When Eros meets Autos: Marriage to someone with autism spectrum disorder

by Rench, Cathryn, Ph.D., CAPELLA UNIVERSITY, 2014, 264 pages; 3681894

Abstract:

While research attention focuses on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Asperger syndrome (AS) in children, little is known about the condition in adulthood. The majority of adults with AS/ASD remain undiagnosed and many of these individuals marry, bringing unexplained and significant challenges to the couple’s relationship. When a partner or couple seeks therapy, an important source of problematic symptoms remains unrecognized, and therapists who do not discern how AS neurology impacts a family system risk compounding their clients’ presenting issues.

Often it is the partner without AS, or neurotypical (NT), who is considered responsible for the relational distress, usually the female due to the heavily male-skewed AS diagnostic ratio of 8:1. Anecdotal and clinical reports consistently underscore serious adverse effects on the physical and psychosocial well-being of NT spouses, yet the lived experience of this population has been remarkably neglected by researchers.

This study used Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method to investigate what it is like to be married to someone with Asperger syndrome, based on semi-structured individual interviews with 10 current or former NT spouses. Edith Stein's feminist phenomenological theory was applied in order to level power hierarchy, while Finlay's model of "reflexive embodied empathy" served for data collection and "embodied dwelling" for analysis. To illumine the core mental processes involved in adult intimate relationships, attachment and interpersonal neurobiology theory oriented the literature review which served to identify the knowledge gap that this study sought to address.

The results were unexpected, and revealed a pattern of intimate partner abuse so pervasive that it emerged as the lifestyle of the couples. The five forms of domestic violence (emotional, sexual, psychological, economic, physical) characterized the lived experience of the participants.

Based on the results, suggested interventions include: screening for PTSD and complex trauma in distressed NT spouses or former spouses; Korn's integrative psychobiological treatment approach to trauma; Jordan's mutually empathic relational-cultural model to restore intersubjective processes; and, Brown's feminist therapy to reclaim a sense of self and inform subsequent support strategies.

Keywords: romantic love; Asperger syndrome; couples therapy; phenomenology; empathy; intimacy; domestic violence; trauma; attachment theory; interpersonal neurobiology; feminist theory.

Adviser Leslie Korn
School CAPELLA UNIVERSITY
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