
Intact Mirroring in Autism

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Abstract

The ability of those with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) to mirror actions (imitation) and emotions (empathy) has been a focus of much research. The standard view is that ASC is associated with deficits in both processes with accompanying deficits in those neural systems subserving them (collectively referred to as ‘mirror systems’). It shall be argued that in fact ASC is associated with deficits in neither process. With respect to imitation, data will be presented which demonstrates that rather than problems with imitation, those with ASC exhibit problems with imitation-inhibition, possibly due to a failure of top-down modulation in ASC. Furthermore, the data suggests that problems with imitation-inhibition are indicative of problems with theory of mind and perspective-taking, and are associated with wider social deficits. With respect to problems with empathy, it shall be argued that the previously reported deficits in ASC, and potentially other reported emotional deficits, are instead due to comorbid Alexithymia. Alexithymia is the term used to describe an inability to identify and describe one’s own emotion, and prevalence is several times greater in the ASC population than in the typical population. It shall be argued that the presence of a high proportion of individuals with alexithymia is responsible for many of the affective symptoms of ASC including the claimed empathy deficit. Furthermore, failure to account for the presence of alexithymia in those with ASC may account for conflicting results in the processing of emotion more generally in ASC.

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