Autism

A utism is a spectrum condition, in that it manifests in varying degrees of severity. At one extreme, a person may have no social skills, no language, and major learning difficulties. At the other end of this spectrum, a person may have normal or even above average IQ, precocious vocabulary development (though a lack of interest in small-talk or chatting), and social skills that are only odd by virtue of being one-sided or extremely self-centred. The former case would receive a diagnosis of classic autism. The latter case would receive a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (AS). Both represent subgroups on the autistic spectrum. Both also share a strong preference for routines and repetition, and where the intellectual style narrow and deep – an ‘obsessional’ interest in highly specific topics. Up to 1% of the population are somewhere on the autistic spectrum.

Psychological aspects

The emphatising-systemising (E-S) theory1 proposes that there are emphatising deficits in autism, whilst systemising is either intact or superior. Empathy involves imagining another person’s thoughts and feelings and having an emotional reaction to what that other person’s feelings. Children and adults with AS show their empathising deficits on age-appropriate tests. This deficit underlies the difficulties in social and communicative development and in imagining others’ minds. Systematising is the drive to analyse a system in terms of underlying rules, in order to understand and predict its behaviour. People with autism spectrum conditions show precocious understanding of systems, relative to their mental age. The unusually strong repetitive behaviour, the strong desire for routines, and the ‘need for sameness’, may have no social skills, no language, and major learning difficulties. At the other end of this spectrum, a person may have normal or even above average IQ, precocious vocabulary development (though a lack of interest in small-talk or chatting), and social skills that are only odd by virtue of being one-sided or extremely self-centred. The former case would receive a diagnosis of classic autism. The latter case would receive a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (AS). Both represent subgroups on the autistic spectrum. Both also share a strong preference for routines and repetition, and where the intellectual style narrow and deep – an ‘obsessional’ interest in highly specific topics. Up to 1% of the population are somewhere on the autistic spectrum.

References