

The evolution of Asperger syndrome: a cross-disciplinary perspective

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Asperger syndrome (AS) is a form of autism that is associated with average to gifted intelligence, timely language development, intensely focused and repetitive interests, and extremely poor social understanding and interaction. Despite the fact that Asperger disorder was dropped from the 2013 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, many scientists continue to recognize this condition as one that is distinct from other subtypes of autism—and with good reason. Instead of melding seamlessly with high-functioning autism (HFA) on one “spectrum,” AS differs from HFA in certain behavioral, cognitive, neuroanatomical, and genetic features, many of which are related to different trajectories for language development. In this talk, I will discuss the mounting evidence that shows that AS may be understood as a natural part of variation that occurred during evolution of the human brain and cognition. Viewing AS within a cross-disciplinary evolutionary perspective has implications not only for education, but also for reconciling society's ambivalence about whether to regard it as a pathology or venerate those who manifest its traits (e.g., Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*). In fact, accumulating research from various disciplines suggests that (with apologies to the late geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky) nothing in Asperger syndrome “makes sense except in the light of evolution.”