Culture refers to shared patterns of human behavior. Cultural norms affect the ways people think, eat, dress, work, understand natural phenomena such as weather of the passage from day to night, spend leisure time, communicate, and other fundamental aspects of human interactions. Cultures vary widely in these respects, so that people in one group might at times find those from another culture to be incomprehensible or very unusual. Culture in the strict anthropological sense is passed on from one generation to the next; people think, feel, and behave in certain ways because of what others in their culture have taught them.

Autism is of course not truly a culture; it is a developmental disability caused by neurological dysfunction. Autism too, however, affects the ways that individuals eat, dress, work spend leisure time, understand their world, communicate, etc. Thus, in a sense, autism functions as a culture, in that it yields characteristic and predictable patterns of behavior in individuals with this condition. The role of the teacher of a student with autism is like that of a cross-cultural interpreter: someone who understands both cultures and is able to translate the expectations and procedures of the non-autistic environment to the student with autism. So to teach students with autism, we must understand their culture, and the strengths and deficits that are associated with it.

Autism is a developmental disability characterized by difficulties and abnormalities in several areas: communication skills, social relationships, cognitive functioning, sensory processing and behavior. Approximately 10-15% of individuals with autism have average or above average intelligence (including some whose IQs measure in the superior range); 25 - 35% function in the range of borderline to mild mental retardation, while the remainder are moderately to profoundly mentally retarded.

The range of IQs reported in people with autism is one source of the tremendous variability in the population of persons who share this diagnosis; another source of variation is the scattering of skills within each individual. Most individuals with autism show a pattern of relative or even significant strength, usually in certain aspects of memory, visual perception, or unique talents (e.g., drawing, perfect musical pitch.)

Because the organically-based problems that define autism are not reversible, we do not take "being normal" as the goal of our educational and therapeutic efforts. Rather, the long-term goal of the TEACCH program is for the student with autism to fit as well as possible into our society as an adult. We achieve this goal by respecting the differences that the autism creates within each student, and working within his or her culture to teach the skills needed to function within our society. We work to expand the skills and understanding of the students, while we also adapt environments to their special needs and limitations. In effect, what we attempt to do for them is what we ourselves might wish for when we travel in the foreign country: while we might try to learn some of the foreign language and gather information about the customs of the country, such as the monetary system or how to find a taxi, we would also be very glad to see signs in English, and have guides who could help us through the process of buying a train ticket or ordering a meal. In the same way, educational services for students with autism should have two goals: 1) increase their understanding; and 2) make the environment more comprehensible.

To achieve these goals of helping people with autism function more adaptively in our culture, it is necessary to design programmes around the fundamental strengths and deficits of autism which affect daily learning and interactions. This approach to autism is related to, but different from, identifying deficits for diagnostic purposes. The diagnostic features of autism, such as social deficits and communication problems, are useful in distinguishing autism from other disabilities, but are relatively imprecise for the purpose of conceptualizing how an individual with autism understands the world,
acts upon his understanding, and learns. Following are the fundamental features of autism that interact to produce the behaviours which comprise the "culture" of this disorder.

The difficulties to be described below are not unique to autism. Many of the characteristics seen in autism are seen in other developmental disabilities, such as mental retardation, learning disabilities, and language disorders. Some are seen in certain psychiatric conditions, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizoid personality, and anxiety disorders. Many are also seen in normally developing children, or even in ourselves. What distinguishes autism are the number, severity, combination and interactions of problems, which result in significant functional impairments. Autism is the composite of the deficits, not any one characteristic.

2. THINKING.

1. Lack of concept of meaning. The primary problem that characterises the thinking of individuals with autism is the inability to impose meaning on their experiences. They can act on their environment, they can learn skills, some can learn to use language, but they have no independent capacity to understand what many of their activities mean. They don't draw relationships between ideas or events. Their world consists of a series of unrelated experiences and demands, while the underlying themes, concepts, reasons, or principles are typically unclear to them. This severe impairment in generating meaning probably relates to several other cognitive difficulties.

3. Thinking SUB 2: Excessive focus on details, with Limited Ability to Prioritize the Relevance of Details.

Students with autism are often very good at observing minute details, particularly visual details. They frequently notice when objects in their environment have been moved, they may see tiny scraps of trash to be picked up, threads to be pulled, flaking paint to be picked, ceiling tiles to be counted, etc. Some also notice other sensory details, such as the sounds of fans or machinery. Individuals who function at a higher level of intelligence usually focus on more cognitive details, such as call letters of radio stations, area codes of telephone numbers, or capitals of counties. What students with autism are less capable of is assessing the relative importance of all the details they have noted. They might focus on the sight of the string they are dangling while crossing the street, and miss the approach of an oncoming bus, or they might enter a room and comment on the sounds of the fans, which ignoring the fact that lunch is on the table.

4. Thinking SUB 3: Distractibility.

Distractibility. It is frequently difficult for students with autism to pay attention to what their teachers want because they are focusing on sensations which to them are more interesting or important. In addition, their focus often switches rapidly from one of these sensations to another. Often the sources of the distraction for lower-functioning children are visual: A teacher might put a pencil on the desk, and the child is so distracted by the pencil that he does not attend to his work. Or the student sees something out the door and is so distracted that he stops working in order to watch more closely. Auditory stimuli can also be very distracting. A student may hear a noise that the teacher doesn't even hear, from five rooms away, and become unable to concentrate. Some students with autism are also apparently distracted by internal stimulation, such as a desire for the stick, string, cup, or other object that they remember from past experiences. Or they might be distracted by internal cognitive processes such as rhyming, counting, computing, or reciting facts they have memorised. Whatever the source of the distraction, people with autism have great difficulty interpreting and putting in priority the importance of external stimulation or thoughts that bombard them. Some look, move, and explore constantly, as if all sensations are equally new and exciting, which for them they are. Others deal with this bombardment by appearing to shut out much of the stimulation around them, becoming preoccupied with a very limited array of objects.

5. Thinking SUB 4. Concrete Thinking.
Concrete Thinking. Individuals with Autism, Regardless of their cognitive level, have relatively greater difficulty with symbolic or abstract language concepts than with straightforward facts and descriptions. In the culture of autism, words mean one thing; they do not have additional connotations or subtle associations. An example of this was in a 15 year-old man with an average IQ, who was asked the meaning of "the early bird catches the worm." He replied, "if a bird wakes up early in the morning, he can catch a worm if he sees it and if he catches it, he eats it right up, and then he goes on and he looks for another worm." Similarly, when asked the meaning of "don't cry over spilled milk," he answered, "if you spill milk you shouldn't cry over it but you should pick up a rag, you should mop it up and then clean the rag and then go have some more milk."

6. Thinking SUB 5: Difficulty With Combining or Integrating Ideas.

Difficulty with Combining Or Integrating Ideas. It is easier for people with autism to understand individual facts or concepts than to put concepts together, or to integrate them with related information, particularly when the concepts appear to be somewhat contradictory. For example, a young man went on regular camping trips to a place called Camp Dogwood. Most of the camping trips were in the fall and early spring, never when the dogwoods were flowering. Each time this young man came to Camp Dogwood he expressed his wish to see them flowering. Finally he got his wish when his group went to Camp Dogwood in April. Knowing how long he had waited, the woman who managed the camp placed a dogwood blossom on his plate, so he could find it when he came down for breakfast on his first morning. The young man picked up the dogwood flower and marched straight to the kitchen looking for the manager, apparently to thank her. Instead, he gave her a long lecture about the importance of protecting nature (he was a member of an environmental club) and the inappropriateness of Picking flowers. When it was explained to him that she was a nice woman who had picked the flower as a gesture of affection, he insisted that if she were nice she would want to know that hurting the environment is wrong, so scolding her was doing her a favor. He could not understand how two inconsistent concepts (nice people save the environment and a nice person picked flowers) could both be accurate.


Difficulty With Organization And Sequencing. Related to the general difficulty integrating multiple information are the problems with organization and sequencing. Organization requires the integration of several elements to achieve a predetermined end. For example, if one is planning a trip one needs to anticipate what will be needed in order to pack all of these items in a suitcase before leaving. Another example would be the need to collect all of the necessary materials before successfully completing a task. Organizational skills are difficult for people with autism because they require the ability to focus on both the immediate task and the desired outcome at the same time. This kind of dual focus is what people attending concretely to specific, individual details don't do very well.

Sequencing also is difficult for people with autism because it requires similar skills. It is not unusual for people with autism to perform a series of acts in illogical, counter-productive order, and seem not to notice. For example, a person might get up in the morning, comb his hair, then take a shower and wash his hair. A person making lunch might take two slices of bread and then put meat on top, instead of bread and meat then bread as we typically do in our culture. Sometimes they put their shoes on before their socks. In these ways they show us that while they have mastered the individual steps in a complex process, they do not understand the relationships among the steps, or the meaning of the steps with regard to the final outcome.

8. Thinking SUB 7: Difficulty With Generalizing.

Difficulty With Generalising. People with autism often learn skills or behaviours in one situation but have great difficulty generalising these to a different situation. For example, they might learn to brush their teeth with a green toothbrush, then balk at brushing their teeth with a blue toothbrush. They might learn to wash plates but not realise that the same basic procedure is used to wash glasses. They might learn the literal wording of a rule but not understand its underlying purpose, and so have trouble
applying it in different situations. For example, a high-functioning young man used to go into the building where he works, very early in the morning, to change his clothes. He was told that even though the building had not officially opened there were still people there busily getting ready for the workday. These people did not want him changing his clothes in full view of them. He apparently understood this, but what he began to do was change his clothes out in the parking lot, in full view of everybody passing by. He honestly did not understand the concept behind the request, because he had difficulty knowing from other perspectives when he could be seen changing his clothes and when he could not.

In addition to multiple cognitive deficits, autism has certain characteristic bio-behavioral patterns:


In addition to multiple cognitive deficits, autism has certain characteristic bio-behavioral patterns:

Strong impulses.
Persons with autism are often extraordinarily persistent in seeking out the things they desire, whether these are favourite objects, experiences, or sensations such as touching something, performing a complex ritual, or repeating an established behavioural pattern. These behaviours, which resemble the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, can be very difficult for teachers and parents to divert or control. In fact, there is such a driven quality to them that they appear not to be under the conscious control of the autistic individual. Directing, controlling and channelling these behaviours is a major challenge.

2. Excessive anxiety.
Many people with autism are prone to high levels of anxiety; they are frequently upset or on the verge of becoming upset. Some of this anxiety is probably attributable to biological factors. In addition, anxiety can result from frequent confrontations with an environment that is unpredictable and overwhelming. Because of their cognitive deficits, people with autism often have difficulty understanding what is expected of them and what is happening around them; anxiety and agitation are understandable reactions to this constant uncertainty.

3. Sensory/perceptual abnormalities.
The field of autism has known for many years that the sensory processing systems of people with autism are unusual. We see people with very unusual food preferences, people who spend their time watching their fingers flick, or rubbing textures against their cheeks, or listening to unusual sounds very close to their ears so that they can also feel the vibrations. We know people with autism who don’t respond to sounds the ways others do, causing others to think they are deaf when they have perfect hearing acuity. Some people with autism seem to confuse the feelings of being pinched with being tickled, or appear not to feel pain at all. Others choose to rock back and forth for hours in repetitive patterns. In many different ways, people with autism show us that their differences begin at the level of processing some or all the sensations that impinge on their body every waking minute.