The interpersonal nature and treatment of autism

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Introduction

In order to understand the syndrome of autism, and to deliver effective interventions, one needs to appreciate the developmental significance of affected individuals’ limited abilities to engage with the attitudes of other people. Although from a biological perspective there are various causes of autism (of which a genetic predisposition is among the most important), there appears to be a final common pathway – one that entails a particular limitation in interpersonal engagement – leading to the constellation of affective, cognitive, and executive difficulties that characterize individuals with autism. It is important to explore how intervention may foster the interpersonal relations of persons with autism.

We shall give four formal presentations that dwell on typical development as well as studies of autism, and anticipate open discussion.

Session 1. Interpersonal perception, engagement, and understanding (‘Theory of Mind’): Typical infants and children with autism. Presenter: R. Peter Hobson

Content: We shall examine how a young child’s engagement with the bodily-expressed attitudes of others underpins the child’s knowledge of people (‘Theory of Mind’) – and how such engagement is compromised among individuals with autism. We shall address these matters from philosophical as well as empirical viewpoints. We shall consider how limitations in interpersonal relations affect mutual relations towards a shared environment (joint attention), and highlight the relevance for understanding autism by citing our studies of congenitally blind children.

Session 2. Social-developmental origins and expressions of symbolizing. Presenter: Jessica A Hobson

Content: We shall illustrate the implications of interpersonal engagement for cognitive development, through the example of creative symbolic play. Early interactions with caregivers are vital to the development of pretend play, accompanied by qualities of playfulness and fun. Children with autism are often limited in these aspects of play – yet play may be fostered through guided participation in joint engagement with caregivers. Again we shall combine theoretical perspectives with empirical studies involving children with autism.

Session 3. The organization of social experience and communication: Identifying with other people. Presenter: R Peter Hobson

Content: We shall delve more deeply into the nature of interpersonal engagement and communication, and suggest that a process of ‘identifying with’ others is critical for social, communicative, and cognitive
development. We shall present a series of studies to illustrate how this ability is compromised among individuals with autism.


Content: We shall consider the implications of our approach for designing and implementing interventions for individuals with autism. If, for a variety of reasons, a prime focus of intervention should be affected individuals’ limitations in social engagement, then how is such engagement to be fostered, and what are the potential implications for the children’s functioning? We shall respond to these questions by discussing how Relationship Development Intervention offers a way to enhance the child-caregiver interactive system, and present research on its potential benefits.

References


Additional reading:
