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Loneliness, social relationships, and a broader autism phenotype in college students

Lisa E. Jobe *, Susan Williams White

Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Medicine, United States

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Abstract

Impaired social functioning is a hallmark of autism spectrum conditions. The purpose of this study was to investigate possible relationship between social functioning and a broader autism phenotype. With a sample of non-clinical undergraduate students from a large, urban university ($N = 97$; mean age = 19.4 ± 2 years), characteristics associated with autism were measured as well as self-reported dating and friendship history, feelings of loneliness, and social motivation. Results indicate that those individuals with a stronger autism phenotype (e.g., rigidity, preference for sameness, high attention to detail) report significantly more loneliness ($r = .52, p < 0.01$) and fewer and shorter duration friendships. Also, for participants in romantic relationships, a stronger phenotype was moderately and positively correlated with length of relationship ($r = .34, p < 0.05$). Findings support the view that individuals with characteristics of autism and related conditions do not necessarily prefer aloneness, as once assumed, but rather experience increased levels of loneliness related to lack of social skill and understanding. Significance and limitations of these findings are discussed and future directions for research and possibilities for social skills training in this population are explored.

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Keywords: Autism; Asperger's syndrome; Friendships; Dating; Personality; Autism phenotype; Autism Spectrum Quotient

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 804 307 8421.

E-mail address: lisajobe@memphis.edu (L.E. Jobe).

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) include clinical diagnoses of Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – not otherwise Specified. Following the spectrum model of autism, there is considerable evidence for a broader autism phenotype, or a set of subclinical personality traits and symptoms associated with ASD, observable in relatives of individuals with spectrum disorders as well as in the general population. For example, social, communication, and language difficulties have been found in higher levels in relatives of individuals with autism than in the general population (Piven, Palmer, Jacobi, Childress, & Ardnt, 1997; Bishop, Maybery, & Maley, 2004). Beyond relatives of individuals with autism, and as evidence of the full spectrum of ASD characteristics in non-clinical samples, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Skinner, Martin, and Clubley (2001) found that science students were more likely than art students to have characteristics related to autism.

Baron-Cohen et al. (2001) developed the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ), an empirically based self-report questionnaire, to detect characteristics of autism in the general population. The AQ has been used to investigate the relationship between characteristics of autism and personality factors such as neuroticism and extraversion (Austin, 2005) as well as decreased empathizing and increased systemizing, or the drive to control and construct strict rule-based systems (Wheelwright et al., 2006).

Autism is characterized by social and communication deficits, as well as stereotyped behaviors and restricted interests (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In individuals with high-functioning autism and Asperger syndrome, social deficits can be especially detrimental due to acute self-awareness of their lack of social connectedness (Carrington & Graham, 2001). Many individuals become ostracized and subsequently withdrawn from peers, leading some to believe that persons with ASD *prefer* to be isolated.

However, recent research has indicated that adolescents and adults with ASD are typically interested in having friendships and sexual relationships (Henault & Attwood, 2002, cited in Henault, 2005), as well as marriage (Newport & Newport, 2002). Bauminger's (2002) work on social skill training with adolescents with Asperger's syndrome supports the idea that training in social and emotional understanding can help increase quality of social interactions. Henault (2005) summarized the main social challenge of individuals with high-functioning ASD as a discrepancy between normal social needs/desires, and social skill difficulties. Instead of ignoring such interpersonal needs, it is important to address these needs, as children without friends or close relationships have problems related to low self-esteem, delayed social skill development, and poor school performance (Rubin, Dwyer, & Booth-LaForce, 2004).

In the general population, chronic loneliness during adolescence and college has been correlated with alienation and social anxiety, (Sandstrom & Zakriski, 2004), as well as decreased self-esteem (Moore & Schultz, 1983). More severe, cumulative outcomes of chronic loneliness include depression, aggression, and paranoia (Diamont & Windholt, 1981). Carr and Schellenbach (1993) theorized that, although following rigid social codes may be adaptive in childhood, this may become maladaptive when more intimate communication is expected as teenagers. Such immature social interaction patterns have been supported as a precursor to chronic loneliness in adolescents. As social difficulties are a hallmark of the entire ASD spectrum, it would be of interest to investigate loneliness in relation to characteristics of ASD. Autistic social impairment may best be viewed

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