The Spectacular Spectrum: College Students and a New Way of Understanding

Jane Thierfeld Brown, Ed.D
What’s it Like to Think Like Me?

- Distractible
- Unable to “know” what other’s want from me
- Highly knowledgeable about certain topics
- Concrete – black and white
- Excellent memory from a long time ago
- Problems generalizing across settings
- Rule-bound
What’s It Like to Learn Like Me?

• Disorganized
• Concept of time
• Singular learning style
• Sequencing
• Executive functioning problems
• Poor judgment and decision making
• Inflexible thinking
1...

• Could have written the textbook
• Don’t turn in my homework
• Jump out of my chair to correct my professors
• Can’t speak when called on in class
• Want you to get to know me
The Modal Student

- Male
- Clumsy
- Lonely or sad
- Rigid
- Disorganized
- Sensory aversive
- Talks a lot about a little
- Loud voice
- Odd phrases or gestures
- Poor eye contact
- Seems to follow but doesn’t understand
- Doesn’t see others point of view
- Dress slightly off
- Doesn’t come alone
- Appears bright but vague or lost
Are the numbers going up?

- Spike in last decade
- Textbooks used to say 4/10,000
- Current estimate 1/88
- Is it real?
- Why?
National Statistics ASA

✓ 1 in 88 births
✓ 1 to 1.5 million Americans
✓ Fastest-growing developmental disability
✓ 10 - 17% annual growth
✓ Growth comparison during the 1990s:
  ✓ U.S. population increase: 13%
  ✓ Disabilities increase: 16%
  ✓ Autism increase: 172%
✓ $90 billion annual cost
✓ 90% of costs are in adult services
✓ Cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention
✓ In 10 years, the annual cost will be $200-400 billion
What is causing the increase?

- Environmental factors
- Broader criteria
- Diagnostic substitution
- Sampling differences
- Changing nomenclature
- Perceived advantages
Core of ASD

- Cognitive
- Behavioral
- Interpersonal
Cognitive Disability

- Integrate and synthesize
- Parts vs. wholes
- Executive dysfunction
- “Theory of Mind”
Behavioral Disability

- Rigid, stereotyped behavior and/or mannerisms
- Unusual, repetitive preoccupation with objects or ideas
- Often mechanical in nature, maps, weather, trains, schedules
- Special interests may become real talents and assets

Interpersonal Disability

- Core social skills
- Lack social awareness, naïve, indifferent or anxious
- Approach often awkward & effortful
- “Intuitive social knowledge” (Tanguay, 2001)
- Bully magnets
Communication

• Processing incoming information
• Reading between the lines
• Determining implicit as well as explicit directions
• Asking too many questions
Social Dyslexia

• Richard Howlin, Asperger Society of Michigan 2003 newsletter
• Inability to read social interactions
• Systematizers vs. Empathizers (Baron Cohen)
Sensory Integration Dysfunction

- Lights
- Music
- General dorm or noise
- Fire alarms
- Touch
- Behaviors/causes/misinterpretation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>(mis)Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head on desk</td>
<td>Sensory overload</td>
<td>Rude, sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimics or recites back</td>
<td>Time to process</td>
<td>Not taking speaker seriously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great expressive skills</td>
<td>Compensates for receptive skills</td>
<td>Overestimation of functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odd speaking habits</td>
<td>Pragmatic Language deficits</td>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May not respond to facial expressions, tone</td>
<td>Difficulty with non-verbals</td>
<td>Leads to miscues in assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not recognize you</td>
<td>Limited facial recognition</td>
<td>Aloof, rude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May not shift topic on cue</td>
<td>Does not automatically catch on</td>
<td>Self-absorbed, uninterested</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facial Expressions

• A code we use to decipher the inside of others.

• Peter Vermeulen
Vermeulen, p. 131

“Just as with objects, we see faces in a context. The meaning we give to a facial expression is context sensitive.”
**Fitting in... Autistic Burnout**

**What is it?**
1. Late onset loss of functionality due to sustained monumental efforts.
2. Happens to MANY young ASD adults and many more all the way up into 50-60 years.
3. Often directly related to failing at "fitting in" with NT social skills despite faking it all the time to make it.

**ASD Adult NEEDS:**
1. Know basic polite skills
2. Acceptance.
3. Protection.
5. Education on awareness and advocacy.
7. Vocational training in a strength area.

**NEVER:**
1. Assume social skills learned in a classroom will work outside of the classroom.
2. Underestimate how hard it is to be someone you are not neurologically meant to be.
3. Assume that NT social skills are the only way to success and/or integration in society.
4. Underestimate the importance of "like" people/friends for social interactions and practicing of ASD social skills.
5. Believe the books have all the answers. Ask about Autistic Burnout on forums where there are autistic adults.

No ASD book or NT professional references Autistic Burnout. Only ASD adults talk of it. Please treat this as a real and serious threat until it can be disproven as a threat.

Visit Karla's ASD Page for more information

Karla Fisher
Mental Processing

Brain Drain

- The typical brain processes more than 80% of information subconsciously, with minimal cognitive effort.
- Because of delayed processing, the autistic brain processes most information at a conscious level.
- Typical day requires so much more cognitive energy.
- Nervous system becomes taxed and overwhelmed.
Beware of your assumptions:
Myth vs. Reality

- People with AS lack empathy for others
- People with AS have flat emotions
- People with AS fidget when restless
- In general, NT’s have very little empathy for people with AS
- The emotions of people with AS are anything but flat; not seeing them doesn’t mean they aren’t there or aren’t felt.
- Behaviors function to regulate the environment
Texas researchers believe that people who have Asperger's Syndrome may have found a new therapy in an unlikely place: the online virtual world Second Life. As a treatment, professionals take patients through a series of exercises, in groups and individually, designed to help them learn social skills. In the center's new therapy, patients may have a job interview with a "boss" character or learn to ask another avatar out on a date.
Second Life
Benefits of video conferencing

For Students:

• Computer screen interface less stressful than face to face for ASD

• Buy-in for students who already love technology
Benefits for Students cont.

• Can have appointments with provider at more preferred times

• Decreased demand to process interactions quickly over computer screen
Benefits of video conferencing

For Providers:

• Less travel time, cost effective

• Maintain more consistent contact with student

• Ability to assess co-curricular life while maintaining appropriate boundaries
Benefits for Providers cont:

• Can include parents, other support persons

• Support student from strength based perspective

• Real-time sharing and editing of documents
Leave with a challenge…

The student is not the only locus of change
The Parent’s Guide to College for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Jane Thierfeld Brown, EdD,
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Lisa King, MsEd
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Foreword by Temple Grandin
Questions and Comments

Thank you for coming.

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www.CollegeAutismSpectrum.com

Yale Child Study
UConn UCEDD
UConn Law