

Social concepts in autism: Desirability and preference

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Abstract

Social difficulties are typically assigned a central role in descriptions of autism. Some theories see social issues in autism as a consequence of difficulties in understanding other people's mental states (social cognition), while others argue that social difficulties stem from diminished social motivation. In this study, we are interested in investigating social concepts (i.e., ways to categorize social behaviors) as well as social motivation in autistic children and adults. By employing a novel image database depicting abstract concepts varying in social desirability, we examine how social concepts are represented by autistic and non-autistic participants. We found that autistic participants performed similarly to neurotypicals regarding the identification of social desirability in a search task. However, in a preference task, we observed a choice bias away from prosocial concepts that was significantly higher in autistic participants and in neurotypical individuals who scored high on the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ).