



## Review article

## Commonly studied comorbid psychopathologies among persons with autism spectrum disorder



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 29 January 2014

Accepted 17 February 2014

Available online 12 March 2014

## Keywords:

Autism

Comorbidity

Psychopathology

ADHD

Intellectual disability

## ABSTRACT

The study of comorbid psychopathology among persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is picking up steam. The purpose of this paper was to review and describe important characteristics of existing studies. Among the current crop of papers, depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been frequently evaluated. Groups studied have most frequently been children. Persons with ASD and normal intelligence quotient (IQ) scores have been studied more often than individuals with ASD and intellectual disability. Additional characteristics are discussed, and the implications of these data for future developments in the field are reviewed.

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## 1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a chronic, life long condition that is among the most debilitating of the developmental disabilities. The disorder is composed of a number of core features including communication and social skill deficits and excesses in addition to stereotypies and repetitive behaviors (Fodstad, Matson, Hess, & Neal, 2009; Gadow & Drabick, 2012; Matson, Dempsey, & Fodstad, 2009; Matson, LoVullo, Rivet, & Boisjoli, 2009; Matson & Wilkins, 2009; Poon, 2012). Recently, researchers have pointed to a marked increase in the number of ASD cases identified, further underscoring the importance of the condition (Lin, Lin, & Wu, 2009; Matson & Kozlowski, 2011).

ASD was first described in the 1940s and for several decades after, the focus was on the core symptoms of the disorder. More recently, the notion of comorbid conditions has become a prominent area for study (Rumpf, Kamp-Becker, Becker, & Kauschke, 2012; Smith & Matson, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Among the most concerning and prominent of these comorbid

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disorders and problems are challenging behaviors and mental health issues (Kuhn & Matson, 2004; Matson, Dixon, & Matson, 2005; Matson & Kuhn, 2001; Matson, Mayville, et al., 2005).

This field of comorbidity is rapidly expanding and for good reasons. First, researchers are still learning how ASD interfaces with various forms of psychopathology (Matson & Smiroldo, 1997; Matson, Smiroldo, Hamilton, & Baglio, 1997). Second, these data are important for better understanding the etiology of all of these problems as well as how they interact (Grondhuis & Aman, 2012; Paclawskyj, Matson, Bamburg, & Baglio, 1997; Turner & Romanczyk, 2012). Third, these data have important implications for assessment and treatment (Edwards, Watkins, Lotfizadeh, & Poling, 2012; Fentress & Lerman, 2012; Matson & LoVullo, 2008; Matson, Wilkins, & González, 2008). For these and other reasons, research on this topic is flourishing. The purpose of this review was to take stock and provide an overview of common characteristics of these studies.

## 2. Method

To establish a database of articles, SCOPUS was searched using the terms autism, comorbidity, psychopathology, ADHD, diagnosis, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and disorders. Further, the references from the papers identified in the search were crosschecked to identify additional articles and related topics. One hundred nine papers were viewed as distinct. Papers were excluded if they failed to address the topic of comorbid symptoms in ASD. Seventy-two papers remained and are reported below.

## 3. Results and discussion

The papers were all of recent origin and are presented in Table 1.

Three papers were reported in 2000. Zero to three papers per year were located through 2007. The year with the most papers was 2008 ( $n = 14$ ). From 2008 through 2013, seven or more papers were identified each year (see Fig. 1). This trend demonstrates that emphasis on this topic is growing. Until recently, core symptoms were viewed distinct from comorbid conditions. For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)* did not allow for a dual diagnosis of ASD and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). However, these beliefs have changed and are at least in part reflected by the research trend noted above. The current version of the *DSM (DSM-5)* now permits comorbid diagnoses with ASD.

Thirty-one different disorders were studied in the papers reviews. The most frequently studied problem was ADHD ( $n = 38$  papers) followed by anxiety ( $n = 35$ ), depression ( $n = 20$ ), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD;  $n = 12$ ), oppositional

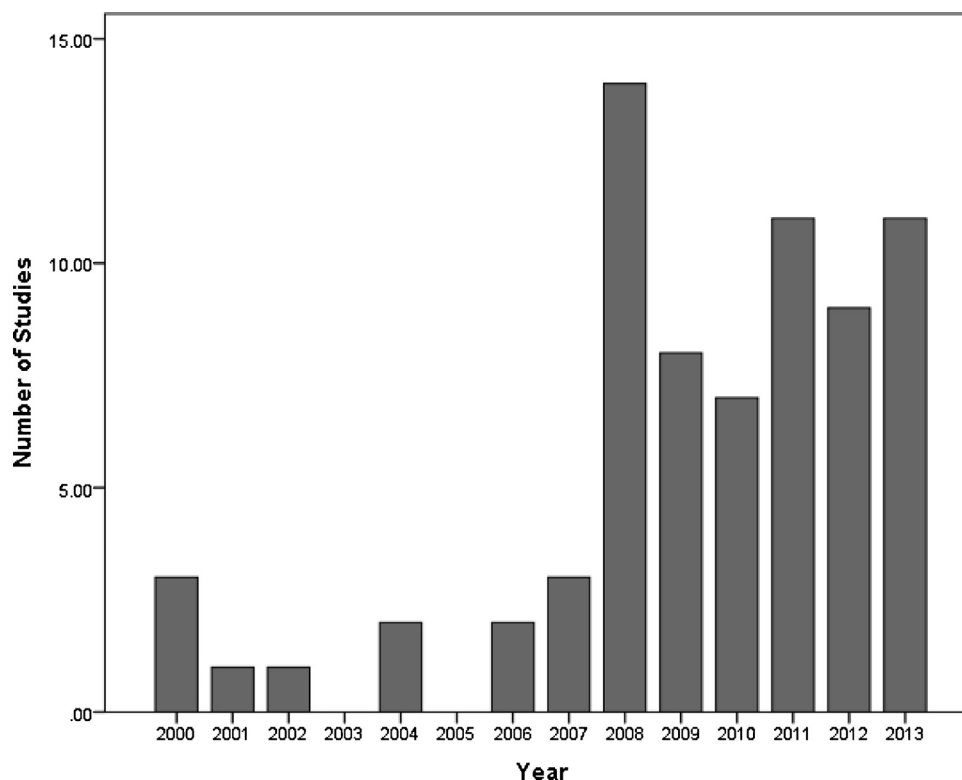


Fig. 1. Number of studies addressing comorbid psychopathologies in ASD by year.

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