

THE NEW NORMAL The New Normal: Blogging Disability

A Response To The Autism Matrix

Why Jill Escher's Autism Matrix is Pseudoscience

BY HENNY KUPFERSTEIN | May 1, 2017, 7:34 am |

Jill Escher designed an “autism matrix” published on the [Jewish Week's “New Normal: Blogging Disability”](#) which does a terrible disservice to autistic people by perpetuating myths and stereotypes by passing judgements on observable traits. According to Escher, who is the president of the Autism Society of San Francisco, the majority of autistic people are severely impaired intellectually and have functional challenges. She started her matrix baseline at a functional level zone below “normal,” which implies that autistic people are a deviance of her norm. Next, she classified specific autistic people into intelligence zones based purely on verbal expression, which is neglectful of the advancements to the cognitive sciences and the fields of IQ and diagnostic testing. To augment her theory, Escher utilized photographs of well-known autistics, without their consent, to paste into her matrix illustration.

Escher goes to great lengths to pigeonhole autistic people into a newfangled matrix, while ignorantly hiding behind the self-proclaimed “autism philanthropy” of being a “science junkie.” According to actual research, which Escher neglects to cite, at least 80% of autistic people worldwide have an average or above average IQ[1]. Key findings in California reveal that only 20% of the 264,847 consumers served by the State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD) this year are autistic, 86% of whom do not have an intellectual disability[2]. In fact, very few autistic people qualify for Regional Center or any state or medical services because their functional skills are above the threshold for standardized measures rooted in cognitive sciences. The matrix is skewed to show an overall low functioning spectrum overlaid with real people as examples. As a former lawyer, Jill should know better than to gather photos of autistic people without their permission.

Escher lumps PhDs, accomplished artists, authors, and brilliant intellectuals into “zones” per her personal discrimination. She also marginalizes savants because of how they use, or don't use their words, regardless of their reliable stream of income as a result of extraordinary splinter skills. In her matrix, one of her exemplars who types to communicate and studies college level material, is marked as an “outlier” because he is a “typer” rather than a speaker. Escher presumes that he should not warrant the same functional classification as the other verbal speakers on the same tier. By pinning functioning level onto spoken words, Escher pushes against cognitive neuroscientists who test for intelligence through a battery of tests aside from verbal expression.

Lacking the credentials in the cognitive sciences, Escher backdates the DSM-5 criteria for autism spectrum disorder and locks autistic people into the Dark Ages. The experts appointed to redesign the latest edition of the DSM have gone to great lengths to eliminate the mental retardation stereotypes. Now, behavior is recognized as a symptom rather than a function of an intellectual disability diagnosis[3]. With this designation, intellectual ability is not contingent on the symptomatology of the condition. With the DSM-5, the criterion affords flexibility for all individuals to have both their abilities and challenges quantified. An entire field of psychometric measures exists to support the DSM criterion to strictly avoid double scoring of co-morbidities and confirming validity of assessment instruments. Autistic people who have expressive language differences may still have a very high IQ and functional challenges in other areas, or vice versa. Escher lacks the authority to design an instrument for assessment because she fails to acknowledge scientifically-proven designs.

Escher's matrix begins below the "normal zone," to classify autistic people as distinctly abnormal. Normality is not a scientific concept. Popularized during the 1950's and 1960's by journalists, psychologists, and psychiatrists, normalization was a source of worry for a lot of people who wanted to conform and appear well-adjusted. Parents of autistic children eventually split into two reactive subtypes: the devastated moms who were repulsed by their child's deviances, or the warrior mom who sought to expose her child to interventions that would empower the child's chosen strengths. Fierce rejection of a child's difference is often masqueraded as a crusader "autism mom" who philanthroposizes, hypothesizes, runs non-profits, and raises money for a "cure" because she sees her child as suffering from an ill pandemic that must be annihilated. When Escher designed this abnormal matrix, she revealed that she sees autistic people as grossly low functioning and intellectually impaired.

As an autistic researcher, parent of autistic children, and service provider to autistic students, I bring personal and professional expertise to this matter. Every day, I teach piano to non-verbal and autistic students around the world. Due to neurological motor challenges and dyspraxia, many students struggle to stabilize their arms and keep their hands fixed in the playing position. Their fingers flail and twitch involuntarily, making it impossible for them to demonstrate that they are able to read the notes and play independently. Over time, independence emerges, to the delight of the student, the parents, and the occupational and physical therapists. The goal is to take their music books into the school district's IEP meetings and show off what they are capable of, and then mainstream them for the next semester.

Rather than being stuffed into a C5 zone of the matrix, Escher's "nonverbal daughter" deserves to be exposed to an intervention protocol which integrates the way she receives and learns information, and the way her body chooses to demonstrate that she knows it. When this integration is achieved, she wouldn't be an outlier, but rather an empowered autistic like many thousands around the world. Autistic people are generally proud of their accomplishments and choose not to identify as "suffering from" or being "afflicted with" autism. The world would be better if more parents would recognize their children as brilliant and abled, unless proven otherwise. I urge the national Autism Society of America to take accountability for their affiliate office and for pre-existing complaints against Jill Escher ([July, 2017](#)). I also urge Jill Escher to reconsider advocacy by collaborating with actual autistic researchers before spreading misinformation that hurts the people she is claiming to help.

Henny Kupferstein is a doctoral student of psychology with a specialization on autism research. As an autistic scholar, her activism has led to the [Autism Action 2016 proposal](#) resulting in the Autism Action NY legislative package to be introduced to the New York State Assembly: ACCESS-VR ([A.5141](#)) communication support; Autism Spectrum Disorder Advisory Board ([A.8635](#)); Autism Home Loan Program ([A.8696](#)); A Communication & Technology Bill of Rights ([A.8708](#)); Autism I.D. Card ([A.8389](#)). Henny maintains a private practice and teaches non-verbal students to sight-read music for piano in the classical tradition. A frequent presenter, Henny is also a consultant to parents and educators on the subjects of music, perfect pitch, autism, and sensory integration. A co-author of the book [Perfect Pitch in the Key of Autism](#), Henny can be contacted via <http://www.hennyk.com>

[1] Ghaziuddin, Mohammad, and Kimberly Mountain-Kimchi. "Defining the intellectual profile of Asperger syndrome: Comparison with high-functioning autism." *Journal of autism and developmental disorders* 34.3 (2004): 279-284; Wing, L. (1981). Asperger's syndrome: a clinical account. *Psychological medicine*, 11(01), 115-129.

[2] State of California Department of Developmental Services Quarterly Consumer Characteristics Report Index For the end of March 2017. Retrieved from http://www.dds.ca.gov/FactsStats/docs/QR/March2017_Quarterly.pdf

[3] Simpson, M. K. (1998). The roots of normalization: a reappraisal.

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