

**INVULNERABLES & PEOPLE WITH AUTISM**  
**ANCHOR INTERPERSONAL CONTINUA**

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This paper examines two classes of individuals who are proposed to anchor extremes on continua of innate interpersonal abilities. Autistic individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have severe deficits in social-emotional functioning but may be otherwise of normal or even superior intelligence. Researchers studying psychological resiliency have found individuals dubbed "invulnerables" who transcend punishing childhoods to become emotionally healthy adults. Both autism and invulnerability have confounded behavioral scientists, who frequently use words such as "enigma" in discussing these two phenomena. This paper argues that mainstream psychology has largely failed to make sense of autism and invulnerability because the standard social science model does not take into account the highly evolved nature of humans' abilities in the domains of social and self-development.

Since its inception in the nineteenth century psychology has consistently underestimated the extent to which people are endowed by their genetic heritage with innate structures for developing human relationships. Social scientists have traditionally supposed that children didn't come equipped with a desire to love and be loved, possessed no instinctual skills about how to relate to others or to read others' intentions and emotions, and that children were not naturally interested in what other people were thinking, feeling and doing. But, Baron-Cohen (1995) points out, this description fits not a normal child, but a child diagnosed as autistic.

In addition, psychology has traditionally failed to realize how deeply social the human species is (see Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). Modern psychology formed during a period of radical individualism; Freud and others gave primary importance to self-development over interpersonal relatedness. Both the errors of seeing babies as blank slates and that of believing they are asocial

were due to psychology's failure to appreciate the impact of biological evolution on the human psyche.

Cosmides and Tooby (1992) have argued that evolution results in cognitive structures -- such as those governing jealousy or empathy -- rather than atomic behaviors, per se; they speculate that hundreds or thousands of evolved psychological structures help humans make sense of the world. Baron-Cohen and his colleagues have identified a number of cognitive structures or modules that they call Theory of Mind Module (ToMM), Shared Attention Module (SAM) and Intentionally Detector (ID) that help individuals navigate the social world.

This paper suggests that humans also possess a rich set of what might be called Theories of Relationships Modules (TRMs) for Mother, Lover, Friend and Self. The degree of development of these TRMs may be conceptualized as varying along continua. The so-called invulnerable and autistic individuals represent opposite poles in the presence or influence of the hypothetical modules governing the ability to imagine and enact the reciprocal roles of mother, friend and lover, as well as modules affecting social interest, empathy and competence that Baron-Cohen and others describe.

### **INVULNERABLES**

Anthony (1974) called certain individuals "the invulnerables." These resilient children from extremely deprived and chaotic environments grew up to be healthy, loving adults. While autistic children show little attachment even when surrounded by loving family, some young survivors of trauma turn readily and trustingly toward human connection. Autism shows us by its deficits what we have taken for granted in normal children; positive evidence for the innate presence of social modules comes from studies of resiliency. These studies remind us that normal infants are born with a capacity to connect. Often they will love, even when their parents are cruel, unreliable, or neglect them. For example, Genie, a thirteen-year-old girl who had been kept in isolation since infancy, was past the critical period for learning grammar and never developed normal language, but attached readily to her first caregiver, despite never having experienced maternal devotion.

If normal children have innate cognitive structures concerned with abilities to imagine relationship and to relate there are likely to be variations in those abilities. Studies of identical and

fraternal twins found that identical twins were more similar than fraternal twins in their reported empathy (Matthews et al, 1981; Rushton et al, 1986 ). Nowicki and Mitchell (1998) found variation in accuracy in identifying affect among preschoolers. This variation was only weakly associated with IQ indicating that the ability to recognize feelings derives from separate structures than general intelligence. Baumrind's (1971) longitudinal study found individual differences in children's nurturance, sympathy, consideration and understanding of the perspectives of peers (what Baron-Cohen would call the functions of the ToMM) that persisted over the years.

Oddly, research on resiliency has tended to focus on environmental factors, with relatively little research on personal characteristics of the individuals. When resiliency researchers look for individual factors they list such relatively undifferentiated characteristics as "easy temperament," "ability to plan," "high activity levels," "cognitive skills," and "resourcefulness" (Garmezy 1991). They then shift to focus on environmental factors such as being given responsibility for chores, or the presence of a benevolent non-parental adult. Resiliency researcher, Emmy Werner explains that researchers have focused on "protective factors" in the environment rather than factors in the individuals because while "... resiliency is a characteristic that varies from person to person, protective factors are more specific and narrowly defined" (Werner and Smith, 1992, p. 5).

Resiliency researchers have failed to look for differences in individual's ability to *imagine* relationship. Their failure to tackle this problem may result from lack of a conceptual framework for studying these individuals in an evolutionary context. Evolutionary psychology may well provide a set breaking framework that the study of resiliency, as well as normal development, needs.

The invulnerables themselves share optimism that loving relations are possible despite their personal experience of pervasive abuse and neglect. They do not think of their transcendence in terms of their skill at reading facial expressions or mindreading. They conceptualize their lives' struggles in terms of their belief in the possibility of loving relationship. These ideas which are shared human schemas of relationships with mother, friend or intimate partner, allow the resilient individuals to, in the words of one researcher, "fall down seven times and get up eight."

When asked what gave them the strength to transcend their environment the invulnerables often attribute their success to someone who loved them and believed in them. Working with poor inner-city youth, Henderson and Milstein (1996) and Schorr (1988) emphasize the salutary role of relationships with an adult who cares. What attributes and social skills in the invulnerables lead these teachers, ministers, neighbors and friends to choose a particular child out of the crowd; and, what allows the resilient child to respond to this opportunity with trust, openness and attachment beginning a beneficial chain of reciprocal interactions? Researchers find that the resilient are the kind of children people want to take home with them--intelligent, engaged, open and optimistic.

It is because of instincts for relationship that many will try to find someone to love even if their parents are unavailable or brutal. The unconditional devotion of animals has been used by the resilient. Many people are healed by feeling the love of religious figures. In the absence of caring adults, children in concentration camps mothered each other. It is difficult to account for "invulnerability" or even "resilience" unless humans come into the world with an innate expectation and longing to love and be loved. Nature allows invulnerables to find nurture.

## AUTISM

Autism can provide the negative of what "invulnerable" children possess in super-abundance, the left anchor to their right on a continuum of ability. If humans have instincts for social relations and self-development, we would expect such structures to fail occasionally, just as some babies are born blind or deaf; failure of these instincts may account for some autistic symptomatology. Autism highlights how much innate knowledge of and desire for social relations normal children have.

Autism is a neurological disorder characterized by deficits in social relations and core aspects of self organization. Although the majority of autistic individuals are also mentally retarded, one third have normal or even superior intelligence. These high functioning individuals with autism are now said to have Asperger's Syndrome. Autism is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM IV) as a "pervasive developmental disorder"

characterized by particular interpersonal and communication deficits. Included in the DSM IV criteria are the following: Autistic individuals seem to lack an awareness of the existence or feelings of others; for example, an autistic child may treat a person as if he or she were a piece of furniture, fail to notice another person's distress, and apparently have no concept of the need of others for privacy. Autistic children do not seek comfort at times of distress.

They do not imitate their parents, for example, by waving bye-bye or pointing. Social play is absent or abnormal. There is serious impairment in the ability to make peer friendships, either no interest in making peer friendships or, despite interest, these children may demonstrate lack of understanding of conventions of social interaction. For example, an autistic child may think interaction consists of reading a phone book to another child. An autistic child rarely looks at the person or smile when making a social approach, does not greet parents or visitors, and has a fixed stare in social situations. There is marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others. Nonverbal communication strikes observers as markedly abnormal, as in the use of eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture, or gestures to initiate or modulate social interaction. Autistic children often use "you" when "I" is meant.

We can read this description paraphrased from the DSM IV as a picture -- in reverse -- about the skills, wisdom and desires that normal babies develop automatically. For those who are not autistic, social intuition and the sense of "I" and "you" are so automatic that we have taken them for granted. Friendship and love not only involve skills, but rely on the individual's possessing the idea of and motivation for relationship. An autistic adult explains, "I don't know what a friend is;" this suggests an appreciation that most children do. The resilient show us that some children can imagine and have the skill for friendship even when they have never experienced it directly. People with autism demonstrate that some children cannot imagine friendship even when opportunities are present.

Baron-Cohen calls autistic people's inability to imagine what others are feeling "mind blindness." We take for granted our effortless empathy with other people's emotional states, but those who work with autistic children are struck by their patients' inability to read emotions. Some

attribute this lack of knowledge to a lack of interest, but people with autism say that they know the rest of us have intuitive knowledge that they cannot access (Grandin, 1984; Williams, 1992).

### **THEORIES OF RELATIONSHIP**

This paper proposes that invulnerability and autism anchor continua of the activity or influence of interpersonal and self schemas, and suggests that one of the major deficits in autism involves a lack or developmental lag of interpersonal schemas for Friend, Mother, Lover, and Self, and other interpersonal constructs. These putative modules might be called -- somewhat playfully -- a Theory of Reciprocal Relations module (ToRR), Theory of Maternal Devotion module (ToMD), Falling in Love module (FiL), and a Theory of the Self module (ToS).

To date the most sophisticated work has been done with the ToMD which corresponds to Bowlby's attachment instinct (1969) and to Jung's Great Mother archetype (1954). Most behavioral scientists have a knee-jerk negative reaction to Jung. They dislike his alleged mysticism, but Jung has put forward the most detailed descriptions of cognitive-affective schemata, including schemata of relationships. His description of the Great Mother archetype drawn from clinical research and themes in myths and stories abstracts notions of the contradictory aspects of being a mother, both idealized and concrete and for the ambivalent experience of being mothered.

Researchers studying first-time parents and their newborns find parents already possess a complex set of abilities, cognitions and emotions that prepare them to become devoted and skillful parents while babies orient to human faces, mold to their mothers' body, and anticipate care (Papoucek and Papoucek, 1982; Stern, 1985).

The processes and competencies involved in falling in love and friendship have been relatively neglected by cognitive scientists. Temple Grandin, a brilliant autistic woman explains that she is mystified by romantic love and perplexed the non-verbal communication of courtship and says, "I don't know what it is like to fall rapturously in love" (Sacks, 1994). Grandin apparently lacks the concept, motivation, feelings and skills that make up the schemata, or in Jung's terminology, archetype of romantic love.

## CONCLUSION

It is argued that the normal child growing up in the average environment naturally develops particular interpersonal schemas and behaviors that are characteristic of humanity, complete with a uniquely human set of skills, beliefs and motivations having to do with familial devotion, friendship, and sexual love. This normal development results from the interaction of genetic information and the expectable environment. Even when the environment is grossly inadequate, some aspects of these characteristic interpersonal schemas and behaviors may still be present. Yet, when bright autistic youngsters grow up in a loving environment these schemas may never develop.

These phenomena are evidence for the existence of innate modules for Theories of Relationship. Broadening the discussion of autism, resiliency and normal development to include modular structures for being a friend, lover or parent can provide a fresh perspective for researchers and clinicians. We can think of autism and invulnerability as anchoring ends of continua of social interest, social cognition and ability, with invulnerables being especially proficient, skillful and motivated to relate.

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