


ASD and relationships
Clarifying the challenge and the challenge of clarifying
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SIKON 2019

AUTISM in CONTEXT
 from neurodiversity to neuroharmony
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Available on Twitter
[peter_autisme](https://twitter.com/peter_autisme)


Teaching about (intimate) relationships
 An autism friendly program for education on sex and relationships



Part 1: sexuality
 (Hellemans, Vermeulen, Conix, & Delameillieure, 2006)

Part 2: relationships
 (Vermeulen & Carette, 2011)

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Keys to successful relationships

- ✦ Friendship
- ✦ Honesty
- ✦ Communication
- ✦ Empathy
- ✦ Understanding
- ✦ Trust
- ✦ Mutual respect
- ✦ Responsibility
- ✦ Mutual support
- ✦ Commitment
- ✦ Giving gifts
- ✦ Being attentive
- ✦ Showing affection
- ✦ Time together
- ✦ Forgiveness
- ✦ ...

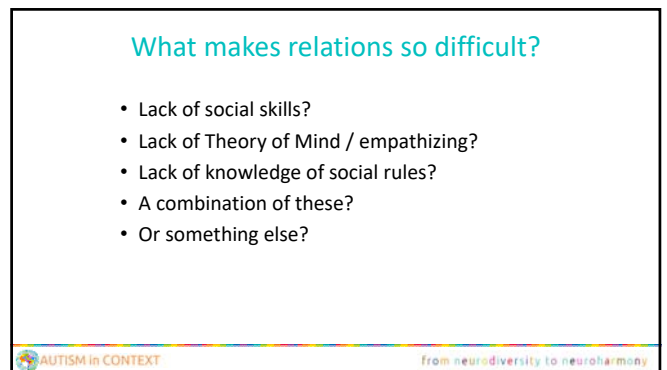
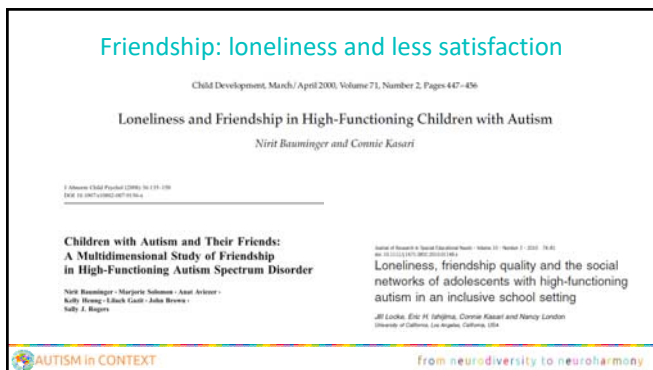
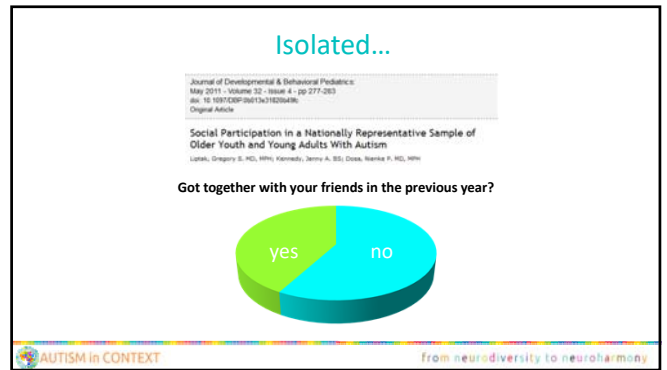
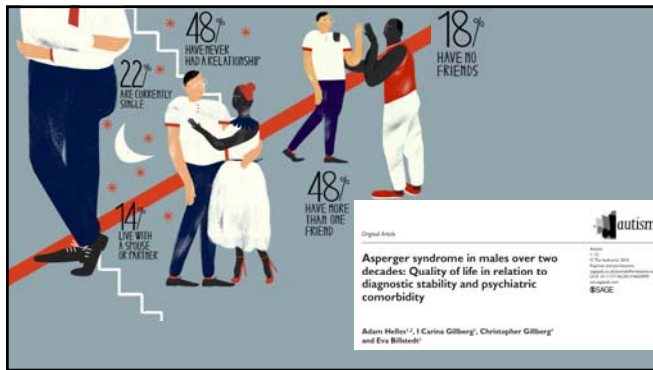
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The challenges

People with ASD have a hard time engaging in (intimate) social relationships:

- Not knowing what to do and say, how and when
- Anxiety and worries
- Doing and saying the “wrong” things
- Being very vulnerable
- ...

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Very bold statement

If we want to help people with ASD in their relationships, **social skills training** is not the best, nor the first strategy!

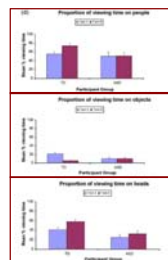
Relational competence

- Requires more than social skills!
- It requires that you focus on the “right things”!
- Social perception is different in ASD (see a.o. Klin et al., 2002; Benson, 2009: atypical scanning of scenes)

Atypical scanning in autism



- A = material instruction
- B = social instruction



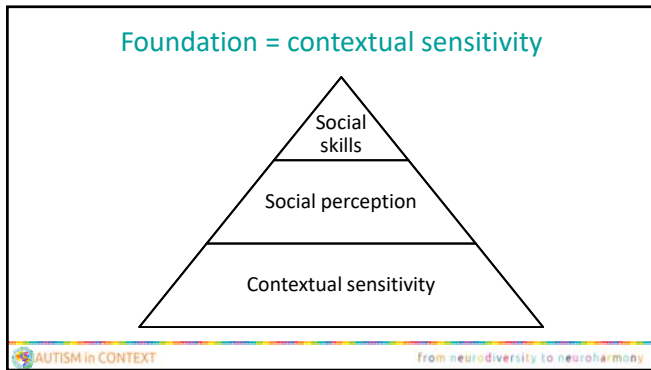
Benson, V. (2009). Atypical saccadic scanning in autistic spectrum disorder. *Neuropsychologia* (47) 4, 1178-1182.

What you look at...



Is depending on the **context!**

- External context (*the situation*)
- Internal context (*goal, expectation, previous experiences...*)



Autistic people do have a Theory of Mind!

Adults with autism perform well even on more advanced tests of Theory of Mind (Roeyers a.o., 2001; Chevallier a.o., 2010; Spek, 2010; Begeer a.o., 2010)

Surprised Sure about something
Joking Happy

Reading the Mind in the Eyes (Baron-Cohen a.o., 1997)

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Context and mind reading

Difference between static and a-contextual (laboratory) tasks and more dynamic, naturalistic, **contextualized** tasks

Surprised Sure about something
Joking Happy

Reading the Mind in the Eyes (Baron-Cohen a.o., 1997)

At the end of the scene, how is the woman feeling?
1. worried 2. sorry 3. indifferently 4. interested

Reading the Mind in Films (Golani a.o., 2008)

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It's all in the context!

Schizophrenia Bulletin vol. 42 no. 7 pp. 875-883, 2016
doi:10.1093/schbul/kbw076
Advance Access publication December 1, 2015

Context Effects on Facial Affect Recognition in Schizophrenia and Autism: Behavioral and Eye-Tracking Evidence

Naath A. Sapani¹, Amy E. Pinckney¹, Laura P. Weitschiller¹, David J. Foss¹, and Claire Simpson¹
¹School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX; Department of Methodist University, Dallas, TX

The current study used the novel "Emotions in Context" task to examine how the interpretation and visual inspection of facial affect is modulated by congruent and incongruent emotional contexts in SCZ and ASD. Both adults with SCZ (n = 44) and those with ASD (n = 21) exhibited reduced affect recognition relative to typically-developing (TD) controls (n = 39) when faces were integrated within broader emotional scenes but not when they were presented in isolation, underscoring the importance of using stimuli that better approximate real-world contexts. Additionally, viewing

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Context and social cognition

Social cognition in ASD only impaired when context is involved
(Baez, Ibanez et al., 2012; 2014)

Foundations in NEUROSCIENCE

The effects of context processing on social cognition impairments in adults with Asperger's syndrome

Sandra Baez^{1,2,3} and Agustín Ibanez^{1,2,4,5,6*}

¹ Institute of Cognitive Neurology (INCOG) and Institute of Neuroscience, Flinders University, Barossa, Australia; ² UPR AIECO Foundation, Centro de Neurociencias (AIECO), Diego Portales University, Santiago, Chile; ³ National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Barossa, Argentina; ⁴ Universidad Autónoma del Caribe, Barranquilla, Colombia; ⁵ Australian Research Council, Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders, Sydney, NSW, Australia

FOCUSED REVIEW
published 12 September 2014
doi:10.1007/s11145-014-9333-9

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Context and social cognition

Process of Social Cognition: Performance of Adults with Asperger's Syndrome

Source: Baez & Ibanez (2014)

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Consequence:

- **ToM training no effect on social skills in real life!**
- Review study: 22 studies with 695 people:
While there is some evidence that theory of mind, or related skills, can be taught to people with ASD, there is currently poor quality evidence that these skills can be maintained, generalised to other settings, or that teaching theory of mind has an impact on developmentally-linked abilities.

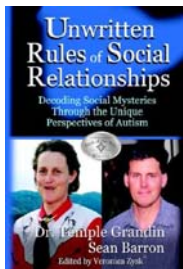
Fletcher-Watson S, McConnell F, Manola E, McConachie H. (2014) Interventions based on the Theory of Mind cognitive model for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2014, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD008785. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD008785.pub2.

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Foundation = contextual sensitivity

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Knowledge of social rules



The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships

Rule #1
Rules are Not Absolute; They are Situation-based and People-based.

Social skills and social scripts

- People with ASD can learn a lot of social scripts and skills...
- But have difficulties with contextual changes (flexibility) (Loth a.o., 2008; 2010)

Loth a.o. (2010)

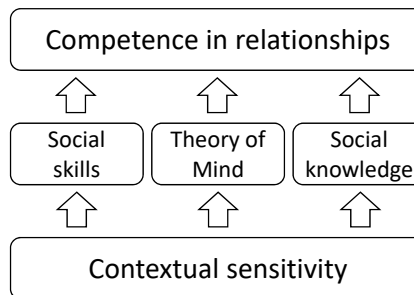
J Autism Dev Disord
DOI 10.1007/s10803-009-0929-7

ORIGINAL PAPER

Variety is Not the Spice of Life for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Frequency Ratings of Central, Variable and Inappropriate Aspects of Common Real-life Events

Eva Loth · Francesca Happé · Juan Carlos Gómez

- Contextual variations are often seen as central or as fixed rules, even in those who pass high level ToM tests
- e.g. *having a dessert when going to a restaurant*



A relationship...

Is a contextually influenced
open system

Closed systems	Open systems
If x, then y	If x, then <i>maybe</i> y
Outcome based on rules and laws	Outcome based on "many things"

Lawson, J. (2003). Depth Accessibility Difficulties: An alternative conceptualisation of autism spectrum conditions. *J. for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 33(2), 189-202.

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Closed and open systems

- Closed systems:
 - No contextual influence
 - Context is fixed and static
- Open systems:
 - Huge contextual influence
 - Dynamic context (context reacts!)

Input: 2
 Operation: add 2
 Output: 4

Input: Peter Vermeulen
 Operation: Give a present
 Output: ???

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Open vs closed systems

The difference?

CONTEXT!!

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Autism as context blindness

Context blindness:
 Reduced ability to use the context **spontaneously** when giving meaning to (especially vague, ambiguous and abstract) stimuli.





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Keys to successful relationships

- Friendship
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- Empathy
- Understanding
- Trust
- ... attentive
- Showing affection
- Time together
- Forgiveness

Vague and abstract!!

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Keys for success = abstract concepts

The concept of “a relationship” is very vague and abstract.

Relationships are 1000 times more difficult than math!

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If you're context blind...

Relations are for an autistic brain

illogical and unpredictable!

MOST ILLOGICAL

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Conclusion

We will have to clarify all those things that are obvious for people who are context sensitive

in a very, very concrete way!

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