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Monotropism – An Interest Based Account of Autism



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Synonyms

[Attention tunneling](#), [Hyper/hypo responses](#), [Intense interests](#), [Passionate minds](#), [Splinter skills](#)

Definition

The central idea of monotropism (a word coined for Murray in 1992 by Jeanette Buirski) is that in autism, processing resource strongly tends to localize and concentrate to the exclusion of other input; an atypicality from which many other differences can be seen to follow. Understanding this concept fully requires a view of mind as a system of interests which inform cognitive, perceptual, and emotional processes. Hence this definition briefly sketches that model.

Interests are what we care about, what we spontaneously give attention to, and what we value (if only briefly). In our model they are fueled by a scarce resource ($N =$ “interest” or “attention”) of highly and dynamically varying distribution both within and between different individuals (see Murray’s PhD, 1986), Language structures interest systems (guaranteeing mental

overlap) and is an expressive tool for manipulating one’s own or others’ interests. This dynamic, ecological, model of minds (and sets of minds) can help us see how the pattern of autistic intense interests (in all DSMs and ICDs) leads to such a complex and varied range of people and activity; this model predicts infinite neurodiversity, with emergent patterns of resource distribution.

We hold this can make sense of a wide range of autistic phenomena: “all or nothing” thinking; coordination and integration issues at every level; executive function and “mentalizing” challenges; hyper and hypo sensibilities; difficulties set switching; enhanced perceptual processing; in addition, “splinter skills” (Dawson 2018) and early language regression, particularly singled out as puzzling anomalies by Rutter and Pickles (2016). A scarce resource account, “spoon theory” (Miserando 2003), which overlaps with an interest model, has become popular among autistic people (Memmott 2018).

The key implication reintervention of this way of thinking has long been summed up in the old autism as, “Start where the child [person] is.”

Some Significant Features of the Model

For anyone, the more intensively localized is N (at any given time) the more keenly experienced the current interest will be.

Endogenous absorption is likely to yield high-performance within-interest:

The more absorbing the flow, the more disruptive diversion is likely to be and the more potential there is for resource absence (inattention/zero processing) elsewhere

- Cross-flow intrusions across the “switched on” area will tend to be highly turbulent and may abruptly use up and replace available N and/or become expressed in ways that may seem angry or frightening to others.
- Feedback via expression in rehearsal or real action in the outside world may be “trapped” – unable to invoke wider activation, instead feeding back to the same locus, risking overstimulation and a disabling crisis.
- When flow is obstructed and spoilt, recovery time is needed; turbulence needs to settle and levels of N be restored and available for distribution; this will take longer the more powerful the disrupted flow.
- Or a “flow” state may be achieved and in-flow processing will ultimately replenish N throughout the system.

Co-ordinating distinct interests (to forge a new whole) will require extra effort.

Moving out of an endogenous focal interest will require overcoming turbulence and re-aligning: it will take extra effort; undergoing that may be a strongly aversive experience. It is a main use of speech and language to “reach into one’s head” and do things there; therefore, speech can be powerfully aversive unless it “goes with the flow”/“starts where the person is.” Also, because one’s own speech has an impact on others too but one has minimal control over its effects, those who do take up speech may give it up later.

The pattern of action above may predict long term

- Very uneven development of connections
 - Denser than typical, instantly available connections
 - Sparser than typical long-reach connections
 - Continuing developmental increases of especially long-reach connections

- Less blurriness, less “room for manoeuvre,” and less socially oriented structuring of connections than a more typical person
 - A strong drive for certainty derived from personal investigation, as all else appears unreliable.

Qualities of flow, turbulence, activation, inhibition, expression, and connection seem likely to have physical correlates. This model suggests some possible meanings for those. Murray et al. (2005) compared monotropic distribution of N to a torch beam vs. a lantern but we now prefer a water analogy, as water has flow and turbulence, and finds its way through any gap: monotropic people appear especially good at spotting the cracks and gaps. To “seed the dry zones” successfully, irrigate them with interest first.

On the basis of a monotropic, interest-based interpretation of autism, of much research and of our own long-term observations, we recommend: encouraging and sharing delights, only redirecting (going off-flow) when essential (as it often is), building learning through interests and permitting recovery time for all redirection (See also Lawson 2011). Shared interests foster *mutual* understanding and fellow feeling, and help overcome what Milton (2012) characterizes as the “double empathy problem,” in which neither party grasps the other’s intent. Instead people are equally engaged with each other.

An interest system is a biologically grounded *value* system. Executive function and social adjustment challenges make demands on our processing resource and interfere with our doing the things we do most sweetly. Some of those things may involve shared experiences with meanings passionately connected to a common weal and transcending issues of profit or gain. In contrast to the notion of reading other individuals’ minds in order to guess what they are thinking, or where you stand in relation to them and using language effectively to manipulate others’ interest systems, this way of sharing experience is not about presentation of self to self but about a freedom of shared joy and wonder that entirely transcends self. It’s difficult being a human, whoever you are.

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