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Research Paper

Using personal construct methodology to explore relationships with adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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ABSTRACT

Background: Research shows that adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience difficulties developing friendships, and that loneliness is a significant factor contributing to higher incidence of anxiety and depression within this population.

Aims: This study aimed to provide an in-depth analysis of relationships as described by adolescents with ASD, and, from these descriptions, to explore what can be inferred about the development of successful interpersonal relationships for these individuals.

Methods and procedure: Eight adolescents with ASD participated in semi-structured interviews using established personal construct theory (PCT) techniques.

Outcomes and results: PCT was found to be a helpful approach to elicit rich, qualitative data. A thematic analysis identified four themes: relationships as a source of support, perceptions of similarity and difference, valued qualities in self and others, and the development and maintenance of relationships.

Conclusions and implications: Whilst this exploratory study highlighted some commonality in terms of perceptions of family support and friendships as protective and desirable, participants differed in their ability to establish and maintain peer relationships. Participants valued personal qualities such as intelligence, humour and trust within relationships, and recognised the important role of peers and siblings in the development of social skills, a finding which has implications for the delivery of social skills training and other interventions. The study provides empirical support for the application of personal construct methodologies in ASD research and offers a potentially useful approach to therapeutic intervention.

What this paper adds

Whilst research suggests that individuals with ASD typically find forming and maintaining relationships difficult and, as a consequence, may experience loneliness and psychological distress, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative case studies describing their experience. Perhaps because they often find talking about emotive issues and interpersonal dynamics difficult, engaging this population in qualitative research can be challenging. However, personal construct theory has been presented as a useful approach, since it is sensitive to the social communication needs of people with ASD. This study employed two specific PCT approaches as a way of generating discursive data. Dyadic construct elicitation was found to work well with this population, but due to the discrete nature of the constructs the technique of laddering may not illuminate a consistent hierarchy. However, in utilising these methods, the study

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enriches previous findings by reinforcing the importance of friends and siblings as active conduits to the social world, the importance of considering gender in the social context of the individual, and the importance humour plays as a social skill.

1. Introduction

Consistent with current diagnostic criteria, individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face challenges developing and maintaining social relationships. Research has demonstrated they often experience loneliness as a consequence (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000) and this can lead to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (Mazurek, 2013).

Studies have shown that adolescence is a particularly challenging time for individuals with ASD, with increased vulnerability to comparatively high levels of loneliness, low life satisfaction, anxiety, and depression (Feldhaus, Koglin, Devermann, Logemann, & Lorenz, 2015; Strang et al., 2012; Whitehouse, Durkin, Jaquet, & Ziatas, 2009). Social relationships play a significant role in buffering against loneliness and enhancing psychological resilience (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). However, recent research has shown that not only may there be differences in the quantity of relationships maintained by young people with ASD, but also in the quality. In a systematic review of the characteristics of friendship in children and adolescents with ASD, Petrina, Carter, Stephenson, and Sweller (2016) conclude that this group differed in the frequency, quality and reciprocity of friendship, and there was some evidence this became more acute as the child developed. The literature indicates that adolescents with ASD experience particular difficulty forming appropriate relationships with peers at school (Attwood, 1998) and are at increased risk of experiencing peer bullying (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam, & Williams, 2008).

In addition to friends, family has been identified as a significant source of social support for children with ASD (Bradford, 2010; Cridland, Jones, Magee, & Caputi, 2014). Good parental support has been found to be a protective factor against the experience of loneliness in this population, by facilitating access to social networks (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000), and by providing practical support in forming and maintaining friendships (Lasgaard, Nielsen, Eriksen, & Goossens, 2010). Sibling relationships have also been shown to be a protective factor (Lasgaard et al., 2010) by providing social support, sometimes as substitute friends (Knott, Lewis, & Williams, 1995), but also as an important source of social learning and social facilitation (Tsao & Odom, 2006).

Research exploring precisely how children with ASD see social relationships functioning is limited, but recent work looking at gender is illuminating some essential differences between boys and girls with ASD (Orsmond & Kuo, 2011). Whilst both genders want friendships, girls tend to be more actively motivated in seeking out and maintaining these relationships, and consequently may experience better quality relationships (Sedgewick, Hill, Yates, Pickering & Pellicano, 2016). Such studies show the complex interaction between mainstream gender differences in social development, combined with the specific social communication difficulties experienced within ASD (Tierney, Burns, & Kilbey, 2016).

Carrington and Graham (2001) caution researchers against making assumptions based upon their own beliefs regarding friendships, as these may differ from those held by adolescents with ASD. Previous research also indicates the need to more fully understand how the foundations to building social relationships, such as social motivation, self-presentation and reputation management, are seen from the perspective of the young person with ASD before effective support strategies can be developed (e.g. Cage, Bird, & Pellicano, 2016; Scheeren, Banerjee, Koot, & Begeer, 2016). Consequently, whilst the need for more in-depth, qualitative, studies focusing on relationship formation is argued for within the literature, it does present methodological challenges as the very deficits being explored may limit the utility of research methodologies which rely heavily upon the participant's ability to engage in a conversation of this nature (Carrington, Templeton, & Papinczak, 2003). Hence, researchers have sought structured methodologies to help scaffold these conversations and allow exploration in a way which is more comfortable to individuals with ASD.

One approach found to meet these aims is Personal Construct Theory (PCT). PCT (Kelly, 1955) is based on the principle of constructive alternativism, the notion that all our understanding, perceptions and insights are open to question and reconsideration (Butler & Green, 1998). The focus within the PCT framework is on exploring how an individual construes entities or events by using specified techniques to elicit constructs on which the individual builds their world views, and then, through contrast and comparison, how they make judgments and decisions (Butler & Green, 1998). PCT in the research context uses these techniques within a structured interview to elicit narratives around a particular topic. The aim is to reveal the subjective cognitive structures by which a person makes sense of the world, including a hierarchy of constructs. All constructs are bipolar, e.g. 'good' only has meaning in relation to 'bad', allowing the person to place themselves and others on that construct and hence build up a rich picture of themselves in relation to others. Used in this way PCT is a constructionist, phenomenological approach, but unlike some other approaches facilitates direct comparison between self and others.

Case studies using PCT methodologies have demonstrated this approach to be well suited to individuals who have ASD (e.g. Hare, Searson, & Knowles, 2011; Hare, Jones, & Paine, 1999; Hare, 1997; Proctor, 2001; Sharma, Winter, & McCarthy, 2013). Even those with quite significant impairments have been able to engage with this approach (Thomas, Butler, Hare, & Green, 2011). Cridland, Caputi, Jones, and Magee (2014), Cridland, Jones et al. (2014), Cridland, Caputi, Jones, and Magee (2015), Cridland, Jones, Caputi, and Magee (2015) and Cridland, Caputi, Walker, Jones, and Magee (2016) endorse the use of PCT when conducting research with adolescents with ASD, pointing to 'the dearth of literature attempting to look at this subgroup grounded in any theoretical approach' (p108, 2014a). They identify three significant adolescent developmental tasks which should be considered: functioning within the increasingly complex world of adulthood; identity development; and development of flexible processing styles.

In the 2015 paper Cridland et al. investigated these tasks using semi-structured interviews, with 26 participants, including adolescents with ASD ($n = 7$) and their families. Through thematic analysis they identified themes which related to the tasks outlined in the conceptual paper and an additional area: the challenges of puberty. All participants reported developing and maintaining friendships as difficult, especially understanding the complex and subtle functioning of adolescent friendships and distinguishing

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