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Who cares? Or: The Truth about Empathy in Individuals of the Autism Spectrum.

Impaired empathy is considered a central characteristic of autism spectrum conditions. In fact, there are hardly general accounts, as displayed in the internet as well as in research reports, *not* mentioning a lack of-, impairment in-, or failure to develop empathy. The picture that is drawn is often insensitive to individuals on the spectrum, implying that they are cold, emotionless, and indifferent, culminating in comparisons with psychopaths: "...it would appear that both Asperger syndrome and psychopathy...share some common characteristics, notably the total absence of human empathy..." (International Journal of Psychophysiology, 1999). Despite these accounts, research of empathic capacities in individuals with autism spectrum conditions is still lacking.

Since 2002 we have been conducting a study on empathy and social cognition in adults with Asperger syndrome at the Center for Brain Health, New York University School of Medicine. In addition to detailing the profile of empathy and social cognition in Asperger syndrome, we have also been interested in trying to disentangle these concepts by showing their differences and commonalities. The results of that study, which we presented in part at the April 2004 AHA/AS/PDD conference: Issues in Independence for Adolescents and Adults on the Autism Spectrum counter many of the unfounded statements that have been made and demonstrate that depicting Asperger syndrome as an "empathy disorder" may be misleading.

Social cognition refers to the ability to understand other peoples' mental states such as feelings, thoughts, desires, and intentions. To measure this cognitive domain we administered a variety of tests, such as facial recognition tasks and social stories. In addition, we developed a more naturalistic, video-based test to measure very subtle difficulties. Empathy is generally defined as the reaction of one individual to the observed experiences of another. We assessed empathy with a multi-dimensional self-report measure, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

Over the course of the last two years, we evaluated more than 50 individuals with Asperger syndrome and neurotypical control subjects. In summary, our data shows that social cognition and empathy overlap considerably. Both constructs involve recognizing other peoples' mental states. The essential difference between the two is that empathy, unlike social cognition, also involves an *emotional reaction* to a mental state of another person once it is recognized. Although individuals with Asperger syndrome showed problems with the "overlapping" part of the concepts, namely the ascertaining of mental states of others, they were not, most importantly, less empathically concerned as compared to neurotypical individuals. More generally

speaking, our data shows that people with Asperger syndrome have a reduced ability to read other peoples' social cues (such as facial expressions or body language) but once aware of another's circumstances or feelings, they will have the same degree of compassion as anyone else.

Empathy is one of the most remarkable human characteristics and for the longest time autism has irresponsibly and mistakenly been depicted as an "empathy disorder". We hope that our research will contribute towards giving autistic individuals back the place on the empathic spectrum that they deserve.

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