



at its most extreme, is a disadvantageous condition that handicaps one in society. Thus, to say one is on its spectrum is to say one is on a spectrum of disadvantage. And because, according to this article, autism's underlying qualities apparently manifest within all humans—and these manifestations come with such delicate shadings as to be easily muddled among all the other delicate shadings of the human condition—everyone can be put on this spectrum of disadvantage.

Take the example of psychopaths, as we commonly call individuals with an extreme lack of empathy. We all have varying degrees of empathy. Would you say that we all lie on a psychopathic spectrum? Would you say that Mother Teresa did? Perhaps you argue, “Well, she’s closer to an extreme degree of empathy. Let’s reverse the spectrum nomenclature for her. Instead of low on the psychopathic spectrum, we’ll say she’s high on the empathy spectrum.” But if so, then where does your exceptionally successful businessperson, the CEO who must lay off 10,000 people in the morning and still sleep at night, lie? Compared with the average individual, would you say that person is “high on the psychopathic spectrum?”

Rather than putting people on this psychopathic spectrum, let’s just say we know what a psychopath is: someone

with so little empathy it is truly extremely disadvantageous. If a spectrum must be used, let’s say that the CEOs have less empathy than the norm or maybe that they are lower on an emotional sensitivity scale. People can be low on that scale and still be good people. They can compensate by using cognitive abilities. Perhaps they can even do more good than someone with slightly greater empathy but much less cognitive skill. It would obviously be a disservice to label these people as being on the psychopathic spectrum.

Back to autism. Rather than putting everyone on a spectrum of disadvantage, let’s invent a word for it without that connotation. Say, “focusivity”—a proclivity for a singular focus. Because not only are we doing a pretty poor job of diagnosing it, we are doing an even worse job of knowing whether or when being on the autism (or focusivity) spectrum is bad or good.

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## SKEPTICAL OF THE SPECTRUM

**What I'm most struck by** after reading “The Invisible Girls,” Maia Szalavitz’s article on autism diagnoses in females, is how laughably we are stumbling through this whole terrain. Words matter. With some borderline cases, the stigma of a diagnosis may be worse than any benefit from classification.

“Autism spectrum disorder” has a negative connotation because “autism,”

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