Neurodiverse spaces: Exploring the potential for social networking to reconstruct our ideas of ‘friendship’

Lindsay O’Dell, Charlotte Brownlow and Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist
The Open University ● Milton Keynes ● UK
University of Southern Queensland ● Toowoomba ● Queensland ● Australia
Umeå University ● Umeå ● Sweden

INTRODUCTION

Given the strong focus on ‘impairments’ associated with autism in many of the dominant (NT) literatures, particularly the ‘impairment in social interaction’, alternative understandings of friendship and social interactions, as well as how social barriers stands in the way for friendships, are important if we are to engage with neurodiverse relationships. In this poster we explore representations of friendship among autistic people. We examine the potential impact that social networking in online-space such as Facebook or concepts of accessible off-line spaces may have in enabling a reconstruction of ideas about friendship and how these alternative notions of ‘friendship’ may be useful for some autistic people.

METHODOLOGY

This project draws on three primary sources of information in order to critically explore the concept of ‘friendship’:

- Data collected through ethnographic research in a Swedish educational off-line setting for adults with autism
- Articles in a Swedish paper (Empowerment) aimed at and produced by adults with autism
- The potential of online social networking sites such as Facebook

FINDINGS

The key findings from the early stages of the project suggest that neurodiverse spaces can be crafted in several arenas, including face to face and online interactions. The effectiveness of neurodiverse spaces however rely on the reconstruction of the NT-dominated understanding of the concept of ‘friendship’, what it means to be and have ‘friends’, and the importance of enabling social spaces.

THE NEXT STEPS

This is an ongoing research project. These early findings indicate that spaces that respect neurodiversity can be created and managed by people with autism in order to facilitate the fostering of friendships and close relationships. The growing body of literature focusing on the internet as a potential tool for empowerment for use by people with AS, means that it is important to explore its potential for creating neurodiverse spaces that recognise and respect difference. Such interactions remove the need for FTF interactions, potentially removing ‘impairment’ in social interaction. The discussions and images in Empowerment and the ethnographic fieldwork illustrates that there exists possibilities for neurodiverse spaces to support friendships in the offline world too. We plan to do further investigations into the concept of the crafting of neurodiverse spaces and the impact that this may have on the need for us to reconstruct the pervasive NT-dominated ideas of ‘friendship’.

For further information please contact: l.odell@open.ac.uk