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REVIEW ARTICLE

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASPERGER SYNDROME, SEXUALIZED  
AND NON-SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Asperger's syndrome is grouped under the umbrella of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This syndrome is usually undermined and remains undiagnosed despite its high prevalence among the psychiatric population. Such individuals usually find it difficult to establish social interactions and are involved in repetitive and sometimes futile activities. One point of concern is the tendency of such individuals to get involved in acts of violence and sexual offence. It has been reported, by a number of studies and case reports, that people suffering from Asperger's syndrome are more likely to be involved in acts of violence and sexual abuse as compared to the general population. The quality of research available in this regard is not satisfactory and data available is scanty. But, based on the information we've so far, it can be safely assumed that there exists a positive correlation between Asperger's and these variables (acts of violence and sexual offence). The plausible mechanism for such behavior in sufferers of this syndrome is the lack of Theory of Mind (TOM). More research is needed in order to confirm these preliminary findings. Moreover, research is also needed to successfully identify and rectify the risk factors and causes that might trigger such behavior in Asperger's sufferers.

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INTRODUCTION

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is a condition characterized among the autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The overall prevalence of this disorder is estimated to be around 0.06% (Fombonne, 2005). The prevalence may not sound that significant to be considered, but what makes this syndrome significant is its tendency to do undermined and undiagnosed. According to some estimates, as much as 50% of individuals with AS reach adulthood without being diagnosed of their condition (Arora *et al.*, 2011). Major symptoms of AS include difficulty in social interactions, inability to form deep relations, lack of emotional and social reciprocity, impaired ability to communicate non-verbally, repetitive motor manifestations, with others and stereotypical behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Bishop *et al.*, 2007; Chen *et al.*, 2009; Mosconi *et al.*, 2009; Jordan and Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Volkmar and Pauls, 2003; Tanidir and Mukaddes, 2014). Acts like violence and sexual offence attract a lot of attention in the politics, media and a lot of other settings. Violence and other similar acts, when discussed in the context of a mental illness, are often sensationalized.

This does more harm than good for the mentally compromised patients, as it adds to the stigma of their lives (Marie *et al.*, 2008). Same is true for Asperger syndrome as well. This article is basically concerned with answering some fundamental questions. For instance, are Asperger syndrome sufferers more prone to commit acts of violence or sexual offence as compared to general population? Is there really a positive correlation between Asperger syndrome and such acts? If any positive correlation is found between these variable, we'll further try to probe the plausible causes of such correlation. For this purpose, we'll take into account recently published literature in this context and will try to evaluate the validity of these speculations.

Relation between Asperger's Syndrome and Violence

Taking into account the published literature, there is limited information regarding the prevalence of violent behavior in individuals suffering from ASD. Little, still, is known about the prevalence of such behavior among the sufferers of AS (Donna M. Schwartz-Watts, 2005). A Medline research done to find a correlation between AS and violent behavior yielded only a few case reports. The most noticeable include the case report an Asperger sufferer who was found involved in the acts of violence.

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Moreover, there was the case report of a 23 old young man, who attacked his mother. He was afterwards found to be suffering from Asperger's syndrome (Kohn *et al.*, 1998). However, the study of Asperger prevalence in forensic settings reveals some startling statistics. Fombonne *et al.* 2003 the prevalence of Asperger's syndrome among forensic settings to be as high as 2.5 per 10,000 individuals (Fombonne, 2003). Another Swedish study report the prevalence of pervasive developmental disorders (Asperger's syndrome and Autism) in the Juvenile Forensic settings to be as high as 15% (Siponmaa *et al.*, 2001). A preliminary inference can be made that sufferers of Asperger's syndrome are more likely to be involved in acts of violence as compared to members of general population. This inference can be validated by the fact that the prevalence of AS in Forensic population is higher than normal population {0.06% (Prevalence of AS in general population convicted of acts of violence) vs. 15% (Prevalence of AS in forensic population convicted of acts of violence)} (Siponmaa *et al.*, 2001; Barbara G. Haskins and Arturo Silva, 2006).

Studies have repeatedly shown that the prevalence of ASD and their subsets (mainly Asperger's syndrome) is substantially higher in forensic samples. Scragg and Shah *et al.* 1994 screened the entire population of Broadmoor Hospital for cases of Asperger's syndrome. Interestingly, as much 2.3% of the population turned out to be suffering from Asperger's syndrome (Scragg P, Shah, 1994). Another similar study was conducted by Hare and colleagues *et al.* 2004, where the researchers screened the entire population of the English special (forensic) hospital. Researchers screened 1305 individuals and a definite diagnosis of ASD was made in 31 individuals- similar but uncertain diagnosis was made in a lot of other individuals, with other percentage of 4.8% ASD in the total population. Out of the 31 definite cases of ASD, 21 were later labeled to be the sufferers of AS (Hare *et al.*, 2015).

In addition to the above mentioned studies, there are a number of statistical and case studies that report people with Asperger's syndrome getting involved into violent behaviors. Howlin *et al.* 1998 reported cases of people suffering from Asperger's syndrome where the sufferers were found to be involved in antisocial and violent behaviors. Similarly Wing *et al.* 1981 conducted a study on children suffering from Asperger's syndrome. Researchers found that at least 4 of the 24 children included in the study were found to have committed acts of violence (those children tried to harm their fellow children through chemicals). Everall *et al.* 1990 and Tantam *et al.* 1991 reported several cases where the fire setting behaviors were observed in the victims of Asperger's syndrome. Mawson, Ground and Tantam *et al.* 1985 reported an interesting case of Asperger's syndrome. The case was a 44 years old male sufferer of Asperger's syndrome who found to have committed repeated acts of violence against children, women and babies. That man was particularly obsessed with poison and chemicals (Trudy Klauber and Maria Rhode, 2005).

### Non-Sexualized Violent Crimes and Asperger's Syndrome

There is a long history of case reports where the researchers have reported instances of non-sexualized violent acts in Asperger sufferers. The severity of these acts can range from

assault to even serial killing (Mawson *et al.*, 1985; Murrie *et al.*, 2002; Silva *et al.*, 2005; Barry-Walsh and Mullen, 2004; Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1988; Silva *et al.*, 2003; Silva *et al.*, 2000). As mentioned before, individuals with Asperger's syndrome usually have a narrow interest and tend to be involved in repetitive activities. This tendency seems to play part in the violent behavior in individuals with Asperger's syndrome. Unrelated to violent offences, Tietz *et al.* 2002 reported the case of a boy suffering from this condition and showing a very narrow streak of interest and utter repetition and obsession with certain activities. For instance, that boy used to drive subway trains and buses, without authorization and without any known interest or hope of return (Tietz, 2002). Moreover, Asperger sufferers have been frequently found involved in such repetitive behaviors like stealing, stalking, touching, bondage, and even kidnapping and murder (Chen *et al.*, 2003; Mullen, 2004; Stokes and Newton, 2004; Everall *et al.*, 1990).

### Sexualized Violent Crimes & Asperger's Syndrome

Now that we've discussed the link of Asperger's syndrome to violence, we'll now move on to discuss something more specific here. People suffering from Asperger's syndrome only consider their interests and objective to be important enough. For them the emotions and responses of others to their actions don't carry equal importance. This passiveness of emotions and interests for others particularly make individuals with Asperger's syndrome more likely to commit crimes like sexual penetration or offence. This part of the article is concerned with answering an important question that how likely is it for the sufferers of Asperger's syndrome to be involved in acts of sexual offence ?

One study that relates Asperger's syndrome with sexual offense was conducted by Kohn *et al.* 1998. Researchers reported a male character suffering from Asperger's syndrome. The main problem of that male was his tendency to commit sexual and criminal offenses. Researchers, after thorough study, concluded that such behavior in that male were secondary to the Asperger's syndrome. In Kohn's point of view tendency of the sufferers of Asperger's syndrome to commit sexual crimes is perhaps because of the defect in their theory of mind due to which they are unable to live, work and understand their fellow humans (Kohn *et al.*, 1998)

Individuals suffering from Asperger's syndrome exhibit a variety of sexual practices ranging from rape to sexual perversions like pedophilia and sadism. This fact was validated by a case report of Millon *et al.* 2002. The study included a male who was found to be associated with repeated sexual offences. That person was also found to exhibit a variety of paraphilic behaviors. Thorough investigation showed that the person was suffering from Asperger's syndrome and such behaviors were perhaps secondary to Asperger's syndrome<sup>(31)</sup>. Silva *et al.* 2004 reported an extremely interesting case of Asperger's syndrome. The case report was about a serial killer named Jeffrey Dahmer. That killer lived a highly compartmentalized life. He had one pro-social aspect of personality in which he seemed extremely ordinary and law abiding citizen. But on the other side of the picture was his antisocial side in which he played the role of a serial killer and

enjoyed killing people. Investigations showed that he most likely suffered from autism spectrum disorder, most probably Asperger's syndrome (Silva *et al.*, 2002).

These case reports do show that there might be some link between Asperger's syndrome and sexual offense but large studies have failed to produce statistically significant results which could help establish a clear link between Asperger's syndrome and sexual offense. For instance, the result of a Swedish study showed that only 2 of the 442 patients suffering from Asperger's syndrome were found to be involved in sexual offenses (Siponmaa *et al.*, 2001). Similar results were reported by Mats *et al.* 2007. Researchers found that out of 70 individuals with Asperger's syndrome only 1 was found to be associated with sexual offence (Mats Cederlund *et al.*, 2007)

### Explanation for the Development Violent and Sexually Offence Behaviors in Asperger's Syndrome- The Theory of Mind (TOM)

The above mentioned studies indicate that Asperger's syndrome might increase the chance of the sufferer developing a violent or sexually offensive behavior. The quality of data available in this regard is quite unsatisfactory and more research is certainly needed in this area. But if the sufferer develops such behavior, what could be most likely reasons for that? The violent activities or sexually abusive behavior associated with Asperger's syndrome can be attributed to two important domains (1) some deficit in the theory of mind (ToM) (2) narrow and repetitive interests and actions. Theory of mind refers to the ability of a person to estimate affective, perceptual and cognitive life of other as well as of the self (Hare *et al.*, 2015; Abu-Akel, 2003). People suffering from Asperger's syndrome also suffer from a defect in their theory of mind. This phenomenon is termed as mind blindness (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Such individuals possess a significant defect in their ability to know that different people respond to a shared event in a different manner (both cognitively and emotionally). In other words, such individuals lack the ability to read those clues that would help them engage with others in social encounters.

Frith *et al.* 1989 tossed the concept of central coherence to explain the enigma of criminal and sexually offensive behavior associated with Asperger's syndrome and other groups of autistic disorders. In Frith's opinion, central coherence is a person's ability to create the view of world in his own mind and this view is based on individual, collective and social experiences. But people suffering from Asperger's syndrome have defect in their central coherence. Their view of the world is based only their individual liking and disliking. This preoccupation with personal interests makes such individual commit violent crimes because they are really not worried about the social consequences of their actions (Frith, 1989; Frith, 2004). In other words, a normal person would think of both personal and social consequences of his actions but an individual suffering from Asperger's syndrome doesn't consider social consequences to be as important as his personal interests. This difference makes an individual suffering from Asperger's syndrome commit more crimes than the normal individuals.

### Consideration

It can be concluded from the above discussion that our current understanding regarding the relation between Asperger's syndrome and acts of violent and sexual abuse is still lacking. As the forensic clinicians become more aware of how prevalent this disorder this, they can adopt a more systematic approach in the diagnosis and establishing a relation between this disorder and acts of violence. As clinicians, psychiatrists and as a community we shouldn't treat such individuals as outcasts or insane maniacs, instead we should strive more in understanding the behavior, risk factors and most importantly ways for mitigating such behaviors in Asperger's sufferers.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the results of different studies do suggest that people suffering from Asperger's syndrome are more likely to develop criminal and sexually offensive behaviors, but might depict only one side of the picture. Although the data available in this regard is still lacking, but the most likely mechanism involved in the development of such behavior in the sufferers of Asperger's syndrome is the lacking of theory of mind (TOM). Still nothing can be said conclusively and large scale studies are needed to establish and confirm the relationship between Asperger's syndrome, sexual offence and violence.

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