

## **Oops...Wrong Planet!: Encountering Asperger Syndrome as Cross-Cultural Experience**

Christine Guth

April 5, 2006

How is relating to someone with Asperger Syndrome<sup>1</sup> (AS) a cross-cultural experience? The playful name, "Oops...Wrong Planet! Syndrome," given to Asperger Syndrome by some persons with AS suggests that they may perceive the challenges of relating to neurotypical people, that is, those who do not have an autism spectrum disorder or other neurological difference, as even greater than those of crossing cultures. For those of us who are neurotypical (NT), developing relationships with individuals with AS requires some of the same skills and perseverance that we need when encountering another culture. The same is apparently true for persons with AS as they interact with the surrounding NT culture. Here I write from the neurotypical perspective, wishing to help others who are NT understand a bit about another culture.

Authors Marcelle DuPraw and Marya Axner, writing about cross-cultural communication, list six ways cultures may differ from one another. These include differences in communication style, attitudes toward conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, attitudes toward disclosure, and approaches to knowing.<sup>2</sup> Of these six, differences in communication style and attitudes toward disclosure stand out most distinctly as differences in relating to the people I know with AS.

If relating between those with Asperger Syndrome and those who are neurotypical is a cross-cultural experience, an added challenge for learning the "culture" of AS is that each individual with AS is a culture of his (or her) own. While some generalizing may be possible, there is so much variability between different individuals with AS that one dare not assume uniformity. My experience of living with two sons who have a diagnosis of AS and a husband who describes himself as having AS has given me a few glimpses of the variety of ways AS can be expressed.

My family provides me with daily opportunity to work at understanding very different ways of perceiving the world. Encountering these differences, for an NT person, can range from exasperating to delightful. In order to enjoy the delight of relationship with a person with AS, we who are NT must work to understand the world as the person with AS perceives it, and to enter the other's world.

The communication patterns of persons with AS may lead to misunderstandings similar to those generated by persons encountering another culture. Our understanding the communication style common with AS can reduce the estrangement caused by what we might label social blunders. Typical of AS is blunt and direct communication, what author and autism consultant Rebecca Moyes calls having "no buffer between what is thought and what is said." Moyes describes an occasion when her preteen son was talking aloud to himself in the supermarket. He

---

<sup>1</sup> Asperger Syndrome is a neurological disorder characterized by marked impairments in social interaction and restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. It is a pervasive developmental disability related to autism. Persons with AS have average or higher intelligence and no delay in language development, although use of language often has pragmatic peculiarities.

<sup>2</sup> Marcelle E. DuPraw and Marya Axner, "Working on Common Cross-cultural Communication Challenges," *A More Perfect Union*, ed. Marcy Reaven., 1997, The Democracy Project; retrieved March 5, 2006 <<http://www.wwcd.org/action/ampu/crosscult.html>>.

was pretending to be a truck backing up, complete with sound effects: Sounds of a motor revving were followed by a high-pitched, “Beep beep beep!” Then, when a large woman approached, without missing a beat he continued, “beep beep beep—wide load ahead—beep beep beep.”<sup>3</sup>

This anecdote reveals a central trait of AS—difficulty understanding and identifying with others' points of view—that can lead to cultural “mistakes.” The boy with AS does not understand that his “wide load” comment could embarrass and hurt another's feelings. The large woman in question might easily in turn interpret the behavior of the boy as deliberate rudeness or not having been taught manners. The boy is likely oblivious that such behavior from a child his age is likely to attract attention and similarly oblivious that such attention could have negative repercussions for himself. He is also likely unaware of the perspective of his mother, who is probably as embarrassed as the other woman. Intensely focusing on the drama in his mind, he may be unaware of other shoppers he is blocking from moving through the aisle with their carts. One can teach rules for handling such situations, which the person with AS can usually memorize and adhere to with ease. The challenge is that generalizing from one situation to the next may be difficult, and it is impossible to articulate rules to cover all the exceptions and nuances of possibility in human behavior.

Persons with AS tend to interpret words literally. This may create challenges for understanding idioms, similar to the difficulty of learning idioms in a new language. We may need to explain ourselves when we say we got up on the wrong side of bed, cut off our nose to spite our face, or kept our nose to the grindstone. Another great challenge that literalness causes for the person with AS is in learning to understand sarcasm and teasing. The subtle nonverbal ways people signal that they really mean quite the opposite of what they are saying may be lost on or, at best, confusing to the person with AS. Teasing is similarly very difficult to understand. It is especially difficult for a person with AS to detect the difference between friendly and malicious teasing. Both sarcasm and teasing make people with AS uncomfortable, at the very least. Given the degree to which NT communication typically relies on these patterns, AS persons live with such discomfort a great deal of the time. The person with AS may not be able to articulate why they are bothered by particular people, no matter how well-intentioned, who make frequent use of sarcasm or teasing. We can make NT culture easier to decipher when we take the trouble to name our sarcasm or teasing as such.

When we get to know someone with AS, we may learn to speak with an uncustomary directness. Neurotypical people typically rely on subtle nonverbal signals to indicate such things as, “You are standing too close,” “You smell bad,” “I’m getting bored,” “It’s time for you to go home,” “I’m uncomfortable with this topic,” or “I have something to say.” It often makes us uncomfortable—we might say it violates our culture—to talk about such things directly, but it makes us even more uncomfortable to continue an encounter when our nonverbal signals are ignored by the person we are talking with. We may respond to our discomfort by withdrawing from the person who elicits our discomfort. Such withdrawal is deadly to a relationship, yet the person with AS may encounter this pattern from the majority of persons in his/her life.

We NTs may imagine deliberate rudeness in many situations that in reality involve a simple lack of awareness of social protocol, or inability to generalize previous learnings to the situation at hand. Jumping to the conclusion that a person is being rude is another response that is deadly to a relationship with the person with AS. To maintain the relationship, we NTs need to

---

<sup>3</sup> Conference presentation, March 6, 2006, Notre Dame University. Moyes’ books include *Incorporating Social Goals in the Classroom* and *Addressing Challenging Behaviors in the Classroom* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers), and *I Need Help with School* (Future Horizons Publishers).

learn the cross-cultural skill of explaining social protocol without being condescending and letting the other person know directly but respectfully how her behaviors impact us. "I messages" are useful here—messages that explain my experience without accusing the other person, for example, "I am not interested in hearing about trains any more." Sometimes our explanation requires creatively making connections with experiences the AS person can understand. We may need to make more than one attempt in order to find a connection that "clicks."

A mother tells a story that illustrates her effort to make connections. Her son with AS has difficulty remembering to apply deodorant. He also has an olfactory abnormality such that many common smells bother him intensely, but he is unable to detect others. When the mother needs to stop at a gas station, the son usually gets out of the car and walks as far away as he can to avoid the offensive smell of gasoline. To help him understand the importance of remembering deodorant, the mother made a comparison with the smell of gasoline. When he remembers that people whose company he enjoys are as irritated by his smell as he is by the smell of gasoline and he remembers that they might wish they could go far away when he forgets his deodorant, he is more willing to work on good hygiene habits. It is hard for him to realize that others might not speak up even though they feel irritation, and that unspoken attitudes could nonetheless negatively impact him.

In addition to the differences in communication style I have mentioned, persons with AS may have different attitudes toward disclosure, another frequent stumbling block in cross-cultural communication. Who among us has become red-faced when we realize we have mentioned a subject or used a word that is taboo in "polite company," that is, in a particular subculture? The person with AS might run afoul of unspoken rules regarding disclosure, but just as possible, NTs may run afoul of the privacy needs of the person with AS. The subjects about which we commonly make small talk may seem harmless enough, but we need to pay attention to how our inquiries are received. Common, casual questions that we typically use to engage another in conversation may feel invasive to the person with AS. Discovering and asking about the topics a person with AS is passionate about, on the other hand, is likely to spark plenty of conversation. It won't be typical small talk, but you are bound to learn something new as you listen.

This introduction can cover only a few of the challenges of relating across the NT/AS cultural divide. Tackling the challenge is well worth the effort required, however. Our effort to listen and observe allows us neurotypical people to make honest, loyal, and delightful friends who provide us with astonishing new perspectives on ourselves and our culture, as if from another planet.