

7 Asperger syndrome: understanding strengths and weaknesses

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In this paper I will discuss the pattern of strengths and difficulties seen in those with Asperger Syndrome and, more generally, autism spectrum disorders. I will briefly review the research and current theories regarding the underlying cognitive bases for the core features that Hans Asperger described; social and communication difficulties, problems in planning and organising everyday life, and strengths such as excellent memory and eye for detail.

Background and terminology

Hans Asperger described a fascinating mixture of strengths and difficulties that is clearly recognisable today in both children and adults. The term ‘Asperger syndrome’ was introduced into the English-speaking world by Lorna Wing in the ‘80s, and popularised through Uta Frith’s translation of Asperger’s classic paper in 1991. This term served a useful purpose in raising awareness that individuals on the ‘autism spectrum’ could have good language and intellectual abilities. ‘Asperger Disorder’ became a specific diagnosis in the ‘90s, but in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5, APA 2013) it has been collapsed into the wider category of ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD). This somewhat controversial decision has been debated elsewhere, but was based among other things on evidence of poor agreement across clinicians distinguishing subtypes of ASD (e.g., Happé, 2011). Asperger syndrome remains a term with which many individuals identify strongly, and certainly serves a descriptive purpose as an exemplar-based fuzzy category. In what follows, therefore, both Asperger syndrome and ASD are used.

Hans Asperger’s view that the difficulties and differences that his patients presented were organic in nature and of early origin, has held up in research to date. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), including Asperger syndrome, are among the most heritable developmental disorders, and there is no evidence

that poor parenting has any role whatsoever in the aetiology of these conditions (Abrahams & Geschwind, 2010). Despite concerted efforts to find the genes or brain regions underlying ASD, the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome and of ASD's in general remains behavioural: a child or adult receives this diagnosis based on the pattern of behaviour s/he presents to the clinician and the developmental history as provided by parents. Specifically, according to current criteria, someone must show "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" and "restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities" from early development and to a degree that causes clinically significant impairment. The manifestations of the core difficulties varies enormously between individuals, giving rise to the notion of an autism *spectrum*: while a young child may avoid or be apparently unaware of people, an adult may actively seek friendships but in an inappropriate manner; while one person with ASD may show repetitive interest in lining up objects, or watching coins spin, another may have a narrow and fixed interest in an abstruse area of astronomy.

Taking the full autism spectrum, current estimates of prevalence are around 1 % in children and adults. Males outnumber females, especially at the higher ability levels, and it remains a concern that many women with Asperger syndrome in particular may be overlooked or misdiagnosed. Recent reports of increases in ASD probably reflect widening of diagnostic criteria, better recognition and services, and diagnostic substitution, but a real increase in incidence cannot be ruled out. ASD are lifelong conditions, and the needs of a growing elderly population with Asperger syndrome and other ASD is an area urgently in need of research.

A problem of translation between two worlds

Hans Asperger's original descriptions of his cases remain fresh and relevant today, and his view of the potential and value of the young people he diagnosed carries a powerful message. Specifically, Asperger regarded the condition he described as akin to a personality trait, with generally good prognosis, in contrast to classic autism as described by Leo Kanner (1943). From Frith's (1991) translation of Asperger's 1944 paper, we can take some telling quotes about the assets and difficulties seen in his cases. On the one hand, he describes a "*special clear-sightedness*", "*in favourable cases...exceptional achievements*", and that "*work performance can be excellent, and with this comes social integration*". On the other hand, significant difficulties are described such as "*helplessness in the matters of practical life*", and that "*their closest relatives or spouses find them difficult to get on with*". Indeed, Asperger suggests that the strengths and difficulties seen in his cases are intimately linked: "*Obedying only spontaneous impulses and never paying attention to social demands may well*