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The Culture of Autism

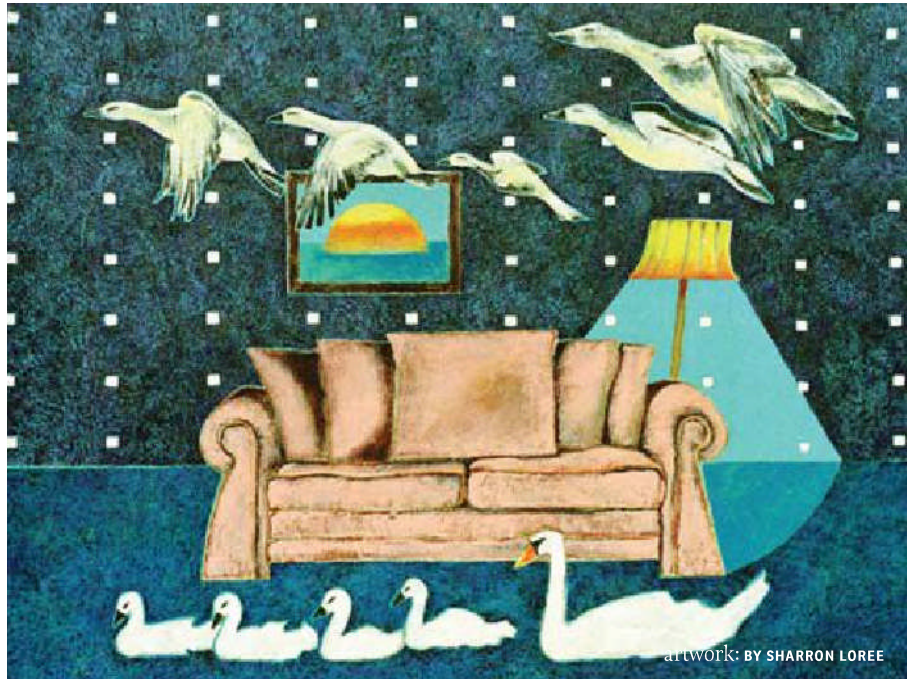
SHARING OUR BELIEFS AND PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE:

Being a Parent on the Autism Spectrum
Sibling Perspectives
Learning Altruism Through Stories
Autism and Employment

And more...





Variety Avoidance, Sensory Overload and Frustration

The Shopping Experiences of Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

Very little empirical research has been done on the shopping experiences of individuals on the spectrum. Many “living skills” programs include a component of the pragmatics of shopping, but the emphasis has usually been on developing practical skills rather than genuinely understanding what the individual experiences.

BY LARS PERNER, PH.D.

In the general population, there are people who love shopping and those who hate it. Among people on the spectrum, much the same can almost certainly be said. Yet, the intensity of the feelings involved is likely to be greater. It is also likely that some aspects of shopping will appeal to certain individuals more than others.

Under the right circumstances, shopping can, of course, lead to the acquisition of objects of special interest, but the process of shopping may or may not be a joyful one.

There are large variations in shopping preferences and experiences among individuals on the spectrum. Sometimes, in fact, the differences *among* people on the spectrum are larger than the average differences *between* those on and off the spectrum. This, for example, is often the case for how sensory input is handled: While some “spectrumites” are extremely sensitive to one type of stimuli (e.g., noise or bright lights), others may be quite insensitive. Some may be oblivious to sounds that bother most people, while others may break down because of undetected sounds that may be inaudible to most individuals.

Despite individual variations, there are certain aspects of shopping that are likely to be a challenge for persons on the spectrum. Many will face considerable sensory overload and frustration with crowds. The surprise that a store is out of one’s favorite brand of cereal

would typically be an annoyance to the general population. However, for people on the spectrum, this finding can be truly *devastating*. Communicating with store employees, planning and actually finding what is needed, and the abstraction involved in some purchases can be frustrating.

Social Interaction and Communication Issues

These days, most grocery, department and discount stores in the United States are self-service. There are even some that will let the customer do “self-checkout,” rather than going through a human cashier. This can be helpful on days when one has already suffered considerable overload. On other days, paying the cashier directly may not be as overwhelming (except when the cashier offers comments, sometimes in a disapproving tone, about how you bought 30 yogurts, all the same flavor!). On the upside, store clerks can serve as a convenient captive audience for a four-minute monologue on dinosaurs, giant squids, vacuum cleaners, computer server systems, binary stars, superstring theory or 1980s music.

To maximize the efficient use of floor space, some products—especially the bulkier ones—are often stored on top of tall shelves or in other locations where they must be retrieved by a store employee. Because many retail stores have cut down on their staffing to save on labor costs, it is sometimes difficult to find a store employee who can retrieve the needed object. Another challenge involves actually finding, identifying and approaching a store employee. An even more frustrating experience is being referred to someone else or having to deal with the ambiguity of someone who first has to help other customers or complete other tasks.

For certain larger and specialty purchases, more elaborate interactions may be necessary.

In some situations, such spontaneous conversations may be challenging in that the process involves an exchange of information. There may be issues of the vocabulary used—many people on the spectrum are not particularly flexible when it comes to the relative merits of different synonymous terms. Using the term “sneakers” rather than “tennis shoes,” for example, may not be conceivable. Sales people—especially those who sell on commission—may also have an agenda of their own. For someone who has difficulty with Theory of Mind—the ability to understand the possible thoughts and motives of others—it may be difficult to distinguish between someone who may have valid advice, someone who merely has poor taste or someone who does not have one’s best interests at heart.

Ironically, in my research, I have actually come across some people on the spectrum that use shopping in small, familiar neighborhood stores as a “safe” means to pursue limited and brief social interaction. It is possible to chat briefly with people one knows—albeit superficially in some circumstances—with a quick exit strategy readily available.

Many people on the spectrum have difficulty dealing with messages that are not intended to—or should not—be interpreted literally. Thus, many spectrumites fail to discount the claims made in advertising, expecting that the product will, in fact, “deliver” on what was promised. The skepticism of advertising that is common in the general U.S. population is, to some extent, culturally based. American consumers have typically learned over time to beware of claims made by advertisers since American advertisers have been able to get away with more “puffery” than would be permitted in many other countries. When one American cake mix was introduced in Britain, it initially failed miserably. Cakes as beautiful as those pictured on the packaging must be very difficult to make! The product only sold

after the packaging had been redesigned to reflect more “homely” cakes with smudges and other imperfections.

Sensory Issues

Although sensory vulnerabilities are not currently part of the American Medical Association’s diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum conditions, sensory “violations” are common and among some of the more onerous experiences of people on the spectrum. Unfortunately, many shopping environments are jungles brimming with hostile sensory encroachments. Bright and flickering lights are common; annoying noises often emanate from announcements on store networks and from people and merchandise moving around. Food stores, of course, are permeated with food odors, some resulting from the storage of foods and others deliberately created to please the “average” shopper. Some grocery stores, for example, will “pipe in” bakery odors since these smells tend to be pleasurable to many shoppers and may motivate certain purchases. Unfortunately, all of these stimuli can be overwhelming to a person on the spectrum.

Crowding compounds these problems, especially when adjustments have to be made to allow shoppers to pass each other in the aisles. It can be a jarring experience when one is engrossed in one’s own thoughts to be asked by another shopper to be “excused.” To avoid this experience, I often hurry to move out of people’s way in anticipation of their need to pass. Crowding and the sensory violations that it entails often result in a vicious cycle of exhaustion that makes a person on the spectrum even more vulnerable.

Idiosyncrasies

Many people on the spectrum have idiosyncrasies. These may range from preferences for unusual food concoctions to specific rituals

that must be followed in the purchase process while shopping. A suggestion to change the order in which stores are visited, for example, can come as an entirely unreasonable proposition. To the extent that variety in diet is accepted, certain foods may be “reserved” for certain days of the week. There may also be rules as to where selected items should be purchased. Some individuals on the spectrum are likely to have quite unbendable convictions similar to those of Raymond Babbitt in the movie *Rain Man*, who believed that underwear could be bought appropriately only at K-Mart on 400 Oak Street in Cincinnati. Some of us can relate to the frustrations of Adrian Monk when he was unable to find his preferred brand of Sierra Springs™ bottled water in Mexico. Another label by the same manufacturer just wouldn’t do.

Control—and the Lack of It

A large part of the frustration experienced by people on the spectrum can be attributed to living in a seemingly unpredictable and “lawless” world ripe with noxious surprises. Certain foods—such as fresh bakery items—are often made daily in certain stores. Predicting the exact demand can be difficult, so stores often run out of items. This is especially the case, for example, when a small number of a particular type of pastry is delivered to a given store. Many people on the spectrum learn from experience to anticipate the possibility of such stockouts. However, for someone who may suffer from executive function problems, anticipating that a favorite brand may be sold out can be difficult.

Special interests—and the “absolutely essential” material goods associated with them—

can be rather emotional matters. Finally getting to shop for a long-coveted object—such as a major vacuum cleaner missing in one’s collection—can be an exhilarating experience, especially if there are some genuinely knowledgeable store employees who really “get it.” On the other hand, product discontinuations and stockouts can be devastating. And not knowing how long it will take to save up for an “extremely important” object can be a source of tremendous frustration.

Executive Function

Difficulty with planning and other types of executive function is a common problem for many on the spectrum. Shopping requires a number of consecutive steps. Some people will write detailed shopping lists for groceries while others will identify what is needed while in the store. Regardless, there is a need to anticipate what will be needed until the next opportunity to shop. Envisioning the different meals and the cumulative effect of what goes into preparing them may not be intuitive, especially if others are involved. Setting aside a period of time to go to the store and arranging for the logistics of transportation are required. Most people have a certain intuition about store traffic and crowdedness at various times, but these phenomena may be less well understood by someone on the spectrum. Combining shopping with other events—such a doctor’s visit—requires some understanding of the relative locations of destinations and the time involved in getting from one to the other.

Even in the general population, many people have great difficulty with budgeting.

These days, a large number of individuals and families have racked up a considerable amount of credit card and other debt. A lot of people experience problems in “stretching” a paycheck or other source of income from one payday to the next, with many running low toward the end of the month. For many individuals on the spectrum, executive function challenges exacerbate these problems. If you do not have a rough idea of the cost of different items, it is difficult to predict how much money you will need at check-out time. Even if you do know, identifying and adding up the items for purchase requires a certain amount of organizational skill. When objects of special interest are involved, impulse buying can be a significant problem for the true fanatic. Again, an awareness of how impulse purchases can impact the monthly shopping budget may be lacking.

Finding specific items in a large store can be difficult for anyone. Many people on the spectrum have some difficulty with spatial organization; compounding the situation is the confusing nature of many stores. It may not be clear where to find a particular type of product. With the diversity of retail store choice in the U.S. today, it may also be difficult to understand in which type of store a specific type of product would be found.

Conclusion

Many people on the spectrum lead relatively happy and fulfilling lives. Shopping provides needed items for daily life and can, on occasion, even be an enjoyable process. Nevertheless, this activity has the potential for a multitude of frustrations for the person on the spectrum.

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Lars Perner, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Marketing at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. He became interested in the autism spectrum after being diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome at age 31.