

Autism linked to less empathy in general population—but that may not be a bad thing

June 7 2019, by Andy Dunne



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Researchers have conclusively shown that people with autistic traits show less empathy and reduced understanding of other people's feelings in a new study out today from the University of Bath and King's College London.

Whilst autism might be associated with [social difficulties](#), there has been debate in recent years about whether the autistic community experience difficulties in processing emotion or not and the exact form this takes.

This has centred on difficulties in measuring [empathy](#), but also on the complicating factor that many autistic people also experience alexithymia, the condition otherwise known as 'emotional blindness'. Those with alexithymia face difficulties in understanding their own and others' emotions, yet it was less clear whether autistic people without the condition faced the same challenge.

For the new study, published in a Special Issue on Empathy in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, Dr. Punit Shah, Lucy Livingston and colleagues addressed limitations in previous research. Across two large-scale surveys, sampling over 650 adults from the general population, they measured the links between autistic tendencies, alexithymia, and scored individuals on a detailed empathy test.

Their results found that having more autistic tendencies was linked to lower empathy, even after factoring in alexithymia. Using computerised simulations, in advanced statistics used for the very first time in the history of autism research, autism was the more 'dominant' and statistically important link to empathy when compared to alexithymia. These simulations showed that the results would be found around 90% of the time in the population. Their results were found in two studies and held after factoring in both participants' age and gender.

Lead researcher and expert on social processing in autism, Dr. Punit

Shah from Bath's Department of Psychology explains: "These findings provide some of the strongest evidence to date that autism is linked to lower empathy in the general population. Although many have associated autism with poor social skills, prior to this study the association with empathy was much less clear. By drawing on large samples and using advanced statistical techniques we hope these robust results can help settle a long-standing debate and will make an important contribution for future autism support."

Study co-author, Lucy Livingston, of the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience at King's College London, added: "Autism being linked with lower empathy is not necessarily a negative thing. Empathy is useful in social situations, but it can be a mentally tiring exercise. It is also thought that selective empathy, such as understanding some people's feelings while ignoring others', can lead to negative behaviours such as excluding some groups from society. It may be that lower empathy for those with autism actually has unforeseen benefits that we do not fully understand yet."

Bath psychology student Lois Player was also part of the research team for the study. This is the first time an undergraduate second year has co-authored a paper at Bath.

The researchers hope their results will be used to improve understanding and acceptance of people with autistic tendencies and diagnosed autism. They suggest it is important for policymakers, clinicians, and educators, to be aware of such behaviours in order to create more [autism](#)-friendly environments.

More information: Punit Shah et al, Trait Autism is a Better Predictor of Empathy than Alexithymia, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-019-04080-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04080-3)

Provided by University of Bath

Citation: Autism linked to less empathy in general population—but that may not be a bad thing (2019, June 7) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-06-autism-linked-empathy-populationbut-bad.html>

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