



Jim Hoerricks

NO PLACE FOR AUTISM?

Exploring the solitary forager
hypothesis of autism in light of place
identity

Disability Studies

Collection Editors

DAMIAN MELLIFONT

&

JENNIFER SMITH-MERRY

**LIVED PLACES
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Abstract

Guided from a lived experience point of view, *No place for autism?* explores how what we consider to be autism can vary from place to place. Is it a disability? If it is a disability, what is the better model for framing the authentic autistic experience: the medical model, the social model, or the ecological-enactive model of disability? If it is simply a difference in the human experience, what about structural supports and accommodations? The answers might surprise you.

Working from the premise that the autistic system is the result of 50,000 years of natural selection, the author posits that the autistic system works as designed and then unpacks the design in a highly detailed fashion, diving deep into questions of autistic identity across time and place. Noting that autism is both a set of traits and an identity, implications of this design-centric approach are given from the standpoint of place. That is to say, are there places and spaces where one might feel more or less disabled? If so, why ... and what can be done to give **place** to autistic people and autistic communities?

Keywords

Asperger's Disorder; Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); autistic; disability studies; neurodivergent; special education; teaching studies

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Introduction

Learning objective

Students will be able to synthesize the lived experience of autistic adults in the context of place, based upon the supplied descriptions and related research.

Activity

At the end of the chapter, students will engage in an activity that explores the evolution of their intersectional identities as their place or context has changed over time.

Key vocabulary, terms, references, and background knowledge-building resources

You will find explanations of key vocabulary and terms at the end of each chapter, together with the chapter's references and knowledge-building resources.

Meet the author

Hello and welcome. My name is Jim Hoerricks, the author of this text. I'll be your facilitator through this experience. I happen to

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be autistic and non-verbal. I don't just mention this in passing. It is an important factor in this text. You see, for many years the greater autistic community has asked that future work focus on those areas that improve autistic people's day-to-day lives. Also, that there needs to be more involvement from autistic people in autism research, as well as the creation and publication of materials that deal with autism. This work is an attempt to do just that – to feature the work of an autistic researcher and educator with a diverse range of lived experiences. These experiences reinforce the central premise of this text, that how one experiences autism can vary depending upon one's intersecting identities as well as one's place on this planet.

Allow me to explain. As I write this, I'm over 50 years old and living in the rural mountains of northern Los Angeles County, California. My experience of being autistic thus spans times when autism wasn't widely recognized in the world to the present, where we are again questioning what it means to be autistic. I was originally diagnosed in 2012 with Sensory Processing Disorder and Sensory Integration Disorder (both related to my confused processing of incoming sensory information), and Asperger's Disorder (related to my processing of the world). With the change from DSM-IV-TR to DSM-5, these individual diagnoses were changed within the medical records system of my health care provider to the single diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Like many autistic people, I have many other health issues – also known as co-morbidities. For example, I am alexithymic and histamine intolerant, which has a profound impact on how I experience the social world. Alexithymia is not only an inability to accurately describe how one feels, but an inability to correctly attribute the

source of those feelings. For a hyper-empathic person, one who is constantly absorbing the feelings and energy from around them, this can be quite problematic. I'll share more on this later in the book.

Academically, I have bachelor's and master's degrees in Organizational Leadership, a master's degree in Education Instructional Design, a master's degree in Special Education, and a PhD in Education. My dissertation focused on the sensory environments on university campuses in the US that are so hostile to the autistic system that more than 60 percent of first-year autistic students voluntarily withdraw in their first semester. From the resulting data, I suggested four easy-to-accomplish tasks that college administrations could do to improve outcomes for this vulnerable population of learners. I was able to accomplish these academic achievements after learning to work in the English language in my late twenties. As a non-verbal autistic person growing up in a culturally diverse part of an English-speaking country, I did not acquire a verbal language as a child.

As a child and a young adult, I used echolalia to communicate vocally. I had a very low success rate with the dozen or so words and phrases I had memorized. I lived in a working-class suburb of migrants who largely came from northern and eastern Europe, Mexico, and Armenia. Thus, my basket of phrases contained a range of languages, which further complicated my language development. German, making more sense to me than English, was the first language that I attempted to learn. It helped that I had German-speaking friends who were largely supportive of my efforts.

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I managed to graduate from high school in the top 25 of my class of almost 500 students despite being functionally illiterate. This fact has been the largest factor informing my decision to become an educator. But first, I had to learn to operate in the world of the verbal.

As my ability to process verbal language developed in my late twenties, I found work as a forensic scientist. Later, after tasking my autistic brain to turn my new vocation into my special interest, I wrote a book on the uses of Photoshop for digital multimedia forensic science as a giant info-dump. It became a best-seller and is still available for sale almost 15 years after its initial publication. As I dove deep into my new special interest, I developed hyper-specialized courses around the topics in that field. These were info-dumps full of complex, hands-on exercises. Requests to host these courses took me all over the world, teaching students from over 40 countries. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic happened and shut down in-person training. With my college and professional experience around creating and facilitating engaging learning events, I transitioned into a similar career, one that the government deemed more essential than adult professional development. I enrolled in a local college's teacher preparation program and am now a credentialed special education teacher and literacy specialist.

Despite this seemingly busy blur of a schedule, I've found the time to be married for 25 years. I am a parent to an array of neurodivergent children. Through it all, our family has found a way to accommodate each other's autism, ADHD, anxiety, and OCD. Being a parent of neurodivergent children, I understand and can empathize with the Autism Parent™ movement. Yet, I

don't identify within that space as the Autism Parent™ is often a neurotypical person seeking help in understanding and supporting their neurodivergent child/children. From their publications and advocacy, they don't seem to realize that their autistic child did not occur by chance, that autism is part of their family's genetic history. This movement features excessive and harmful treatments (Millman, 2020), as well as harmful "cures" (Zadrozny, 2019). That's not where me and my family are in our advocacy or identity work.

That is the 10,000-foot view of a well-lived life spent living and working across three continents. With this in mind, however, there is a saying within the American autistic community, "if you've met one autistic, you've met one autistic." This is to say, every autistic person is unique, with unique strengths and challenges. There is always a problem when someone attempts to frame something as complex as autism within their own unique experiences. This book won't attempt to do that. Instead, it will utilize multiple frameworks to illustrate, and help you investigate, how the experience of autism changes according to time, place, and identity.

Indeed, so much has been written about the autistic experience. The current trends seem to divide the work into two main silos: strengths-based memoirs or deficits-based examinations – seemingly in constant conflict with each other. Academia tends towards deficits-based pathological examination, diving into the differences between autistic people and the neurotypical, and suggesting so-called therapies or interventions to help autistics fit into a largely neurotypical world. The autistic community tends towards featuring our strengths, almost to the point of seeming

to attempt to justify our existence. Some of it is co-opted by the neurotypical community and ends up as inspiration porn.

Often lost in the discussion is the relatively unpopular opinion in academic circles that what we now call autism is not new and that it has been around for quite some time. As an example, I can examine the traits and behaviors of my relatives going back generations and find so many similarities to my own experiences in the here and now. Some, like the University of Southern California's Jared Reser, even posit that these traits can be traced far back in the human genetic record.

If you've never heard of Jared Reser, you're not alone. Though the trend is starting to slowly shift in a more helpful direction, most of the current research on autism begins with the premise that the autistic brain and system are a disordered "normal" system, and then works from there to commercialize some "cure" or "treatment" (Stenson, 2019). Not so with Reser. He takes a dispassionate, non-commercial view of autism and dives deep into humanity's genetic past to examine a rather simple premise – what evolutionary forces were at work in the creation of what we now call autism and how did it survive through natural selection? In his paper on the subject (Reser, 2011), he notes that the cognitive differences currently associated with autism spectrum disorders are clear and well documented; however, modern social and occupational practices may hide their evolutionary or adaptive benefits. From an anthropological or historic perspective, he notes, the society we live in now is very different from the environment of human evolutionary adaptedness. In other words, place has quite a lot to do with our

experience of autism and our ability to pass this genetic material from one generation to the next.

Yes, that's quite a mouthful. But it's a simple premise that Reser pursues, and he does so from several angles. His Solitary Forager Hypothesis builds upon his Animal Theory of Autism. Both combine to inform some of the more fundamental aspects of what we now call autism spectrum disorders. One of the subplots of his work deals with the "why autistics wander away" question, which he explores from several vantage points – hence the solitary forager name.

Along the same line, an examination of the etymology of the word autism finds that it was derived from the Greek word *autos* or self. Thus, it literally means "selfism." It's important to note that this selfism does not imply being selfish. Neither does it imply a departure from reality. We autistics often create a world which buffers us from our often-extreme sensitivities. We think and feel quite deeply (Gernsbacher and Yergeau, 2019). We struggle to fit into the neurotypical world. This selfism often results in isolation, alienation even, from our peers. We long for deep and meaningful interactions in a world where such interactions are quite often superficial. Society sees the communication of autistics as one sided or focused on our own special interests without equal sharing. But this interpretation is often influenced by identity and place. Autistic-to-autistic communication does not need to conform to the norms or desires of the neurotypical world, and thus usually doesn't.

I can relate to the solitary forager theme. I'm autistic and I've been wandering off for as long as I can recall. My most stark childhood memory of wandering off was in primary school. The "official family memory" of the event was that I missed the bus

and went home with a classmate to play with him at his house. This is certainly a “just the facts” type of account. But, in the days before awareness of autism, there was no other way to explain my rather willful behavior. Willful in that it wasn’t an accident; I wasn’t abducted. I simply wandered off or roamed away to explore something or someone of interest. My classmate made an offer that the solitary forager in me couldn’t refuse. It is a strong and lasting memory because of how it ended for me ... a rather public beating for the high crime of worrying my parents by disappearing. I suspect that a swift beating has resulted for autistics of my generation wandering off and worrying their parents. Although beating children is completely out of favor in modern times, it did serve as a conditioning event. My unconscious solitary foraging tendencies needed another way to satisfy their desires (Hoerricks, 2022).

Reser’s theory notes that we autistics are wired for a solitary life. He added the foraging aspects into his theory because, again, this neurotype has been around since before the time when *Homo sapiens* was slugging it out with Neanderthal, at least 50,000 years ago. The solitary wandering or roaming thus fulfills a vital biological function – we wander away from the pack to make our own way. Hunger and thirst refine our intelligent, systematizing mind towards being able to sustain our solitary desires.

But what are we foraging for in modern times? I think that part of the theory becomes unique to each autistic individual and their place in this world. That’s where Glasser’s Choice Theory comes in. According to Choice Theory, at all times, we’re seeking to fulfill one or more of five basic needs in pursuit of our Quality World. That Quality World is our idealized life, the world as we

see it, or a kind of flow state in which we have our basic needs completely met.

My next childhood memory relating to this topic is a visit by my grandmother's brother when I was six. My mother and her family are from Canada, and my great-uncle Sandy was an engineer for Ford Motors in Canada. At the point where we met, he was traveling North America testifying in trials related to crashes of certain Ford vehicles. This was 1976. It was also the day I was introduced to the concept that a professional baseball team could be created out of thin air (yes, I'm still a Toronto Blue Jays fan to this day). What Uncle Sandy placed into my consciousness was the idea that one could be paid, and paid well, to wander. That one's foraging activities could be sponsored by someone who wanted services that I could provide. This was a hint at my later career in forensics, and a roaming of the world teaching this new science.

Growing up in the lower echelons of the trade-unionist working class, my family didn't have much material wealth in comparison to those with whom I went to school. What we did have was hard earned and treasured. I say this in relation to my first bicycle. About the time I got my first bike, I was old enough to be permitted to wander farther away from the house. If I was home by a certain hour, I could roam quite far away on my bike. I explored the depth and breadth of my city. I was in no way honest with my parents about where or how far I'd gone on any particular day. In contrast to modern parents of autistic children, I was encouraged to get out of the house and stay out until the day's end. I took advantage of this freedom and pushed its limits each day.

This is also the time when I staged a series of disciplinary situations to get kicked off the school bus so I could wander my way to school. Certainly, there were bullies on the bus who were brutal in their daily assaults. But I could have easily dispatched them, as I had done to a few classmates previously. I was head and shoulders above my classmates in size. Nevertheless, I didn't want to be on the bus. The sensory assault notwithstanding, getting off the bus meant having to make my way to the school on my own ... about 3 miles away. There was a set of railroad tracks that made the route even more of an adventure. So, finding out what it would take to get kicked off the bus permanently was a win-win goal for me. Soon enough, I was off the bus and walking and biking to school.

In high school, my involvement in sports also supported my wandering. Having to stay in shape for multiple sports, I got on my bike and hit the streets daily. One summer had me at the Converse All Stars basketball league. This time, I was riding my bike about 20 miles to a distant community college to play 3 hours of basketball only to bike the 20 miles home at the end. Needless to say, engaging my solitary wandering in this way led to me being in phenomenal physical shape.

This desire to wander would also appear when I was playing varsity basketball but also wanting to wrestle. In high school in the US, these sports happen in the same season. I couldn't play basketball and wrestle at the same time at the same school. So, I got on my bike once again. I snuck out after basketball practice to wrestle at the local Greco club, which met in the evenings at the local college. Again, the 5-mile bike ride through the hills after a full basketball practice only to engage in a full wrestling

practice and then bike back the 5 miles led to me preserving that physique.

Unfortunately, not being aware of the context of these wanderings has led to some rather unfortunate episodes. I wandered off to college after high school, taking the first offer that came my way. My desire to leave home was greater than any advice given to me that it wasn't a good idea or that it wouldn't end well. It didn't. I wasn't ready to be fully on my own, but there I was. I even had access to a car. Boy did I ever wander. I wandered so far one Friday, and my flow state was so intense, that I missed my football game on Saturday. I completely forgot that I was in school to play football and that they owned the rights to my time. The following Monday, my coaches let me know who was in charge. The resulting behavioral conditioning event, forced fitness drills until I collapsed due to severe exhaustion, ensured that it didn't happen that way again.

Several injuries, and several unfortunate incidents later, football was over for a time, and I was wandering north to continue my education in a more supportive setting. This time I was in northern California. There, in the care of a wonderful woman who is still a dear, albeit distant, friend, I was completely on my own and able to wander in some incredible spaces. I took every advantage. So great was my desire to explore, so poor was my health relative to my autistic system, and the fact that I was functionally illiterate, it took me four years to complete the first two years of college. I didn't do well academically, still struggling as I was with language.

It was there I met the mother of my oldest son. In retrospect, she enjoyed the wandering and was keen to join in. An incredibly

intelligent and resourceful woman, she was the perfect partner for me at the time, and we willingly joined forces ... a rarity for the solitary type (though Reser does account for this). She had wandered so far away to California and was anxious to get back to where her heart remained, Germany. A year or so later, we had wandered across the width of the US and were exploring western Europe. It was within this space that I experienced many meltdowns as well as my first two autistic shutdowns. They scared us both tremendously. Nothing like that, the shutdowns, had ever happened to me. I had no words for what I was experiencing then. Now, I can try to put them into words that neurotypicals may understand.

Meltdowns

In children, meltdowns often present as a total loss of control with screaming, violence, spitting, and smashing things co-occurring. A child may present one or all of these behaviors while melting down. For most adults, meltdowns look different. When you're an autistic adult, particularly one who has masked well into adulthood and received a late diagnosis, you've often learned strategies to cope and not react in a visible way. It's not generally socially acceptable for an adult to throw a tantrum. Perhaps you haven't learned to cope, but you've learned to contain those urges and react in a different way to the overwhelming build-up of whatever causes your meltdowns. What do meltdowns look like for many autistic adults? Overwhelming, devastating emotion. This can manifest by crying to the point where we physically shake and can't breathe properly. Preceding this, we can have irritability, a short fuse, or we can zone out. Then there's

the impatience. The getting muddled when we try to do the simplest of tasks. General forgetfulness and ineptitude moves into a complete lack of executive functioning. We can have a “don’t touch me!” feeling. Next come the “don’t talk to me,” “leave me alone”, and “I am DONE!” feelings. As this is happening, our already poor spatial awareness worsens. Adding to the problems, panic/anxiety attacks are frequently experienced along with meltdowns.

When an autistic person can’t manage their meltdown and return to a calmer state, or if they’re not able to manage these over longer periods of time, shutdowns will occur. It’s worth noting here that medication is not helpful when dealing with meltdowns. The system simply needs a safe and calm space in which to settle down.

Shutdowns

An autistic shutdown is a freeze response as a reaction to something that has happened. It can be caused by overstimulation, a stressful situation, last-minute changes, being emotionally overwhelmed, sadness, and more. It is like a fight/flight response. During a shutdown, we can become less vocal or completely non-speaking. We can look “spaced-out” or detached from what’s happening around us. We may curl up in a fetal position. We may hide under furniture, blankets, and so on. If you are around someone experiencing a shutdown, you can help to remove them from any noisy, crowded situations, avoid asking questions that require a lot of verbal processing, don’t trivialize or blame the person for the situation, and offer something that makes them comfortable (stim toy, weighted blanket, iPad, etc.).