

Girls & Women on the Autism Spectrum

Diagnostic (Dx) Issues

Dr Louise Connor
Clinical Psychologist

WHY do we Assess & Diagnose

- What use is the LABEL?
- Access to funding for support in education
- To provide appropriate intervention packages
- To explain a difficulty which the individual is experiencing or others around them are experiencing
- FORMULATION
- To describe fully
- Understand the core reasons for thinking processes, emotional reactions and behaviours
- Develop a relevant intervention plan for any difficulties
- Develop Self Awareness and Self Acceptance

Assessment is a process,
a journey of discovery
to answer questions.
Ideally it is not just a tick box and
rubber stamp exercise

Therefore identifying a label is the
beginning of the process – not the
end

Important 'normal' gender differences

- Evidence base that men **Externalize** emotional reactions, E.g. Throwing a table across the classroom.
- Whereas women **Internalize** emotional reactions, E.g. Self harm, Eating Disorders - Often 'hidden' conditions therefore may not be referred further by GP -
- However both represent equally high levels of distress when life isn't working for them
- A description (Eating Disorder) may be considered a Dx – but the underlying function is not explained. *Seen more in girls?*
- Clinicians may stop investigating after one Dx

Background to gender differences in Dx Issues

- Dx criteria developed by men – about men
 - Females are Dx between 4:1 & 10:1 Males to Females ...
 - Girls who are Dx have greater impairment than boys
 - Dx later than boys
 - DISCO, ADI-R do not account for gender differences
- However:
- Women can have the neuro-developmental characteristic & underlying ways of thinking, without the 'behavioural characteristics'
 - Dx based on there being SIGNIFICANT IMPAIRMENT . Possible to have the characteristics without obvious SI affecting others.
 - Many people with ASD have gender identity uncertainty

Male Brain Theory of Autism

Simon Baron Cohen, 2002.

- **Systematizing**
- The drive to analyse the variables in the system, to derive the underlying rules that govern the behaviour of a system. Systematizing also refers to the drive to construct systems. Systematizing allows you to predict the behaviour of a system, and to *control* it..
- **Empathising**
- The drive to identify another person's emotions and Thoughts, and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion. Empathizing allows you to predict a person's behaviour, and to care about how others feel.
- *Although not all of these research findings have been replicated*

Carrying out the Diagnostic Assessment

- Attwood – Spend TIME with the client.
- That person's characteristics and features are best determined through the relationship and interview process
- Look for a qualitative difference, not just quantitative. E.g. Intensity and rigidity of interest (e.g. American Dolls). Difficult to self report
- ADI focuses on **quality** of play, interaction, engagement in interests etc.

Persistent deficits/Impairment in Social Interaction.

- Demonstrate better Social and Emotional skills (Head et al 2014)
- Girls are more socially aware and Social Driven – *but why?*
- *Culture – Societal Expectations? - girls Talk rather than play football.*

Impairment in Verbal Communication

- Impact of social learning is more powerful on girls i.e. Social rewards & +ve feedback.
- Boys who talk about their special interest beyond the listener's interest = **Little Professor** – more socially acceptable than if a girl talks +++ dinosaurs.
- If struggling, can learn acceptable phrases (*Urban Dictionary*).
- Literal interpretation – cute, funny...
- Understanding underlying social message in language (small talk – expected in girls)

Deficits in Non-Verbal Communication

- How are non-verbal responses interpreted in our society? E.g. “Look at me when I’m talking to you”
- Girls are allowed to be ‘shy’. *But what does shy mean & why?*
- *‘Awkward’ girls are not as beautiful...therefore less socially acceptable.*

Restrictive Narrow Interest Patterns

- Girls show higher rates than boys on restricted repetitive behaviours.
- Girls often focus on animals, celebrities and fictional franchises – more ‘mainstream’ & socially acceptable.
- Focus on INTENSITY of the interest.
- E.g. Dallas, slug destruction

Routines and Rituals

- Repetitive and stereotyped behaviours in boys decreased over lifetime, whereas in girls it increased. (Rynkiewicz et al 2016) *Due to stress, reduced ability to cope/depression?*
- *‘male hobbies’, e.g. stamp collecting, are less acceptable in girls*
- Yet Routines & Rituals are linked to coping/anxiety reduction. They serve the function of increasing predictability

Sensory Issues.

- Sensory processing Issues (Lai et al 2011) more lifetime sensory symptoms than males
- Is it more socially acceptable for girls to like sparkly girly fiddle things? Or sing? Or dance in their room? rather than walk heavily around in circles?

Motor Co-ordination

- If 'clumsy', cant hide or succeed in sport or physical activities
- There is less of a demand on girls and women to be well co-ordinated.
- Girls can hide inside 'static beauty'

Emotional functioning & difficulties

- Girls experience greater anxiety or depression and greater sleep problems
- Empathy – for things that the person cares about personally.
- If a person has rationalised a death, and had a 'superficial' relationship, then their loss may not be perceived as huge as that of a dog in a film who was unjustly treated.
- People on the Spectrum have a reduced level of emotional intelligence/self awareness. If girls talk more about feelings – this is more likely to be socially learned by girls with ASC.

Coping

- **Camouflage Hypothesis** – (Gould & Ashton Smith). Girls mask limitations in Social Communication, understanding and Social Imagination.
- Girls tend to apologise and appease - this is *nice* in girls and a *weakness* in boys.

Characteristics present in Early development

- Rough and tumble play
- Establishing dominance in hierarchy
- Reduction in face preference and eye contact
- More sharing & turn taking
- Responding empathically to distress of other
- Ahead in development of theory of Mind
- Sensitivity to facial expressiveness
- Lack of female typical non-pretend play
- Girls with ASD More pretend play than boys (Knickmeyer & Baron Cohen 2008)

Significant impairment

- **Women** – Internal
- Symptoms of anxiety or anger in emotional reactions.
- Therefore if feeling threatened by an imposed change = anger toward self – **self harm**. *Not noticed*
- *Dx = Self Harm*
- **Men** – External
- Symptoms of anxiety or anger in behavioural reactions.
- Therefore, if feeling threatened by imposed change = **anger** towards other people, shout, slam door. *Gets noticed*
- *Dx = Anger problems*

Desired Outcome

- Recognition so that others can understand rather than judge
- Find appropriate ways towards interventions which increase coping (rather than change or cure)
- Be able to make choices that ensure that you get needs met
- Is it more useful to consider Autism as a CULTURE rather than a DISORDER. (e.g. burp after eating - Bahrain).

What people need

- WE ALL NEED:
- Predictability
- Control
- A sense of Mastery & Success
- Meaningful life
- Self awareness
- Self respect
- The ability to escape or cope with awful experiences.

SO...

- If we come into the world with the appropriate Tool Kits of Skills and Abilities and continue to learn throughout life, by avoiding what doesn't work and building on what does work
- And we have the environment within which we have the opportunity to learn and grow through self understanding, self acceptance, cultural understanding and cultural acceptance

SUMMARY

- There IS a difference between men and women
- If we're going to use tick charts to identify issues & diagnose – then these must reflect that difference
- More research is required into ASD Gender differences

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