Mediated encounters in autistic spectrum disorder: from the material to the digital

Research on autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) commonly describes autistic individuals as displaying (i) a preoccupation with the world of objects and (ii) a withdrawal or detachment from the world of subjects. In her insightful and persuasive article, Sofie Boldsen argues that we should not fall into the trap of viewing the world of objects and the world of subjects in isolation from one another. Drawing from her qualitative and phenomenological study on social interaction in ASD, Boldsen urges us to recognise how interacting with material objects can scaffold, facilitate, and regulate different forms of social connectedness in ASD. In doing so, the distinction between the "social" and "non-social" dimensions of ASD is problematised, and a robustly *situated* and *embedded* understanding of ASD is presented.

Excerpts from both observational and interview-based data are used to illustrate ways in which social interaction in ASD is mediated via interaction with the material world. Line and Helene engage with one another through their mutual attention to a guitar; Ina and Viola dance together, guided by a virtual dance partner; Hanna and Mads connect while playing a board game. Boldsen argues that *through* engagement with material aspects of the environment various social possibilities are opened; social possibilities that are importantly experienced as less uncertain and overwhelming.

Boldsen suggests two ways in which material mediation regulates and grounds social interaction. First, through their sensible nature, objects can scaffold social co-ordination and attunement. The rhythmic structure of music, for example, is *socially-supportive*; it entrains our bodily movements both in time with the music and, in turn, with others also dancing. As such, the music provides a shared structure in which bodily movement and attunement unfolds, guiding and delineating when and how to act. Second, Boldsen highlights how

objects can make normative rules and expectations explicit. As such, they not only provide a structure which shapes the spatio-temporal dynamic of an interaction but facilitate an understanding of how to act appropriately in a particular situation. Board games, for instance, come with a clear set of rules about turn-taking and actions. This brings a confidence about what to do oneself, as well as making the actions of others predictable, thus helping to alleviate the pervasive uncertainty that many autistic individuals experience in social situations.

Using material objects is an efficient and effective way of grounding a social interaction in a specific framework that not only makes appropriate forms of interaction more salient, but importantly reduces the kinds of action that might arise. Engaging in a specific materially mediated activity, then, carves out a more manageable space of meaning in the world. Indeed, we might be reminded, here, of Alfred Schutz's notion of "finite provinces of meaning" (Schutz 1962). Schutz describes how we can enter certain worlds which operate along their own codes of conduct and logic (e.g., the world of theatre, poetry, games). In such worlds, aspects of the everyday world are temporarily rendered irrelevant or non-salient and meaning is constituted within the limited framework of that particular world. If the everyday world is experienced as overwhelming and chaotic, entering the explicitly codified world of, say, a game might be experienced as a relief.

Note, though, that material objects offer up different styles and structures of mediated engagement. This point could be made more explicit in Boldsen's analysis. Music prompts a different rhythmic interaction and set of normative expectations than playing a board game together. Even within the sub-category of games, different games promote very different forms of social engagement – think of the difference between playing chess (a game with highly structured moves, sometimes a specified response time, and which structurally unfolds

in a near-identical manner across games and players) and a role-playing game like Dungeons & Dragons (a game with more diverse and creative game styles that alters across games and players). I am, therefore, left curious about the differences between materially mediated social encounters. To use the Schutzian terminology, it would be interesting to explore how different finite provinces of meaning and engagement are created through different material objects, and which of these are experienced as most attractive for alleviating social doubt and awkwardness by autistic individuals. Developing this nuance in future research would both add phenomenological texture and depth to Boldsen's account and provide insights that could be helpfully translated into therapeutic settings.

Overall, I am persuaded by Boldsen's clear and careful argument and am convinced that her work builds an important bridge between "social" and "non-social" analyses of ASD. Her work draws attention to how aspects of the world can "do" social work for us; how we can "offload" bodily co-ordination and the normative framing of an interaction onto the material objects around us. Importantly, the article concludes by encouraging us to reflect upon how the material world scaffolds social cognition and social interaction outside the context of ASD; urging us to more look more broadly at ways of *being together* by *doing together*. Given my enthusiasm for Boldsen's framework, I want to conclude my commentary by sketching a potential avenue for future consideration.

Digitally-mediated encounters

Boldsen's examples demonstrate how the material world can regulate the spatio-temporal dynamics and norms of interpersonal encounters through interaction *with* an object. What, though, about instances where social interaction is mediated *through* an artifact? Where the focus is not *on* the object (e.g., the musical instrument or board game) but where artifacts

instead create new mediated environments in which to act and communicate. I am thinking here about how technological artifacts (e.g., phones, laptops, and tablets) can be used to enter into digitally mediated encounters.

Digitally mediated environments can alter the spatio-temporal structure of a social interaction. On an online platform like WhatsApp, the environment does not necessarily entrain the participants movements but brings certain constraints to the interaction. For instance, while WhatsApp is an example of *instant* messaging, it typically takes longer to read, write, send, and receive a message than to speak a response in a face-to-face interaction. Perhaps even more importantly, our normative *expectations* around response time are adjusted in this digital environment; we anticipate time-gaps in responses. We might describe a 'stretching' of the temporal present online, where what counts as an appropriate response-time is extended (Osler 2021). Autistic individuals, who often experience the rapid pace of neurotypical face-to-face conversations as intimidating and stressful (Leary & Donnellan 2012; Krueger 2021), may find relief when the time-pressure associated with response time is alleviated. Entering the space of WhatsApp also allows for visual (physical) bodily cues and various forms of non-verbal behaviour to be left behind. This can work to alleviate concern about what one's own body is doing and how it is being interpreted by others, as well as limiting what one needs to attend to regarding the other participant(s) (Benford & Standen 2009; Antunes & Dhoest 2021). Encountering one another via digital artifacts, then, can limit aspects of a social exchange that may prove overwhelming or chaotic to certain individuals.

In a similar vein, as Ruth Ayaß (2014) and Viktor Berger (2020) both highlight, online media provide many opportunities for entering Schutzian 'finite provinces of meaning', for instance, the gaming worlds of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games such as World of Warcraft and Elder Scrolls. Akin to the example of the board game,

individuals enter these provinces where "social interaction is primarily about the game and secondarily about people, and importantly, the latter conforms to the rules of the former". Within the game, players *do* things together, e.g., go on raids, work out puzzles, explore dungeons. What players can do is also not only normatively structured by the rules of the game (i.e., goals, roles of particular player classes) but also by what is technologically possible to do via an avatar (i.e., based on the unique skills of that character). Thus, it seems that the technological mediation further constrains the framing of an interaction, creating a tightly formed province of meaning, and making social interaction via the game even more predictable.

The briefly sketched examples prompt us to not only adopt a situated analysis of social interaction in ASD but to consider ways in which new technological artifacts can *re-situate* social interactions into environments that create new structures of encounter, connection, and shared experience. They also open questions about how such artifacts can be specifically designed with easing social connection for people with ASD in mind.

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