

Tolerance: A core value or a social construct?

An autistic individual was harassed by groups of “yobs” in his local town on 3 separate occasions while he was out walking. After the third time his mother decided he had to report it as the attacks had a devastating impact on the young man¹.

The family had struggled to build his confidence for years and this sorry affair has shattered that confidence resulting in damage to his mental health and in fact leaving him so self-conscious that even the sight of one of his assailants was enough to send him into meltdown. The Police were incredibly supportive, reassuring him and installing apps on his phone that could help if he meets his assailants again.

My question here is why? Has the social fabric of society disintegrated to such an extent that behaviour like this is just a part of normal life? Fortunately, I think that this is not the case. When his mother turned to social media for support and/or advice she was inundated with messages of support from well-wishers and one gym owner offered him some free training sessions. Although these are positive outcomes, the question still remains; why was this autistic adult targeted in the first place? Is it lack of understanding? the social pressures to fit in with the “norm” or disinformation available on the internet? I would have to say a combination of all three.

After 10 years of an Autism Strategy in Scotland why when I ask people if they know about autism, do I still get the answer yes, I have seen the “Rain Man”? This totally misses the point that autism is a spectrum condition and individuals can display different traits. It worries me that in modern times society can feel that this is okay when dealing with neurological conditions. We would not look at an individual in a wheelchair and automatically assume they are paraplegic, so why look at individuals with autism and assume they are an awkward maths genius?

I believe society is unkind to teenagers demanding that we fit in with some irrational ideal of what is normal. Humanity is a diverse race and it’s these small differences that make us unique, so why does society construct some false idea of “normal”? This coupled with the biological changes happening in adolescence makes it extremely difficult for individuals to break from these “norms”. Perhaps Ross’s assailants were shy themselves and looking for a way to fit in with the “norm” and not become the subject of irrational dislike.

The internet and social media platforms can be wonderful tools; enabling us to keep in touch with family and friends all over the world, spread tales of hope and share our experiences with other like-minded individuals. There is however, a dark side – as social media is not policed, misinformation can be rife; with inaccurate and/or misleading information being shared widely with immense speed. I am getting so tired of hearing comments like “it must be true I saw a post about it on Facebook”. As a society, have we drifted too far away from intellectual sites and sources of information such as academic journals or broadsheet newspapers; that must do due diligence to ensure the information they share is real and correct; toward visceral opinion pieces that only follow the arguments that support their viewpoint?

¹ Thomson, R. (2021, 04 12). *Scots mum left gutted as autistic son suffers sickening abuse while out walking*. Retrieved from Daily Record Online: <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/in-your-area/lanarkshire/worried-mum-reveals-autistic-son-23897050>

Throughout our adolescence, parents, educational institutions etc all instil in us the understanding that tolerance of other people's viewpoints is key to being a well-rounded individual. This is great but when you are a hormonal teenager what do you believe more; what your parents tell you or what your friends say on social media? Social media plays such a huge role in young peoples' lives that it is bound to have an impact on how we view values such as tolerance. In my opinion tolerance can be seen as both a core value and a social construct.

My argument is why can't we be more like the two girls in Ross's group who displayed maturity beyond their years and could empathise with him, realising how distressed he was, going to his aid, and walking home with him. Or the gentleman in England who, when he saw an autistic boy and distressed mother having a meltdown in the street, instead of following societal norms and stalling, mocking, or recriminating with the mother, understood the situation and proceeded to lie down in the middle of the street next to the boy and chat to him until the boy calmed down².

How can social media strengthen values such as tolerance and understanding of the small idiosyncrasies such as autism that make us unique into the societal norm?

² Gill, E. (2021, 04 14). *Mum thanks 'hero' stranger who lay on the pavement to calm her autistic son*. Retrieved from Manchester Evening News online: <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/parenting/mum-thanks-hero-stranger-who-20383117>.