

Autism: myths and realities: a disability, a neurotype, and challenges for inclusion and equity.

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Around 1% of the global population is autistic. Autism is not a medical condition and has no cure – moreover, it is for life (not just a ‘condition’ of childhood). Autism has been defined in many ways: some consider it a neurotype – it is a different way of understanding and interacting with the world. Some define it as a developmental disability, because of how it affects the way autistic people communicate and interact with others, and perceive the world. The media has played an important role in the social perception of autism: this has come most often in vaccination-related debates that saw a surge in fear towards autism; and also in the form of film and television, whereby autistic people are often depicted as either incapable of communication (often as children), or extremely bright geniuses (yet awkward and alienated). However, autism is a spectrum. With 75 million people being autistic, it is likely that most, if not all professions, have autistic personnel with all levels of skills and abilities. These professions include science. In this presentation I will discuss in a conversation, barriers faced in terms of inclusion and equity. I will also address my experience on effective actions that can promote inclusion and equity. This is with the hope of raising awareness to create a more empathic environment for current autistic scientists; of addressing taboos surrounding autism; of addressing prejudices regarding whether one can be a successful scientist “despite” being autistic; and with the hope of facilitating integration and acceptance of young autistic scientists to scientific life.