

OTHER MINDS: PERSPECTIVES ON (AND IN) AUTISTIC COMMUNICATION

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This talk uses 'identity-first language' to talk about autistic people. See: Botha, Hanlon & Williams, 2020

Theory of mind and perspective-taking
in cross-neurotype interactions

...and why this matters for clinical practice

My own work on communication

between autistic and non-autistic speakers

THEORY OF MIND AND AUTISM

The ability to
perspective-take of
oneself and others

“mind-reading”
“mentalising”

- One of the ‘**quintessential abilities that makes us human**’ (Baron Cohen, 2001: 174)
- **Chimpanzees** may also have it (Premack and Woodruff, 1978), but autistic people, seemingly, do not.

SOME ISSUES

Typically-developing children and adults **do not** consistently perform at ceiling level in theory of mind tasks

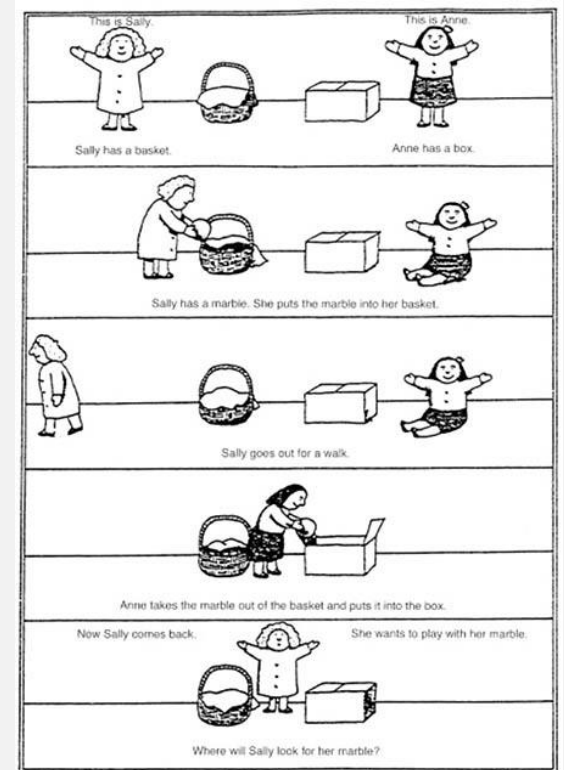
(e.g. see *Samson and Apperly, 2010; Warnell and Redcay, 2019*)

“Passing the false belief task requires abilities other than theory of mind”

(*Bloom and German, 2000*)

“most autistic children...continue to make substantial longitudinal theory of mind progress during the school years.”

(*Peterson and Wellman, 2018*)



The “Sally Anne Task”

THEORY OF MIND AND AUTISM:
A TWO-WAY PROBLEM

Non-autistic people have been found to experience difficulty in inferring the mental states of autistic people...

difficulty in inferring autistic affective and mental states

(Brewer et al., 2016; Edey et al., 2016; Heasman and Gillespie, 2017; Hubbard et al., 2017; Sheppard et al., 2016)

a tendency towards negative thin slice judgements about autistic people

(Morrison et al., 2019a; Sasson et al., 2017)

autistic people can demonstrate highly successful and nuanced socio-communicative abilities when among others of a similar neurotype

(Crompton, Fletcher-Watson and Ropar, 2019a, 2019b; Heasman and Gillespie, 2019; Morrison et al., 2019b)

‘THE DOUBLE EMPATHY PROBLEM’

(Milton 2012; Milton, Heasman and Sheppard, 2018)

“a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors”

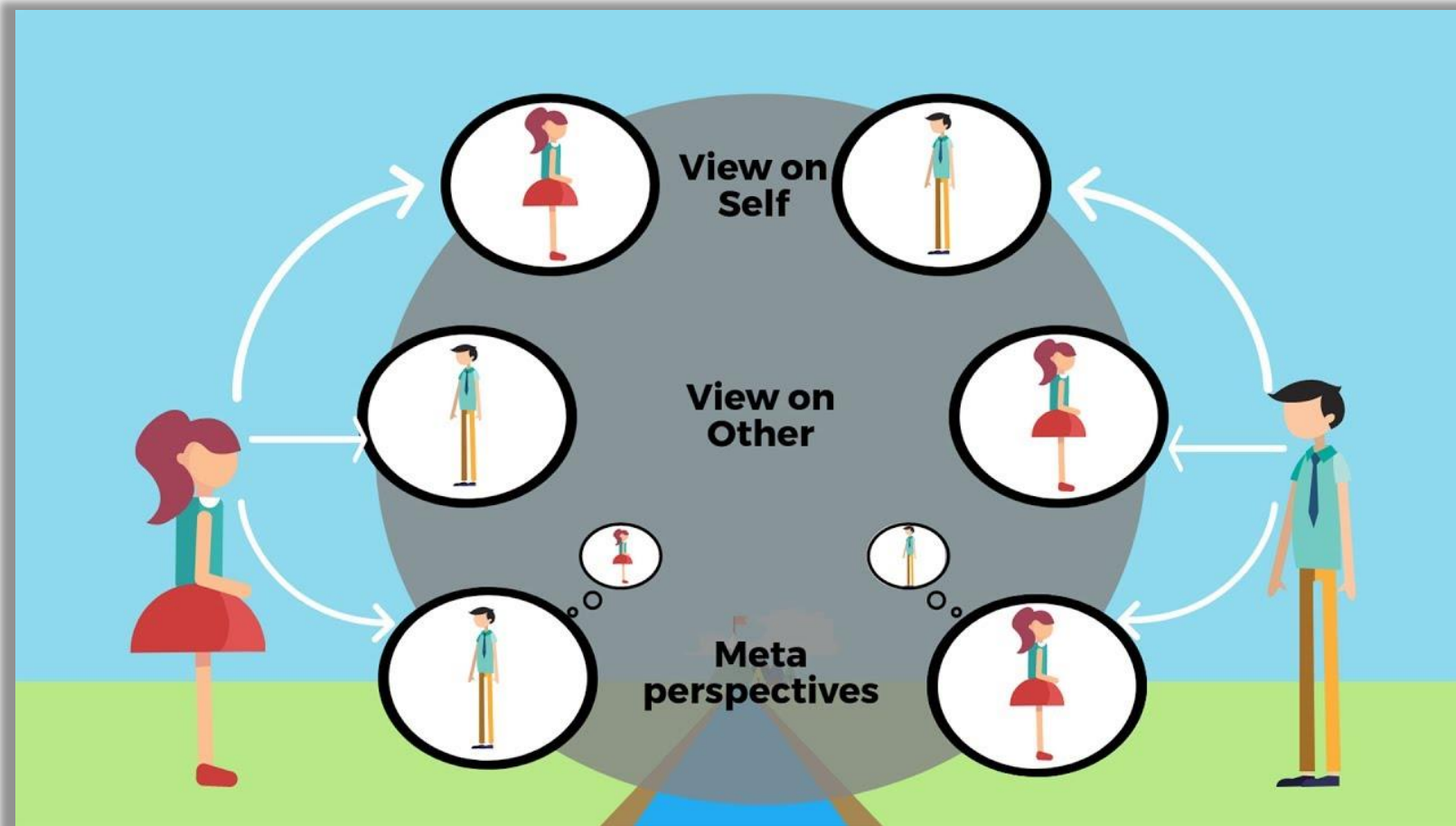
Milton (2012: 884)

perspective-taking as an **interactional achievement**

(Heasman and Gillespie, 2020)

“Perspective-taking is two-sided...”

Heasman and Gillespie, 2017



Autistic people were able to **accurately predict** their family member's low ratings of them, **despite disagreeing** with their view

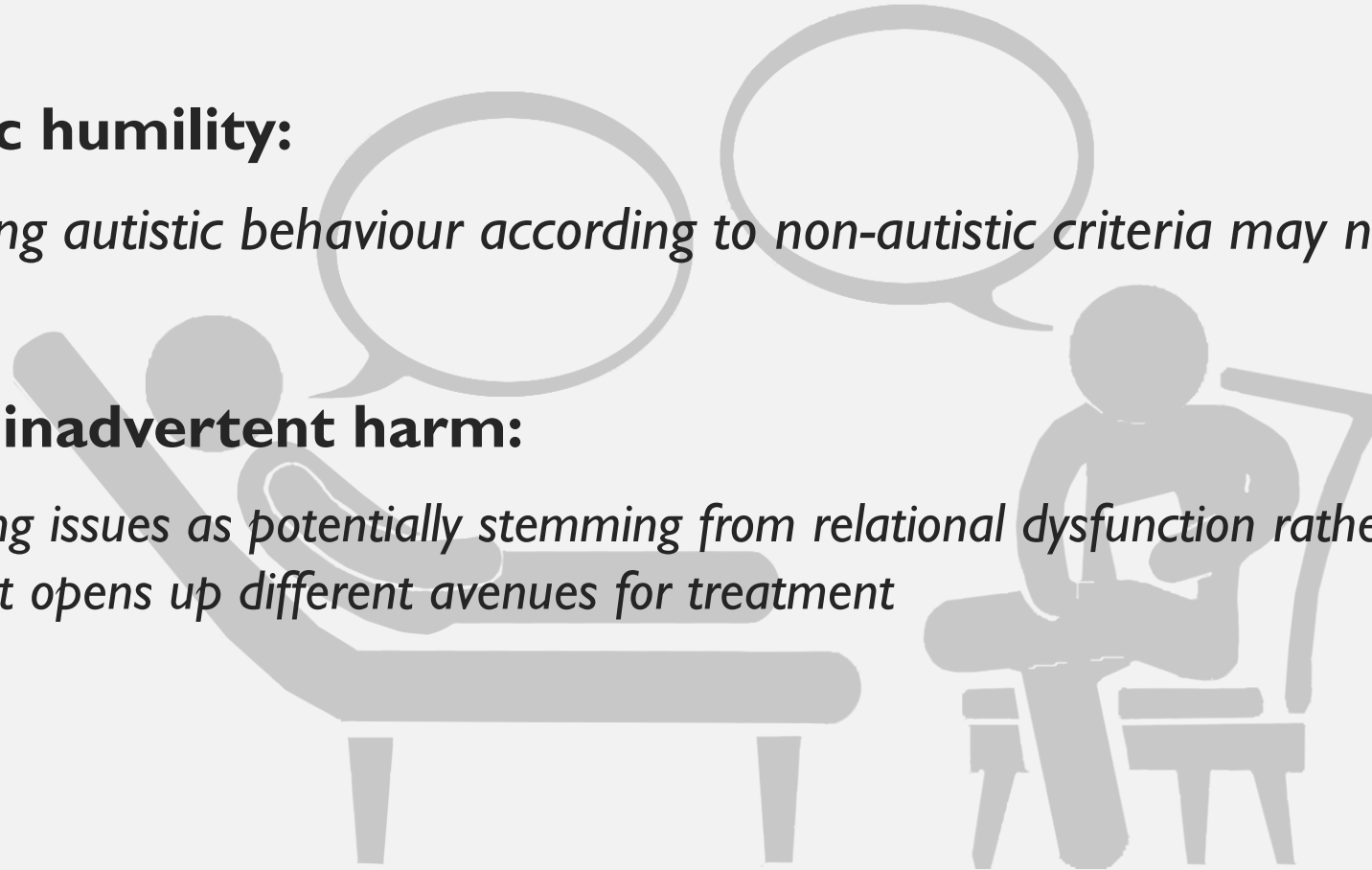
WHY THIS MATTERS FOR PSYCHIATRIC CLINICAL PRACTICE

- **1. Epistemic humility:**

- *interpreting autistic behaviour according to non-autistic criteria may not be helpful*

- **2. Avoiding inadvertent harm:**

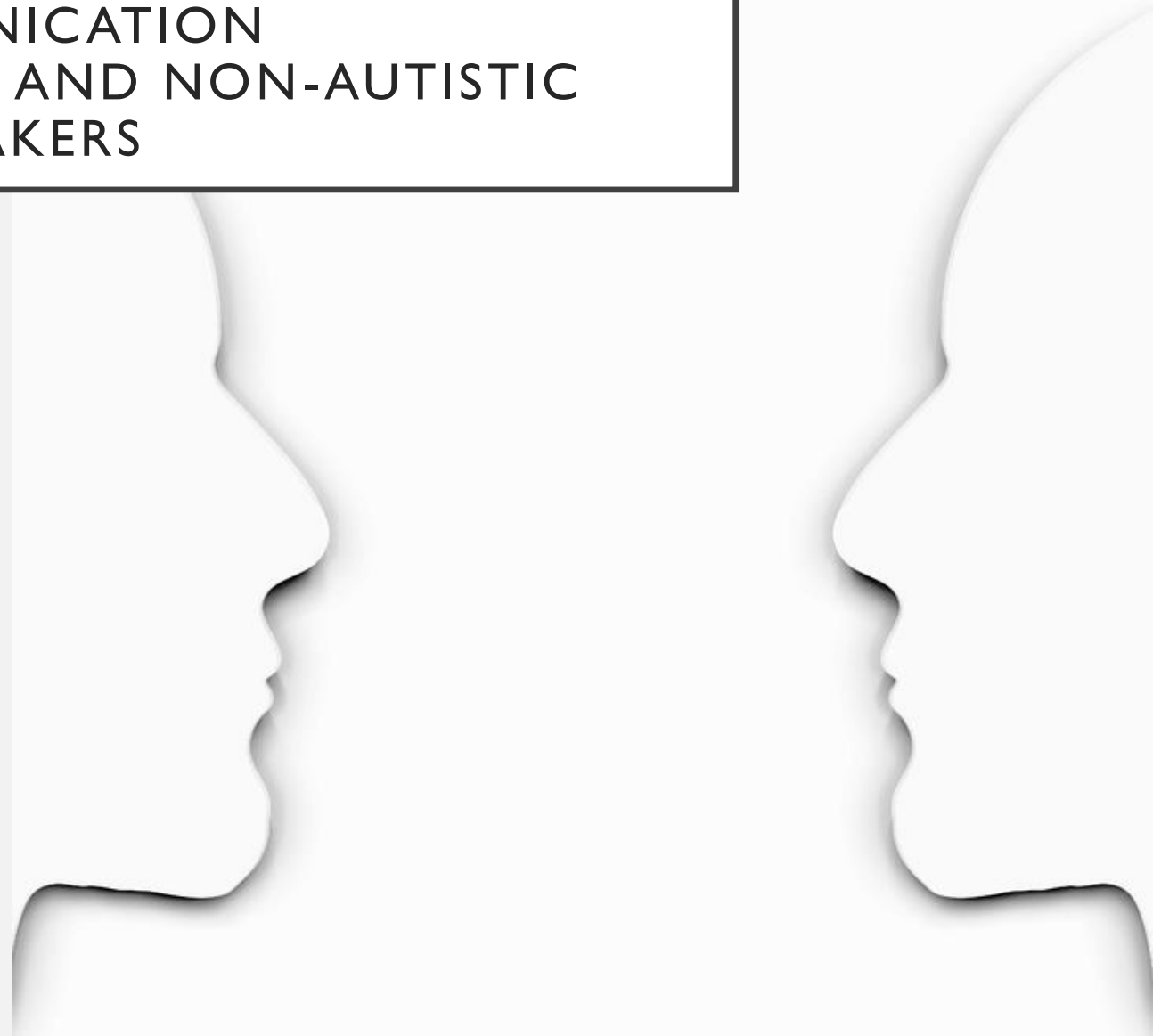
- *Approaching issues as potentially stemming from relational dysfunction rather than individual impairment opens up different avenues for treatment*



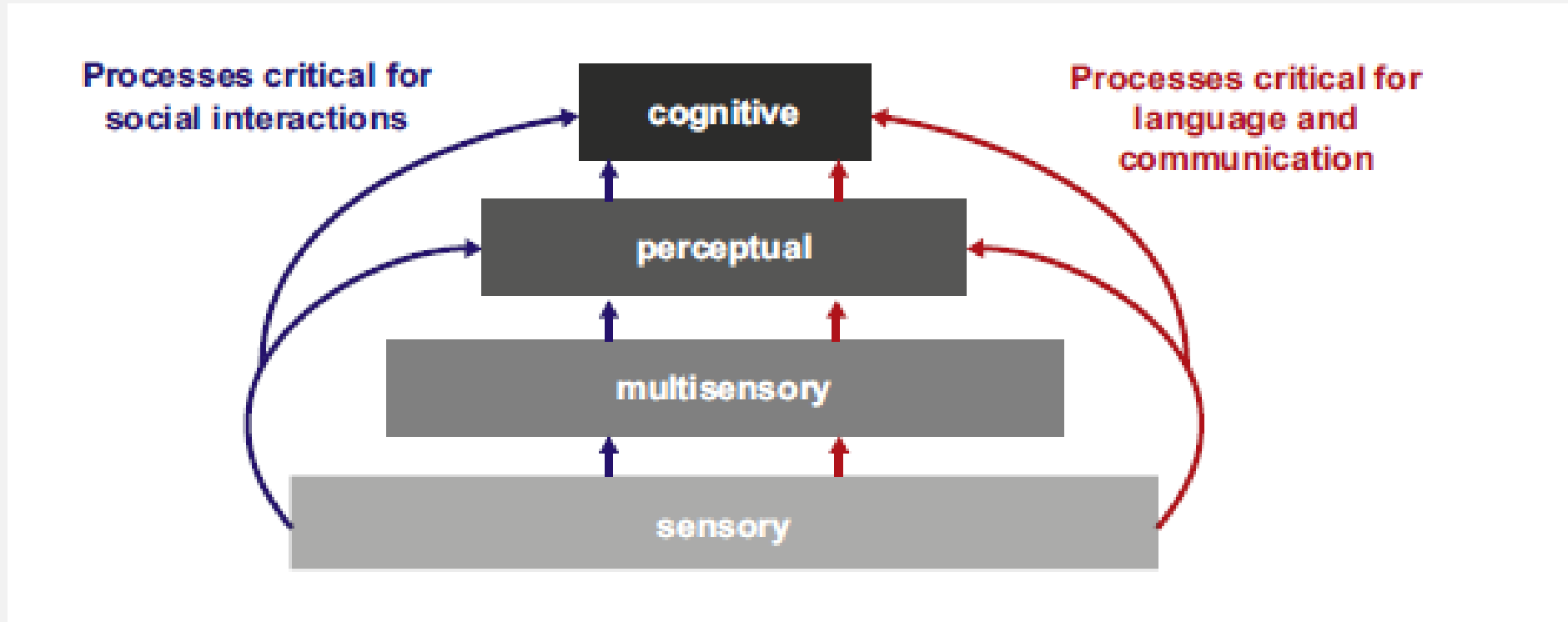
COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AUTISTIC AND NON-AUTISTIC SPEAKERS

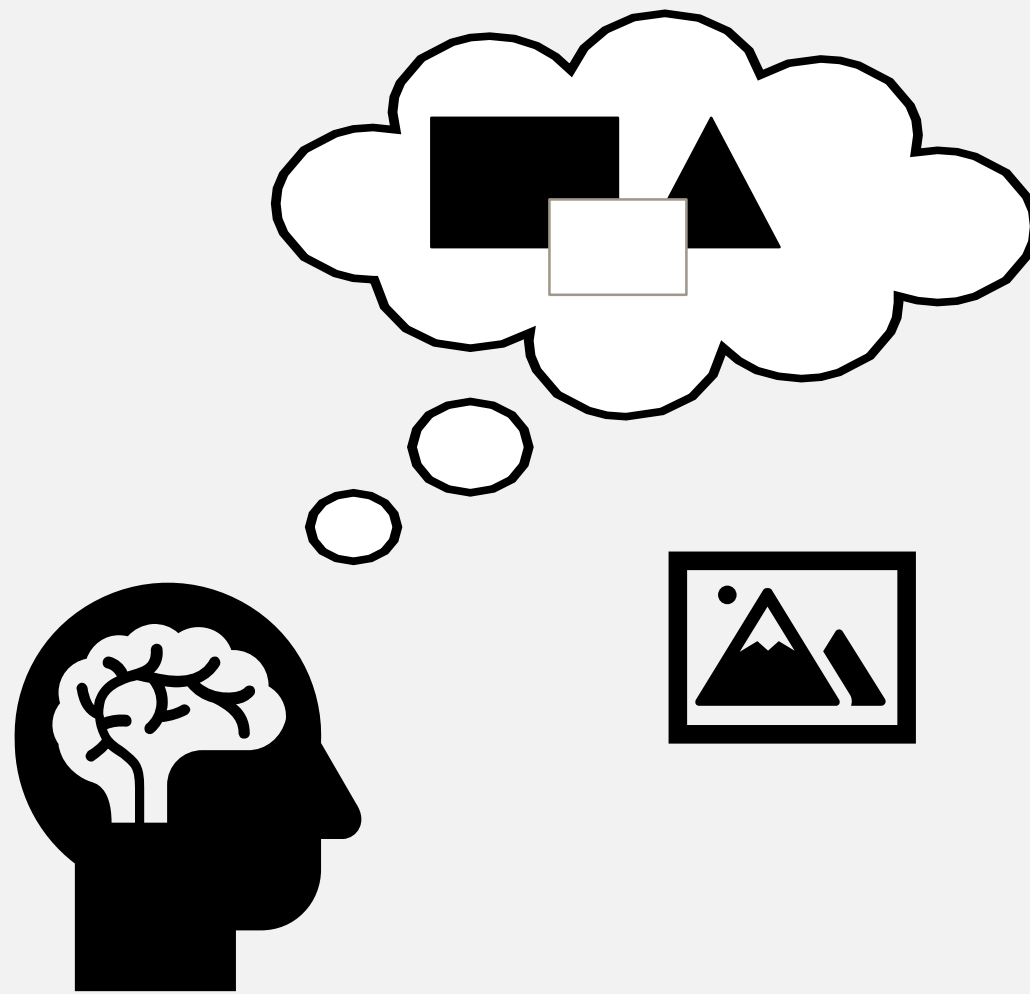
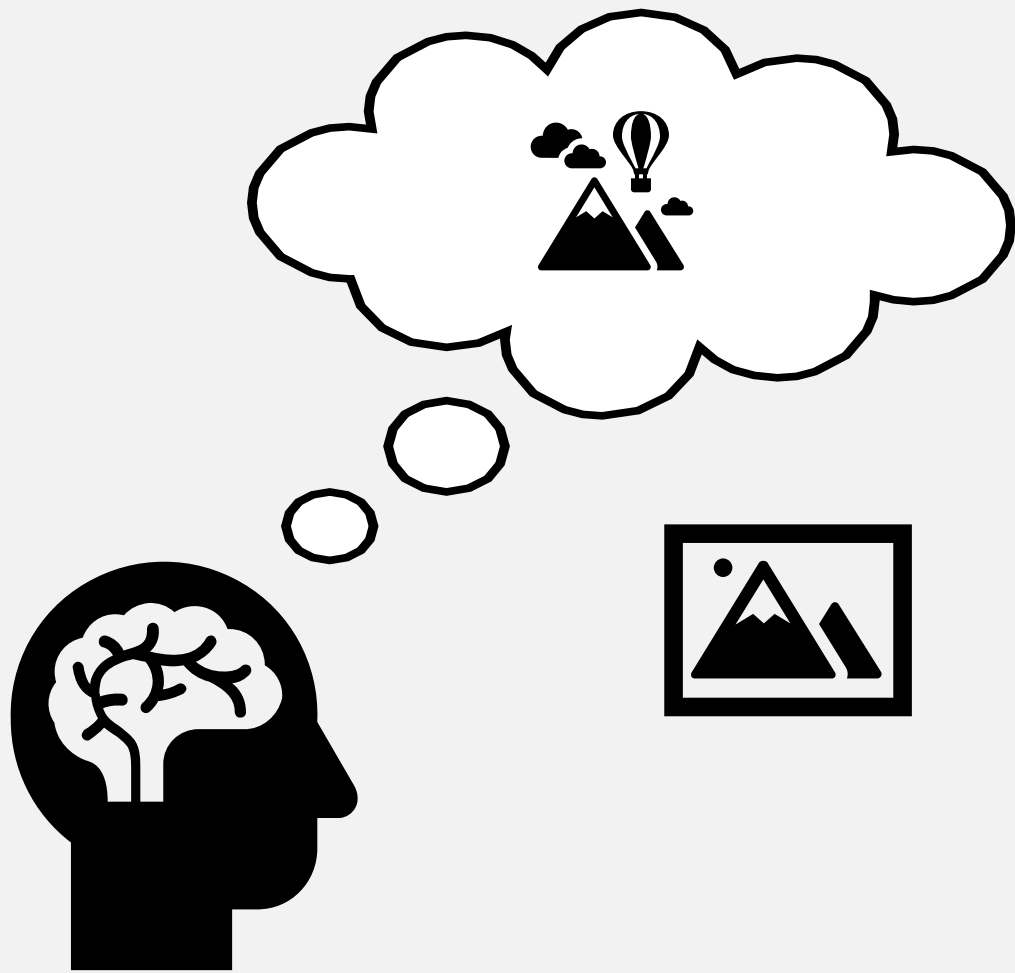
Long-held belief that the 'pragmatic'
(i.e. social / contextually bound)
communication of autistic people is
impaired

(see: Kanner, 1943; Tager-Flusberg, 1999)



- Autism is characterised by **perceptual** (sensorimotor) and **attentional** differences that are present from birth.





MAKING EXTRA 'EFFORTS' CAN HELP BRIDGE THE GAP

“It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn’t the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are ‘foreigners’ in any society. You’re going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You’re going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you’ve probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You’re going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you’re in charge...

(Jim Sinclair, autistic autism-rights activist, 1993: 2)

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Many thanks



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