

Being in the presence of a person with an Autism Spectrum Condition does not guarantee acceptance

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine Maltese young adults' knowledge and perceptions of individuals with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC). Social Representation Theory was utilized to inform the study on the possible ways participant's perceptions were shaped. Particular focus was given to the way participants interpreted the behaviour, abilities and potential of people with ASC and whether the information acquired aided the acceptance of their peers with ASC. The study applied a qualitative approach: a sample of eight participants, aged between 18 and 24 years, responded to a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis of data uncovered six main themes. These included three levels of respondents' perceptions of ASC stemming from participants' experience and knowledge of ASC, that were in turn associated with three levels of acceptance of people on the spectrum. The findings suggest that being in contact with persons on the autism spectrum does not necessarily translate into acceptance, highlighting the importance of providing peers and society with explanations of behavioural differences manifested by individuals with ASC in order to reduce uncertainty and facilitate inclusion.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Condition, Perceptions, Social Representation, Attitudes

Introduction

Numerous studies have reported that neurotypicals (persons without autism) develop negative attitudes towards people with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) due to their deficits in social skills and differences in

behaviours (Someki et al., 2018; Fondelli & Rober, 2017; Payne & Wood, 2016; Swaim & Morgan, 2001). In contrast, Gardiner & Iarocci (2014) found somewhat positive attitudes towards people with ASC among college students who formed meaningful conceptualisations of ASC. Given the daily exposure to an inclusive setting in schools in Malta, it is expected that there would be changes in perceptions with an increased level of acceptance of persons with ASC by young adults living in Malta. Being exposed to daily presence of people with ASC should have allowed for social contact to take place and facilitate the acquisition of information about the condition. However, research shows that even though young adults possess accurate knowledge of ASC, there are still negative perceptions associated with the diagnosis (Fondelli & Rober, 2017; Payne & Wood, 2016). Understanding how society gains information about ASC and gives meaning to this concept, will shed light on how to implement interventions that are designed to foster increased inclusive attitudes and practices within the community.

In an attempt to understand how perceptions are shaped, Social Psychology has focused its efforts on the study of attitudes (Howarth, 2006; Sammut et al., 2015). Wagnes and Hayes (2005) explain how the formation of knowledge and attitudes is reliant on the environment that an individual is raised in, and the social groups he or she makes part of. They contend that knowledge and attitudes are a dialogical phenomenon, moving from the individual to the social environment and back, in a process that enables reconstruction.

The complexity of how the human mind constructs perceptions requires a coherent framework that will help the researcher explore reasons underlying the intricacy and heterogeneity of perceptions. According to Moscovici (1989), Social Representation Theory provides a “bridge between the individual and the social sphere” (p. 82), aiding our process of understanding how communities build up their knowledge and form idiosyncratic attitudes towards a given phenomenon.

The Foundations of Social Representation Theory

According to Moscovici (1972), social representations emanate from an interlinking system of values, ideas and practices within groups, with the intent of retaining social order and facilitating communication, providing individuals with the possibility to make sense of ambiguous objects, events or persons found within their society. Furthermore, Wagner and Hayes (2005) claim that a person’s pattern of thinking stems from the time and place he or

she lives in and the experiences one is exposed to. Thus, a person's social milieu, the group he or she belongs to and the cultural norms employed during the individual's lifetime will shape his or her cognition and the way information is processed. In other words, social representations can be defined as "systems of opinions, knowledge, and beliefs particular to a culture, a social category, or a group with regard to the object in the social environment" (Rateau et al., 2012, p. 478). This means that the way a person with ASC is viewed by a neurotypical person is very much dependent on the groups, culture and society he or she forms part of.

Attitudes to disability

The history of disability has consistently been framed negatively in the years leading to the arrival of capitalism in the West (Devenney, 2004). The Greek and Roman empires obsessed with perfection, beauty and 'intellectual fitness' found both physical and intellectual disability intolerable. New-borns with impairments during this period were abandoned and left to their own means, which ultimately resulted in death (Carlson, 2010). Subsequently, during the early modern period, philosophers like Locke and Kant described people with intellectual disabilities as "less than human" (Carlson, 2010). The early 20th century saw the emergence of the eugenics movement whose aim was to improve the human race. People with disabilities were seen as a threat to the health of the nation, resulting in forced sterilisation and institutionalisation of persons with mental and physical impairment. During the second world war the Nazis took up the Eugenics idea and extermination of people with disabilities took place.

In the middle of the 20th century, in Malta, disability was a subject which denoted taboo within the Maltese society, and as such was avoided in public discourse (Gonzi, 1955). People with disability during this period were shunned by society and hidden from public eyes (Bartolo, 2017). Furthermore, Callus (2013) states that nowadays the Maltese construction of disability is often embedded in sentimentality and Christian religion, sometimes even depicting persons with disability as 'angels,' resulting in what she calls 'stereotypes of untouchability.' These stereotypes encourage the community to distance itself from the person with disability in a process that reinforces oppression (Bartolo, 2017; Bartolo, 2010; Camilleri & Callus, 2001).

According to Wagner & Hayes (2005) these "affective-emotional" historical events enter society's collective memory and form a common social

representation via dominant images and symbols which are used as cognitive shortcuts for recollection of salient historical events. These occurrences make part of society's representation of disability and are subsequently mixed with present events in an effort to interpret and construct reality, forming what Sammut et al. (2010) call an "inter-objective common-sense". Thus we can tentatively assume that, at the root of the neurotypical's social representation of disability, society's cognitive structure might include shortcuts that contain sentiments of pity, intolerance, otherness and segregation.

Stability of Social Representations

Shifts in society's perception over time happen because people are social agents and are able to change the construction of "reality" (Veiga & Arzate-Salgado, 2013). According to Sammut et al. (2015), knowledge has its origins within society and constitutes the power for social change. Unfortunately, the presence of stereotypes, inherited discourse and myths which make up a salient part of society's perceptions, hinder the process of change, resulting in a struggle for individuals with disabilities to become socially integrated (Veiga & Arzate-Salgado, 2013).

Sammut et al. (2012) assert that change in perception is possible when an individual takes up a new role, or encounters a situation that requires a shift in an existing point of view relative to the object in question. Recent studies that have examined the impact of social representation on the lives of people with disabilities, claim that a positive shift has taken place in public discourse. This shift has resulted in more polite and socially correct language (Decca, 2011).

This study sought to investigate whether there has been a change, and if so, what type of change, in Maltese perceptions of and attitudes towards persons with ASC. The study focused on the perceptions of young people who would have come across peers with ASC during their school years.

Method

The study aimed at capturing a contextualised description of individuals' perceptions of and attitudes towards ASC, as well as a retrospective account of how these were formed. It was, therefore, best to adopt a qualitative design that allowed for an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences and perceptions.

Participants

Eight young adults aged between 18 and 24 years were recruited via purposive sampling through a non-politically-affiliated NGO. Potential participants received an invitation to participate and communicated their voluntary willingness to join the study. The participants consisted of five females and three males. Each one was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity. While the sample was relatively small, participants came from different school backgrounds and experiences, each possessing diverse knowledge of ASC (see Table 1). All the participants had been exposed to a Maltese school environment that included either peers with ASC specifically or with other disabilities. Subsequently heterogeneous experiences followed in their young adulthood ranging from no contact to multiple contacts with persons with ASC.

Table 1: *List of participants by experience*

Participants Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Level of Education	Experience of ASC/Disability
Pamela	Female	24	Tertiary	Disability in the family
Natasha	Female	18	Higher	Works with person with ASC/ disability
Kyle	Male	22	Higher	Works with person with ASC/ disability
Yvette	Female	23	Tertiary	Works with person with ASC/ disability
William	Male	19	Higher	Contact with person with ASC/ disability
Moira	Female	20	Tertiary	Contact with person with ASC/ disability
Julie	Female	21	Tertiary	No personal contact*
Daniel	Male	22	Tertiary	No personal contact*

* Had peers with ASC/disability in class but do not recall contact

Data Collection

Each participant responded to a semi-structured interview of about one hour. The interview questions sought to elicit participants' knowledge and thoughts concerning ASC. Particular focus was given to the way they interpret the behaviour, abilities and potential of people with ASC. During the interview,

the researcher tried to be completely with the person, empathising with the experiences being told through the participant's lens. Given that "the participants are the experts on their experiences, views and practices" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 101), the researcher refrained from passing judgement by shedding her own personal bias. This was achieved by listening intently to the participants' narratives, keeping in mind that these narratives emanate from the person's past experiences and information gathered throughout their lifetime. Unnecessary probing and body language control, such as frowning and nodding, were avoided during data collection, with the aim of capturing primary and raw perceptions.

An audio recording device was utilized during each interview. Data were transcribed shortly after every interview and the researcher also tried to capture the paralinguistic features embedded in the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) was deemed to fit the requirements of the study. TA structures the process of finding meaning and patterns within the data by following the six phases of analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2019). This methodology facilitates the process of capturing hidden "patterns of meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 15). It allows for flexibility and provides the necessary tools to discern salient themes present in the data that are pertinent to the research question.

Results

The themes identified through thematic analysis were grouped into three thematic levels: two Overarching themes, each with three Main themes, and the latter with several Subthemes (see Figure 1).

Overarching Theme 1 (shown in black on the left of the first row of Figure 1) captures the participants' different perceptions of ASC that were found to be related to the three different levels of experience and knowledge of ASC (see the three Main Themes in the first row of oval shapes accompanying Overarching theme 1).

Overarching Theme 2 (shown in black on the left of the second row of Figure 1) captures the corresponding three different levels of acceptance of ASC that resulted primarily from each of the different levels of experience and

knowledge of ASC (see the three Main Themes in the second row of oval shapes accompanying Overarching Theme 2).

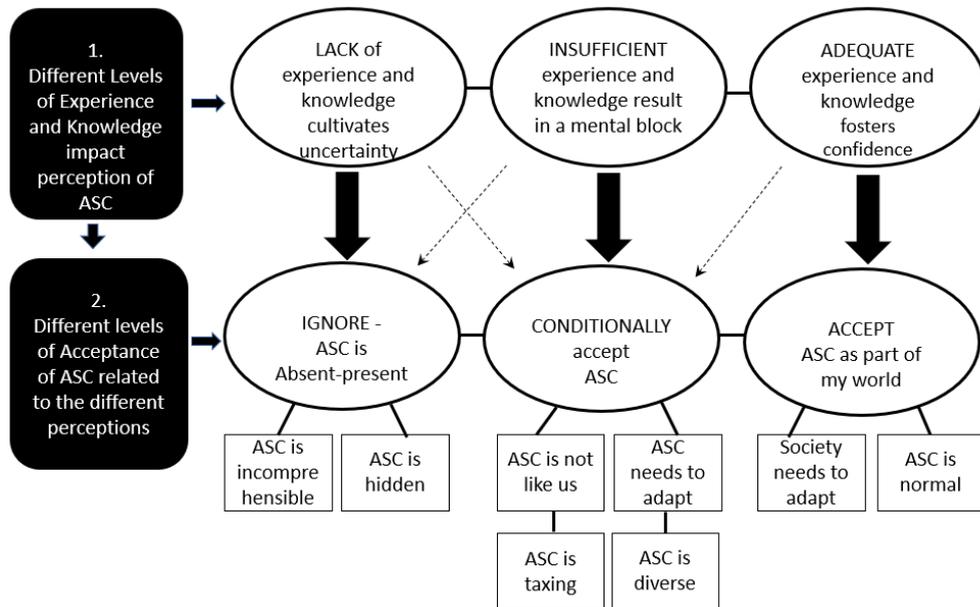


Figure 1. Overview of Overarching Themes, Main Themes and Subthemes identified

Overarching Theme 1: Different Levels of Experience and Knowledge impact perception of ASC

The analysis of the participants’ responses showed clear evidence that the participants had different levels of knowledge and experience that influenced their conceptualisation of people with ASC. Moreover, this conceptualisation was found to have continued to change along with the different other relevant encounters the participants had experienced during their everyday life and which they described as having influenced their attitudes towards persons with ASC. These conceptualisations were categorised into three levels of knowledge and experience of ASC: ranging from a *Lack* of knowledge-experience, to *Insufficient* knowledge-experience, and to *Adequate* knowledge-experience of ASC.

Lack of experience and knowledge cultivates uncertainty

Participants found that their first encounters with a person on the autism spectrum left them feeling ambivalent:

“To be honest, it was a bit difficult since I had never met a person [with ASC]. Honestly, at first, I couldn't. I couldn't understand the person” (Pamela)

“Well, before when I was younger and I used to see someone not acting normal I used to say... “What are they doing? Why are they not acting normal like me?” (Yvette)

Campbell and Barger (2011), explain how a neurotypical's formation of a coherent schema about ASC may be slower due to lack of physical markers associated with ASC. Additionally, without knowledge about the condition, participants lacked the tools to be able to conceptualise and process their initial encounter with a person with ASC.

Kyle reported feelings of apprehension when his colleague, a football coach, was told he would have a new team-player with ASC, without first being consulted. He described the challenge for sports trainers:

“We had (activities) where we integrated with these autistic kids. The coach still did not have any knowledge about them - and when he realized that the boy was autistic, he flipped out. He told them, 'I don't want him, since I am not able to handle him'” (Kyle)

The person with ASC evokes feelings of uncertainty in the neurotypical who readily shuns the individual with ASC from the group (Blascovich et al., 2001), resulting in decreased opportunities for social contact.

Insufficient experience and knowledge result in mental block

Each of the participants had at least one peer with disability in his or her classroom during their schooling years. This was a predictable finding since all Maltese schools have been integrating students with diverse abilities alongside neurotypical ones. However, it was surprising for the researcher to find that seven out of these eight participants were unable to identify the difficulty of these individuals:

“I don't know what they had exactly, but they were disabled. I had one or two maybe, but we weren't sure what they had. They never told us specifically... ‘This one has that!’ So we always assumed that she had something” (Julie)

“We were not aware of it, we didn't know, maybe since we were kids ourselves we did not understand why he was on his own” (William)
“I think that when we were at school, we were not fully aware of it [autism]. I mean, we never had a teacher telling us “That boy or girl is autistic” (Daniel)

Despite the prolonged contact during their childhood with people who were or might have been on the spectrum, these participants unconsciously blocked the experience from entering their reality. They employed a strong sense of detachment, as if the person with ASC was an illusion, physically present but at the same time distant and absent. Jodelet (1991) explains how society “peacefully coexists” with people with mental disorders, accepting the atypical person within the community “as they are and not for *what* they are” (p. 75):

“Truth is, that now that you are asking me about it, I never thought of it. Especially back then... so, I'm thinking, could it be that there was someone (autistic) and I never realised?” (Moir)

“In secondary school I had a girl with me in class, but I wasn't aware of her. I never asked about her... what she has or doesn't have. I know she had an LSA” (Natasha)

Link and Phelan (2001) point out how the stigmatized person undergoes cognitive categorization which is distinct from that of the group members. This is achieved by placing boundaries and reinforcing marginalisation in a process that subjectively divides society into ‘us and them’ (Tajfel, 1978).

Furthermore, without adult explanation and guidance, the opportunities to build knowledge and engage in social contact remain undeveloped, leaving the individual unable to start forming a coherent schema of ASC that might become useful when contact outside the academic setting takes place. Wagner and Hayes (2005) contend that only when an objectified notion becomes relevant in one's social life will a person start seeking ways of apprehending the new concept in a safe manner and exert effort to make sense of it.

Adequate experience and knowledge fosters confidence

Four of the participants, however, acquired further knowledge as they were growing up and were exposed to multiple experiences with people on the spectrum. Consequently, they described how they became more conversant with ASC during post-school experiences:

“Ehhhhee, the skills which I learnt at school [university-training as a nurse] they help me even more to notice certain points here and there from their [people with ASC] behaviour” (Yvette)

For Pamela, this shift occurred through meaningful contact with a person with ASC who was employed in her organisation. Her confidence was achieved by taking on a curious position and seeking explanations of the ambiguous behaviour presented:

“It was difficult in the beginning because I didn't know what was happening. But after I understood what was happening, we worked as a team” (Pamela)

These shifts in perception equip the individual with the ability to connect all the scattered information and give new meaning to the condition. Sammut (2015) indicates that change is possible when a novel ‘situational reality’ is presented. The conglomeration of these new interactions that participants were exposed to, enabled the neurotypical to gain confidence in the presence of people with ASC.

Some participants pointed out that familial affiliation is an important factor that increases one’s openness to gather knowledge and be open to experiences with people on the spectrum:

“There are people who do not care, they wouldn't want to learn. And still, they place them in a bubble, where people are different; but if, God forbid, it happens to someone within their family, or someone close, then it becomes normal” (Yvette)

These data need to be interpreted under the lens of the Maltese context, where family is considered an integral part of a person’s identity. Thus, once an individual with ASC is introduced to the family system, a shift in perception may take place instantaneously, propelling the person from one end of the continuum that blocks acceptance, to the other, that embraces the condition. The representation of ASC shifts voluntarily from the unknown to common sense, affecting not only one individual but a social group’s conceptualisation, when suddenly ASC becomes “normal and consensual” (Veiga & Arzate-Salgado, 2013).

Overarching Theme 2. Different levels of Acceptance of ASC related to the different perceptions

The analysis showed that participants' level of acceptance was mainly influenced by experiences rather than knowledge: when describing their attitudes, participants were constantly extracting memories of the encounters they had with people with ASC. Contact with a person on the spectrum was an essential constituent for the participants to cultivate higher levels of acceptance, a finding that is reflected in Gardiner and Iarocci's (2014) study on students' perception of individuals with ASC. Additionally, Pettigrew (1998), in his discussion on intergroup contact theory, explained how having an interpersonal relationship with a person who is not considered part of the group will eventually translate into reduced prejudice.

Participants linked their perceptions according to the memories of physical encounters that they recalled. This even led to contradictory positions that were linked to different experiences as illustrated in the three Main Themes and their Subthemes identified under Overarching Theme 2.

Ignore - ASC is absent-present

For those whose experience of being in the presence of a person with ASC was not acknowledged, two types of positions resulted.

ASC is incomprehensible - These participants felt that the behaviour of a person with ASC was incomprehensible and puzzling. Judgement and disapproval by the group towards enigmatic behaviour was very strong:

“You talk to him and he starts saying “Qiiq Qiiq”, he starts doing that, you know, to talk with us... [giggle - sounding uncomfortable], something he really used to do. Then [referring to the group members without ASC] “What are you doing?” Then he used to stay quiet, and look at us like this [participant mimics a blank face]” (William)

Instead of asking themselves “why” this behaviour was taking place, the answer to which would provide an interpretation of the behaviour, neurotypicals were asking “what” he was up to, which naturally led the group to see the problem situated within the person. Butler & Gills (2011) claim that atypical behaviours related to ASC heavily impact stigmatization attitudes.

The ambivalence felt by the participants is intelligible and can be captured in the lack of ability to conceptualise ASC. Listening to participants articulating their perceptions of ASC, the researcher felt that neurotypicals were accessing a disjointed schema that they found difficult to formulate explicitly, and make sense of:

“I don’t want to put them on a different level just because they have autism, in the sense that it doesn’t make them different... I hate trying to make them sound different because they’re not, but at the same time they have something” (Julie)

This inability to clearly conceptualise ASC instils a sense of threat within the neurotypical who is constantly searching for stability and prediction (Veiga & Arzate-Salgado, 2013).

ASC is hidden - A number of participants voiced their concern on how people with ASC are not easily identifiable. This inability to recognize a person with ASC relates to what Goffman (1963) defined as discreditable stigma where the person carrying a devalued stereotype is not easily identifiable:

“I have no idea, I have no idea. I never realized and spotted someone and say that he has autism” (Daniel)

“There are cases where you wouldn’t realize, or we’re not aware of, or there is certain behaviour where you question why he is doing that, for example. And the truth is that there is a type of autism or elements of it, kind of!” (Maira)

Research shows that the levels of stigma increases when society lacks the skill to identify conditions such as ASC (Underhill et al., 2019; Someki et al., 2018). The inability to understand behaviour and the messages these behaviours denote will automatically result in exclusion. Consequently, the person is denied contact with society and society in turn loses the opportunity to gain the necessary skills to connect with the person with ASC.

Conditionally accept ASC

Some participants did recognise the presence of ASC, but their acceptance was limited and conditional. They placed responsibility on the individuals with ASC, expecting them to change their behaviour and adjust to society’s norms for them to be tolerated. Research shows that, in order for inclusion to take

place, society needs to be taught to understand and respect difficulties of people with ASC (Harma et al., 2013; Nevill & White, 2011). Thus explanatory, rather than informative details will encourage the person to develop an understanding of these differences.

ASC is not like us - Some participants experience ambivalence when discussing ASC, interpreting the condition as something dissimilar to the norm which translated into feelings of uncertainty. Discourse of otherness echoes in these quotes:

“They have their own thing in their head, sort of thing you know!”
(Julie)

“I was in class with him. He really wasn't, he wasn't... he used to think that everything is like math. He thought there is a formula for everything or some equation for everything” (William)

“Because it looked like he had something different! And they said he had autism” (Daniel)

Jodelet (1991) explains how society engages in a symbolic process that places ‘others’ in a distinct category in order to protect its identity. This process becomes rooted in society’s ‘social memory’, enabling the representation to spread across the members. In this way the individual with ASC is physically tolerated within the group without conceptually forming part of it. The group consequently retains control and understanding of the world they live in.

Persons with ASC need to adapt - During the course of analysis it became clear that some participants conceptualised change of behaviour as an integral part of acceptance. Individuals with ASC were expected to adapt their behaviour to fit society’s norms:

“If they are controlled, even though it is very hard, if you find the right support and the right teacher for example who will teach the child, when they grow older it will be easier for them to communicate with people, go around in shops and not show.... It’s not that it’s bad to show, but then for themselves I think they will feel better when they grow” (Yvette)

“Maybe even not to overcome it totally [referring to behaviour control], I guess, but it will help them deal with what they have missing.... But it’s the wrong wording. It will help them make up for what they’re finding difficult” (Julie)

This need to change or 'fix' the person reflects the ideology of the medical model of disability, where identification of the problem is situated within the person who is expected to make all the necessary efforts to reduce societal discomfort (Carlson, 2010). A social representation that contains such beliefs places the blame squarely on the person with ASC who is expected to make all the necessary adjustments to conform to society's expectations.

ASC is taxing - Some participants perceived individuals with ASC as offering a taxing experience during social contact. Interpretation of their behaviour requires the laborious task of deciphering the underlying meaning, loading the neurotypical with an undesirable chore:

"For me it would require more out of me kind of, to build a relationship or converse with them. So, especially for society, then it's more of a burden since it requires more effort, kind of!" (Moira)

"You go once, twice, three times, four times. You think that he doesn't want to stay near me" (William)

"Because it's like if you haven't really touched something, you cannot really speak and relate to the person. For example, if he used to come to me for a bit, I used to find it a bit difficult since I didn't know how I should react" (Pamela)

These utterances reflect the burden society experiences when novel environmental changes transpire (Rateau et al., 2005). It was only when the situation called for more negotiated interaction, and they became able to interpret the meaning behind the ambiguous behaviour, that some participants found it necessary for themselves to adjust, and related comfortably to the person's different behaviour:

"But then when we were a team, he integrated well. We used to know that after some time when he stopped understanding or he got tired, that he needed time to go out" (Pamela)

Wagner and Hayes (2005) state that "erratic and merely selective interaction does not objectify a social representation" (p. 277). Therefore, persisting through the initial taxing experience is essential to initiate the process of forming a clear representation of ASC.

ASC is diverse - Participants that had numerous encounters with people on the spectrum were constantly extracting information from their encounters, resulting in a flexible perception that shifted between polarities of severe to mild:

“Because the football boy is totally different from the school-boy. Plus, at school this boy with autism was totally different as well. Autism is not just one case and all are the same. There is a whole spectrum. There is who is severe and who is less” (Kyle)

“There are people coming to mind... again also this, there was someone particular who was super obvious. But others, they might kind of have autism but it's less severe” (Moir)

When repeated exposure occurred, the realisation that ASC constitutes diverse competences furnished the person with the ability to put aside the difficulties and identify other characteristics within the individual, allowing new meaning and content to be added to the representation:

“It's like we used to be happy that we ended up with him [peer with ASC]. Because he was really capable [during biology experiments]” (William)

Being aware that the person on the spectrum has capabilities, encouraged William and his peers to seek contact with the student with ASC, facilitating a transformation in the group's representation of ASC. Even if this representation was limited to the time they spent together during this particular class, the fact that there was a level of interaction satisfied momentarily the social deficits experienced by the person with ASC (Underhill et al., 2019). Furthermore, these encounters present opportunities to alter peripheral elements, which along with the central system constitute ASC's social representation. According to Moliner & Abric (as cited in Sammut et al., 2015), peripheral changes have the potential to make 'soft transformations', that eventually could lead on to a possible shift in the representation.

Accept ASC as part of my world

Participants that experienced high quality contact with people on the spectrum allowed themselves time to become familiar and get emotionally invested towards the person with ASC, resulting in acceptance. Other participants that lacked contact were still amenable to the idea of being in the presence of people

with ASC, engaging in fluid thinking processes that allowed them to accept society's diversity. Therefore, it is through the emotional involvement and openness to heterogeneous relationships, such as those with individuals on the spectrum, that re-conceptualisation of ASC can take place.

Society needs to adapt - An interesting finding that transpired from the data was that some participants were ready to adapt to the needs of persons with ASC as opposed to ASC adjusting to society. This was achieved by providing space in their environment for the person on the spectrum and taking on an open stance at the way they viewed ASC:

“Because if you are aware of the condition of the person, I think you have to adapt then, right? In the sense that you know there are certain issues, why not try to cater for everyone?” (Daniel)

By engaging in a reflective process, with the passage of time some participants shifted their conceptualisation from seeing the problem located within the person with ASC, to the understanding that society's expectations of normative standards are generating barriers and hindering inclusion of the person on the spectrum. This is in line with the ideology of the social model of disability, which explains how socially constructed barriers exacerbate the problems experienced by individuals with disabilities, creating undesirable environmental factors such as societal inequalities, negative stereotypes and prejudice (Callus, 2013; Oliver, 2009).

ASC is normal - Participants that had extensive contact with ASC managed to blur away the disability, moving it from the foreground to the background of their representation. These participants found a way to incorporate persons with ASC in their life, and experience comfort in their presence by putting themselves in their shoes and being willing to be part of their world:

“There could be instances where they [people with ASC] need something, but at the same time even I, for example, I don't know how to fix a picture frame to the wall, I also need to ask for help” (Moir)

“I really do not like this... 'normal'? Who is normal? Am I normal? Are you normal? It doesn't make sense to me. For me they are normal persons” (Pamela)

These participants removed societal barriers by viewing the person with ASC as a coequal. A process that eradicated power issues and promoted equality,

paving ways for inclusive possibilities to ensue. Because “what and who others, as well as we are, depends on our relationships with them and what we choose to make of us” Rapley (2004, p. 208).

Discussion

In line with the literature, this study found that participants’ perceptions of individuals with ASC were related to the knowledge (Griffin et al., 2012; Nevill & White, 2011) and experience (Dillenburger et al., 2013) that neurotypicals had with people on the spectrum. Meaningful experiences with persons with ASC were found to leave an increasingly salient impact on the neurotypical person, paving the way for the development of understanding and acceptance.

The study served to clarify the process of transformation from being perturbed by the unusual behaviours of a person with ASC, to accepting them as part of the diversity of society. Most importantly, the study found that merely being in the presence of people with ASC will not necessarily translate into an accepting position. A crucial element for this shift to take place was found to be a reflective process that sought an explanation of the behaviours exhibited by individuals with ASC, which allowed for the reconstruction of their conceptualisation of ASC in an effort to remove the uncertainties that are embedded in society’s ideology.

Changes in people’s social representations are possible because humans are agentic (Veiga & Arzate-Salgado, 2013). The interactions they have and the social communication they engage in, during their everyday lives, have the potential to re-shape their viewpoints and re-categorise individuals that are present in their environments (Rateau et al., 2005; Sammut, et al., 2012). However, when there is no engagement and interaction with the person, and no discussion or explanation is sought and received of the ambiguous behaviours, like those exhibited by students on the spectrum within the school setting, neurotypicals will simply discard the ambiguous experience as foreign to them. This finding highlights the missed opportunity of schooling to form a clear conceptualisation of persons with ASC, and to develop the necessary skills to interact with the atypical population.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This qualitative research has sought to understand the complexity of neurotypicals’ perceptions of ASC, by carrying out in depth interviews with a

sample of eight participants. Therefore, the findings acquired from this small sample cannot be regarded as representative of the whole population. Quantitative research targeting a larger pool of people can provide additional understanding of the content of society's social representation of ASC. Another limitation of the study is the homogeneity of the sample, with all eight participants having a higher or tertiary level of education, and aged between 18 and 24 years. A more diverse sample would have allowed for greater insight on how society's perceptions about ASC are formed. Moreover, the development of the participants' perceptions was obtained through retrospective enquiry. This did provide data on how the participants currently evaluate their encounters with ASC. However, longitudinal studies can reveal how neurotypical persons experience and perceive ASC as they grow up.

Conclusion

Identifying and understanding social representations of ASC is important to sustain sociopolitical factors giving rise to a more inclusive society. This can be achieved by outlining strategies that have the potential to alter society's discriminatory attitudes. Supporting neurotypicals, within multiple community settings, to engage and interact with persons with autism, and contemplate and openly discuss the reasons behind ambiguous behaviours demonstrated by them, could be a valuable step towards fostering acceptance. For the younger generation, urging school educators to enable interactions with peers with ASC and openly discuss behavioural difficulties and to model appropriate social responses is proposed. Validating the peers' efforts to engage with students with ASC might be another way to promote inclusion. Schools offer a unique opportunity for repeated peer contact that should not be overlooked. It has the potential to equip neurotypicals with appropriate images of the strengths as well as weaknesses of persons with ASC and with confidence in positive social interaction with them, paving the way for the younger generation to form an ideology that denotes equal status and acceptance. Rateau et al. (2005), however, warn us that "integrating the new object into a pre-existing system of norms and values cannot happen smoothly" (p. 483). Thus, for change in society's exclusionist attitude to occur, its members will need to exert an amount of effort until a new social representation of ASC can be formed.

The perceptions that society holds of ASC are a complex phenomenon that require further research. This study has underscored the need to equip the lay-person with welcoming attitudes, knowledge and skills to interact effectively

with persons with ASC, thereby laying the foundations for a community that is capable to recognise, understand and reflect upon the behaviour exhibited by people with ASC, enabling society to look beyond the disability and embrace the person as a full member of their group.

As Howarth et al. (2015) eloquently explain; “Psychologically speaking, community does not emerge and does not survive without the recognition of diversity” (p. 189). Thus, there exists the salient need for society to proactively welcome diversity, thus enabling persons with ASC to be free from the stigma of being viewed as bizarre outsiders, and enjoy their right of being regarded with equal respect and provided with opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the everyday life of our society.

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