

Fie Lund Lindegaard Christensen

Fie Lund Lindegaard Christensen is a medical anthropologist from Aarhus University. She has a Bachelor in Philosophy and a Master in Anthropology. Her PhD research was conducted at the Department of Culture and Society (Aarhus University), where she was part of the "Center for Cultural Epidemics: Epicenter" that explored the spread of non-communicable diseases. She is currently engaged in work with autistic people at local institutions.

**Time and place for the defence**

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DEFENCE

RECONFIGURING AUTISM AS RELATION: AN ANTHROPOLOGI- CAL STUDY

PhD dissertation by Fie Lund Lindegaard Christensen



AARHUS UNIVERSITET

RECONFIGURING AUTISM AS RELATION: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

This PhD dissertation titled *Reconfiguring Autism as Relation: An Anthropological Study* by Fie Lund Lindegaard Christensen explores the social and cultural dynamics behind the increase in autism diagnoses. The research involved ethnographic fieldwork in institutions in Denmark and California (U.S.A.) with the aim of collecting perspectives and lived experiences of diagnosed individuals and their families. The anthropological observations resulting from this work suggest that autism, on the one hand, is experienced as a 'way of being' whilst, on the other, is a context-dependent diagnosis. This PhD embraces both perspectives, by arguing that autism stems from a connectedness with the world.

Autism as a social construct

By investigating a Danish family affected by autism, the dissertation explores the dynamics of how and when families seek out for and receive autism diagnoses. It is argued that who gets diagnosed depends on dynamic configurations within local communities and that diagnoses vary in relation to gender, age, ADHD, school and diagnostic systems, etc. This family-based case study shows that institutions and social networks play a crucial role in how the diagnostic process unfolds.

Social perception of autism

The way that institutions and society deal with autism also plays a role in its perception beyond the family. By exploring two otherwise non-related 'epidemics', i.e. 'the autism epidemic' and 'the epidemic of police violence' in the United States, it emerges that in critical situations autistic behaviors can be perceived as dangerous. This produces fear amongst

'autistic families', because police have been known to reserve similar treatments to autistic people, as that they have done to Afro-Americans. This shows the importance of the social perception of autism and its context-dependent symptom recognition.

Group dynamics on the autism spectrum

The perception of what constitutes autistic behavior is also the subject of controversy between members of the autistic community and those promoting the official diagnostic criteria. From the perspective of three autistic women, the author argues that the criteria have been broadened to the point that they now feel as though they have been pushed to the extremes of the spectrum and that people who are not autistic are being diagnosed. This makes these women feel alienated from their own diagnosis and brings into question what the common perception of autism is based on.

Autism through the lens of rhythm

Interviews with autistic families and people have highlighted that one of the main challenges linked with autism is in finding a common rhythm in social interactions, the lack of which likely increases diagnoses. These observations also motivate pedagogical strategies aimed at aligning the rhythm of autistic people with those of their surroundings. Using rhythm as a metaphor for sociality, alternative understandings on the shared responsibilities for interactions between autistic people and society can be attained.

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that, although there is an undeniable 'core' to autism, the 'way of being' autistic is a matter of connectedness with the world. Anthropological studies conducted as part of this research point out the tension between what autism is in the eyes of the autistic community and its perception more generally in society. The only way to congruently bring together different perspectives on autism is to understand more fully how its biological core is affected by social relations.

Perspectives

The findings of this anthropological dissertation contribute to:

- Understandings of the role of context for the rise in autism diagnoses in Denmark;
- Insights into how the social perception of autism is affected by changes in diagnostic criteria and culturally-based epidemics;
- Suggestions on how a non-disabling language and a rhythm-based view of autism can provide an alternative perspective for practitioners working with autistic people.