

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME AND RELATED CONDITIONS The reason why?

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen

Director, Autism Research Centre, Cambridge

Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, University of Cambridge

Monday, 7th March, 2005; 7.30 - 9.00 p.m.

The Wolfson Lecture Theatre, Churchill College, Cambridge

Chair:

Professor Eugene Paykel

Vote of Thanks:

Professor Sir Sam Edwards FRS

About the lecture:

"Simon Baron-Cohen, a tall, soft-spoken clinical psychologist at the University of Cambridge, has spent two decades studying autism - how to help the people disabled by it and what the syndrome tells us about normal minds. Baron-Cohen is interested in the brain and in genes (his group at Cambridge is collaborating with geneticists in new studies of Asperger's syndrome), but his key interest is in minds: their workings, their malfunctions, their origins, and their care.

From the beginning, his work has been centred around what's called a theory of mind - that is, an innate ability to understand other people as having feelings, intentions, and pictures of the world that are not the same as our own. A theory of mind is a basic requirement for empathy or, for that matter, deceit. And according to an approach to autism that has become increasingly influential in Britain over the past decade or so, a theory of mind is what people disabled by autism and its related conditions lack. They are, in Baron-Cohen's nicely coined word, "mindblind." More recently, Baron-Cohen has looked at another aspect of the autistic mind: a proclivity for systemising - for understanding and constructing rules-based systems to explain our experience. To understand the social world, such rules are a poor replacement for a theory of mind; to understand the natural world, they are very useful."

(quoted from an interview with Prof. Baron-Cohen from 'Wired' magazine)

Asperger's syndrome (AS) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA)

Autism is diagnosed on the basis of abnormalities in the areas of social development, communicative development, and imagination, together with marked repetitive or obsessional behaviour or unusual, narrow interests.

Individuals with autism may have an IQ at any level. By convention, if an individual with autism has an IQ in the normal range (or above), they are said to have 'high-functioning autism' (HFA). If an individual meets all of the criteria for HFA except communicative abnormality/history of language delay, they are said to have Asperger's syndrome (AS).

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What is not clear, and therefore the subject of debate, is whether individuals with AS/HFA necessarily have a disability.

About the speaker:

Simon Baron-Cohen is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge in the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry. He is also a Fellow in Experimental Psychology at Trinity College, Cambridge. In addition, he is Director of the Autism Research Centre (ARC) in Cambridge.

He has conducted extensive research into autism spectrum conditions at the psychological, diagnostic, and neuro-scientific levels. Among other books he is author of Mindblindness (MIT Press, 1995), The Essential Difference (Penguin UK/Basic Books, 2003), and Prenatal Testosterone in Mind (MIT Press 2004). He has edited several academic volumes, including Understanding Other Minds (OUP, 1995 and 2001). He also authored a DVD-OM entitled Mindreading: The interactive guide to emotions (Jessica Kingsley Ltd, www.jkp.com). He has published extensively in scientific journals in the fields of autism and cognitive neuroscience. For more information, see www.autismresearchcentre.com

The CSAAR Organising Secretary adds.....

According to Professor Baron-Cohen, Asperger's Syndrome is much more prevalent than hitherto believed. It is (according to some) about seven times more prevalent in males than females. Also, some of the characteristics of the condition predisposes the individual to a life in maths and the physical sciences!

I have known several people who might qualify; they have been brilliant scientists, with 'odd' social skills and (if one allows for their idiosyncracies), generally very nice people.

Housekeeping:

Starting with this lecture we shall charge **non-members** a nominal sum of £2.50 each for admission. I shall have a list of all our *paid up* CSAAR members to tick you all off as you enter, so you don't need to worry! Member's guests, spouses etc will also be given free entry

Next year, we'll introduce a two-tier membership system; individual membership, and joint/family membership. The latter will, for a small extra charge, enable people to bring along the wife, husband, partner, kids, servants and camp followers as well. Bargain!

The reason for the change is to recognise the fact that our fee-paying members are a very important part of both our audience and also our finances; and that, at present, they really subsidise the lectures for those non-members who simply turn up on the day. We are an unashamedly minimalist society, existing on a budget of around £5k/year, so any losses or missed income are potentially damaging to us. Time to set matters right!

I have also discovered that two other Cambridge societies have started charging their non-members nominal sums for attending their lectures. So we are not alone.....

Coffee and biscuits available, as usual, in the foyer from ~7.00 p.m.

Richard Freeman, *CSAR Organising Secretary*