

## WHY IS BARON – COHEN’S STUDY IMPORTANT TO SOCIETY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Baron-Cohen proposed that the core problem in autism is the inability to think about other peoples, or one's own thoughts. It is thought that some type of physical damage to the brain causes autism. This assumes that the development of a theory of mind is a maturational process and therefore an innate capability.

Autistic children typically have difficulties in social interaction and in language and non-verbal communication, and have a restricted range of activities and interests. Symptoms in all these areas appear before 36 months of age. Some autistic children have additional cognitive difficulties and many are intellectually impaired. Some autistic children have exceptional gifts, termed islets of ability, in one particular area, such as music or art. In most cases autism is a life-long condition, although the patterns of difficulties may change or become less severe as children grow up. There have been many explanations for the origins of autism and attempts have been made to identify a core deficit which can account for the symptoms of autism.

According to Simon Baron-Cohen the core deficit of autism is the autistic person's inability to employ a 'theory of mind'. It is argued that a child develops a theory of mind between 4 and 6 years of age demonstrated that children as young as two have a theory of mind. Having a theory of mind is the ability to understand that other people have independent minds of their own.

Baron-Cohen's theory is particularly useful to society because it seems to provide plausible explanations for many of the symptoms displayed by autistic children. For example a major difficulty for autistic people is language and non-verbal communication. If a child lacks the ability to understand another person's thoughts, difficulties in using language for conversation are to be expected.

Autistic children also often have a lack of pretend play. Baron-Cohen argues that this can be explained as an inability to reflect on one's own (rather than another person's) thoughts. Imagine a child playing at 'mothers and babies' with her doll. To take the role of mother and treat her doll as the baby, the child must be able to hold simultaneously in her mind two conflicting sets of beliefs. She knows that in reality she is a little girl, and her doll is a toy. At the same time she must 'think' the opposite - that she is a mother and her doll is a baby. So she must 'think about her thoughts'.

However there are problems with Baron-Cohen's theory. Autistic children have difficulty reflecting on their own thoughts which would seem likely to affect complex skills like solving mathematical problems. But some autistic children appear to excel at mathematics. Overall it would seem that Baron-

Cohen's theory does go some way in explaining the many difficulties faced by autistic children but that more work still needs to be done.

The study therefore goes to show that autism is not strongly related to IQ and height, and therefore the societies in general have wrong assumptions that autistics are 'stupid'. Due to Baron-Cohen's study, the understanding of autism is now widely shared – which is one reason the number of children diagnosed as autistic has risen so dramatically in the past decade. Autism was once almost invariably associated with a below-normal IQ, and its prevalence was said to be around 4 in 10,000. Nowadays, ten times that many children are diagnosed with an autism-spectrum disorder, many of them at the high-functioning Asperger's end.

A major strength of the experimental method used by Baron – Cohen was the precise control of variables. The experiment was carried out in By ensuring that the autistic children were the most intelligent of the three groups he was able to control levels of intelligence. He therefore ensured that it was not lower levels of intelligence which caused the autistic children to get the belief question incorrect but rather it was something to do with being autistic.

A major weakness of this method is its lack of ecological validity. As the experiment was carried out in scientific conditions, it lacked realism. For example, it could be argued that the autistic children do not attribute beliefs to dolls because they have a more developed theory of mind than the experimenter who seems to think that a lump of plastic can think in the same way as a person? The study also shows that it is important to have a sample balance; the results were skewed due to the imbalance of groups. The study as a whole is useful as it raises issues, it shows and highlights methodological issues, as the scenario and the use of dolls is rather artificial. The experiment was also too generalised, not all of the children lacked a theory of mind, i.e some got the Belief Question right.

Generalisations (Baron-Cohen – not all lacked a theory of mind)