

Future Affective Technology for Autism and Emotion Communication

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| Journal: | <i>Philosophical Transactions B</i> |
| Manuscript ID: | RSTB-2009-0143 |
| Article Type: | Research |
| Date Submitted by the Author: | 02-Jul-2009 |
| Complete List of Authors: | Picard, Rosalind; MIT, Media Lab |
| Issue Code: Click here to find the code for your issue.: | COMPUTATION |
| Subject: | Health and Disease and Epidemiology < BIOLOGY |
| Keywords: | Affective Computing, Autism, Electrodermal Activity, Technology, Sensory Processing, Idiographic Methodology |
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Submitted to the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*

Future Affective Technology for Autism and Emotion Communication

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Keywords: Affective computing, autism, autonomic nervous system, ambulatory monitoring, wearable sensors, sympathetic nervous system, electrodermal activity, arousal, stress and anxiety

Abstract:

People on the autism spectrum often experience states of emotional or cognitive overload that pose challenges to their interests in learning and communicating. Measurements taken from home and school environments show that extreme overload experienced internally, measured as autonomic nervous system (ANS) activation, may not be visible externally: a person can have a resting heart-rate twice the level of non-autistic peers, while outwardly appearing calm and relaxed. The chasm between what is happening on the inside and what is seen on the outside, coupled with challenges speaking and being pushed to perform, is a recipe for a meltdown that may seem to come “out of the blue,” but in fact may have been steadily building. Because ANS activation both influences and is influenced by efforts to process sensory information, interact socially, initiate motor activity, produce meaningful speech, and more, deciphering the dynamics of ANS states is important for understanding and helping people on the autism spectrum. This paper highlights advances in technology that can comfortably sense and communicate ANS arousal in daily life, allowing new kinds of investigations to inform the science of autism while also providing personalized feedback to help individuals who participate in the research.

Introduction

The motivation for this research begins with a scenario that has replayed many times as part of a longer, sometimes heart-breaking, story of why a family felt compelled to remove their son or daughter away from environments focused on learning and social opportunities, and into a place where the child’s behavior could be better controlled:

David is a mostly non-verbal autistic¹ [1, 2] teenager interacting with his teacher during a lesson. He appears calm and attentive. When it is time for him to

¹ Many people diagnosed on the autism spectrum wish to avoid “person with autism” language in favor of being called “autistic” (Sinclair, 1999), while others prefer “classified autistic” (Biklen, 2005). American Psychological Association style proscribes that authors “respect people’s preferences; call people what

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respond, the teacher encourages him to try harder as he is not doing what she is asking. She knows he is capable from past experiences, and he appears to be feeling fine; he just needs a nudge. All of a sudden – it appears to come out of nowhere – David has a meltdown, engaging in injurious behavior to himself and perhaps to others. Afraid for him and others around him, the teacher calls for help to restrain him. What was intended to be a positive, productive learning episode turns into a harmful major setback, with discouragement and possibly despair ensuing.

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Many versions of this story exist with a variety of causal explanations. Consider this one possibility: David was experiencing extreme pain with an undiagnosed tooth abscess. While most of us who experience excruciating pain reveal it in our faces, speak about it, and do nothing else until we first address the pain, David could not communicate through his speech or facial expressions, and the more pain he felt, the more his motor system did not respond in the usual way. While sometimes his face capably did express emotion, at this time it did not, nor could he initiate the movement to cooperate with the task the teacher requested of him.

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The Autism Spectrum refers to a broad set of diagnoses given to individuals who show certain combinations of atypical communication, social interaction, and restricted repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities [3]. While not part of the official diagnostic criteria at this time, autism frequently includes mild to major affective swings that may arise from sensory and other challenges, and mild to major motor disturbances that can affect gait, posture, and ability to type, write, speak and produce facial expressions [4, 5]. Complicating matters, movement disturbances can come and go, giving the appearance of a willful lack of cooperation when a person does not move as desired or expected, even if they are trying to cooperate [6]. Sensory and movement problems are a source of increased stress for the afflicted person, and the increased stress may precipitate other problematic behaviors, including facial expressions and other movements that contrast with what the person intends [7]. David's unsuccessful efforts to communicate or get his body to move appropriately may have increased his internal frustration and anger to the point where they erupted as self-injury. Several autistic people who self-injure have explained that these behaviors do not come out of the blue, but may arise from mounting frustration, stress, and failed attempts to be understood.

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Observations that include measurements of physiology in autism have shown that a person can appear differently on the outside than what is measured on the inside. For example, an autistic person can appear perfectly calm to those who know him or her, while having an unusually high resting heart-rate, 120 beats per minute or more, instead of the usual 60-80 b.p.m. [8]. Similarly, an autistic person's electrodermal activity (EDA), a measure of sympathetic arousal, can swing very high [9], as if engaged in a physical work-out, but without any visible signs of sweating, heavy breathing, or outward stress.

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they prefer to be called" (APA, 1994, p. 48). A Google search conducted on March 14, 2007, revealed that 99% of the first 100 Google hits for the term "autistics" pointed to organizations run by autistic persons, whereas all of the first 100 Google hits for the terms "person/s with autism" or "child/ren with autism" led to organizations run by nonautistic individuals (Gernsbacher, Stevenson et al. 2008).

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3 How is a teacher, parent, or care-giver supposed to know what is truly going on when all they
4 can observe is what is shown on the outside and that is misleading? The best-intentioned helpers
5 who deeply care for and try to understand their autistic companions may, nonetheless,
6 inadvertently cause quite a bit of trouble and even danger when the outward signals indicate the
7 opposite of the inward experience.
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10 The emotion communication problem in autism can be viewed as an amplification of a problem
11 that exists across *Homo sapiens*. Anyone who has lived with a person in marriage or in a long-
12 term relationship knows that misunderstandings occur, no matter how well you know, love, and
13 care for a person. Furthermore, there are important rational reasons why there is ambiguity in
14 how humans display emotion: One man might choose to hide his feelings of arousal for a
15 woman because he doesn't want to threaten her marriage, or his, with the possibility of broken
16 vows and divorce. There may also be important survival reasons: The woman is married to a tall
17 irascible man who happens to be a professional fighter. For whatever reasons, rational,
18 biological, or other, emotion communication mechanisms do not accurately and reliably display
19 outwardly what is felt inwardly.
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23 Technology has increasing potential to bridge the chasm between what is felt inwardly and
24 displayed outwardly. However, because there are also good reasons to keep feelings private, it is
25 important to consider how such technology can be designed so that it respects human needs for
26 control over the display of feelings. This paper presents new technology being developed to give
27 people expanded tools to bridge the chasm between internal feeling and external display, while
28 maintaining important control over what is communicated and to whom. Here is a vision of one
29 such technology, providing an alternative outcome to the scenario above:
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33 David is looking forward to his lesson with a teacher whom he likes and trusts. He
34 chooses to communicate his autonomic data to her, and pulls on a wrist band with
35 a logo of his favorite superhero. His teacher chooses to wear one too, and he
36 touches his to hers in a way that indicates "share." He appears calm and attentive
37 during instruction. When it is time for him to respond, the teacher notices that his
38 physiology is soaring unusually high and steadily escalating despite his outwardly
39 calm appearance. He is not responding to the lesson in a way she believes him
40 capable. Instead of pushing him to respond, she stays out of his face, and brings
41 him tools that the two of them have previously chosen for him to use to self-
42 regulate and calm himself. He looks toward the sound-modifying headphones,
43 which she helps him put on. Suddenly, she becomes aware of a sound in the
44 distance that she hadn't noticed before, which might be bothering him. After
45 some time, she sees his physiological state returning to a calm and attentive state,
46 where what is signaled from the inside matches what she sees on the outside. She
47 gently recommences the lesson and he participates eagerly, surpassing his
48 previous achievement level.
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53 The MIT Media Lab is working to realize new technologies that people with communication
54 challenges can use to improve their abilities to communicate emotion; however, the problem is
55 not an easy one to solve.
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The challenge of emotion communication

To communicate a phenomenon like emotion, you need to first know what it is, which suggests starting with a definition. Unfortunately, emotion theorists do not agree on a definition of emotion, despite that nearly a hundred definitions were suggested decades ago [10] and new ones continue to appear. Most theorists agree that the two dominant *dimensions* of emotion can be described as valence (pleasant vs. unpleasant or positive vs. negative) and arousal (activated vs. deactivated or excited vs. calm). These two dimensions have been in use since at least Schlosberg [11]. Several third dimensions have also been proposed, but there is less agreement about those. While the valence and arousal dimensions do not fully capture the space of emotion, they can be considered a second-order approximation to the emotion space. Consequently, measures of arousal and valence are useful for describing emotion, even though they do not perfectly represent it.

A popular way to measure and communicate emotion, in part because it is easily done with pencil and paper, is to ask people to rate their feelings along valence-arousal dimensions, e.g., using the self-assessment mannequin of Lang et al. [12]. However, self-reported ratings are untrustworthy in populations of typical people, and coupled with the high rate of alexithymia in autism [13], self-report can be expected to be inaccurate for many autistic individuals. When a PDA-based system for manually logging self-reported feelings [14] was used to compare autistic teen's self-reports to teacher's reports of their feelings, there were huge discrepancies, and no way to know what was most accurate [15]. Furthermore, many autistic people have difficulty producing speech and getting it to mean what they want it to mean; they may find that their typed speech comes out more accurately reflecting their thoughts than their spoken speech. People who rely upon voice-output devices to help them communicate their feelings do need and use verbal expressions of feelings such as "I'm frustrated" or "I'm in pain." Such expressions, even if a person can only push a button, may provide life-saving communication, and are critical to provide. However, at the moment of mounting pain and overload, it may also be the case that a person cannot physically move in a way to operate their communication device, much less navigate to the correctly worded choice.

What is the best physical measure for capturing the two dimensions of arousal and valence: Face? Voice? Gestures? Physiology? Context? Other? Over the years researchers have found that the face is a good indicator of valence: especially with corrugator and zygomatic activity separating states such as pleasure/displeasure, liking/disliking, joy/sadness. EDA is a good indicator of arousal, going up with sympathetic nervous system activation – the "fight or flight" response. However, measuring emotion is not as simple as measuring a few bodily parameters. When people infer an emotion such as "exuberant," they combine multiple channels of information: smiles, shrieks, upward bodily bouncing or arm gestures, and perhaps even tears of joy, in a complex way. No algorithms exist yet describing how to precisely combine the many contributing channels into a full space of emotions. A different complex combination may need to be characterized for each emotion. Furthermore, it is not sufficient to map the combinations of signals emanating from the person whose emotion is being assessed; it is also necessary to observe the context, to see, for example, that the person is simply trying to act exuberant because of their drama teacher.

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3 A scientific illustration of the importance of context and how it exploits the similarity of
4 different expressions appears in a study by Aviezer et al. [16]. In this study, Ekman-Friesen's
5 basic faces of emotion are paired with different contexts and found to be interpreted in strongly
6 different ways based on the pairing. For example, a disgust face is paired in one case with a man
7 holding up his fist, and in another case with the same man holding up soiled underwear. When
8 asked to "label the facial expression," 87% of participants labeled the disgust face in the first
9 image as expressing anger, while 91% of participants labeled the disgust face in the second
10 image as expressing disgust. The surprise in this result is that the face was identical in both
11 images, containing the prototypical facial action units for disgust, chosen from the Ekman and
12 Friesen illustrations for basic emotions [17]. Also, participants were clearly asked to label the
13 facial expression. Thus, a system to "label facial expressions" will likely require mappings that
14 include more than facial information, at least if you want it to behave like people do.
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19 The behavior of a group of people labeling an identical "basic" facial expression differently,
20 depending on context, points to greater complexity required in developing a system for
21 automatically understanding facial expressions. Whether to help people with nonverbal learning
22 challenges, or to build software that a computer or robot could utilize, there is a need to develop
23 systematic mappings between what is viewed and what emotion is interpreted – and not just what
24 is obtained from the face. Interpreting facial movements alone is an extraordinarily complex
25 problem, with an estimated 10,000 different combinations of facial expressions able to be
26 produced, and new expressions able to appear in tens of milliseconds. Autistic poet Tito
27 Mukhopadhyay captured the visual complexity of this space beautifully when he wrote, "*Faces*
28 *are like waves, different every moment. Could you remember a particular wave you saw in the*
29 *ocean?*" [18]. While the space of facial expressions is oceanic, the space formed by crossing all
30 possible expressions with all possible contexts, and the demand to compute their meaning in real
31 time, is computationally intractable. Autistic people who attempt to perform such a feat in a
32 precise and rigorous systematic way are setting themselves up for likely overload and failure.
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37 Mysteriously, people often succeed at reading facial expressions, or at least most people think
38 they do this task fine, and they do so in real time, even if far from perfectly. While we do not
39 know how people actually compute the labels that are commonly agreed upon (and many labels
40 are not agreed upon), our challenge at the MIT Media Lab Autism Communication Technology
41 Initiative is to build tools that imitate what typical people do, providing labels that most people
42 would agree on, where there is such agreement. Our challenge is also to construct these tools in
43 a way that can be easily appropriated by people who have trouble interpreting emotion, if they
44 wish to use them. The tools will not be perfect, but neither is human emotional communication.
45 Our approach is also not to force the typical social way of operating on people who don't easily
46 operate this way, or who may choose to not operate this way; people should not be required to
47 communicate emotion if they do not want to. Instead we are interested in providing people with
48 expanded means for communicating, in ways they can freely choose to use or ignore.
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52 *Expanding emotion communication possibilities in autism: ANS*
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54 The ANS has two main subdivisions: Sympathetic and parasympathetic, which work together to
55 regulate physiological arousal. While the parasympathetic nervous system promotes restoration
56 and conservation of bodily energy, "rest and digest," the sympathetic nervous system stimulates
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3 increased metabolic output to deal with external challenges, so-called “fight and flight.”
4 Increased sympathetic activity (sympathetic arousal) elevates heart rate, blood pressure and
5 sweating, and redirects blood from the intestinal reservoir toward skeletal muscles, lungs, heart
6 and brain in preparation for motor action. Since sweat is a weak electrolyte and good conductor,
7 the filling of sweat ducts results in increasing the conductance of an applied current. Changes in
8 skin conductance at the surface, known as EDA, thus provide a sensitive and convenient measure
9 of assessing sympathetic arousal changes associated with emotion, cognition and attention [19,
10 20]. Thus, EDA provides a measure of the arousal dimension of emotion, although it can change
11 for non-emotional reasons as well, such as when a mental task increases cognitive load, or when
12 ambient heat and humidity are suddenly increased.
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16 Connections between the ANS and emotion have been debated for years. Historically, William
17 James was the major proponent of emotion as an experience of bodily changes, such as your
18 heart pounding or your hands perspiring [21]. This view was challenged by Cannon [22] and
19 later by Schachter and Singer who argued that the experience of physiological changes was not
20 sufficient to discriminate emotions, but required also cognitive appraisal of the current situation
21 [23]. Since Schachter and Singer, there has been a debate about whether emotions are
22 accompanied by specific physiological changes other than simply arousal level. Ekman et al.
23 [24] and Winton et al. [25] provided some of the first findings showing significant differences in
24 autonomic nervous system signals according to a small number of emotional categories or
25 dimensions, but they did not develop systematic means of recognizing or communicating
26 emotion from these signals.
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31 Could emotion be recognized by a computer with which you chose to share your physiological
32 signals? Fridlund and Izard [26] appear to have been the first to apply automated pattern
33 recognition (linear discriminants) to classification of emotion from physiological features,
34 attaining rates of 38%-51% accuracy (via cross-validation) on subject-dependent classification of
35 four different facial expressions (happy, sad, anger, fear) given four facial electromyogram
36 signals. Later, using pattern analysis techniques and combining four modalities – skin
37 conductance, heart-rate, and respiration with facial electromyogram – eight emotions (including
38 neutral) were automatically discriminated in an individual, over six weeks of measures, with
39 81% accuracy [27]. The latter also showed that nonlinear combinations of physiological features
40 could discriminate emotions of different valence as well as emotions of different arousal. More
41 recently, Liu et al. applied pattern analysis to dozens of physiological indices to discriminate
42 liking, anxiety, and engagement in autistic children while they interacted with a robot [28, 29].
43 While all these studies restricted measurement to laboratories and small sets of emotions, they
44 demonstrated that there is significant emotion-related information that can be recognized through
45 physiological activity.
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49 The Media Lab’s initiative to advance autism communication technologies currently has four
50 active research areas: (1) Understanding and communicating ANS activity and behaviors that
51 co-occur with its changes; (2) Providing tools for learning to read facial-head expressions [30-
52 32]; (3) Enabling low-cost robust communication aids for people who do not speak or whose
53 speech does not carry the intended meaning [33]; and (4) Developing games to help improve
54 vocal expression and prosody production. These four areas are connected because processes of
55 communication both influence and are influenced by the dynamics of the autonomic nervous
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3 system. For example, the social challenges faced by many autistic individuals, such as
4 discomfort looking at faces and making eye contact, are associated with increased ANS
5 activation and hyper-arousal of associated brain regions [34, 35]. This was expressively
6 communicated by autistic blogger, video artist, and speaker, Amanda Baggs, who uses an
7 augmentative communication device to talk [36]:
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10 It's been a long time since someone's *really* been insistent with the eye contact
11 while I'm squirming and trying to get away. I noticed today exactly how much I
12 react to that.
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14 So I'm sitting there in a doctor's office, and he's leaning towards me and sticking
15 his face up to mine.
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18 And I'm sitting there trying to think in a way that, were it in words, would go
19 something like this:
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22 Okay... he's got to.... **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** he's got to be
23 unaware... **EYEBALLS!!!!** ...he's... uh... eyeballs... uh... **EYEBALLS!!!!!!!!!!!!**
24 people like him think this is **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS EYEBALLS**
25 **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** ...some people think... **EYEBALLS!!** ...some
26 people think this is friendly... **EYEBALLS!!!! EYEBALLS!!!! EYEBALLS!!!!**
27 he really doesn't mean anything **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** he
28 doesn't mean anything **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** he eyeballs doesn't eyeballs
29 mean eyeballs anything eyeballs bad **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** he doesn't
30 understand why I'm turning **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** why I'm
31 not coming up **EYEBALLS** why I'm not coming up with words **EYEBALLS**
32 **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** oh crap hand going banging head **EYEBALLS**
33 **EYEBALLS** oh crap not right thing to do **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS**
34 **EYEBALLS EYEBALLS EYEBALLS** stop hand now
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41 Until I finally reached some point of shutdown. And where every **EYEBALLS** is
42 not just the picture of eyeballs but of something very threatening about to eat me
43 or something. I unfortunately in all that couldn't figure out how to tell him that it
44 was his eyeballs that were unnerving me, and I'm not sure I did a very good job of
45 convincing him that I'm not that freaked out all the time. It wasn't just eyeballs
46 either, it was leaning at me with eyeballs. I tried briefly to remember that people
47 like him consider eyeballs to be friendliness, but it got drowned out in the swamp
48 of eyeballs, and all thinking got drowned out in the end in a sea of fight/flight.
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52 Note to anyone who interacts with me: Eyeballs do *not* help, unless by "help" you
53 mean "extinguish everything but eyeballs and fear".
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55 Many social behaviors can activate the sympathetic flight/fight response in autistic people: yes
56 eyeballs, and also difficulties that increase cognitive load, such as having to integrate speech
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3 with perception of nonverbal cues (e.g., speech prosody and facial expressions) in real-time
4 interactions [37]. Furthermore, the motor function required to speak or to accurately operate an
5 augmentative communication device can be impaired when autonomic functioning enters a state
6 of overload or shutdown [7]. Inability to get one's body to move as desired is a recipe for further
7 increasing stress, fueling a cycle that makes it harder to communicate and get needed help.
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10 Harkening back to the opening scenario in this paper, accurate communication of David's ANS
11 activation may or may not have prevented the meltdown and the injury that ensued, but it could
12 have at least alerted a trusted person to take a second look at what might be causing the ANS
13 activation, making it more likely that they could help debug what was causing David trouble.
14 Timely communication might have led to addressing the problematic state, enabling subsequent
15 continuation of productive learning, and increased understanding of David's sensitivities and
16 differences in functioning. Moreover, David might be given tools to help him learn how to better
17 understand and regulate his own ANS activation without having to share his internal changes
18 with others, allowing him more control and autonomy, which is also very important in autism.
19 In any case, we aim to design technology that people can use, on their terms and under their
20 control, to better understand and, if they wish, communicate their internal emotional states.
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24 *Personalized measurement for learning and communication:*

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27 Earlier research at MIT showed that ANS data related to emotion varied significantly from day
28 to day in the same person, even when the person intended to express the same emotion, the same
29 way, at the same time of day [27]. The findings indicated that simply averaging the patterns
30 across the person's different days reduced the accuracy with which they could be characterized.
31 What was needed was recognition of how each pattern related to an ever-changing "baseline" of
32 underlying physiological activity, but how can such a baseline be obtained?
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35 When measurement is taken over a short period of time in a lab, it causes several problems in
36 characterizing a person's responses. Typically a researcher constructs a baseline by asking the
37 participant to relax quietly, holding still for 15 minutes. The researcher waits for signals to
38 settle, and then averages the signals at their lowest and most stable level. However, this process
39 is an artifact of having a small amount of time to characterize a person, usually because the
40 measurement apparatus is not suited for home wear. What can be found when measuring a
41 person 24/7 is that these "low stable" periods occur naturally during portions of sleep and other
42 times of day, and an hour in a strange lab may be entirely non-representative of this.
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46 Here is a common, modern-day scenario that illustrates not only the baseline problem but also a
47 larger problem: A person goes to an unfamiliar clinic or laboratory and is asked to take a test in
48 front of a stranger while wearing possibly uncomfortable electrodes, perhaps with sticky
49 fasteners and wires taped to their skin. Their personal information streams to a computer where
50 the data are read by researchers, normalized against their 15-minute "baseline," averaged over a
51 dozen or more people, compared in aggregate to a control group, and then published in a
52 research article. The participant (and/or family) may later read the article and learn, for example,
53 that "the autism group has higher average levels" or something that supposedly holds for that
54 study. However, these findings may not actually apply to any one individual who was in the
55 group, whose data may appear in significant clusters not numerically in the center, who may be a
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3 statistical outlier, or whose “momentary baseline” may have resulted in a characterization not at
4 all representative of daily life.
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7 Scientists know that they are trading off conclusions about the individual for conclusions about
8 the group²; however, this represents only one concern with today’s approach. A bigger problem
9 is that the very nature of going into an unfamiliar clinic or lab for assessment means that only a
10 tiny sample of the participant’s behavioral repertoire is used to characterize him or her. This
11 methodology can be likened to someone listening to a dozen bars randomly played from the
12 middle of Beethoven’s Ninth, averaging them, and offering the result as a description of the
13 symphony. The results should not be trusted as a scientifically accurate characterization, even if
14 the practice is standard in science.
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17 The need for monitoring people accurately over extensive periods of time has stimulated interest
18 in comfortable wearable technologies – unobtrusive devices that can be worn during normal
19 daily activity to gather physiological data over periods of several weeks or months [38, 39].
20 Researchers at MIT have led several of these efforts, envisioning and developing devices that
21 can be worn comfortably during everyday activities [40, 41], including a new wireless EDA and
22 motion sensor packaged comfortably on the wrist (Figure 1), freeing up the hand for everyday
23 use [42].
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27 A wireless EDA sensor was one of eight technologies we took on a first visit to meet autistic
28 adult, Amanda Baggs, who was generously willing to try out and give us critical feedback on our
29 prototypes. After our visit, she blogged about the EDA sensor [44]:
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32 ...they had one that was just electrodes that attached to a thing that transmits to a
33 computer, which then shows it on a graph. Because there were so many people in
34 the room, my arousal level was really high, it turned out (I wouldn’t be surprised,
35 being around lots of strangers stresses me out). But if I sat and rocked and didn’t
36 look at the people, it slowly went down. The moment one of them turned her head
37 to look at me, though, it suddenly jumped up again. And this was *before* the point
38 of eye contact, even, and certainly before I could *feel* more than a small difference
39 in my stress levels. ...
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42 At the end of this post she described how she wished she’d had the device during a CNN
43 interview with a medical doctor, as well as other interesting possibilities:
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46 I wish I’d had that on during the interview with Sanjay Gupta so I could show him
47 that I was even reacting in a measurable physiological way to his attempts at
48 making eye contact (he asked me, in a part that didn’t get aired, why I didn’t just
49 look at him, and he was, I think in an attempt at friendliness, leaning into me the
50 whole time in a way that was making me very stressy indeed, too stressed out to
51 fully explain to him the effect he was having on me). I also wish I had one of
52 those devices to play with for longer. It sounds as if they could be really useful in
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55 2 Study of the individual is referred to as *idiographic*, while study of group data is referred to as *nomothetic*. Nomothetic comes
56 from the Greek *nomos*, meaning “custom” or “law”, while Idiographic comes from the Greek *idios*, meaning “proper to one.”
57 Several arguments have been put forth for bringing back idiographic methods (Molenaar, 2004); new technologies and analysis
58 techniques, such as described here, make this approach increasingly favorable.
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3 learning what stresses me out before it reaches the point that I notice it. I also
4 wonder if showing readings like that to the sort of professionals who are heavily
5 invested in forcing eye contact and other invasively direct forms of interaction on
6 autistic children would make them think twice about it.
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10 While the experiences above belong to one person, might it not be fruitful for many to give them
11 the option of showing others the physiological effects that they or other things in the
12 environment are producing, especially when those effects cause harmful overload? Such
13 information might suggest that we change our understanding of how to best interact with them in
14 ways that are helpful. As such information is truly personalized for each individual, it might
15 inform better practices for fostering individualized learning and development. Instead of
16 believing that an approach that was published in a scientific journal as “best for a group of
17 autistics” must be best for every autistic person, this method would allow closer look at
18 individualized patterns, and how a technique interacts with those. Scientists can still look for
19 common patterns across individuals, clusters of similarity and phenotypes, and ways of
20 responding to these clusters that foster helpful outcomes in general; in short, the “group analysis”
21 can still be done. Thus, an individualized measurement approach, scaled to include anybody
22 who wants to participate, can contribute to deepening understanding of the science of autism.
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26 The science of individualized measurements – the idiographic approach – is not a new idea, and
27 Molenaar and others have elsewhere argued for the benefits of this methodology [45]. The idea
28 is to measure and characterize patterns over time (not just minutes, but also days and weeks) for
29 an individual, then repeat this methodology for many individuals. The immense scientific value
30 of this approach has long been known, yet it has been impractical. Today’s technology advances
31 make the idiographic science newly practical. Most of all, with the individualized data intensive
32 approach based on measurement in a person’s natural environment, it is not just the science that
33 benefits: Each participant can now benefit with information specific to their needs and situation.
34 Participants need not wait and see if a publication a year or more later shows a finding, and
35 wonder if their data was an outlier or a core part of that finding. Instead, if you participate in a
36 study, you see your own data, and you can see if your patterns connect to those that the scientists
37 find across the group of individuals.
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40 41 *Design Principles and Challenges: Comfort, Clarity, and Control*

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44 The challenge is to design a device that can accurately and comfortably measure data outside the
45 lab as well as it does inside the lab. As shown in Figure 1, Researchers at MIT have developed
46 an EDA device that is able to be worn comfortably around the clock, privately logging or
47 wirelessly transmitting data [42]. The wrist sensor is also easy to put on or take off, requiring
48 little dexterity to slip over the hand. Comfort is substantially improved over previous sensors
49 that required application of electrodes to fingers, securing of wires, and attaching of a recording
50 instrument to the body.
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54 Researchers at MIT have tested quality of the new device’s signal by comparing it both to a
55 commercial FDA approved device used on the inner wrist as well as to traditional EDA sensing
56 on the fingertips [43]. These tests considered stimuli from three kinds of stressors: emotional,
57 physical, and cognitive. Measurements of EDA by the wrist-worn sensor showed very strong
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3 correlation (median correlation coefficient, $0.93 \leq \tilde{r} \leq 0.99$) with a widely-used commercial
4 system (Thought Technology Flexcomp Infinity). A range of resistors from 0.1 to 4.0 M Ω were
5 applied to the device and the mean error in conductance was measured as small ($0.68 \pm 0.64\%$).
6 Correlation between EDA on the distal forearm and ipsilateral palmar sites was strong ($0.57 \leq \tilde{r}$
7 ≤ 0.78) during all three stressor tasks, showing that the wrist is a feasible EDA recording site.
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11 Attaining clarity with EDA measurement is a two-sided coin. On one side, scientists would like
12 a precise measure of the individual emotion or state being experienced; on the other side, many
13 people feel uneasy with that possibility, and would not like detailed emotional state information
14 to be obtained through analyzing EDA. EDA represents generalized arousal – from emotional,
15 cognitive, or physical stimulation. If humidity, physical motion, or other variables introduce
16 changes in the moisture barrier between the skin and electrodes, these artifacts may masquerade
17 as sympathetic responses; however, the wrist sensor also detects motion and usually these
18 artifacts can be identified by their patterns (e.g. sudden drop in level is usually slippage of
19 electrodes and not reduction in sympathetic activation). Once identified, such artifacts can be
20 discounted and/or removed. Also, humidity and temperature can be measured in the device and
21 their effects removed to some extent. Importantly, EDA does not communicate valence: it can
22 go up with liking or disliking, with truth or lies, with joy or anger. While negative events tend to
23 be more emotionally arousing than positive, one cannot reliably read valence from EDA alone.
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28 Ambiguity around valence is protective, but can also cause misunderstandings. If you see
29 arousal go up, how do you know if the person is feeling good or bad? One mother of an autistic
30 child told me that she recognizes her daughter is over-aroused when she sees her tapping her
31 fingers in a certain way. However, she cannot tell from the tapping if the child is in a negatively
32 aroused state or a positively aroused state, until she tries the following: Mother taps in the same
33 way, and then slightly varies it. When her daughter adapts her tapping to follow Mom's
34 variation, she is usually in a positive state; if, however, the daughter does not adapt, then it is
35 probably a negative state. While this works for this person, such patterns will be different for
36 different people, and may need to be discovered. In general, arousal must be combined with
37 other information (such as facial expressions, provided these are accurate and working properly)
38 to get a more complete understanding of emotion.
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42 Control is a major factor in arousal regulation. A survey of the most stressful jobs concluded
43 that bus drivers had the most stressful job because they had a schedule they had to keep and
44 keeping it was largely dependent on traffic and other people, things that were all out of their
45 control. If you build a tool to help somebody regulate negative arousal, and they have trouble
46 controlling the tool, or if they feel controlled by the tool or by others when they use the tool, then
47 effectiveness will be compromised. In our research we do several things to enhance control,
48 including practicing an "opt in" policy where nothing is sensed from a person without their fully
49 informed consent, which can be withdrawn at any time without penalty. We also emphasize
50 creating devices that a person can easily take on or off, turn off, or fake their participation with.
51 We have been collaborating with autistic people to co-design toolkits that customize the control
52 and output of their devices, so that we can understand their perspectives, needs, and wants. We
53 do not expect that there will be one best solution; instead, our approach is to develop a garden of
54 devices, hoping that one or more can be adapted to meet individual needs and preferences.
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Out of the lab and into daily life

Emotional measures from daily life provide the advantage of representing real-world experiences in familiar and unfamiliar environments under naturally varying conditions (say after a good night sleep vs. a bad night sleep) and in encounters that really matter to people (as opposed to most lab encounters, where some activity is requested that a person may or may not feel motivated to perform.) Figures 2 and 3 show samples of data collected during daily life using the MIT EDA wrist sensor. Figure 2 shows 24-hour changes in a neurotypical adult, while Figure 3 shows data from a child while he undergoes a 45 minute occupational therapy session, a sample from a much larger set that we are beginning to collect in a series of clinical studies that have just gotten underway. Both of these sets of data show a huge variation in response level, even over only 45 minutes.

Published results of ANS activity in autism show at least two groups of responders during short lab measurements: one group with high ANS arousal and one group with low arousal [46]. However, we see in Figure 3 an example of one child showing both very low and very high responses, with the largest escalation happening for no apparent reason. Specifically, at the point where the child lies on the ground, the level goes up by a factor of five, even though the child remains quiet and calm in appearance. Does this child have a high or a low baseline? Here it would depend completely whether he is measured before the escalation, or later while he is lying calmly on the floor. Just because he looks calm lying on the floor, does not mean it is a good time to capture an ANS “low baseline.” This child could easily be classified as “too high” or “too low” simply depending on when you measure him, and judging from the outside is not an accurate measure. A comfortable wearable sensor that can be worn long-term, during daily activity, provides new opportunities for greater scientific understanding of the ANS in autism, and in many other conditions as well.

Emotion changes most readily with what is real and what really matters in a person’s life. While lab visits offer observation over some outward influences on a person’s emotional state, and allow useful control over some of those influences, they also run the risk of missing entirely the patterns that characterize the symphony of real life. In autism, where autonomic nervous system variations abound, it is all the more imperative that comfortable, personally-controllable, solutions be developed to better understand ANS changes and interactions, for the sake of the individual who may not know what their own ANS system is doing as well as for the sake of enhancing scientific knowledge. If scientific findings are to apply to daily life, it is important that daily life data be represented in the scientific data collection process. New technology, if properly developed, can make this advancement both possible and practical.

Conclusions

Those who have worked with a lot of people on the autism spectrum know this adage: “If you’ve met one person with autism, then you’ve met one person with autism.” In this day when the computational power of the first lunar mission fits into a pants pocket, when wireless technology is pervasive, and when kids upload home videos for the entertainment of people around the planet, there is no reason to restrict research to the old paradigm of laboratory observations that use snapshot measurement technology and average the findings across a group. While there are

important conclusions to draw about groups, the technology is ready to address the richer understanding of individuals, especially bringing light to the everyday challenges faced by people on the autism spectrum, and the role of emotion and ANS changes in these challenges. While difficulties bedevil the researcher who wishes to conduct rigorous science in the uncontrolled real-world measurement environment, the difficulties can be overcome with ultra-dense large sets of individualized data, and with dynamic pattern analysis tools that characterize spaces of changing variables. New emotion communication technology can remedy many of the old measurement problems and enable personalized opportunities for learning, especially for people with autism diagnoses, and for those who aim to better understand and serve them and their needs.

Acknowledgements

This work has benefited from discussions and collaborations with Matthew Goodwin, Amanda Baggs, Rich Fletcher, Oliver Wilder-Smith, Michelle Dawson, Joel Smith, Jonathan Bishop, Kathy Roberts, Dinah Murray, Lucy Jane Miller, Rana el Kaliouby, and the whole Affective Computing group, especially Jackie Lee, Ming-Zher Poh, Elliott Hedman, and Daniel Bender. I am especially grateful to Leo Burd at Microsoft, the National Science Foundation, the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation, and the Things That Think Consortium for helping support our autism technology research.

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Fig. 1. Wearable EDA sensor. (a) Sensor is inside stretchy breathable wristband. (b) Disposable Ag/AgCl electrodes attached to the underside of the wristband. (c) The EDA sensor can be worn comfortably for long periods of time.

Only

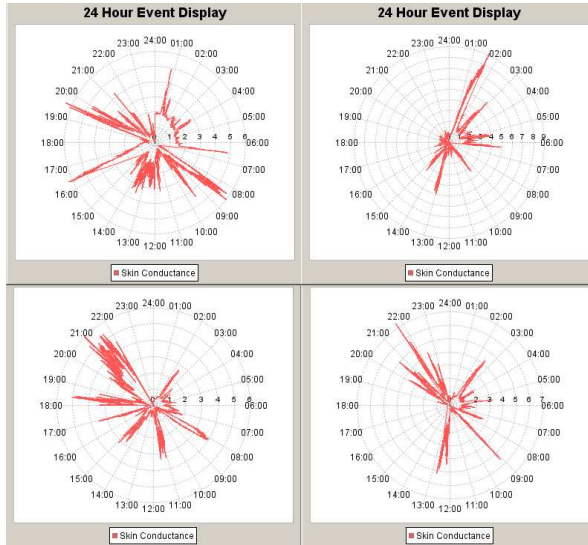


Figure 2. Radial 24-hour plots of EDA data from four days of wearing the wireless wrist sensor. Arousal level is proportional to distance from the center. During three of the days, the biggest peaks occur during wake; while in the upper right, the biggest peak is during sleep.



Figure 3: EDA over a 45 minute occupational therapy session, as measured from wireless wrist EDA sensor, for a child with sensory processing disorder. Arousal escalates when child is lying quietly on the floor, appearing outwardly calm.