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Sexual Behaviours, Vocabulary, and Orientations in Adults on the Autism Spectrum

What is this research about?

There is a lack of research that examines the sexual behaviours and sexual interests of adults on the autism spectrum. Research in this area is important, as these adults exhibit deficits in the areas of social interaction and verbal and non-verbal communication. Previous studies have shown some differences in sexuality between adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the general population.

What did the researcher do?

In this study the researchers compared two groups. One group was a sample of adults on the autism spectrum (82 total) and the other was a sample of adults from the general population (282 total). Participants completed an online survey that asked demographic questions, as well as questions about:

- sexual knowledge (sexual vocabulary);
- sexual experiences (examining experiences ranging from kissing to intercourse);
- and sexual orientation (heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, asexuality).

Each type of sexual orientation was rated on a scale of how much the participant endorsed that orientation.

What did the researcher find?

Researchers found that adults with ASD and those in the general population did not differ in their

What you need to know:

Adults with ASD have an interest in sexuality. They engage in sexual behaviours and understand sexual vocabulary similarly to those in the general population. Yet, differences exist in terms of sexual orientation.

sexual experiences or their understanding of sexual vocabulary. Researchers found that adults on the autism spectrum were significantly more likely to indicate higher scores than the general population on the measures of:

- bisexuality (ASD group average = 4.47 and control group average = 1.60);
- homosexuality (ASD group average = 4.71 and control group average = 1.16);
- and asexuality (ASD group average = 1.29 and control group average = 0.27).

They also compared male and female ASD participants. Most scales did not significantly differ except for the heterosexuality scale. They found that female participants with ASD had significantly lower scores on the measure of heterosexuality than male participants with ASD. This difference was not seen between males and females in the control group.

How can you use this research?

This research helps further our understanding of sexuality and ASD by informing us that sexual

orientation may express itself differently in those on the autism spectrum compared to the general population. Also, sexuality differs between males and females with ASD in terms of heterosexuality. This research is relevant to clinicians, parents, support workers, and most importantly, individuals on the spectrum.

About the Researchers

Laura Gilmour is a graduate student in Educational Psychology at Grant MacEwan University whose research focuses on special education and ASD. Laura has a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and has a blog where she discusses articles relating to ASD (touchedbyanalien.blogspot.ca).

Dr. Melike Schalomon is a professor and department chair of Psychology at Grant MacEwan University, whose research focuses on comparative neuroanatomy and human sexuality.

Dr. Veronica Smith is an Associate Professor in the area of Psychological Studies in Education within the Department of Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta.

Citation

Gilmour, L., Schalomon, P.M., & Smith, V. (2012). Sexuality in a community based sample of adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 6(1), 313-318.

Keywords

Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Autism Spectrum Disorders

This research summary was written by Michelle Vicili for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

The Chair is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance, Health Canada, NeuroDevNet and the Sinneave Family Foundation. Additional funds from the Spectrum of Hope Autism Foundation and support from York University.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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