

Name Game

By "D"

I did a recent survey about autism and the terminology used to describe it. The survey sought to know whether we prefer to be called, for instance, autistic people or persons with autism. I call this the Name Game.

Over the years similar questions have been asked about how to address people with a below-average IQ. The terminology has evolved over time. Once, the medical literature actually identified such people as morons or idiots. When it was found that these names were hurtful, neurotypical doctors struggled to find a nicer description and eventually settled with mental retardation. It wasn't long before that too took on a derogatory meaning and hence the term developmental delay. Do you think developmentally delayed is a nice thing to call someone?

It is sad to see that a century later the strategy of continually changing what we call something is seen as an effective way of combating prejudice. It is in fact the practice of testing IQ and placing individuals on an arbitrary, one-dimensional spectrum that is the root of the problem. As long as we are told that having a low-IQ is bad and having a high-IQ is good, it's never going to matter what you call those at the bottom. It will always and immediately be derogatory.

When I was a child, I struggled in school in the early grades and of course, my teachers jumped to the assumption of low intellect. After being given a two-day assessment by a psychologist their conclusion as it turns out was quite the opposite. Instead of low, my IQ was assessed by them at the time to be off-the-charts. Does it really make sense though to assign a high-IQ score to someone who could barely read and write and was years behind in social development? How did this assessment help me? It certainly didn't make me rich or famous. It decidedly did not make me more sympathetic. It's one thing to be a loser, but a loser with high potential? That's the worst thing you can be!

The fact of the matter is that this was an example of the problem not lying with me but with the system. People are multi-faceted creatures. We are not a standard peg that fits into a standard hole. Everyone is unique. Everyone has things they are good at and things they are bad at. For me, there are things I can learn so much easier than others it's effortless and other areas where no matter how much I try I cannot make progress. This is what's known as a savant syndrome, but it's not really a mystery – it's just a more extreme version of a phenomenon everyone can relate to. Everyone has their own set of aptitudes and deficits that are specific to them.

IQ tests have long been criticized as methodologically flawed. Different tests or different versions of a test can have dramatically different results on the same person. Often the tests are biased, giving advantages to people of a certain gender, language or culture. The test arbitrarily favours certain types of abilities over another. In the end, it all comes down to a number that is supposed to tell you some kind of imaginary potential the person does or does not possess.

The desire to standardize IQ seems to be part of a trend towards increasingly standardized education. At one time you had to pay to go to school, but you also had the ability to decide what you wanted to learn. Now that things have become more equitable school has become free for everyone, but it comes at the price of loss of freedom over what we learn. From kindergarten until, surprisingly the university level we are constantly told what courses we have to take and what benchmarks we have to reach and are always compared to others with standardized one-dimensional scores. This is a system that works okay for most but can be total hell with those on the autism spectrum. Autistic people are in general more choosy and would generally focus only on the things that interest them with the exclusion of all else

if given the choice. Obviously, some diversification is needed to teach us how-to live-in society, but this is often taken to extremes as the inability to conform is always seen as a failure. Imagine if you owned a mutual fund and some stocks in the fund out-performed others. Can you imagine if the investment manager took funds out of the stocks that performed well and put them into the stocks that performed poorly in order to ensure that all of the stocks had the same returns? Would you want this investment manager?

In closing, playing the name game is a solution to nothing. As long as the system continues to force round pegs into square holes we will be hurt. The solution to ending the stigma is to look at each one of our special unique talents and cultivate them, within reason to foster a person that is strong, confident, and not too concerned about his name.

About the Author

“*D*” is one of Autism Canada’s newest Autism Ambassadors and Newsletter Contributors. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome **D** to our team and we look forward to sharing **D**’s perspectives with our community.