the interviewees<sup>42</sup> in public spaces. It begins with an exploration of school as a public space and how the experiences there have had repercussions in public spaces for many of the interviewees. It then explores and analyses the views and experiences of the interviewees in terms of the expectations contained in public spaces, and their understanding of these expectations. For many of the interviewees these expectations are implicit in most public spaces and are often very problematic. This led some of the interviewees feel compelled to perform ‘normal’ in order to fit in with public expectations. This section explores the way in which the participants understand expectations of ‘normal’ and how the performance of ‘normal’ is in effect a subjugation of their AS identity. Public

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<sup>42</sup> Please note that the terms ‘interviewee’ and ‘participant’ are used interchangeably throughout the text



spaces contain other difficulties besides expectations for those with AS and for some of the interviewees the sensory difficulties implicit in public spaces create anxiety and discomfort. The sensory experiences of the interviewees are analysed in this section in the context of public spaces. The final section of this chapter looks at the use of the internet by those with AS as an alternate space of communication and interaction separate from public or private spaces.

### **Home as a Complex Private Space**

For a number of the participants in this research home represents a place of safety, comfort and protection. It is a place of self expression unbridled by public expectations. Such perceptions were reflected by interviewee E who stated: 'Home is somewhere comfortable and safe and I can more or less be myself and more or less be comfortable and relax with friends and stuff like that'.

In the opinion of interviewee E home is not only a place of safety but also a place of freedom where he can express his true self. It is a place which is intrinsically linked to his identity, and his sense of self. It is a space free from performance (Goffman, 1963) where he can be himself and also interact with his friends. This is particularly significant given the difficulty that many people with AS have interacting with others and developing friendships. Much of this difficulty can revolve around the 'odd' or 'unusual' behaviour of people with AS when interacting with others. This is often due to the anxiety that they may feel in situations that may be uncomfortable. For interviewee E the home represents a space that is free from this anxiety, where he can interact with others safely.

### ***Home as a site of conflict***

Home can also be a space of potential conflict. This is not to say that it cannot simultaneously be a site of conflict and safety 'the meaning of home is unstable and transitory' (Imrie, 2010: 24). However for two of the participants in particular the home represents a site of stress and conflict more than safety and security. This is expressed by interviewee G:

Where I am actually growing up well for me that was actually quite stressful just complicated circumstances all that sort of stuff..my diagnosis was not even

known about at the time yeah it was very stressful even just practically space wise the house is actually quite small. (Interviewee G)

For interviewee G the family home represents a space of stress, conflict and lack of understanding. In this instance because the home has become a space of further confusion and conflict as opposed to a place of safety and understanding, the interviewee moved into an apartment where he lives on his own. This apartment has come to represent home for him in terms of safety and comfort. The home therefore for interviewee G is a sanctuary and a site of self expression, which is not physically tied to family or a particular building:

where I am living right now in the apartment I am living in while attending college that's for me where there is a sense of security almost a sense of freedom and be myself with all my Aspergers traits and that without anyone kind of criticising what I am doing or wondering am I doing something odd or that I can completely relax in my apartment now (Interviewee G).

The expression of AS traits without worrying about the criticism of others is important to Interviewee G. The apartment as home has become a site where his AS is not seen as 'odd' or 'problematic' as it was in his family home. The apartment represents a personalised space where the interviewee can express the unusual norms (Parr, 2000) associated with his AS, free from judgement or expectation. It is a physical space which has become intertwined with both his emotional self and his identity as a person with AS:

the apartment itself the space might be more of a metaphor for my private self a sort of..that I have difficulty letting someone get close to that part of myself..I am never truly myself unless I am on my own and it's like letting them into that close that more intimate part of myself that I would feel is almost under threat when there are people nearby as I say I would feel like I almost would be criticised and judged and I can't be myself at all (Interviewee G).

The home may also be a place of potential conflict with boundaries and divisions within its walls as expressed by interviewee A: 'I have two rooms in my house and the rest would be fairly contested..'. For interviewee A the home as an entity is not necessarily a place of safety or comfort but rather it is sub divided into physical

spaces separated as islands of safety from the rest of the house. He occupies two rooms which he deems to be safe and comfortable due to their 'familiarity and exclusivity, I'm basically the only one in them'.

The rest of the family home is seen by interviewee A as spaces of contestation and conflict. These spaces are unsafe and contain behaviours and rules that are unfamiliar to him. His two rooms also serve as a personalised space for the manifestation of his real self. It is a space in which he can be himself without fear of retribution, judgement or appearing odd: 'mostly it is safety and generally normality, as in like I will act normal, like a fairly normal human being there compared to public spaces'. Implicit in his quote is his sense of feeling 'abnormal' or 'odd' in public spaces.

### **Aspergers Syndrome and Public Spaces**

#### ***The Experience of School and its Repercussions***

'When you are very uncomfortable for three years in a certain kind of environment that environment will always bring that uncomfortableness with it...and you see echoes of that environment in other environments' (Interviewee A focus Group).

School represents the first site of social interaction and the first real engagement with public space for most. For a proportion of people with AS this experience was dominated by the negative interactions with peers and an uncomfortable introduction to public spaces. Much of this negativity came in the form of peer victimisation or bullying, and this had the knock on effect of negatively shaping their first real experience of public space: 'Not everyone on the spectrum was bullied but most were and what bullying did occur was likely felt more strongly because of the individual's inability to understand why it was happening in the first place' (Carley, 2008: 87).

There is bullying in all schools; however people with ASDs are at a higher risk of victimisation and bullying than the general populace (Roekel et al 2010). Studies have shown that up to two in five people with ASDs have suffered bullying or peer victimisation (Batten et al, 2006) while this figure jumps to 90 percent of those with AS (Little, 2001, 2002, Balfe, Chen and Tantam, 2005 ). For adolescents and children with AS the social world of the school is often a source of anxiety and trepidation. The feeling of wanting to fit in at school is a natural one which is shared

by most adolescents. For interviewee G his sense of being different led to his isolation in school:

when I was being bullied obviously my behaviour that would have been drastically different to everyone else around me.. I came across as being odd, as being different and I was picked out for that and it was very stressful at the time.

He was excluded and victimised for his behaviour which was viewed as being odd and unacceptable by his peers who may have felt that: ‘the person with an ASD could conform, if he or she wanted to, and should be made to do so’ (Tantam, 2009, pg 155). The interviewee was excluded from the mainstream communal spaces of the school because of his perceived lack of understanding or unwillingness to conform to expectations of ‘normal’ behaviour. The school epitomises the learning ground for social ‘norms’. School as a public space may serve therefore to begin the process of ‘othering’ of people with ASDs. This process often continues to have profound effects on people with ASDs into adulthood:

It would be from the bullying I got I was worried afterwards that everybody was going to pretty much reject me the moment I tried to approach them so I have never tried to reach out for friends, when I tried to do that before I was being picked on so I waited for people to approach me and if they didn’t approach me then that was it I wasn’t going to be making any friends. (Interviewee G)

Interviewee A also experienced much distress at secondary school in particular. He felt isolated and excluded by and from his peers: ‘I was nervous of the larger numbers than a primary school which put me on edge and I was not very good at socialising which isolated me’. The anxiety and distress built to a point of being intolerable:

I made myself keep going and I achieved a very high baseline of awkwardness and near panic at all times from school which impacted on my health after a year and a half..it reached a point where my health was being affected to such a state that I had something of a breakdown in second year.

This concurs with the view of Tantam that:

Bullying, like other forms of abuse leads to long term harm to people with ASD, as I have already discussed. Many of them react by withdrawal, and isolating

themselves from the mainstream. Bullying in other words, often leads to social exclusion. (Tantam, 2009: 212)

### **The Internet as a virtual space**

Virtual space or cyber space exists both between and in public and private spaces. It is a public space that may be used for social interaction while being accessed from a private space. Cyber-space in the form of the internet can provide an alternate space through which people with AS may interact with each other, and with 'neurotypicals'. It represents a space that is potentially less stressful, stigmatising, uncomfortable and exclusionary than public spaces (Davidson, Parr, 2010). Much research has shown the benefits of the Internet for those with AS (Armstrong, 2010). It has also facilitated the creation of the neurodiversity movement which began as, and continues to be, an online based movement. The potential for use of the internet for those with AS as a space for interactive and educational purposes has been explored by various authors (e.g. Parsons and Mitchell, 2002).

However, the heterogenous nature of the AS population (Schneider, 2002) dictates that not all on the spectrum use the Internet for interaction. In this research paper one out of the seven participants uses the internet as a space to interact with others: 'I use Facebook to chat to certain people, one or two people that I am friendly enough with outside but I am a lot more friendly with on Facebook' (Interviewee D). The interviewee uses a social networking site as a space to interact with certain people. He feels a preference for meeting face to face but this creates anxieties for him:

I probably prefer to meet people face to face but on the other side there's a bit of worry in me I guess sometimes it's just a bit safer to chat to them on the internet because...I am always able to keep a conversation going and not make any awkward gaffes...I am able to sit there for a couple of minutes and I am able to think about what I am going to say.

The interviewee expresses a preference for talking to people face to face. This is in line with the view of numerous people with AS in wanting to meet and interact with people: 'Most of us also crave companionship' (Simone, 2010: 95). He fears that if he meets his friends in actual, as opposed to virtual, space that aspects of his AS may make it difficult for him to interact comfortably, by setting him apart as 'different':

‘We want to be accepted for who we are but it is difficult to be yourself around others when you can’t relax’ (Ibid: 95). He feels a sense of safety in the virtual space as it is a more forgiving space. For example the Internet allows him time to process conversation. In this way he does not feel under the pressure of real time as he has a couple of minutes to process what he has been told and respond accordingly.

Interviewee A feels that the internet as a space does not adequately convey all aspects of an interaction: ‘I find it difficult to talk to people when they can’t hear the tone of my voice, it’s more difficult when it’s pure text...there’s a kind of dimension of communication that’s cut off when it’s not spoken, for me’. This opinion of the interviewee is contrary to much research posited around AS and mindblindness which is the inability to read others thoughts, feelings and emotions, (Baron-Cohen,1995), and it serves to show the diversity of the AS population. The interviewee expressed a preference for communication where he could hear the intonations of the voices of those he is communicating with, and that they could hear his. The nuanced nature of his verbal communication is also in opposition to the view that those with AS may talk in a monotone way: ‘Individuals with AS often exhibit a constricted range of intonation that is used with little regard to the communicative functioning of the utterance’ (Klin, Volkmar, Sparrow, 2000: 323).

## **Conclusion**

What emerged from the research was a number of insights into how people with AS experience different spaces. In so doing the research exposed both a number of different perspectives on AS, and on how spaces are perceived by those who exist on their periphery. It also exposed how spaces are culturally constructed and reproduced and the effect that this has on those who do not fit in to this cultural hegemony. What is obvious from the research is that people with AS are a diverse, heterogenous group. The experiences of the participants of home is an example of the diverse nature of the AS community, and of their experiences.

For some the home represented a safe space, a site of refuge and a space which allowed free expression of their AS identity (see also the work of Ryan and Raisanen (2005) which explores home as a safe space for people with AS). For others the home became a site of isolation, a space where the various aspects of their life cycle played



out, separate from any interaction with public spaces. The home is also potentially a divided space however. This division may manifest in emotional boundaries, where there are spaces of conflict and spaces of safety. It represents a further shrinking of the home as a space of safety, and is thus a shrinking of the life world (Dyck, 1995, Crooks, 2010). The division of the home space may lie along emotional boundaries but may also be divided along temporal lines. The sense of the home as a space of safety may be interrupted by the presence of others in that space at different times. This division occurs along temporal lines but may also be divided by a sense of control over a given space.

The importance of a sense of control over spaces emerged from many of the interviews in this research. For those with AS this provides a reassurance and certainty necessary for feeling comfortable in a space. This sense of wanting to have an element of control over a space has its roots in the experiences many of the interviewees had in school. School is the first public space most people interact with on an ongoing level. For those with AS this proved to be a very difficult and at times traumatic experience (Tantam, 2009). For many of the participants this first experience of a public space led to peer victimisation and exclusion. These experiences of the first public space in their formative years has had a profound effect on many of the interviewees.

Public spaces are sites of social interaction, they bear witness to the everyday lives of individuals and they are a vital site in the reproduction of society (Conlon, 1963). Society is reproduced in these spaces based on mainstream expectations of 'normal' behaviour (Goffman, 1963). For those who step outside of this expectation there are consequences in terms of exclusion and stigmatization. People with AS often exist on the periphery of public spaces either through being excluded due to their 'aberrant' behaviour or through choosing to stay outside of societal expectations.

Many of the participants in this research do not understand societal expectations but rather understand that mimicking behaviour that is deemed 'normal' makes their passage through public spaces easier. The questions that the participants raise around public expectations are prescient and valid, and revolve around the purpose or indeed

the fairness of these expectations based as they are on notions of ‘normal’ that do not take into account the spectrum of the human condition. A number of the interviewees felt that the expectations in public spaces were mysterious or even nonsensical (for example the expectation for small talk in certain situations). One space however, that many felt the expectations made sense and were relatively easy to follow is in public speaking. This is a space that, although public, does not contain the difficulties or mystery of many public spaces for the participants. The rules of this space are clear, the level of engagement is preset, and the individual who is speaking has an opportunity to think through what they are going to say, which is very often not the case in other fluid social interactions. It is also an opportunity for AS people to show their abilities, verbally and intellectually. This is in the context of rarely getting this opportunity given the difficulties many have with interactions generally.

In a sense public speaking is a rehearsed performance of an aspect of the AS identity that may otherwise be difficult to express. This may be contrasted with public spaces generally. A number of the participants feel that they have to perform in a way that suppresses their AS identity in public spaces, as the manifestation and expression of their AS identity in the form of ‘odd’ behaviour may lead to rejection and exclusion. In essence this means performing ‘normal’ in public spaces and is a subjugation of their AS identity in order to fit in with societal expectations. This loss of identity occurs for many people with disabilities who feel compelled to retreat from the difficulties associated with public spaces (Sibley, 1995).

The difficulties that those with AS may experience in public spaces are not limited to expectations however. For some of the participants inhabiting public spaces can also create sensory difficulties for them. For example the noises associated with public spaces may be experienced differently by someone with AS, than ‘neurotypicals’, due to their anxiety. This means that AS senses may be heightened in these circumstances to the extent that the sensory inputs may become unbearable.

This experience is not exclusive to noise and may affect any of the five senses. What this means is there are a combination of difficulties contained in public spaces for those with AS.

For numerous people with AS this has meant seeking out alternate spaces for interaction, (Davidson and Henderson, 2010, Davidson and Smith, 2010). Virtual space is a space that is both public and private. It is a space that allows for communication and interaction without the necessity for face to face interaction. It has become important an important tool for AS lobby groups such as the neurodiversity movement. It is however as imperfect as all spaces. In common with other spaces it is defined by cultural and societal influences.

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