Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disorder of varying severity that is characterized by difficulty in social interactions and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior. There are strong parallels between someone who has intellectual disability (mental retardation) and someone diagnosed with ASD. Those living with intellectual disability have degrees of difficulty with intellect, social functioning and self-care. Those on the higher end of autism don't have problems with intellect, but their social functioning and selfcare can be challenging.

Deeper Dive:

Ken Mogill, a defense attorney, notes:

> . . . Asperger's Syndrome is not a mental illness: It is a developmental disability…[that] begins at birth, although causality most likely occurred congenitally… Each stage [of development] is a foundation for the next stage. If a particular stage of development is not completed successfully or if something has an effect on the stage such that there is an arrest in the progression of the stage, future stages will be distorted, as well… The difference between mental illness and developmental disabilities is based on the difference in how the symptoms develop. Individuals with mental illness do not have a specific impairment from birth which affects their development. Their symptoms become manifest at later points in their life when certain biological triggers set off neurochemical processes that result in the symptoms that we associate with their mental illness… In individuals with Autism/Asperger's Syndrome, their development is affected from birth and it permeates all later stages of development, with a primary effect on their capability to communicate effectively secondary to an inability to process pragmatics.
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> Kenneth M. Mogill (2017). *Caught in the Web of the Criminal Justice System* (pp. 121-123).

Erin Comartin, Ph.D. is a professor of social work with extensive experience regarding convictions and incarceration of individuals with ASD and sex offense. Caution, you might find the following quote a bit confusing. ***Asperger's syndrome*** and ***high-functioning autism*** is applied to someone who is high functioning in their independent living skills. ***Autism spectrum disorder*** represents those with the condition that are more severely affected and limited in their ability to live independently. Dr. Comartin's observations include (with added highlights).

> ***Asperger's syndrome (AS)*** is a developmental diagnosis related to an individual's brain functioning (Khouzam et al., 2004). The diagnosis, once separate but linked with autism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), has now been combined on a continuum of related features, known as the ***autism spectrum disorder (ASD)*** (Happe, 2011). The hallmark characteristic of both disorders is the high level of social impairment for the individual (Khouzam et al., 2004). It has been emphasized that ASD is not a diagnosis of social pathology. Individuals diagnosed with a spectrum disorder do not have features of callousness or maliciousness found in antisocial disorders or personality disorders, but there is a true developmental delay impairing their ability to understand and interpret social cues, as well as understanding socially acceptable behaviors and social norms. Two additional diagnostic features shared by ASD and AS are repetitive behaviors and intense and restricted interests. There are also two features generally not found in individuals diagnosed with AS, but commonly found in individuals diagnosed with ASD: delays in language development and lower cognitive capabilities (Mesibov and Shea, 2001).
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> Social impairments in individuals with AS are particularly important to consider when thinking about the way they interpret potentially criminal behavior, and in the way they

deal with the consequences of sex offender management policies. Thus, a description of these features of the diagnosis are important. AS causes a delay in the individual's ability to understand others' needs, perspectives, and feelings. This is commonly noted as a lack of empathy on the part of someone with AS (Roth and Gillis, 2015). Generally, when noting that an individual lacks empathy, society commonly construes this as antisocial behavior, in that it is malicious in nature. For individuals with AS it is a function of their diagnosis, not antisocial. Clinical criteria suggest individuals with AS do not see, and cannot accurately interpret, social cues. They are not skilled in reading others' facial expressions, body language, or reactions (Mahoney, 2009). They also fail to appreciate socially acceptable behavior and social norms. For example, they do not understand that a lack of response from a message sent to a love interest means they do not want to continue a relationship. Finally, individuals with ASD are delayed in their social and emotional development, causing them to act and appear younger than their age. Their intense interests and repetitive behaviors cause them to be perceived by their peers as outcasts.

A defining difference between individuals with AS not commonly found for others diagnosed with ASD is their desire for social interaction. Both have deficits in this area; however, individuals with AS desire friendships and romantic relationships, whereas individuals with ASD generally do not desire social interaction (Mahoney, 2009). Since individuals with AS want and desire social interaction, but are isolated and shunned, they commonly experience depression because they do not have the skills to acquire such relationships (Whitehouse et al., 2009). A final AS characteristic is the lack of expressive use of language and the inability to carry out a conversation that is reciprocal in nature (Mahoney, 2009). Although their language skills are not delayed, the way they use language to communicate is concrete and explicit. Due to their repetitive and intensely focused interests, they are likely to dominate a conversation by discussing only the things they are interested in while leaving no time for what others wish to talk about. The social isolation they feel, combined with the social interaction they desire, leads many individuals with AS to turn to the computer for social relationships.

Erin Comartin (2017). *Caught in the Web of the Criminal Justice System* (pp. 292-293)

Gary Mesibov is a psychologist and professor. Melissa Sreckovic is a professor of special education. Both are experts in ASD. They state.

Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by challenges with social communication and interaction, and the presence of narrow or restricted behaviors, concepts, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The cognitive, social, and communication impairments associated with ASD greatly affect an individual's ability to function independently and the overall quality of life. Although all individuals with ASD demonstrate some level of difficulty within each of these areas, the degree to which their problem-solving and learning, independence, and relationships are affected varies from person to person.

Autism is a neurological disorder, meaning that the brain of an individual with ASD organizes, processes, and uses information differently to that of an individual without ASD. Many individuals with ASD have problems with central cohesion, which means they focus on specific details and lose sight of "big picture" concepts. They often have difficulty applying skills and information to novel situations or using previously learned information to problem-solve; these are examples of an ability called fluid reasoning. Working memory, or the ability to hold and manipulate multiple pieces of information in conscious thought at one time, also is often impaired. Certain components of executive functions (EF) such as directing and sustaining attention, planning, organizing, and inhibiting behavioral

responses are also challenges for many individuals with ASD. Fluid reasoning, working memory, and EF abilities rely on communication between several regions of the brain.

Recent neuroimaging studies provide evidence that there is a disruption in brain connectivity—the communication—between different regions of the brain in individuals with ASD. Just et al. (2004) proposed the underconnectivity theory of autism and argue that the behavioral characteristics of ASD are caused by a disruption in communication between the frontal and posterior brain regions. For example, individuals with ASD have difficulty with theory of mind (ToM), which is the ability to understand the perspectives and intentions of others. During one neuroimaging study, when participants with ASD completed a task requiring them to make inferences about the intentions of animated geometric figures, the functional connectivity between frontal and posterior ToM areas was lower compared with individuals without ASD (Kana et al., 2009). Limited communication between brain regions may be explained by abnormalities in white matter in individuals with ASD (Schipul, Keller, and Just, 2011).

Gary Mesibov and Melissa Sreckovic (2017). *Caught in the Web of the Criminal Justice System* (pp. 75).

John Douard is a professor of cognitive psychology and Pamela Schultz is a professor of communication studies.

Baron-Cohen (1995, 2011) has isolated a complex network of neural processes that, when functioning within a normal range, enable us to know what it is like to be another person, to experience another's pain, to respond to another's joys and sufferings, and to see the world from the other person's point of view. Those subjective experiences are also an essential capacity for learning to control our human environment, which is made up of potentially unpredictable persons like ourselves. These mind-reading skills are independent of general intelligence levels. We can control our human environments because we can imagine what it is like to be other people and can predict their behavior with some degree of facility (Baron-Cohen, 1995, p.4). People with AS, however, do not seem to have such facility and we often cannot predict their behavior (Baron-Cohen, 1995, pp.59–84). Attribution of mental states "is our natural way of understanding the social environment" (Baron-Cohen, 1995, p.4).

There is an obvious irony here: people with AS seem to require behavioral routines to reduce stress, which should make their behavior more predictable than those who can respond to circumstances with greater spontaneity. But part of our conception of personhood with a full range of experiential capacities is precisely that our behavior, and especially our use of language, is intentional and responsive to the variety of circumstances in which we find ourselves.

That is not to say that people with AS do not have experiences, but that neurotypical people cannot experience the world as do people who process information in atypical ways. People with AS are like Nagel's bat; their senses and perceptions are moving to a rhythm that is difficult, if not impossible, for us to imagine because it is so different from our own. Baron-Cohen has distinguished people who lack the cognitive and affective capacities for empathy, but can develop other skills that enable the development of a moral conscience, from those who lack even those alternative routes to morally responsible conduct. He calls the latter "zero-negative" because they lack a moral conscience. He calls the former "zero-positive" because they need to construct rule-governed patterns of conduct to protect themselves from intense levels of stress and anxiety, and those rules often include moral rules (Baron-Cohen, 2011, pp.111–141). These repetitive or routine-based behaviors that people with autism exhibit should show that control is as important to them as it is for the

rest of us, and hence prove that they are not so very different in the end. Yet until fairly recently, their lack of ToM and their routine, repetitive behaviors, in addition to myriad other manifestations of autism, have led us to view people with AS as abnormal, alien, and, in some circumstances, even frightening.

John Douard and Pamela Schultz (2017). *Caught in the Web of the Criminal Justice System* (p. 353).