

# A Misfitted Understanding: Developing A Future of Critical Autism Research Through Feminist Disability Studies

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# Overview & Introduction

- Neuro-Difference – Sociological Perspectives of Autism
- Feminist Disability Studies
- Developing FDS and *Misfitting*
- Misfitting and Neuro-Difference
- FDS and Autistic Identity – Interpreting Educational Spaces
- Progressing Future Understandings of Autistic Lives Through A Feminist Disability Lens

# Neuro-Difference – Sociological Perspectives and Progressions Of Autism

- Medicalised perspectives have a tendency to view autism through a reductivist lens.
- Autism as Neuro-Difference not Deficit.
- Identity formation & Empowerment (Cooper, Smith & Russell, 2017; Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman & Hutman, 2013).
- Potential damage to identity formation through various avenues which stigmatise or position autism as deficit (e.g. McGill & Robinson, 2020).
- Growing spaces *for* and *by* autistic individuals.

# Feminist Disability Studies

- Those who have become core authors of Feminist Disability Studies, such as Garland-Thomson, Asch, Tremaine and Kafer are all disabled scholars exploring and interpreting alongside their own experiences.
- Feminist Disability Studies (FDS) draws challenges to the constructed materiality of bodies and disability as somehow 'less' through challenging stigmatised perceptions of disability, body and gender.
- Feminist Disability Studies “encourage us to move away from universalizing concepts of disability to reveal the multitude of disability experiences” (Knoll, 2009, pg.124), seeking to instil perceiving individual experience rather than a single shared experience.
- Garland-Thomson “disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune” (2001, in *Feminist Disability Studies*, pg. 17).
- Tremain highlights the need for those with expertise, experience and knowledge to be better accounted for in the broader research context.

# Developing FDS & *Misfitting*

- “If disability is inherent in the human, how can it at the same time disqualify us from full membership in the human community?” (Garland-Thomson, 2012, pg. 339).
- Garland-Thomson’s work on Misfitting or Misfit Theory (2011) builds a foundational theoretical understanding moving beyond viewing disability in terms of individuals rather than groups or plural.
- *Misfitting* shifts individuals between spaces and boundaries, between binaries of normalcy and difference.
- As such, the idea of being *epistemologically disturbing* was conceptualised to interpret and bring together the diversity of those who don’t fit with traditional views of disability or difference.

# *Misfitting* and Neuro-difference

- Reframing the narrative on Autism has become a vital focus in autism research.
- The construction of autism has remained predominantly based within a male narrative. In this sense autism troubles more than one universalised construction.
- In this sense, autistic girls trouble epistemology and misfit with social and medicalised perceptions of autism.
- Autistic girls, women and differing gender identities beyond cis white male have long been left out of the broader autism narrative.
- What would a Misfitted construction of Autism look like in theory?

# FDS and Autistic Identity – Interpreting Educational Spaces

- Research has built from a Feminist Standpoint positioning of research, while bringing together Feminist Interviews and framing of Focus Groups.
- Autistic identities and experiences in education have been historically categorised with those of male peers.
- Autistic women's voices in *Spectrum Women, Autism and Girls*, and *Aspergirls*.
- Space in education for autistic voices has only begun to diversify in recent years.
- Drawing on the work of Cin (2017) and Rawlings (2016), a progression towards understanding the boundaries and spaces gender diverse autistic pupil's traverse.



# Progressing Future Understandings of Autistic Lives Through A Feminist Disability Lens

- It is vitally important autism research continues to highlight the autistic expertise of lived experience, though FDS can enhance the structured formations of sociological perspectives challenging the 'norm'.
- While Critical Autism Studies interrogates the intersecting structures which surround autism, autistic lives and autism research, a basis for challenging the lived realities and structures could be enhanced through FDS.
- The interrogation of realities which has been continually built throughout Feminist Methodologies holds value for autism research.
- From a lens which promotes a challenge to the binaries of able/disabled, health/unhealthy, normal/other autistic lives the modernised approaches of autism research could draw a clearer more divisive challenge to social stereotypes.

# Conclusion

- Autism as both a condition and difference have been consistently framed in a manner which essentially internalises debate and individualism.
- FDS offers a strong contingent to challenge and trouble the ableist perspectives which disabled and neurodiverse individuals may face.
- Autistic individuals, particularly those of differing gender identities, challenge the current epistemic comprehension of autism and autistic lives.
- How we understand autistic being has continually adapted over the last decade, though an engagement with Feminist perspectives has remained minimal in broader research contexts.
- Building future research alongside Feminist frameworks which interrogate and open knowledge production to the unseen, unexplored and unwritten while maintaining power balance to autistic individuals of differing gender identities can mark future understanding through voice empowerment.
- Spaces created in education could develop a sense of empowerment for autistic pupils, while promoting inclusive ideology.