

What does it take to be rigid?

Reflections on the notions of rigidity in ASC

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Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC henceforth) are mainly characterized by socio-communicative problems, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests. Different characterizations of ASC include multiple references to rigid or inflexible features, such as fixed interests, insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, black-and-white mentality, intolerance of uncertainty, ritualized patterns of verbal and nonverbal behavior, literalism, and discomfort with change. Reports of rigid behavior and mentality are often endorsed by ASC people themselves to describe their personality, routines, and preferences. Despite its importance, the notion of rigidity has received little systematic discussion. In this paper we shed some light on the notion of rigidity in ASC by exploring different facets of this phenomenon. In Section 1 we start out by describing some prominent notions of rigidity as they have been discussed in the literature on ASC. We then review some recent attempts at unpacking rigidity and argue that they assume a “Cognitive flexibility-first” approach, that is, they construe all rigidity facets as executive function issues in the domain of cognitive flexibility. In Section 2 we also argue that the unspecificity of some notions surrounding rigidity is problematic. After that, in Section 3 we address the issue of whether different facets of rigidity may be characterized independently of each other, thus avoiding the problems tackled in Section 2. We also show that the connections between these facets of rigidity are more intuitively than empirically grounded, and we conclude by suggesting some ways in which ASC research and clinical practice would benefit from a finer-grained view of rigidity.