

# Learning the language of life: autistic experiences in a foreign world.

I WALK a lonely path in a foreign land. The landscape and people are strange and hard to interpret. The natives speak a non-verbal language and there is no guidebook. I've been thrown into a baffling world and must learn fast.

Think of that first day of work experience: a week free of school to taste adulthood. It's an eye-opening experience, grappling with an environment that will be your stage for life. Most grow up and become comfortable as adults – but some don't.

Autistic people don't fully progress into the adult phase. They might excel intellectually yet live with a social age akin to a child or teenager.

What does it feel like to have autism? It is a spectrum and different for everyone. I am confident in intellectual tasks, but latent in sociability.

There was a time when, if asked "How are you?", I'd say "Fine," and not return the question. What need was there? I truly didn't care whether they had a barbecue at the weekend. I had to learn these seemingly meaningless and insincere formalities.

Growing older, I realised that "How are you" is a social communication; a bridge towards rapport. Particularly in business, the person isn't really asking how you're actually doing, but 'saying' "Hello I'm making an effort to be friendly and polite to you."

I've been told at times I am rude. The reasoning? I wasn't saying "How are you?" to the head of the council, or asking "How was your weekend?" to public relations executives. My approach was to politely say who I was and what I wanted.

I believe that's the best way but it's not how people generally communicate. Some appreciate my 'non-wastage of time' - as one interviewee put it. Some understand that their cat falling off a tree isn't something I care about. I want to write the report and leave them – and their cat – alone.

There are thousands of examples of this unspoken social language that I have had to learn.

In the past, someone would sit next to me on the sofa and I'd immediately get up and go for a drink. Suddenly I'm branded as impolite!

I should have acknowledged their presence first.

Realising when to stop talking, or when to start, and other non-verbal cues is difficult. Neurotypical people can interpret voice tone and facial expressions.

Like learning a foreign language, I have had to learn to the most overt of these social nuances.

In the work place I developed an act that gets me through the day. I use the phone, I speak to people, but it's exhausting. It's like working in a French office with only an intermediate understanding of the French language.

After a day pretending to be an adult, I come home exhausted, and sometimes have breakdowns.

I think we all – autistic or neurotypical – feel a bit like a fraud. We are all children pretending to be adults. We're all afraid we'll get 'found out' for being not really as socially proficient as we've made out. It's that neurotypicals do the adult act better.

I thought about leaving journalism because it was unfair to ask others to put up me. But then, maybe society should understand who I am, understand who *we all* are as differing beings on a vast personality spectrum.

In journalism, they – whoever they are – talk big of old-school, tough, and brass-necked life. But that doesn't mean someone can bully another only for being different. I'm ready for them to tear strips out of me for being late, shout at me for screwing up a piece, but not for being victimised for who I am.

It is my autistic eye that sees the statistic worth a story, submits the smart FOI, brings the turn of phrase or the unique angle. But the positives can only be used if the 'negatives' are understood.

We as a people make an effort to accommodate the deaf, wheelchair users, the blind; whomever. But society lags in the acceptance of those with different mental characteristics.

'Fit in or get out' has long been the precept of workplaces, cultures, and societies. Perhaps it's time to drop the paradigms set by 'normal' people, just as we strain to destroy patriarchy and racism.

Ultimately we're all afraid of what we don't know. Accepting different people will, however, make us all a stronger and more varied society.