

**Re-casting normal for children with autism in occupational therapy clinics: Ellipses, subterranean narratives and imaginative edges**

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Introduction: Pediatric clinics, particularly those using the sensory integration framework, lie on that blurred boundary between biomedicine technology and “folk neurology;” where everyday actions are interpreted as evidence of nervous systems seeking balance.

Objectives: This paper will first view such occupational therapy practices through a Foucauldian “discipline of the body” which confirms how interventions are a relentless pursuit of achieving “normal” in everyday activities (e.g. hand writing, sitting still, eating). Yet, therapists and parents maintain a tacit contract to weave together a kind of “semblance of normality” even as they question, tussle with, struggle against exactly what “normal” in the culture at large actually means.

Method: This paper draws from an ethnography of the interactions between children diagnosed with autism and therapists in a sensory integration clinic. Data collection included participant observation, fieldnotes, and digital-taping of child-therapist treatment sessions over the course of an academic year. Narrative interviewing of both parents or primary caregivers and therapists also captured a multiple perspective approach to clinical interaction. Data analysis included micro-analysis of gesture, tone, bodily-sensing postures that provided the thick descriptions needed to explore the ellipses—the stories not yet told, can’t be told, waiting to be told—of both parent-primary caregiver-therapist narratives and child-therapist narratives as they struggled against the parameters of “normal” dictated by the context of an institution which is (contradictorily and) simultaneously their hope.

Results: In this cacophony of discourses of “normality” promoted by current rehabilitation technologies (e.g. behavioral, sensory-integration, discrete trial training and the like), questions of “being normal” were inextricably entangled with the existential questions of what it means to have a “good life.” Building a case study across three therapist-child-parent triadic interaction, this paper will examine, how parents, therapists and children struggle to recast “normal” in terms of “having fun,” through a focus on mundane technologies (e.g. bouncy castles, buttons on machines, pebbles between toes, the local beach) that open beyond the edges of imagination.

Conclusion: In the scheme of human rights, this rather ‘micro’ example raises for discussion how the simple and the mundane can provide vehicles for a parity of participation (Fraser, 2002).