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'I am who I am': Reputation concerns in adolescents on the autism spectrum

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence is often characterised by an increased concern for one's reputation in typical development. The extent to which autistic adolescents are concerned for their reputation, however, is unclear.
Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 autistic adolescents and five members of school staff to examine reputation concerns in autism. Topics discussed included being 'cool', friendships, worries and self-concepts.
Results: Thematic analysis revealed that autistic adolescents were sometimes concerned about their reputation, although many reported that they did not want to be cool. Instead, they preferred to be true to themselves and struggled to understand the rules of being cool. Adolescents' difficulties in coping with unpredictability also contributed to their understanding of social rules. Findings were supported by the responses of school staff.
Conclusions: This study suggests that autistic adolescents can be concerned about their reputation, with some wishing to be accepted for having a reputation for being different.

1. Introduction

Reputation is a social construct based on what others think of the self (Shaw, Li & Olson, 2013). Being able to effectively manage reputation is an important skill for maintaining friendships and relationships with others (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Tennie, Frith, & Frith, 2010). Although young children may be capable of managing their reputations (Leimgruber, Shaw, Santos, & Olson, 2012), adolescence marks a number of social changes that may lead to increased concern for reputation (Sebastian, Burnett, & Blakemore, 2008). Intimate peer relationships tend to become increasingly valuable for adolescents (Jankowski, Moore, Merchant, Kahn, & Pfeifer, 2014) and there is an enhanced desire to avoid social exclusion (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). For example, adolescents often change their behaviour when peers are present, such as by increasing risk taking (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Accordingly, behaviour in adolescence may be driven, in part, by a need to manage reputation in front of peers.

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Difficulties in social communication and interaction are hallmark features of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Adolescence can be a particularly difficult time for those on the autism spectrum, as they may struggle with the increased social complexities that the secondary school environment presents (Adreon & Stella, 2001; Carrington, Papinczak, & Templeton, 2003a). Indeed, cognitively-able autistic[1] adolescents report increased concerns about their friendships and an increasing awareness that they are different to other people (Carrington, Templeton, & Papinczak, 2003b; Stoddart, 1999). They also report that they would like to fit in and have friends (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010), although they often feel like they do not fit in (Portway & Johnson, 2003) and lack the skills to successfully obtain desired friendships (Bauminger, Cory, & Agam, 2003; Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010). As Milton (2013) notes, although the social experiences of autistic individuals are different to that of typical individuals, there is not necessarily a lack of interest in, or motivation for, social experiences, as is often assumed. For example, Carrington et al. (2003b) found that adolescents with autism reported using "masquerading" – pretending to know how social situations work – to hide their social difficulties from typical peers. Thus, it is plausible that autistic individuals would be to some degree concerned about what others think of them.

Being able to understand peers' perspectives is a key skill for maintaining friendships (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Autistic individuals are known to struggle with automatically determining others' thoughts (Ruffman, Garnham, & Rideout, 2001; Senju, Southgate, White, & Frith, 2009) but may learn to master some perspective-taking skills (Bowler, 1992; Happé, 1995; Scheeren, de Rosnay, Koot, & Begeer, 2013). There is also evidence that children with autism can self-promote (Begeer et al., 2008; Scheeren, Begeer, Banerjee, Meerum Terwogt, & Koot, 2010)—an ability that further suggests that autistic individuals may be somewhat concerned by how they are viewed by others. Furthermore, autistic adolescents are sensitive to social rejection: following ostracism in a cyber ball game, they were negatively affected in terms of anxiety, self-esteem and belonging, much like their typical peers (Sebastian, Blakemore, & Charman, 2009). Concern for reputation may lead to efforts to manage reputation; however, the evidence for reputation management in autism is currently mixed. While some authors suggest that autistic individuals cannot manage their reputation (Izuma, Matsumoto, Camerer, & Adolphs, 2011), other work (Cage, Pellicano, Shah, & Bird, 2013) has suggested autistic adults *are* capable of reputation management, albeit to a lesser degree than typical adults. It may be the case that there are great individual differences in reputation concerns (and subsequently reputation management) in autism. Further work is clearly needed to enhance our understanding of this topic in autism, and to the best of our knowledge reputation concerns have not been specifically examined in autistic adolescents. Additionally, research generally into adolescence for those with autism is relatively sparse in comparison to research into children with autism.

Thus, the current study aimed to examine reputation concerns in autistic adolescents, since (a) adolescence appears to be a particularly potent time for reputation, as discussed above, and (b) we know little about reputation concerns in autistic adolescents. Given that this issue has been hitherto largely unexplored, in-depth qualitative methods were used to gain insight into autistic adolescents' social experiences and uncover any potential concern for reputation. Qualitative methods can provide a deeper understanding of reputation in autism from the perspective of autistic individuals themselves (Bölte, 2014), and highlight previously unconsidered explanations of reputation in autism in order to inform future experimental work. Qualitative methods can also empower individuals whose voices often go unheard (Carrington & Graham, 2001)—and adolescent autistic voices are all too often unheard in autism research (Pellicano, Dinsmore, & Charman, 2014). Our previous quantitative work on reputation management (Cage et al., 2013) could not easily be explained by behavioural paradigms alone—suggesting that qualitative research can tell a story that cannot be told alone by numbers (Brown & Lloyd, 2001). Therefore, we believe that qualitative methods are highly beneficial for understanding how autistic individuals themselves construct the world (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and specifically their reputation.

We examined the social experiences of autistic adolescents, through semi-structured interviews, to assess whether these adolescents are concerned for their reputation. We elicited autistic adolescents' perceptions of being 'cool', friendships, worries, and their self-concept. We also interviewed school staff that supported some of the adolescents to provide an additional perspective on these adolescents' school-based social experiences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twelve autistic adolescents (one female) took part aged between 12 and 15 years (M age = 13 years 9 months). All adolescents were attending mainstream secondary school and were considered to be cognitively able, such that their intellectual ability, measured using the WASI-II (Wechsler, 2011), was greater than 70 (Full-scale IQ: $M = 92.25$, SD = 20.29; Verbal IQ: $M = 91.42$, SD = 20.17; Performance IQ: $M = 94.08$; SD = 17.69). All adolescents had received an independent clinical diagnosis of either autism ($n = 10$) or Asperger syndrome ($n = 2$), according to DSM-IV criteria (APA, 2000) or ICD-10 (WHO, 1992) criteria, and further scored above the threshold for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (score of 15) on the Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ; Rutter et al., 2003). All students also had a statement of Special Educational Needs. Individual characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1.

[1] The term 'autistic person' is the preferred language of many people on the spectrum (e.g. Sinclair, 1999). In this article, we use this term as well as person-first language to respect the wishes of all individuals on the spectrum (Kenny et al., 2015).