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### Book review:

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Multiple Autisms: spectrums of advocacy and genomic science**, Jennifer S. Singh, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 296 pp., \$27.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8166-9831-8

Multiple Autisms considers the “biosocial communities” of autism that arose in the United States between 1990 and 2014. It does so through a well balanced ethnography which draws upon the insights and practices of scientists, parent-activists, and those ‘on the spectrum’. What becomes clear is that the ‘multiple autisms’ of the title refers not only to the novel genomic classifications being described within cutting edge laboratories, but also the lifeworlds of the very different actors whose perspectives and experiences are represented in the monograph.

Substantively, Singh’s thesis is the following: Over the final decades of the twentieth century psychoanalytic thinking about autism was supplanted by a focus on genetics and a concomitant belief in, and search for, an autism gene. The twenty-first century has seen a further shift towards genomics and an assertion that autism’s essence can be found in complex gene-gene and gene-environment interactions. This ‘genomic style of thought’ (84), or ‘genomic gaze’ (96), is regarded by Singh as having negative consequences for those occupying the majority of autism’s many lifeworlds; the possibility of viewing autism as something other than a disorder is restricted, ethical dilemmas are created over the possibility of a prenatal test or cure, funds are diverted from the topics which matter most to those living with autistic conditions, and attention is distracted from possible environmental factors.

Readers are left in little doubt that autism is emblematic of contemporary trends in biomedicine, with autism being shaped by emerging technologies and institutions, and with lay groups challenging what it means to be an expert. Importantly, while many of the sites under consideration here have already been described in the literature – most notably in Chloe Silverman’s (2012) *Understanding Autism*, the depth of Singh’s empirical work means that the present piece retains significant value for those interested in the field. Theoretically, Multiple Autisms orients towards existing post-Foucauldian scholarship concerning the gaze and Fleck’s notion of a ‘style of thought’. It is not, however, clear if Singh’s use of this body of work elucidates the data in a particularly compelling way. This criticism does not detract

from the extent or quality of Singh's work, or her many entirely sensible conclusions, but it is to suggest that the primary contribution here is empirical in nature.

Overall, *Multiple Autisms* reveals extensive an empirical engagement with the numerous actors entangled with autism within the United States. The text emerges following over a decade of research and it is the sheer depth of this empirical engagement that ensures Singh's work will be of value to those concerned with the social dimensions of this condition.

## **References**

Silverman, C., 2012. *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Gregory Hollin

School of Sociology and Social Policy

University of Leeds

[g.hollin@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:g.hollin@leeds.ac.uk)