



Are you flirting with me? Autistic traits, theory of mind, and inappropriate courtship



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Autism
Broad autism phenotype
Autistic traits
Theory of mind
Inappropriate courtship
Relationships
Romance
Dating

ABSTRACT

Despite a strong potential for healthy sexual relationships, high functioning individuals with an autism spectrum disorder often struggle with the appropriateness of their courtship behaviours. Using Leslie's (1992) theory of mind (ToM) theory of autism, we investigated two mediators of the association between autistic traits and inappropriate courtship in a non-clinical sample: (1) ToM, and (2) a bias to perceive ambiguous social cues as flirting. University students ($N = 195$) completed an online battery containing the Autism Quotient (AQ), a measure of inappropriate courtship, a popular test of ToM (Eyes Test-Revised), a measure of flirt perception bias, and a question about singles' venues attendance. AQ was indirectly associated with inappropriate courtship through two pathways: (1) a single-mediator model based on ToM; and (2) a two-mediator serial model with ToM leading to a flirtation perception bias, leading to more frequent inappropriate courtship. Adding flirtation perception and singles' venues attendance to the ToM-mediation model increased the percent of variance accounted for from 17% to 25%, while each mediator remained statistically significant. Sex did not significantly moderate the models. To our knowledge, this is the first model accounting for courtship difficulties in persons with autistic traits. Limitations and applications are considered.

1. Introduction

While individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have the potential to develop healthy sexual relationships (Byers, Nichols, & Voyer, 2013), their courtship behaviours are more likely to be socially inappropriate, than those of their typically-developing peers (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007; see meta-analysis Pecora, Mesibov, & Stokes, 2016). These findings may be explained by the notion that successfully pursuing romantic prospects is facilitated by theory of mind (ToM), which is delayed in autism (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001; Happé, 1994). ToM refers to the ability to infer others' mental states or intentions and is distinct from more general constructs such as emotional intelligence. Whereas emotional intelligence is the ability to use emotions to enhance thought (Mayer, Barsade, & Roberts, 2008), ToM represents an ability to estimate others' intentions to predict their behaviour. Regarding courtship, ToM is required to ascertain a romantic prospect's romantic receptiveness through reading their nonverbal forms of communication (Grammer, 1990; Renninger, Wade, & Grammer, 2004). Given that ToM is delayed in autism, autistic traits may increase one's chances of missing nonverbal cues of disinterest from romantic prospects and persisting in this context could come off as

socially inappropriate. The goal of the current study was to investigate the association between autistic traits and inappropriate courtship, and to determine if challenges using ToM to read nonverbal cues of romantic interest might explain such an association.

1.1. Theory of mind and autism

ASDs are congenital neurodevelopmental disorders defined by social-communication difficulties and repetitive behaviours and/or narrow interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Some researchers believe that autistic difficulties stem from delayed ToM development (Leslie, 1992). Evidence supporting this theory shows that relative to typically-developing individuals, children with an ASD show delays in their ability to infer the intentions of story characters, and as adults they find it difficult to read complex mental states from others' eye- and body-expressions (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, et al., 2001; Golan, Baron-Cohen, Hill, & Golan, 2006; Happé, 1994).

In the context of courtship, delayed ToM can explain both greater vulnerability to victimization and greater chances of offending. If one cannot use social cues to distinguish between benign individuals and predators, one is more likely to be victimized. Also, although predatory

Abbreviations: ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder; BAP, Broad Autism Phenotype; ToM, Theory of Mind

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behaviour is rare in the autistic population, unintentional transgressions due to inadequate understanding of social-communicative reciprocity logically lead to more frequent experiences of rejection. In combination with poor impulse control and growing frustration, inappropriate behaviours might become aggressive ones (Sevlever, Roth, & Gillis, 2013).

1.2. ASD and inappropriate sexual and courting behaviours

Recent articles conclude that high-functioning individuals with ASD are similar to typically developing peers in levels of sexual interest (Pecora et al., 2016), but are more likely to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviours (e.g., masturbating in public; Pecora et al., 2016) and inappropriate courtship behaviours (e.g., persisting despite rejection, stalking; Stokes et al., 2007). Not all researchers agree, however, as Visser et al. (2017) recently concluded that individuals with ASD are no less sexually and socially appropriate than individuals without ASD. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that their study assessed socio-cognitive judgments of hypothetical sexual and courtship situations, as opposed to real-life behaviours as in Pecora et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis.

Most of the evidence supports an association between autism and socially inappropriate courtship behaviours (Pecora et al., 2016). However, while there has been considerable speculation as to the causes of romantic relationship difficulties in this population, evidence to support one explanation or another is lacking. In addition to ToM, other factors of interest in the clinical population include poor impulse control, bad personal experiences (e.g., abuse, bullying, unstable homes), lack of age appropriate social support, and sexual frustration, among others (Sevlever et al., 2013). Each of these could be investigated for explaining inappropriate courtship in the ASD population. However, unlike ToM, they may not be common across all individuals expressing autistic traits, including those individuals on the end of the spectrum extending to the mild, sub-clinical range (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, & Clubley, 2001).

1.3. Sub-clinical autistic traits

Over the past decade, much research has shown that individuals with this “broader autism phenotype” experience similar romantic problems to individuals with autism. Although many are successful in finding a romantic partner (Pollmann, Finkenauer, & Begeer, 2010), they are more likely than peers to have had fewer romantic partners (Baarsma et al., 2016), display signs of attachment avoidance in their relationships (Gallitto & Leth-Steensen, 2015), and report reduced relationship satisfaction in current relationships (Pollmann et al., 2010). Empathy, which is related to but distinct from ToM, has also been studied as a mediator (Lampert & Turner, 2014).

1.4. Flirting

Flirting is an aspect of courting behaviour that has received relatively little study, and none in the autism literature. Examples include making eye contact, smiling and laughing, etc. Although Moore (1985) first observed 52 nonverbal facial expressions and gestures employed by females in a “mate relevant context”, both males and females use flirting to solicit attention from and indicate sexual interest to potential mates (Moore, 1985; Wade & Feldman, 2016). Both sexes also show a preference for behaviours that signal the potential mate is non-threatening and wants to form a relationship with them (Givens, 1978).

Flirting runs the gamut from explicit and overt to implicit and subtle, and it is not difficult to see that ToM might contribute to individual differences in the accuracy of reading flirtatious body language. However, other factors play a role, too. For example, men tend to overestimate the extent of women's interest in them while the converse is not true. This bias may confer an evolutionary advantage to

men only; for them, a false positive may cost less than a false negative (cf. Error Management Theory, Haselton & Buss, 2000).

To our knowledge, the role of autistic traits in the ability to appreciate and utilize flirtations as social-romantic information has not been studied. We chose to include it in the present study to explore the possibility that this ability might be accounted for by ToM or might serve as an independent mediator linking autistic traits and inappropriate courtship behaviours.

1.5. Current study

The goal of the current study was to examine the magnitude of the role played by ToM in the association between autistic traits and inappropriate courtship behaviours. A popular experimental measure of ToM was used (ability to read eye-expressions), alongside a measure of self-reported ability to read flirtatious intention from body language. Based on the clinical literature, we predicted that ToM would be the most important mediator, and that its role would remain important even after considering other possibilities, such as autistic traits coinciding with a reduced tendency to frequent singles' venues where flirting and romantic skills are practiced (Moore, 1985).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

There were two stages of participant recruitment: (1) A mass-testing procedure where 845 psychology university students completed a screening for autistic traits by completing the Autism Quotient (AQ), and (2) recruitment of students through the university online system. From the first stage, 243 participants scoring two standard deviations above and below the mean of AQ scores were invited to participate in the study. However, only 17 students (7.0%) ultimately participated from this method. From the second stage, 216 first and second year psychology students self-selected to complete the study online.

2.1.1. Sample

Twenty-five participants were excluded for missing data (10.7%), seven for reporting too many psychiatric disorders (3.0%), one for reporting an ASD diagnosis (0.4%), one reporting an unusually high AQ score (0.4%), and four for declining for their data to be used (1.7%; see Procedure below). The final sample was 195 students consisting of 76 males ($M_{age} = 19.89$ years, $SD = 1.79$, range 18–25) and 119 females ($M_{age} = 19.20$ years, $SD = 1.44$, range 17–24). Males were slightly older than females, $F(1, 193) = 8.88$, $p < .005$. The AQ distribution was normal ($M = 17.73$, $SD = 5.27$, median = 18, range 6–30) with all participants scoring below the clinical cut-off of 32+ (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, et al., 2001).

Those scoring above and below the AQ median were matched in age, and in proportion of anxiety or depression/bipolar diagnoses and of singles/casual daters. The sample was also uniformly heterosexual (92.8%), and the majority spoke English as a first language (80.5%). However, participants had 2.21 times the odds of being male if scoring above the AQ median ($\chi^2 = 7.03$, $p < .01$). Moreover, if low in AQ, the odds of frequenting singles' venues were 1.78 times the odds of not frequenting singles' venues ($\chi^2 = 3.96$, $p < .05$). See Table 1.

2.2. Apparatus

The questionnaires and the Eyes-Test Revised ToM measure were administered online using Qualtrics Research Suite's (2013) “Minimal Look and Feel” template. The number of questions on a screen was limited to 10, maximum. An option to withdraw from the study and to read a debriefing, was provided at the bottom of each page. See Fig. 1.

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