The relationship between professionals and adults with Autism: an exploration of support workers' accounts

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has emphasised the difficulties Autistic individuals have in forming relationships with others. However, this notion has been counterbalanced by the argument that once these have been established they become meaningful and important. The purpose of this research was therefore to explore these claims in further profundity.

This qualitative study aims to explore the accounts and experiences of professionals, recruited via non-purposive, probability sampling and employed by the same Autism-specific service. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a loosely constructed interview schedule derived from previous literature and the researchers own moral standpoint.

Contrary to previous research, the research question seeks to explore; what kinds of relationships are evident? Why are such relationships prevalent? And what implications do these relationships hold for the future of practice?

Using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six stage process of thematic analysis, four prominent themes emerged in regards to the relationships evident in practice; Relationship Boundaries; Perceptions; Educating Roles and Communication Partnerships. Upon reflection of these interpretations, it became apparent that these relationships were multi-faceted and subject to the contextual dimensionality of society, indicating change at every level of the social care profession as a necessity, in order for truly positive relationships to flourish.
Introduction

Burack (2001) suggests it has been theoretically concluded that individuals on the Autistic Spectrum have significant difficulties forming relationships with other people as they struggle to understand the concept of social rules, which consequently govern relationships and interactions. However, Schopler & Mesibov (1992) argue once these interpersonal relationships have been established, they become meaningful and important to the autistic individual. These statements arouse speculation as to how we categorise constituents of a functional relationship. Sprague and Hayes (2000) argued when social rules are constructed around ‘common needs’ and ‘shared goals’ of certain citizens and assumed to be normal, the needs of others are often unrecognised. This contradicts the traditional assumption that individuals on the autistic spectrum have an inability to develop relationships yet it remains a belief, widely accepted throughout society.

With the preceding information taken into consideration it is unsurprising over two thirds of adults diagnosed with Autism feel they do not receive the support necessary to meet their needs (National Autistic Society, 2006) and with The National Audit Office (2009) reporting, Autism costs the UK economy £28.2 billion annually, it calls into question ‘to what extent are these expenses benefiting individuals diagnosed with Autism?’

These reoccurring notions of Autism have been largely shaped by the biomedical community that views disability as a deficit and people with disabilities as in need of ‘fixing’ (Riox, 1994). Bagatell (2010) has argued that these assumptions have fuelled the self advocacy movement, by which individuals with Autism are able to communicate with one another, giving voice to their experiences. Mest (1988) found, self advocacy groups provided individuals the opportunity to develop relationships, where they can share experiences and concerns with one another, helping them to recognize the stigma attached with their disability without internalising it. Furthermore, these relationships allowed the individuals to develop a sense of self that was resilient, even in the context of other potentially damaging relationships.

Subsequently, despite awareness of potentially damaging relationships, it is inevitable these ‘relationships’ will persist to be a regular occurrence in the lives of autistic individuals. Goodley (1997) argues, professionals can be held accountable for purporting these relationships by operating under professionalised structures which reinforce the concept of the ‘knowledge tradition’. This can result in the Autistic individual becoming a ‘subject for investigation, surveillance, treatment and exclusion’, consequently undermining the objectives of the self advocacy movement. This indicates that professionals need to initiate a shift from relationships built on levels of expertise to ones constructed through lived experiences. Furthermore, Goodley (1997) found through observation, professionals could take on a ‘facilitative’ or ‘restrictive’ role, suggesting a need to re-evaluate the hierarchal structure which dictates the roles both individuals within the partnership are assigned to.

In retrospect of the above literature, it is apparent psychologists have situated their primary focus around the autistic individuals ‘incapacity’ to develop functional relationships. Counter arguments have demonstrated it is rather the types of relationships and the roles within them that professionals expect the autistic individual to adhere too. From the researcher’s position as a support worker, this
issue has influenced the research, through personal experiences of practice, the roles that both individuals adhere to within the relationship contribute largely to the quality of care provided.

Reciprocity is a key issue contemporary psychologists’ and professionals alike should be constantly addressing during their interactions with individuals with Autism. Gernsbacher (2006) defines reciprocity as ‘a relation of mutual dependence or action or influence’. Expanding upon this definition Gernsbacher (2006) suggests reciprocity, when put in to practice should be ‘a mode of exchange in which transitions take place between individuals who are symmetrically placed, that is, they are exchanging as equals, neither being in a dominant position’. However, it has been hypothesised that many researchers, professionals, teachers and peers forget reciprocity is a ‘two way street’ (Kunihiro et al, 2006). Frankel & Wood (2011) argued when reciprocity is compromised, people show little interest in interacting spontaneously and enthusiastically with one another, due to an absence of empathy, closeness and mutual likeness.

In reference to the latter comment, it would seem essential we construct empowering relationships with the autistic community. Mutuality is profound in sustaining these relationships; Christiansen (1997) defines mutual relationships as ‘a collaborative partnership built on shared understandings of what it means to set, work towards and achieve mutual goals’. Seligman (1975) conceded mutual relationships concrete solid foundations for professionals, as they allow individuals with learning disabilities to develop a positive sense of self through opportunities designed to facilitate achievement, reflection to develop skills, explore identity and experience the esteem of others.

Clearly, these kinds of relationships have positive repercussions amongst the autistic community. However, there has been much debate as to what practical applications they have in the context of two individuals with diverse cognitive abilities (Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Houghton et al (1987) have argued, individuals with Autism find themselves engaged in non-mutual relationships in which they have limited rights on a consistent basis. Khan (1985) purports, when an individual’s rights are not mutually addressed, we fall into dangerous patterns of ‘expert’ intervention. Rodriguez (2002) argues, ‘no two people with Autism are the same, just as no two individuals in the rest of the population are the same’ and the only way we can avoid a culture of ‘tokenism’ is to individualise Autism through the development of these mutual relationships (Bradshaw & Carnaby, 2002).

Contrary to the above, some instances are available that would contradict even the most pessimistic of researchers. Bogden & Taylor (1989) found through observation that some professionals take their role as part of a mutual relationship very literally and perceived the individuals they supported as ‘thinking people’ who could be ‘understood through careful attention and empathy’. Bond & Keys (1993) suggest extremity in difference between each person in the partnership could have a potentially positive effect if these differences were not construed as a problem. Sprague & Hayes (2000) add further to this notion by suggesting these differences enrich relationships if they are strategically organised to maximise each person’s contributions. These examples capture the importance of building successful professional relationships with individuals diagnosed with Autism, dismissing any pre-conceptions that all professional relationships must have a structure dominated
around medical and expert orientated interventions. From the researcher’s observations in practice it is apparent that when support workers adhere to a position of authority opposed to mutual consensus, issues such as trust are compromised. Therefore it is important for professionals to reflect upon their relationships to address any arising problems, an element which is central to the research.

A reoccurring issue present in an array of disability literature is the independence versus dependence debate. According to Hillyer (1993), professionals have a tendency to operate under a hierarchal infrastructure which fosters dependence through providing unnecessary help to those with Autism, rather than necessary help. This reinforces the reproduction of negative relationships by not offering individuals with Autism the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to independently complete tasks. Safilios-Rothschild (1991) offer the idea that professionals assign ‘incompetence’s’ to individuals with Autism to reinforce a sense of ‘helping’ and ‘caring’ which inadvertently awards their own sense of self-worth, rather than that of the person they are ‘supporting’. This issue has influenced the proposed research as the researcher has witnessed similar practice in his role as a support worker, therefore it is essential professionals are provided the opportunity to reflect on these elements of practice.

The abundance of research throughout poses serious questions and insight into the nature of Autism and relationships. However, it is transparent that researchers have rarely given professionals the opportunity to voice their experiences. Beals (2003) argues those who spend most of their time working directly with individuals diagnosed with Autism are the closest we have thing we have to ‘experts’. Furthermore, she argues these people should be merited based on their energy and creativity rather than their formal credentials. This closing statement captures the essence of the proposed research, psychology as a discipline, needs to acknowledge the positive experiences of professionals through primary accounts of how they interpret their relationships. In conclusion, to readdress the question to what extent are these expenses benefiting individuals diagnosed with Autism? Psychologists must ask the individuals directly responsible for this to receive the answers they seek to find.

In retrospect of the preceding rationale and arguments made above, the aim of this research is to explore the relationships between professionals and adults with autism through support worker accounts of experiences in practice. Expanding further, the research seeks to explore ‘what kinds of relationships are truly operant in practice?’, ‘how do elements of power contribute towards the construction of these relationships?’ and ‘how do support workers facilitate independence and other related skills through their relationships?’ Subsequently, results could essentially provide useful insight into the current condition of the social care profession and ultimately, areas for improvement.

**Method**

The controversial nature of researching autism has often deemed it difficult for researchers to find an appropriate form of methodology to adopt (Brock & Jarrold, 2004). In addition, the lack of coherence in applying a definitive theoretical approach to autism has often produced contradictory findings which can have devastating
affects upon the autistic community when in the hands of a researcher (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Subsequently, the research topic in question remains under researched, elusive to mobilise and at best wrongly motivated towards. However, the current research aims to advocate a neoteric perspective to relationships, using influence from community psychology and critical disability literature, consequently; methodological selections have been made carefully.

The preceding statement coupled with the researchers epistemological positioning and occupation as a support worker has influenced the rationale to operate under a qualitative research design. Evidently, the intermittent nature of the research has made established resources unavailable for use. Therefore, Semi-Structured interviews were used to justify the qualitative design, as they allow participants the freedom to communicate what is of importance and interest to them, facilitating the process of data collection to flow naturally and depart in unexpected directions, effectively probing certain ideas in greater depth (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

A loosely constructed interview schedule (Appendix A) was devised, gathering influence from previous literature, theory, the research question and the researchers own experiences of working in the realms of social care. Incidentally, three dominant themes emerged and were used as topics in guiding the conversations. Patton (2002) suggests, interview schedules enable researchers to explore and ask questions which will elucidate and illuminate a particular subject. These principles are congruent with the research aims as participants were encouraged to voice experiences which were meaningful to them. The topics were accompanied by a series of sub-questions, which allowed support workers to reflect upon their practice openly, in a fashion which was empowering for them (David & Sutton, 2004).

The participant criterion dictated eligible candidates were required to have primary experiences in supporting individuals with Autism prior to the study. Subsequently, participants were recruited through non-probability purposive sampling. Steir-Adler & Clark (2010) dictated purposive sampling allows researchers to reflect upon their own personal judgement coinciding with a research topic, enabling the researcher to obtain information rich accounts for in-depth analysis. This was of profundity as participants were encouraged to provide subjective accounts of their experiences to explore the issues surrounding the research question (Cottrell & McKenzie, 2011), further advocating this sampling method as appropriate.

As the focal concern of the research was to reject the influence of measurement and disregard statements of prevalence, a small sample was employed. Six participants were recruited in alignment with the criterion and where all currently employed by the same organisation. However, whilst all of the participants occupational positions encompassed ‘supporting roles’, two classified themselves as support workers, two of them team leaders, one an assistant practitioner and the other a registered manager.

Participants were recruited once the registered manager had granted permission for willing staff to participate. Participants were issued with a brief and a consent form prior to the interviewing procedure to ensure issues regarding informed consent and deception were addressed accordingly. Once participants had affirmed their participation, an interviewing environment was selected upon participant request; this was employed in order for participants to address topics freely as they arose, in an
environment in which they felt comfortable (Coon, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview schedule, lasting approximately 40-45 minutes and recorded on a Dictaphone ready for transcription (Example: Appendix B). Following each of the interviews, participants were debriefed.

Upon completion, each interview was individually transcribed, ready for the six-stage process of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected primarily due to the flexibility it entails across epistemological approaches; this was of substantial importance to the research as the researchers contrasting investments as both a support worker and a psychology student required an unrestricted method of analysis, allowing a rich and detailed yet complex account of data to manifest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each of the proposed stages of thematic analysis was completed with equal dedication in order to ensure all necessary precautions were taken. Traditionally, the process of thematic analysis entails a latent or semantic level of theme extraction, however the researcher has engaged in both processes to uncover the broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990) whilst still postulating the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies interrelated to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Despite the potential benefits of incorporating a qualitative research design, it is essential to address any ethical concerns that may consequently surface. In order to make participants accessible, the registered manager of the establishment had to assume the position of 'gatekeeper' and consent to the participation of voluntary staff under her supervisory status. Subsequently, a letter and consent form was issued to the gatekeeper to obtain confirmation (Appendices C and D).

All participants were briefed (Appendix E) to inform them about the nature of the study and the purpose of their contributions. This was considered paramount, as participants may have become distressed by questions if they were not clarified prior (Mack et al, 2005). Furthermore, issues surrounding confidentiality needed addressing as participants had to be aware that any information they provided could be discussed with the researcher's supervisor. Kitchener (2000) perceived this as vital as participants maintain the right to decide who they wish to share information with and who they wish to withhold it from; consequently, consent forms were issued to participants (Appendix F).

In addition, several participants disclosed personal details about service users during the interviewing process, potentially breaching ethical guidelines; therefore, a strict coding system was introduced during the transcription stage of analysis to rectify this issue. Finally participants were debriefed (Appendix G) to provide an opportunity whereby any potential problems regarding distress could be communicated and additional information could be discussed were necessary (Russell & Purcell, 2009). Further ethical considerations have been made in the attached ethics form (Appendix H).

In summary, research of this nature is required to illuminate discrepancies in established theory and previous research. Furthermore, the benefits of implementing qualitative methodologies allowed the process of obtaining the data necessary in achieving this. Thematic analysis will now elucidate prominent findings from participant accounts.
Analysis

The results of the analysis provided accounts of support worker; service user relationships in practice. Reflecting upon personal experiences and approaches produced rich, detailed yet complex accounts of data which have proved consensual at times, but contradictory at others. The support workers were central to the study; therefore the themes which have been extracted have been selected based on their direct connotations with the research question and derived solely from the data provided by participants. The process required in detecting these themes was facilitated by the six stages of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). In effect, each theme was deduced from the data for their semantic and latent potential, the strength in producing new or ignored areas of previous research and the reoccurring nature in which they manifested in participant accounts. Subsequently, four prominent themes were highlighted; relationship boundaries, perceptions, educating roles and communication partners. (See Appendices I-L for process).

Relationship Boundaries

A theme which was consensual amongst all of the participant accounts was that several boundaries were in operation, preventing the development of relationships built definitively on principles of mutuality. It became apparent a hierarchal structuring of relationships was evident, therefore the rationale for this theme was guided by this interpretation. Regardless, there was an acknowledgement of the effectiveness of mobilising mutual relationships:

‘I think there needs to be a middle ground in that we have got different roles but we are sharing the same interests and want the same things’ (T2:166-168).

The above quote suggests although contrasting roles are inevitable in practice; an ability to value each other simultaneously is desirable. However, the preceding quote manifests as elusive when considering mutuality in regards to an array of boundaries. Professional boundaries appeared to be a contingent in all of the participant's accounts:

‘You need to be able to separate your work life from your personal life and prevent the two from crossing over, which would be problematic’ (T1:218-219).

This quote embodies the idea that boundaries enable support workers to disconnect their personal lives from their working lives, suggesting relationships are restrained to organisational expectations which reinforce them as malleable, devaluing the experience of fluidity in favour of rigid structure. This is further reflected in the following quote:

‘I don’t always agree that being professional is the most human thing to be, it is what is expected of me (T2:192-193).

Further promoting the importance of coherence to boundaries regardless of the moral positioning of support staff. In addition, it appeared that boundaries in wider contexts were acknowledged by participants of a managerial position:
‘We need to ensure we are fulfilling our obligation to the people we support but also doing what we are saying we are going to do to local authorities because we are answerable to people’ (T4:141-143).

This indicates economic and political boundaries are adhered to in order to reflect relationships that are desirable to the various stakeholders investing in the future of the organisation's sustainability, suggesting that whilst mutuality may be considered a valuable constituent of these relationships, working within the paradoxes of organisational, professional and political boundaries indicates relationships are manufactured to exert ‘functionality’. This is further reflected in the quote:

‘We don’t want staff members or service users to become too comfortable because we are there to do a job at the end of the day’ (T3:190-192).

In regards to the above quote, ‘becoming too comfortable’ is negatively received suggesting the boundaries in operation are hierarchically reproduced, disregarding the importance of both service user and support worker experience.

Perceptions

It emerged throughout the analysis that relationships and support workers' approaches in practice were guided by certain perceptions of autism. This theme presented surprisingly, as some approaches were entirely motivated by perceptions, disregarding the importance of experience. This is supported in the following quote:

‘I think we have to be realistic, as much as I am saying what our values and approaches are you know, there will always be as much as we strive to get it right there will be an imbalance between staff versus service users because of the nature of our service and to an extent because of the nature of the people that we support, because of the Autism’ (T4:202-206).

This perception of autism appears to be embedded in elements of a medical discourse, for example, reference to the word ‘nature’ to describe autism and the service in question indicates particular members of staff reinforce the perception of autism as an innate impairment. In effect, this reinforces labels and stereotypes originating from medical culture, whereby those with autism need to be ‘fixed’. Further emphasis is placed on ‘being realistic’, suggesting some staff value their relationships with service users at micro-level processes, where ‘imbalances between staff and service users’ are legitimised entirely by the perceptions disguised through a dominant medical culture, subsequently ignoring perceptions as products of the broader social structures present in society.

However, other support workers appeared to challenge the preceding perceptions of autism. This is reflected in the following quote:

‘What they may lack in one area they may excel in another’ (T2:280).

This perspective acknowledges the potential of service users, whereby the use of the word ‘excel’ is superior to the word ‘lack’, in effect acknowledging autism as a strength-based condition opposed to a weakness-based one. Furthermore, it would appear the identity of service users are not solely reflected by their disorders, rather
staff identify with positive perceptions, allowing service users to develop identities exterior to their autism. Further contingency to the above perception is received in the following quote:

‘For me, I prefer to reflect upon the positive things that people with Autism can do, I think there is a tendency to focus on what they can’t do rather than what they can, which is wrong’ (T3:165-168).

Emphasis on ‘a tendency to focus on what they can’t do’ suggests some support workers recognise mainstream, societal perceptions of autism whereby ‘deficit’ is prevalent and rather a focus on ‘what they can do’ is constituent of a perception were service users are not confined to their label of autism. Furthermore, emphasis on alternative perceptions as ‘wrong’ suggests they are misguided and inaccurately reproduced, indicating, experience is detrimental in challenging negative perceptions of autism.

**Educating Roles**

The third theme which manifested throughout was support workers implicit role as educators. Firstly, a support worker drew on a personal experience of a service user’s refusal to attend the dentist and their approaches in trying to ‘educate’ him about why going was essential:

‘We informed him about the benefits of going to the dentist, showed him how to brush his teeth correctly, I think the knowledge and awareness helped this situation’ (T1:368-370).

Emphasis on the impacts as beneficial suggests, providing ‘knowledge’ was in the service users best interest; therefore complying with the role of an educator had positive repercussions. However, challenging the initial refusal contradicts the value of service user independence, implying the support workers ‘knowledge’ was perceived as superior to the decision made by the service users. Ultimately suggesting informed choice is a responsibility of support staff opposed to service users. Furthermore, one support worker quoted:

‘We are facilitators, enablers; we are the people that mean our service users can develop the skills necessary in developing independence’ (T5:117-119).

In this context, it would appear support workers interpret their roles as promoters of mainstream values. ‘Develop the skills necessary’ implies independence is a fixed concept requiring a specific set of skills, rejecting the idea that independence is a fluid concept and subjective to the person who mobilises the processes involved. Subsequently, ‘education’ in this context reinforces the norms and values of society. In contrast, one support worker stated:

‘I think that some individuals do appreciate they wouldn’t have been able to achieve the things they have achieved without our support and guidance’ (T2:217-219).
This suggests the educating roles support workers adapt to are consciously valued by service users and the inclusion of alternative synonyms; ‘support’ and ‘guidance’ indicate that the role of educative practice can be modified accordingly to the circumstances in which it is motioned, suggesting support staff individualise it to each service user.

However, whilst these roles appear to have both positive and negative repercussions, one support worker commented:

“You want to advocate people’s rights and equality but you have to teach people what their rights and equalities are and that’s a complex situation” (T4:255-257).

This implies some educative ‘interventions’ are not as linear as others and incorporate substantial perplexity. Consequently, when this process entails difficulty the outcomes are aspirational for service users, indicating the extent to which staff can adhere to this role is limited and ideological.

**Communication Partnerships**

The final theme which manifested was extracted from the focal attention staff members paid to the non-verbal orientation of the service users in which they support. This attention paid to communication style was reoccurring across interview topics, with the non-verbal orientation of the service users appearing central to all debate concerning communication.

“We use alternative methods of communication because that is detrimental to our establishment because the service users we support are largely non-verbal, some of them can speak but prefer and choose not to” (T5:57-59).

From this consensual perspective, the non-verbal orientation of the service users is not perceived as a deficit, but rather the emphasis placed on ‘preferred’ methods of communication suggests that integrating alternative communication styles coincides with the person centred approaches embedded in the organisations principles. Furthermore, ‘choice’ suggests support staff advocate a rebellion against normative communication. In addition, communication was regarded as amongst the most profound element of practice to integrate in developing positive relationships, one participant stated:

“I think when two different people have conflicting communication strategies which they prefer to use, it’s important both sides of the partnership work towards an agreed communication style” (T2:119-121).

This implies support workers perceived their contrasting communication methods as advantageous in developing positive relationships, as it allowed both contributors within the partnership to have input and educate one another about their preferred communication styles, effectively removing barriers in interaction.

Furthermore, participants identified with another ‘positive outcome’ of operating under the paradigms of these partnerships. One participant stated:
‘When challenging behaviours arise, it can mean service users are having difficulty in communicating what needs they need fulfilling’ (T5:106-107).

This indicates, by developing these partnerships, service user quality of life is enhanced, as less challenging behaviour was reported amongst participants when effective communication rapport was established. However, it is important to recognise emphasis was placed on the service users ‘difficulty in communicating’, disregarding the potential for staff members ‘difficulty’ in understanding, suggesting when misunderstandings were prevalent, deficit was associated with service users. Therefore, these apparent partnerships could represent a misconception regarding communication in the wider social and cultural contexts of society.

Discussion

Previous research has played a significant role in reproducing the notion that the autistic population have substantial difficulties in forming relationships with others (Burack, 2001). This has been coupled with societies compelling tendency to adhere to a dominant medical culture which perceives Autism as a deficit located in the individual, in need of ‘fixing’ (Riox, 1994). However, researchers are progressively beginning to acknowledge the wider contextual issues that are compromising the autistic individual’s ability to develop positive and meaningful relationships (Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Therefore, the research question in this study posits itself towards the latter, aiming to explore the implications of professional relationships through primary accounts of support worker experiences.

Thematic analysis was used to uncover support staff approaches to developing relationships with service users in a residential environment. It appeared support staff valued and displayed interest in developing mutual relationships with service users, challenging concerns as to whether two individuals of diverse cognitive ability can establish positive relationships (Sprague & Hayes, 2000). However, whilst all the participants perceived their roles as essential, using advocacy terms such as ‘empowering’ to describe their practice, it became emergent that these relationships were not primarily the product of those directly affected. Schalock (1997) stated those employed in the realms of social care must harbour a diversity of personal qualities, enabling them to adhere to the ‘supporting’ requirements of their occupation; they must be flexible, empathic and enthusiastic amongst others. In regards to the above, can a support worker truly fulfil these criterions when they are working under the restraints of professional boundaries?

The consensual definition of professional boundaries is ‘a set of guidelines, expectations and rules which set the ethical and technical standards in the social care environment, they set limits for safe, acceptable and effective behaviours by workers’ (Cooper, 2012). This suggests relationships are governed by discourses of ‘risk’ and ‘normalisation’, opposed to individual needs, experiences and interests (Wolfensberger, 1972). Existing research indicates those in a supporting position often form detached relationships with service users due to a fear their behaviours be misinterpreted as exploitative or harmful to others (Austin et al, 2006; Boon & Turner, 2004) and motivated by their own needs rather than those of the service user (Austin et al, 2006). From this perspective there is an element of danger associated in forming relationships with service users. Therefore, the qualities which are
deemed desirable in the social care profession are a romantic ideology, suggesting guidelines are aspirational whereas boundaries are enforceable (Davis, 2007). Ultimately, future relationship research must redirect focus away from an individual level of analysis and look at the wider political and institutional tensions which seek to protect organisations opposed to meeting the relationship needs of service users (Brown & Russell, 2005).

However, the study indicated that relationships in the context of communicative practice tended to challenge the traditional notions of intervention, rejecting the reproduction of a knowledge tradition, which has often left autistic individuals exposed to the influences of normalisation and directed service providers to adopt institutionalised approaches towards communication integration (Bradshaw & Carnaby, 2002). Participant accounts are adjacent with the perception of communication as a multi-modal process (Light, 1988), recognising and valuing the inclusion of non-verbal communication methods, which have often been associated with discourses of incompetency (Ochs & Solomon, 2004). This insinuates that the utilization of culturally normative communication was not considered hierarchally superior in establishing and maintaining successful relationships.

In effect, it would appear participants have established and advocate communication partnerships. These partnerships are perceived as contextual and multi-layered, whereby alternative methods of communication and the roles and contributions of each partner are acknowledged and valued (Grove et al., 1999). This counter-argues the perception of ‘culturally deviant’ communication as idiosyncratic, in essence creating a new discourse of communication grounded in mutuality and collaboration, assigning equal value to the roles of both partners (Bartlett & Bunning, 1997). In contrast, it is important to recognise that anomalies in this approach did exist; participants were compliant with the view that those who experience greater difficulties in communication may be more vulnerable in having their messages misinterpreted (Olsson, 1999). The preceding statement legitimises conformity to the ‘risk’ discourse pre-dominant in learning disability research and practice, subsequently reinforcing generalised labels of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘dependent’ (Couchman, 1997). Interestingly, it appeared service providers were more inclined to challenge the socio-cultural barriers of autism in regards to communication practice than the political dimensionality of relationship development, indicating that inconsistencies in power were more problematic than societal attitudes.

Education has been said to be a challenging institution for individuals with Autism for an abundance of reasons (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2003) ranging from impairments in social interaction, communication and restricted interests to a lack of ability to empathise (Dunlap & Bunton-Pierce, 1999; DSM IV, 1994). However, ‘being autistic does not mean being unable to learn, methods need to be adapted to accommodate an individual’s learning style, interests and needs’ (Koller, 2000). The preceding quote envisions an alternative approach to the education of autistic individuals, suggesting systematic flaws in the education system may be prevalent in preventing individuals from accessing the skills and knowledge they seek to obtain.

For Paulo Freire (1921-1997), this was essentially the root of concern when considering educational opportunities for oppressed groups. Freire’s (1972) central work remains the ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ which highlights the formality of education as a prominent issue, as it encourages ‘banking’, a process were the
educator makes ‘deposits’ in the educatee. Furthermore, he believed education should be a co-operative activity involving mutual respect, as this is definitive in enhancing community and building social capital (Taylor, 1993). In contrast, whilst these ideals seem logical and validated, ‘Educators have to teach, they have to transform transfers of information into a real act of knowing’ (Street, 1983) suggesting that enforcing these ideas in the mainstream remains aspirational.

In regards to this study, the support workers appeared to adopt informal approaches, reporting beneficiary repercussions in terms of service user’s educational outcomes. This indicates that support workers may be key agents in providing alternative means of education, enabling service users to make choices and develop the skills meaningful to them. However, management in particular, articulated complexities in teaching individuals with autism about their rights and equalities. Subsequently, the liberation of both formal and informal education appears to be ideological at present, ultimately providing further evidence for the multi-faceted dimensionality of staff and service user relationships.

In addition, it would appear this research has revitalised a relatively dormant area of research. Previous literature has often dictated that perceptions of autism are shaped by one of two dominant models; the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. The medical model of disability is purposeful of reproducing perceptions of autism as factual, perpetuating an ideology of deficit (Kang, 2006) whereas the social model of disability indicates our perceptions of autism are moulded by a failure to support difference, which is reflected in an intolerance for diversity (Bagatell, 2010). Subsequently, these models are composite of the medical and social discourses which reside in our society. Fairclough (1989) purports, these discourses are dominant due to the overwhelming control ‘able’ individuals have in casting autism as a disability, enforcing them as power laden constructs which uphold the privilege of an able majority, which remain elusive to transform.

However, this research highlights some areas for poignant change within the micro-level processes of the social care profession. Most of the support workers in this study were compliant with the idea that ‘autism is not given, but made’ (Rice, 2002). This perception allowed support workers to construct positive relationships with service users by valuing difference and diversity, rather than through the lens of disability (Stiker, 1999). Therefore, in order to develop more positive perceptions of autism, it would appear essential that support workers constantly reflect upon and value the importance of primary experience. However, whilst presented as quite a logical solution, this is not applicable in all circumstances.

The preceding statement is supported by findings which suggest those in a more authoritative position adopt negatively orientated perceptions of autism, indicating perceptions are determined by a hierarchal structure which situates negative perceptions at the top and positive perceptions at the bottom. Therefore, I promote those in a more authoritarian position must adopt a more proactive, collaborative approach to developing relationships with service users in order to mobilise the transition from negative to positive perception transformation. At present this process remains complex; therefore the social, cultural, historical and political contexts of autism must be confronted to initiate change.
In retrospect of the current study, a series of arguments have been made throughout the entirety of the process, some which reaffirm the findings of previous research and others which offer a contemporary insight into the construction of service user and service provider relationships. Ultimately researchers must acknowledge the dimensionality incorporated in the conceptualisation of these relationships to avoid the reproduction of objectivity, which evidently produce distorted findings. Subsequently, it is essential for researchers to remain interested in the topic at hand in order to uncover the future implications of these relationships.

In addition, whilst support workers accounts were essential in deriving implications for future research, it is also important to acknowledge that in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of areas for societal change; service user perspectives must be obtained. In support of the latter, previous research has emphasised the exclusionary approaches many disciplines adopt whereby the voices of the autistic community are often ignored. Therefore, if research truly seeks to explore relationships in the context of autism, uncompromised attention must be awarded to those individuals who are directly concerned (Radermacher et al, 2010). In closing, I suggest that the service user; service provider relationship appears to be a complex construct which requires stakeholders to actively participate in promoting change at every level of the social care profession.

**Reflexivity**

Throughout the research process I have been able to reflect upon my own role as a support worker using a theoretical framework to confirm, build upon and in some circumstances reject the findings of previous research.

My moral standpoints have been challenged throughout this process, I consider myself somebody who actively advocates the rights and equalities of the service users whom I support. However, I have come to realise this endeavour is not as simplistic as once anticipated, with even the finer details of terminology impacting significantly upon the approaches I operate upon in practice. The term service user was used without caution throughout the entirety of the research process but engaging with research, literature and theory has left me pondering the implications of this phrasing.

In particular, I have been able to acknowledge the contrasting investments of each stakeholder involved in the service user’s daily lives. The positioning of the registered manager in comparison to my own positioning was substantially different, allowing me now to evaluate my role as part of the wider social, cultural and political contexts which autism services are embedded.

The qualitative paradigm embarked upon coupled with the applications of thematic analysis allowed rich, detailed accounts of ‘real’ practice to develop, whereby the participant’s experiences were of central focus to the findings uncovered by the analytic process. Therefore, as these principles fuelled the necessity for the research, a qualitative method was appropriate opposed to a quantitative method. In addition, intricate dedication was required at every stage of the research process in order for me to truly explore the research question.
Although this study at times proved strenuous due to the contrasting roles I was required to adapt to, I personally feel this research has been liberating, highlighting key areas for change. Support workers have a moral obligation to the people they support; therefore unconditional attention must be paid to every aspect of practice encountered in establishing positive relationships, in order to challenge the resistances those with Autism and the professionals working alongside them face in everyday life.

References


Gernsbacher, M.A (2006) Towards A Behaviour of Reciprocity, University of Wisconsin-Madison, pp. 139-152


