

Scientific evidence and autism: A bubble of certainty

Evidência científica e autismo: Uma bolha de certeza

Evidencia científica y autismo: Una burbuja de certidumbre

Preuves scientifiques et autisme: Une bulle de certitude

 10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i3.e14809

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Resumo

O texto faz a resenha do livro *Evidencia Científica y Autismo: Una Burbuja de Certidumbre*, que oferece uma análise crítica do discurso científico contemporâneo em relação à pesquisa do autismo, com ênfase na busca por marcadores biológicos, neurológicos e genéticos. O autor, o psicanalista Iván Ruiz, membro da *Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis*, em Barcelona, Espanha, reuniu contribuições de psicanalistas, psiquiatras e psicólogos da Espanha, França e Bélgica para proporcionar uma perspectiva multifacetada sobre o estado atual da investigação científica no campo do autismo.

Palavras-chave: autismo, psicanálise, evidência científica

Abstract

The text reviews the book *Evidencia científica y autismo: una burbuja de certidumbre*, which offers a critical analysis of contemporary scientific discourse in relation to autism research, with an emphasis on the search for biological, neurological and genetic markers. The author, psychoanalyst Iván Ruiz, a member of the *Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis* in Barcelona, Spain, has brought together contributions from psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and psychologists from Spain, France and Belgium to provide a multifaceted perspective on the current state of scientific research in the field of autism.

Keywords: autism. psychoanalysis. scientific evidence

Resumen

El texto reseña el libro *Evidencia científica y autismo: una burbuja de certidumbre*, que ofrece un análisis crítico del discurso científico contemporáneo en relación con la investigación del autismo, haciendo hincapié en la búsqueda de marcadores biológicos, neurológicos y genéticos. El autor, el psicanalista Iván Ruiz, miembro de la *Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis* de Barcelona (España), ha reunido aportaciones de psicoanalistas, psiquiatras y psicólogos de España, Francia y Bélgica para ofrecer una perspectiva poliédrica sobre el estado actual de la investigación científica en el campo del autismo.

Palabras clave: autismo. psicoanálisis. evidencia científica

Résumé

Le texte passe en revue le livre *Evidencia Científica y Autismo: Una Burbuja de Certidumbre*, qui propose une analyse critique du discours scientifique contemporain en relation avec la recherche sur l'autisme, en mettant l'accent sur la recherche de marqueurs biologiques, neurologiques et génétiques. L'auteur, le psychanalyste Iván Ruiz, membre de l'Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis à Barcelone, en Espagne, a réuni des contributions de psychanalystes, psychiatres et psychologues d'Espagne, de France et de Belgique pour offrir une perspective multiforme sur l'état actuel de la recherche scientifique sur l'autisme.

Mots-clés : autisme, psychanalyse, preuves scientifiques

Evidencia Científica y Autismo: Una Burbuja de Certidumbre (in free translation: *Scientific Evidence and Autism: A Bubble of Certainty*) is a book published in 2020, by the Gredos, organized by the Spanish psychoanalyst Iván Ruiz and features texts by Agnès Aflalo, Mariano Almudévar, François Ansermet, Ariane Giacobino, Michel Grollier, Jean Claude Maleval and Arseni Maximov.

This review is based on a foreign edition of the book, which enriches the discussion with international perspectives. The choice of the title in English corresponds to the translation of the original title in Spanish, with the aim of faithfully reflecting the central theme of the work and offering an adequate introduction to the critical analysis presented here.

The book examines the impact of the search for scientific evidence to support understanding of autism. In addition, the authors explore the implications of this search for evidence in what is called the “autism marketplace.” The book provides a comprehensive overview of the different analyses of scientific discourse, questions the notion of certainty in autism research, and challenges prevailing assumptions in the field.

In this context, the book's reflections on the current state of research on autism, with an emphasis on genetic factors, confront the difficulty of establishing a simple causal relationship between genetic bases and clinical manifestations. The results obtained to date lead to fragmented conclusions about dispersed phenomena. Thus, the authors question the validity of treatments based on these supposed correlations. The promises of unique treatments, definitive causal explanations or new medications, however, do not materialize and end up frustrating the expectations of families, schools and shelters.

In this sense, psychoanalysts criticize the way in which the criterion of efficacy, advocated by evidence-based medicine, ignores the dimension of narrative and, consequently, of subjectivity. The idea that treatments should be based solely on scientific evidence is questioned as a product of biased and economically oriented application through scientific and technological discourse.

This view has contributed to the exclusion of psychoanalysis from public mental health programs and services, also undermining the *status*. The book has been promoting the cultural relevance of psychoanalysis among the public in several countries for some time. However, the book brings to the fore the debate on the relevance of evidence in clinical practices, demonstrating that this issue is far from being merely academic. There are several important interests at stake: the allocation of public resources is directed towards forms of treatment guided by scientific principles and evaluated according to evidence-based models.

In line with the criticism of the hegemony of scientific discourse in the search for “evidence” of autism, authors Ruiz (2020a) and Miller (2002) warn of the unbridled speed at which this discourse spreads, surpassing science's own capacity to keep up with it. According to Ruiz (2020a, p. 6), this acceleration creates a “race” in search of certainties, generating a “bubble of certainty” (Miller, 2002¹), operated by experts who, in their eagerness for results, can manipulate the truth.

Scientific evidence is a mistake, as it is based solely on statistical data that corresponds to models that converge at a meeting point with capital. In this regard, Ruiz (2020a, p. 5, our translation²) states that there is a large amount of money being moved by the autism market, which follows its own logic that “consumes and leaves out the subjects who are trapped in it without financial interest, solely and exclusively because of their suffering – we refer to those affected”.

It is important to emphasize that the criticism of “scientific evidence” does not imply a denial of the importance of rigorous research methods and data analysis. On the contrary, the authors recognize and defend the need for solid and reliable scientific research. However, they warn of the dangers of taking as “scientific evidence” only that which fits into predetermined models and serves specific interests, often related to capital.

1 Ruiz (2020a) refers to the text *Intuiciones Milanesas (II)*, by Jacques-Alain Miller, published in the *Revista del Instituto del Campo Freudiano en España*, in 2002. This text was established by Marie-Hélène Doguet-Dziomba and Nathalie Georges, based on the course *The Lacanian Orientation* at the Department of Psychoanalysis of the University of Paris VIII, held on May 22, 2002. In Brazil, it was translated by Inês Autran Dourado Barbosa and published in *Opção Lacaniana online* in November 2011.

2 “It is only consumed and left to those subjects who are involved in this situation without a financial interest, solely and exclusively the cause of their suffering – we refer to those affected themselves”.

The autism market currently has an alliance between health bureaucracies and pharmaceutical *lobbies*, which mobilize large sums of money on a large scale. In addition, they also have multiple corporate interests, with a high incidence in regional policies, power sharing and promotion of diagnostic and treatment products that sometimes benefit from the activism of relatives of affected people (Ruiz, 2020a). Furthermore, this autism market has been associated with Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies (CBTs).

Psychoanalysts Aflalo (2020) and Maleval (2020) show how the *Applied Behavior method Analysis* (ABA) – known in Brazil as Terapias Cognitivo-Comportamentais– and Treatment and Education for Autistic and Communication-Related Children (TEACCH) are offered with the hallmark of scientific evidence.

In this sense, there are many promises of effective treatments, causal explanations or new drugs that, in fact, have contributed little to families, schools and/or centers for the care of autistic children. Yet, despite the research and each new discovery, conclusions are not reached. For Ruiz (2020a), the interpretation of the numbers may be forced, as studies show serious contradictions and make the etiology of autism an increasingly complex issue.

Ansermet and Giacobino (2020) demonstrated how autism still remains an enigma for modernity. The study by these authors is also published in another book, entitled *Autisme : à chacun son génome* (Ansermet & Giacobino, 2013). According to them, current genetic research shows that the genetic code, in all its aspects, does not release a single causality. Therefore, another contradiction can be drawn from critics who say that psychoanalysis does not treat autism. In the words of these authors: “People think about crushing psychoanalysis with genetics, and behold, the impasses of genetics provoke the rediscovery of the issues of psychoanalysis and its necessity” (Ansermet & Giacobino, 2013, p. 89).

Ruiz reminds his readers that psychoanalysis operates in the space of the subject’s constitution, which is essentially that space of response to its somatics or its history the subject as an effect without a cause. Psychoanalysis “does not depend on etiological hypotheses in its organic foundation” (Ruiz, 2020a, p. 9³). However, in view of this, Ruiz argues that psychoanalysis is not prevented from entering the etiological debates that science, based on evidence, has been supporting for some decades. For him, psychoanalysis must position itself in society in the face of the issues that autism presents, given the studies that attack psychoanalysis and that have strong funding from the pharmaceutical industry.

For Agnes Aflalo (2020), a psychoanalyst in Paris and a member of the School of the Freudian Cause, psychoanalysis has been under attack since 1980, with the publication of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* (DSM-III⁴). From this version onwards, the Freudian conceptions of symptoms that were in force in DSM-I and DSM-II were eliminated. There was also an expansion of the autism category, which gradually began to absorb other diagnoses. Thus, the author says: “(...) the empire of autism expands within and outside the category (...)” (Aflalo, 2020, p. 60, our translation⁵), that is, autism branches out beyond the DSM, gaining other terrains throughout society. The author also observes that, in this context, the new diagnostic criteria are reinvented, including a new name for autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The spectrum proposition (ASD), according to Aflalo (2020), is the result of frantic negotiations that generate a billion-dollar market for the pharmaceutical industry, *Big Pharma*. ASD has become such a heterogeneous mix that autism itself, classified by Kanner in 1943 (Aflalo, 2020), corresponds to only one third of the total autistic disorder, equivalent to 35%. The rest are not autistic: 55% for pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD), 8% for Asperger’s syndrome and 2% for the rest (1% for Rett syndrome and 1% for childhood disintegrative disorder).

There are conflicts of interest even within the pharmaceutical industry itself. The inclusion of Asperger’s syndrome in ASD was the subject of many protests against it, as it places it on the same line of continuity as autism with Kannerian symptoms. Aflalo (2020) says that Asperger’s syndrome is used by *Big Pharma* as a *marketing* argument to generate increased sales. For her, the syndrome covers what classical psychiatry called psychosis without intellectual deficit. This, in turn, is also linked to the rejection of the name psychosis, as it is considered stigmatizing, emphasizing the trivialization of autism.

In any case, it is understood that the pharmaceutical industry has been inventing diseases to promote the use of psychotropic drugs and incite insurance companies. For example, what was once considered *shame* has become *pathological inhibition* and what was once *shyness* is now a *social anxiety disorder*. Furthermore, with the invention of the first neuroleptic prescribed for psychotic patients, it was seen that the effect prevents neurons from producing dopamine. Faced with this finding, the idea that psychoses were caused by the opposite effect, that is, by excess dopamine, spread. The same logic applies to antidepressants (Aflalo, 2020). Depression is another topic, another field of interest for the market, but, as can be seen, it is part of the new diagnoses promoted, which result in the so-called epidemic of the century, reinforced by major advertising campaigns.

The pharmaceutical *lobby* seeks to penetrate public policies, aiming at the deregulation of what, until then, protects citizens from the abuse and widespread use of medicines. In fact, according to Aflalo (2020), several scandals have occurred

³ “no depende de las hipótesis etiológicas sobre su fundamento orgánico”.

⁴ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), is widely recognized as the global standard for the categorization and classification of mental disorders. To access the most recent version of this manual, the DSM-5-TR, with updated diagnostic criteria, it is recommended to consult the official APA website for more detailed information. See APA (2024).

⁵ “El imperio del autismo se expande hacia el interior y el exterior de la categoría”.

in the United States that have tormented the *Key Opinion Leaders* (KOLs) involved with *Big Pharma*, casting doubt on the credibility of the DSM due to the harmful influence of mental health propaganda.

KOLs, opinion leaders, are nothing more than doctors, professors and/or researchers who, through their teachings at universities, and through the publication of scientific articles in specialized journals, will give their opinion on treatment methods and medications, and are responsible for most of the content of the DSM.

Using the same strategy as the pharmaceutical industry, autism treatment methods, such as the ABA program, seek exclusivity in the treatment of autism, to reserve the valuable state tax revenue for themselves and treat patients from an early age. For Maleval (2020), ABA not only permanently confronts the autistic subject with their demands, but also with their deliberate ignorance of cognitive functioning. Everything indicates that there is a willful ignorance of the cognitive functioning of autistic people, aiming, precisely, at a proposition about the resource indiscriminately.

Mariano Almudévar (2020), a child and adolescent psychiatrist from the European Union, in turn, argues that there is no scientific evidence that ABA is superior to any other non-behavioral method aimed at communication problems. This means that, with knowledge of the autism clinic and with experience and/or adequate supervision, other methods meet the necessary conditions to act with rigor and skill.

This method is seen as an attempt at impartiality, thus holding parents responsible if the expected result is not achieved. It is applied at home, consisting of 40 hours of intensive conditioning per week, for a period of two to three years. If there is no success, it is said that the problem was due to poor application of the method. Maleval (2020, p. 154, our translation⁶) is categorical regarding the results of this method: “The results produced with the support of ABA are like the method: dehumanized and purely statistical”.

The DSM positions itself as atheoretical and impartial in its decisions; however, it defends CBT theories because they are compatible with the economic interest at stake. The alliance between the DSM and CBTs is seen by Aflalo (2020) as a totalitarian act, which uses democracy for its exploits. In this context, psychoanalysis is overlooked in Europe, Brazil and, inevitably, in the United States. The researcher says: “For the second time in less than ten years, a bill would seek to prohibit the practice of psychoanalysis. This time with autistic people, because it would be ‘scientifically’ proven that psychoanalysis is ineffective, even harmful to them” (Aflalo, 2020, p. 90, our translation⁷). For these reasons, psychoanalysis cannot shy away from this debate, because what is at stake are human lives that suffer, above all, from words, from voice.

Lacanian-oriented psychoanalysts agree with CBTs when it comes to maintaining the enigma of autism. As Ruiz (2020b) emphasizes, and as already mentioned, knowledge about autism remains incomplete for psychoanalysts because it is in the same place where subjectivity is found in every linguistic being. Furthermore, there is no common definition of autism, not even for the different current psychoanalytic orientations. This does not mean, however, that psychoanalysis cannot offer its knowledge for the treatment of these cases.

Arseny Maximov (2020), a psychoanalyst in Barcelona, reinforces the point of view developed by the previous authors, arguing that psychoanalysis is often treated as an outdated method without scientific basis, reaffirming that, just because it does not produce statistics according to the scientific method, this does not mean that there is no evidence of the strength of its method. Nowadays, it is common for detractors of psychoanalysis to blame parents for their children’s autism, a perspective that originated more than half a century ago, when some authors came to believe that the cause of autism was in the relationship between mother and child. Contemporary psychoanalysis, however, has very different ideas on this subject.

In conclusion, *Evidencia Científica y Autismo: Una Burbuja de Certidumbre* highlights the complexity of the field of autism research, highlighting the critical issues surrounding the search for scientific evidence. The book offers valuable insight into the impact of this search on what is known as the “autism market,” highlighting the influence of the pharmaceutical industry and the expansion of diagnostics.

The debate on psychoanalysis as a valid approach to autism is also explored in the book. The text emphasizes the need to maintain the enigma surrounding autism, encouraging continued discussions and openness to different perspectives. Contrary to scientific discourse and without excluding, *a priori*, the possibility of multiple causes, psychoanalysis was able, in this field, to explain the psychic dimension of autism and, above all, to break with the practices of organicism. Furthermore, it is understood that the authors of the book are quite critical of the emphatic and closed model of diagnosis that conditions the subject to a label. Ultimately, the book highlights the importance of a critical and balanced approach in the field of autism research and treatment, recognizing the influence of economic interests and the complexity inherent to this topic.

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6 ““Los resultados producidos con el apoyo del ABA son como el método: deshumanizados y puramente estadísticos”.

7 ““Por segunda vez en menos de diez años, un proyecto de ley pretendería prohibir la práctica del psicoanálisis. Esta vez con los autistas, por la razón de que estaría probado ‘científicamente’ que el psicoanálisis es ineficaz, incluso nocivo para ellos”.

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How to cite:

Silva, E. P. (2024). Scientific evidence and autism: A bubble of certainty [review]. *Revista Subjetividades*, 24(3), e14809. <https://doi.org/10.5020/23590777.rs.v24i3.e14809>

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Received: 01/05/2024
Revised: 04/29/2024
Accepted: 06/20/2024
Published: 11/01/2024