



Articles

Just Another Aspie/NT Love Story: A Narrative Inquiry Into Neurologically-Mixed Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This paper explores the complexities, issues, and challenges of neurologically mixed romantic relationships; specifically focusing on relationships in which one partner is diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Using a narrative approach to data drawn from online discussion boards, blogs, autobiographies, and research articles, the findings are presented in the form of a narrative reconstruction. Reconstructing data into a fictional, non-traceable format is a fruitful method of attending to the ethical and privacy issues inherent in online research. Starting with a discussion of autism and Asperger's communication and traits, identity politics, and online community building, this article articulates some of the ways that neurological differences result in real differences in emotional needs, sensory perceptions, and ways of thinking and communicating in romantic relationships.

Keywords: Asperger's, neurodiversity, narrative inquiry, online research

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The truth is that it is complex, and very common, and largely undiagnosed in adults. It touches all our lives. It's so widespread that someone you know, someone in your family, someone you work with is likely to be an Asperger. You might even know two or three. And if you're particularly attracted to intelligent, fascinating men with fine features and an idiosyncratic child-like personal style, you might even fall in love with one of them... (Jacobs, 2003, p. 4)

In the clinical literature, individuals with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) are often described as being uninterested in social relationships, lacking empathy, and being deficient in non-verbal communication (Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg, & Cohen, 1993; Wing, 1992). While this may be true, there is another story to be told. As the opening quote implies, AS individuals also can have many positive and attractive qualities; qualities that are often described as quirky and endearing (Ariel, 2012; Bartlett, 2011; Jacobs, 2006). However, romantic relationships with people with Asperger's can bring some unique challenges (for both parties), as indicated by the plethora of self-help books such as *Connecting With Your Asperger Partner: Negotiating the Maze of Intimacy* (Weston, 2010), *Loving Mr. Spock: Understanding a Lover with Asperger's Syndrome* (Jacobs, 2003), and *Alone Together: Making an Asperger Marriage Work* (Bentley, 2007). I came across these books as I was seeking help for someone very close to me. My quest to provide support turned into an in-depth learning journey that resulted in this research

project. This paper is written for people who, like me, are fairly new to the topic of Asperger's. Therefore, it is helpful to start with some basic background information.

Asperger's Syndrome (AS), also referred to as high functioning autism, is thought to be the mildest of the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) because people with AS have normal (or above normal) intelligence and verbal abilities, yet they exhibit some autistic-like traits such as being very literal, having trouble understanding non-verbal communications, and having sensory sensitivities (National Institutes of Health, n.d.). In fact, Asperger's was not a commonly recognized diagnosis until the late 1980's when Lorna Wing began publishing in English about Hans Asperger's research. Until that time, Asperger's and autism were often attributed to bad behavior, poor parenting, or childhood schizophrenia. It was not until the 1990's that Asperger's became much more widely recognized. Because of this previous lack of understanding about Asperger's, many adults, who were out of the school system by the time the Asperger diagnosis became widely recognized, grew up without the label and did not get diagnosed until adulthood. As described in various autobiographies written by AS adults (e.g. Finch, 2012; Robison, 2007), as children they only knew that they were somehow different from other people who seemed to know and understand things about social interaction that remained a mystery to these AS individuals. Despite social challenges, however, AS individuals *do* form relationships, get married, and have children...often times with individuals who are *neurotypical* (NT), a term used by AS advocates to describe people who are not on the autism spectrum (explained more in depth later in this paper). In this research project, I set out to explore the unique issues, challenges, and characteristics of AS/NT couples.

This article proceeds as follows. First, in order to be explicit about my bias and positionality as a researcher, as well as to explain the terminology I use, I start with a brief overview of autism identity politics and locate myself within that dialogue. Because AS communication has not yet been explored in the communication discipline, I draw upon clinical literature in order to delineate what is currently understood about AS communication and social relationships. However, I believe that communication scholars have much to offer on this topic. To this end, I discuss how Expectancy Violation Theory may serve as a fruitful theoretical framework for exploring AS/NT communication issues. I underwent this project using a methodology that is fairly uncommon in communication research, narrative inquiry, which I explain in detail in the methods section. I then present my findings in the form of a composite story—the typical AS/NT love story—in the form of a series of letters. The final letter highlights the key insights from this journey of discovery. I end this article with a discussion of limitations and directions for further research.

Autism and Identity Politics

There has been broad debate and disagreement among clinicians as to whether the label Asperger's should be used or if the condition would more accurately be described as high functioning autism (Arehart-Treichel, 2010). In fact, in the recently revised edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Asperger's syndrome is no longer a diagnosis and is instead subsumed under the label Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which includes various neurological conditions with similar social and communication 'deficits' and repetitive or restrictive patterns of thoughts and behavior (<http://www.dsm5.org>; Arehart-Treichel, 2010; Autism Research Institute, n.d.). There is also a wide diversity of perspectives within the AS community as to how individuals perceive and label themselves and their neurological differences. Many individuals with 'lower' functioning forms of autism (and their families) experience autism as a problematic 'disorder' and support cure-centered research. For them, autism creates real obstacles in life and causes stress from which they seek relief and hope for a better life.

On the other end of that spectrum, there are those who embrace their neurological difference and consider themselves to have *atypical neurology* rather than a disorder. Although they realize that this neurological difference can make life difficult in a *neurotypical* (NT) world, they view AS as a part of who they are and do not seek to change it. These advocates find cure-centered rhetoric to be insulting and compare it to the outdated idea of seeking a ‘cure’ for homosexuality (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). To help others understand their political stance, some advocates compare AS identity to homosexuality in the sense that one would not say “I have homosexuality” nor would one seek a cure for it (Silberman, 2010). There are also some AS advocates who claim a position of superiority to NTs, whom they view as “characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity” (Ortega, 2009, p. 432). These advocates argue that AS individuals should not try to adapt to (or “pass as”) NT communication preferences as many try to do. In short, talking about Asperger’s or autism involves identity politics. Therefore, I must be explicit about my position as I enter this conversation.

My academic research and my professional work are focused on issues of diversity in organizations. As a critical scholar in the communication discipline, I am particularly concerned with the marginalization of non-dominant identity groups in organizations. I came to the topic of autism for purely personal reasons; neurological issues have never been on my radar. However, through this research, I have come to learn that AS individuals are often bullied, marginalized, or forced to adapt to NTs in workplaces, families, and romantic relationships. This is the type of injustice that I am dedicated to fighting against. Therefore, I align myself with AS advocates for whom AS is a neurological *difference*, rather than a disability, deficit, or disorder. Since I share the perspective that AS is something that someone *is* rather than something that one *has* (Ortega, 2009), I adapt the terminology commonly used by AS self-advocacy individuals: ‘Aspie’ or simply AS (which can stand for Asperger’s Syndrome, but is also inclusive of all varieties on the Autism Spectrum). Also, importantly, I use the term NT which destabilizes the ‘givenness’ of *neurotypical* identity. In other words, usually that which dominates goes ‘unmarked’ in our language and non-dominant identities become marked as ‘other’ (e.g., when we talk about gender, race, or sexual/gender identity, we are usually talking about women, minorities, and LGBTQ issues). In this study, I position myself within the *neurodiversity* movement, which calls for ‘neurological self-awareness’ (Ortega, 2009), so that I too must be marked. I am an NT.

AS, Social Relationships, and Expectancy Violation Theory

Recent studies exploring AS experience through interviews and focus groups have confounded stereotypes that depict AS individuals as purposefully aloof and simply disinterested in social interaction and connection (Brownlow, O’Dell, & Taylor, 2006; Jones & Meldal, 2001; Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008; Sperry & Mesibov, 2005). To the contrary, these studies have shown that AS individuals do indeed desire close interpersonal relationships, but they lack the “fluency in the foreign language of social interaction” with NTs (Sperry & Mesibov, 2005, p. 363). This lack of fluency in social interaction often precludes the establishment of romantic relations and can sometimes be misinterpreted as stalking (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007). Research that explores the topic of AS individuals and romantic or socio-sexual behaviors tends to focus on the learning, behaviors, and desires of AS individuals (e.g., Ruble & Dalrymple, 1993; Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007; Van Bourgondien, Reichle, & Palmer, 1997; Welkowitz & Baker, 2005) in order to identify the problems and challenges that AS individuals face and develop interventions to help them cope better. The current project takes a different approach to AS communication research by (a) exploring the perspectives of the neurotypical partner in AS/NT romantic relationships and (b) taking a non-deficit approach to AS communication and behaviors in romantic relationships. First, I will briefly describe some of the challenges that AS individuals face in relational communication. Then, I will introduce Expectancy Violation

Theory and explain why it may serve as a useful explanatory framework through which to understand AS/NT communication.

Face-to-face communication can be challenging for many AS individuals because they have difficulty interpreting non-verbal, contextual, and emotional cues. As a result of not accurately interpreting a message's intended meaning, Aspies may respond 'inappropriately' and provoke a negative response by the NT. Not only do Aspies have trouble understanding NT communication, AS communication tends to be very literal, logical, and direct, which is often perceived as intentionally rude and off-putting to NTs (Müller et al., 2008). Many Aspies have learned to adapt their communication style (sometimes called "play acting") to NT preferences, but it takes constant energy and effort. Other Aspies, try as they might, often cannot figure out the 'right' way to respond, which leads to feeling of frustration and isolation (Jordan, 2010). From a communication perspective, these misinterpretations and mutually enforcing negative characterizations can be explained through Expectancy Violation Theory.

According to Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT), expectations (or expectancies) serve as normative frames by which verbal and non-verbal communication is evaluated. Violation of our normative expectations about physical space, touching, eye contact, tone of voice, etc. provokes positive or negative arousal depending on the communicator, the relationship, and the situation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Depending on how we feel about the other person and our normative expectations, the violation provokes different types of positively and negatively valenced responses (Afifi & Metts, 1998): sometimes we just let it go, sometimes we find it appealing, and sometimes we react negatively. Previous research has applied NVT to explore communication issues arising in cross-cultural communication (Manusov, Winchitz, & Manning, 1997), sexual resistance (Bevan, 2003), and relational development (Afifi & Metts, 1998). The application of EVT in these relational contexts suggests that it may be a particularly useful theory through which to explore some of the issues that arise in AS/NT romantic relationships.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary and interpretive form of qualitative research (Riessman, 2008). In narrative inquiry, the term *narrative* can refer to the process of storytelling, the data being analyzed, and/or the analytical process engaged by the researcher (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, the practice of narrative research in social sciences can take many forms. Common types of narrative inquiry include the analysis of stories told by research participants about their lives and experiences; the analysis of narratives that participants construct after engaging with narrative material presented or requested by the researcher; and the interpretive accounts developed by the researcher based on field notes, interviews, archival data, historic accounts, autobiographies, photographs, etc. My approach is aligned with the latter, an approach that Riessman (2008) referred to as a "story about stories" (p. 6). In this project, I take a narrative approach to analyzing narrative data. I chose to use previously existing written texts rather than texts produced specifically for the researcher, because I felt this was a more effective approach to gathering online data, as will be discussed further in the ethical considerations section. The units of analysis were individual discussion board posts, which I analyzed thematically and wove together in a composite story, a type of *representative construction*. Representative constructions are a form of analysis and reporting of data that preserves the 'truth' of the stories told in the data, but tells it in a different form (Bold, 2012). Representative constructions are produced from a diverse data set "through analyzing the parts and then synthesizing them into a realistic framework – a narrative that is readable and meaningful – in preparation for further analysis" (Bold, 2012, p. 146). Research presented in the form of representative construction assumes that 'truth' is a dialogic process; there are many versions of the 'truth' and readers will find their own truth in what is written (Andrews,

Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Bold, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Therefore, the researcher attempts to tell the story from the perspectives expressed in the data, while at the same time being explicit and mindful of the lens through which she is constructing those stories. In the analysis section, I describe in detail how I underwent each stage of the analytical process in order to develop a composite story in the form of a series of letters that captures some of the complexities that emerge in AS/NT romantic relationships. First, however, I discuss data collection and ethical considerations.

Data Collection Online

Because the internet is a place where AS individuals find expression and voice, researchers have begun to explore AS identity, community, and culture through online research (Brownlow, O'Dell, & Taylor, 2006; Davidson, 2008; Jordan, 2010). Narrative researchers have approached online data collection in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. For example, Paulus, Woodside, and Ziegler (2007) analyzed an online discussion board that was part of an online class project in an attempt to minimize the researcher's impact in the process of narrative construction. From a dialogic perspective, however, these researchers were not removed from the creation of narratives because participants tell stories for a particular audience (Riessman, 2008). In this light, even if the researcher is not face to face with the participant nor asks any questions, it seems inaccurate to assume that the researcher has no impact in the construction of the narratives. I do not mean to imply that it is undesirable for researchers to be part of the co-construction of narratives, only that online communication does not necessarily minimize that dialogic process. Because of my interest in minimizing my impact on the stories that people told about AS/NT relationships, I chose to use previously existing data.

My data collection was primarily drawn from one of the most popular websites for individuals on the Autism Spectrum with over 50,000 registered users worldwide. The website offers articles, chatrooms, and a heavily used and well-organized discussion board. The discussion board is divided by topical interests and is mostly open to the public with a few sections are 'for members only.' All data for this research came from the public forums. However, ethical considerations in terms of informed consent should be considered even when drawing upon publicly available online data, especially when working with marginalized groups (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002). Narrative researchers have approached the issue of informed consent in a variety of ways. In an online ethnography in an AS chatroom, Brownlow, O'Dell, and Taylor (2006) gained informed consent from the site owner and the members of the chatroom. Because they spent a period of four months making observations in one particular chatroom, they felt that their presence eventually became unobtrusive and did not impact the discussions. Similar to my project, Jones (2005) analyzed previously existing online narratives about Bipolar Disorder. She gained informed consent from the authors of the narratives, but did not take precautions to anonymize the data because she used many direct quotes that can easily be traced to the original text through a google search (Jones, 2005). Jones assumed that the writers of the texts took precautions to protect their privacy to the extent that they wished, such as by using a screen name. I attended the ethical issues of privacy in a different way.

Like Jones (2005), my data collection involved previously existing narrative texts found online in the public domain. However, rather than present my data in the form of direct quotes from the discussion board posts that can be traced back to individuals, I synthesized the data and present it in the form of a representative construction, which will be further discussed in the analysis section. Furthermore, I do not name the specific sites or blogs, nor do I refer to specific screen names. In the representative construction, the data represents a composite story rather than individual stories; therefore, informed consent was not sought. I chose this approach both because it allowed

me to synthesize many stories to produce a 'typical' story and because it served to maintain and protect the privacy of all participants on the discussion boards.

I approached data collection with some initial research questions: What does it mean to be in an AS/NT relationship? What are the challenges? Can it work? I started with a keyword search ("AS/NT relationships") in the discussion board section. There were many discussion posts related to this topic which illustrated that individuals struggle with and were interested in discussing it without researcher provocation. The vast majority of AS/NT relationships discussed in the threads involved AS men and NT women in heterosexual relationships. There are several possible reasons for this gender and sexual orientation imbalance, which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, because there were also some stories about AS women and NT men, as well as a few about gay/lesbian couples, it is important to clarify that sample selection for this paper and the analysis is a representative construction of a heterosexual relationship between an AS man and an NT woman.

Analysis

The data collection and analysis process was recursive and iterative. As an initial step, I pulled out one thread in its entirety to gain an overview of the feelings and issues discussed. The discussion in this thread reflected a diversity of viewpoints from both AS and NT men and women in both happy and troubled marriages/romantic relationships. I started by identifying key issues and ideas. Through thematic analysis with a selection of posts from this thread some prototypes about happy and troubled AS/NT relationships began to emerge.

Many AS/NT relationships seemed to start in a similar way according to the stories shared in various discussion threads. One AS man called the pattern a "template" in which the NT woman falls for the AS man because he is "different than other guys" and he showers her with attention. Later, however, when the AS man's level of attention wanes, problems arise. To explore this assertion about a "template," I went back to the data and found that, indeed, this was a 'typical' story that was repeated frequently. I extracted several pages of exemplars that fit this pattern. Because I was interested in a prototypical story, I did not explore the disconfirming cases. There may be more diversity of experience than similarity among AS/NT relationships, but I was interested in exploring the similar and found extensive support for my findings. I developed a basic themes-based storyline that reflected posts that were consistently repeated or generated follow up comments such as "I couldn't agree more!" or "I had the same experience!" I then went back out to the data field to see if these initial findings were supported. I branched out to other discussion threads on the same website, as well as other blogs and autobiographies. In reading through all this data, I began to develop a basic storyline based on the general themes that emerged from this initial analysis (e.g., "Why NTs love Aspies", "Relationship problems", "AS diagnosis"). I then went back to the discussion threads and pulled out individual posts that helped tell the story. I copied and pasted selected posts (sometimes entire threads) into separate word documents for each basic theme and removed identifying information. These documents were uploaded into a free qualitative analysis software program called WEFT, which allows for some basic coding. I then conducted a thematic analysis, which in narrative research means a focus on the 'what' of the story being told rather than 'how' the story is told (Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis is driven by various factors including previous research and theory, the purpose of the investigation, as well as the data itself (Riessman, 2008).

From the key ideas that emerged through this analytical process, I developed a representative construction of a 'typical' AS/NT love story in the form of a series of letters. This creative approach allowed me to synthesize diverse information in a way that captures the meaning and presents the data in an emotionally provocative and engaging

way (Bold, 2012; Gosse, Parr, & Allison, 2008). I then analyzed the letters by drawing upon the literature and other relevant readings (Bold, 2012). To help interpret my findings through a communication lens, I drew upon Expectancy Violation Theory.

The validity of a researcher's interpretative analysis is strengthened when the representation is recognizable to the participants (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, as a type of member-checking, I posted a request on the discussion board for individuals willing to read and give feedback on my paper, specifically as to whether the story rang true to their experiences. I was overwhelmed by the positive feedback from both AS and NT individuals. According to these individuals, my analysis represents (one version of) a 'typical' AS/NT romantic relationship.

The first three fictional letters presented in this analysis describe the typical early stages of an Aspie/NT love story from the perspective of Jane, an NT woman in her early 30's, as she writes to her friend Carol about her new boyfriend, James. The fourth letter, which is written to Jane from the perspective of James, presents a counter-story to Jane's version of events. Prior to each letter, I discuss the theme and the data from which it emerged followed by a brief analysis at the end of each section.

Letter One – “He’s not like other guys”

As mentioned in the literature review section, much of the literature on individuals with Asperger's and social interaction focuses on the challenges and problems they face in communication with NTs (Brownlow, O'Dell, & Taylor, 2006; Dekker, n.d.; Jones & Meldal, 2001; Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008; National Institutes of Health, n.d.; Shea, n.d.). None of those studies, however, explored how NTs feel about the AS individuals in their lives. While many communication problems were discussed in the online discussion board, a very different story also emerged. Some typical Aspie traits, such as obsessive interests and unambiguous communication, can be experienced very positively by NTs as described in this first representative construct.

Jane's description of James is drawn directly from the data. I pulled out individual posts mostly from one thread that started with a question posted by an AS man who wanted to know what NT women found appealing about AS men. I stopped collecting posts after I had eight double-spaced pages of quotes. There was consistent repetition (and saturation) of themes that are synthesized in the following letter. At this point in the story, neither Jane nor her boyfriend, James, know about Asperger's as was the case with many other relationships discussed online. In this letter, Jane writes to her friend Carol about the great new guy she has started dating.

Hi Carol,

Good news...I'm in love! I met the most wonderful man. His name is James...and he's totally different than other guys I've dated. He's so honest and straightforward...he tells me exactly what he thinks and how he feels about me. It's so nice not to play those stupid dating games. He doesn't just say he'll call me. He tells me when he'll call...and then he actually calls! I don't have to wonder or wait.

He's so incredibly smart and talented. He is totally obsessed with music and is a talented guitarist as well as a phenomenal piano player. He's even an excellent cook. We have so much to talk about because he's got so many interests...and he's interested in hearing about what I'm interested in. I mean, he really listens. He's definitely a bit quirky...sometimes he doesn't understand the simplest things. But honestly, I find it adorable. He's just so sweet and funny. I also really like that he doesn't blindly follow social norms. He questions everything and he's got his own ideas about things (religion, politics, ethics). It's just incredibly interesting to talk with him.

For some reason, he doesn't have many friends, but that's okay with me since that means he has more time to spend with me! I'm happy to keep him to myself, but I have to say, I'm looking forward to showing him off at our office Christmas party next month. I'm so tired of going to that event solo every year. It's nice to have a boyfriend so I don't have to worry about such things anymore! I'll write again soon!

Jane

In this letter, Jane expressed a positively valenced reaction to James' violation of her expectations. According to the EVT framework, if we like the other person and/or find them attractive, we may find such violations refreshing and appealing, as was the case with James. James exhibits many typical Aspie traits: obsessive interests, shyness, rejection/incomprehension of social norms and rituals, and limited social circles. My analysis revealed that such traits are not always viewed negatively by NTs. Aspie men were often described as "quirky" and "refreshingly straightforward." NT women who are tired of "dating games" and who appreciate someone who is "different than other guys" found these characteristics very appealing. This is an often neglected aspect of AS characteristics in the clinical literature, which tends to focus only on the problematic aspects of AS communication. However, as with all new relationships, at some point the rose-colored glasses come off.

Letter Two – "Maybe he's not so perfect after all"

Although told by Jane, this letter reflects a typical incident based on data drawn from several stories posted by AS men who were confounded as to why their reasonable, rational, honest responses to questions such as "How do like the dinner?" or "Do you miss me?" caused their NT partner to get upset. It simply did not make sense to them. The socially normative responses that these wives and girlfriends were expecting ("It's delicious! You are an amazing cook!" and "Of course, I miss you!") were violated in a negatively valenced way. So too were the AS men's expectations, who were confused by these negative reactions. The other issue illustrated in this scenario is the typical Aspie difficulty/inability in grasping indirect communication and cues. When NTs assume that they have communicated something, even though they have not said it directly, they get upset when they do not get their expected response.

Hi Carol,

Sorry I've been so out of touch again...I can't believe almost 6 months have passed since I last wrote to you. Things have been kind of hard with James. I guess it started with the Christmas party. When I showed him the dress I was planning to wear and asked him how he liked it...he said "Well, I don't really like the color green." So I asked him what he would prefer I wear...and he responded "Why would I have a preference about what you wear?" This seemed sort of rude...but I tried to lighten the conversation and said "Well, because you'll be looking at me all night, silly." Then it really went downhill. He asked me what I meant and then I got confused. I said "Because you'll be there with me, won't you?" When he told me that he wasn't planning on it, my heart just sank. "What do you mean you're not planning on it? I asked you about it last month!" I was clearly getting upset but he just sat there looking dumbfounded and didn't say anything. Finally, I just said, "Well, if you don't want to go, then don't worry about it. It's not that big a deal." Then he said, "Oh, okay, good!" and started talking about a new CD he heard about. I couldn't believe how insensitive he was being. I mean, he should have known how much that party meant to me since I'd be talking about it for over a month. I asked him weeks ago if he was free the night of the party. Grrrr! I just sat there and looked straight ahead as he droned on about that dumb CD. Finally, he stopped and asked me if something was the matter. I just gave him a cold stare. I was afraid I would start crying

or yelling if I tried to talk. I could see him mentally retrace the conversation...and finally he said, "Oh! Is this about the Christmas party? I thought you said everything was ok?"

He seemed so innocent when he asked this, like he genuinely didn't have a clue. So I explained to him that he should have known that the Christmas party was important to me because I've been talking about it so much. And that when I asked him if he was free that night and he said yes, that meant he was agreeing to go. And so on and so on...I had to explain everything to him. By the end of it, he seemed to understand why I was upset and he agreed to go.

This story is just one example that typifies the problems we've been having over the past months. I try to tell him about things that happen at work that upset me, but he just turns it around and makes it seem like it's my fault for being upset! I don't know, Carol. I still really like him for all the reasons that I told you about in my first letter. I guess I'm just starting to realize that maybe he's not so perfect after all. But I really want to make this work because he's such a great person. I'll write again soon and let you know how it goes.

Jane

In Jane's first letter, she was enamored with James' straightforward talk, his follow through on phone calls, and his engaged attention when talking to her, which all violated Jane's normative expectations based on her experience with other men. Her assessment of his violation of expectations was further influenced by the fact that she was attracted to him. In the second letter, however, we see a change. James' communicative responses had passed the threshold of Jane's tolerance of acceptability (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) and lead her to feel frustrated and upset by his unexpected and undesired communication behaviors.

Letter Three – "Now it all makes sense!"

As previously mentioned, many AS adults go through life undiagnosed since they were out of the school system by the time the diagnosis became popular. In most cases, a diagnosis provides some relief for the AS individual since there is finally an explanation for a lifelong feeling of difference, of not understanding, and of being misunderstood (Finch, 2012). NT spouses also express relief because now they can understand that their partner's behavior is not intentionally hurtful. They can look back, as Jane does in this letter, and understand past arguments and issues in a new way.

Dear Carol,

I don't know even where to begin. The past year has been an emotional roller coaster, but I think James and I are finally coming to some understanding. After I last wrote you, things continued to get worse. We had several incidents similar to the Christmas story. James just became withdrawn and distant. I thought he was mad at me all the time, but I didn't know what I had done. When I asked him, he would tell me that I hadn't done anything at all, but he just needed 'some space' to be alone. It seemed like he wanted to break up with me, but I decided I wasn't going to make it easy on him, I was going to wait for him to come out and say it. One day, I finally got tired of waiting and I asked him straight out.

To make a long story short, he did not want to break up with me at all. He just didn't understand what our fights were about and he was afraid of saying or doing something that would upset me and was just trying to be careful not to hurt me. I was so touched...he seemed so genuine and uncertain. So, we ended up going to see a counselor to help us figure out what was going on. It turns out that he has Asperger's Syndrome. If you're like me, you've probably heard of it, but might not know what it is. Basically, it's a neurological "condition" that makes it hard to interpret non-verbal, contextual, and emotional cues. There

are a lot of other typical “Aspie” traits such as a need for very direct and explicit communication, an obsession with special interests, and a need for a lot of alone time. So many things about him make sense now.

Remember that story I told you about the Christmas party? When I asked him if he was free the night of the party, he did not understand the implication of his saying “yes I am” and me saying “okay, great.” And when I asked about my dress, he literally did not understand why I was asking him about it...nor that saying he does not like the color green was not what a girl wants to hear! And when I told him it was fine for him not to go, he thought I really meant it. It’s taken me a while to understand that he really doesn’t get what I’m saying or asking unless I say things directly, clearly, and without nuance or sarcasm. So, instead of asking, “Wouldn’t you rather stay in tonight?” I have to tell him that I don’t feel like going out. What I’ve also come to realize is that all those things that I liked so much about him at the beginning...his honesty (and lack of game playing), his intense focus on things, his sincere interest in me...all these things are also “typical” Aspie traits. So, now that we understand each other better (or at least, I understand him better), we haven’t really had any problems like the Christmas fiasco. I know that I need to say things very directly and I check to make sure that he has understood what I meant. Sometimes he’s still so insensitive, like when I told him I was sick the other day...he didn’t ask if I needed anything. Instead, he told me he wasn’t going to come over so he wouldn’t catch anything. At least now I know that I shouldn’t get upset with him...he can’t help it if he doesn’t get it. But still...

He’s still going to counseling on his own. I can see that he’s really trying, but it’s still hard. He gets so withdrawn. And sometimes when I try to draw him out, he gets really angry. But as I said, I know he’s trying. I’ll keep you posted!

Jane

As Jane explains, the AS diagnosis helps, but the problems do not go away. Key ideas that emerged from the posts relating stories about AS/NT marital/relationship issues were: intentionality, blame, and effort. In response to problems that rise, NT women typically describe their own efforts at trying to be tolerant and their expectations that their AS husbands should or do try to change/improve. For the NTs, the AS label helped women understand that their AS men were not being *intentionally* hurtful or insensitive. Although this understanding did not act as a prophylactic against being hurt, some NT women shifted the blame from the man to the AS. The understanding that “he didn’t mean it that way” or “he can’t help it” allowed women to temper their reactions to what they viewed as negative behaviors. Thus, the AS diagnosis helped to alter the valence of the expectancy violations. However, AS was not seen as an excuse for “bad behavior” and AS men were expected to change, to be more conscientious. So, somewhat paradoxically, the AS diagnosis provided an understanding that “he can’t help it,” but at the same time the AS men were expected (by themselves as well as by their wives) to make an effort to change. In fact, one autobiography, *The Journal of Best Practices* (Finch, 2012), is described as a “candid story of ruthless self-improvement” (book cover) to become a better husband. A typical AS/NT story at this stage is one in which the NT is tolerant and the AS tries to do better and the AS label is almost a third character in the story, the one who shoulders the blame for the problems. In the next letter, a different story emerges.

Letter Four – “An AS Counter-Story”

Up to this point, the analysis has focused on the NT women’s view of the relationship issues. This NT-focus is representative of the content on the discussion boards. Most of the discussion about AS/NT marriages focused on how the relationship impacts the NT. This imbalance was noted by one AS man who posted a question asking AS men in relationships with NTs to step forward and have their voice heard. The response to his request yielded

64 single spaced pages of text. Through the posted responses to his call, a counter-story emerged and forms the basis of the following letter. Readers should note that while all the data is derived from the discussion board posts, the “voice” is my interpretation. In other words, this letter does not sound like it was written by an AS man, but the content rings true according to my member checking.

Dear Jane,

I'm sorry to have to explain all this in a letter. I wish that I could find a way to talk about this with you face to face. But I know I would just freeze up and end up not being able to explain myself to you. I know things have been really hard on you over the past few months. I also know—because you have told me—that you think that I don't care or have no feelings about the situation. Well, this assessment could not be farther from the truth. Through talking with my therapist, I have realized that it's time for me to tell you how hard these past months have been on me too.

Sometimes when we lay there in bed, I can sense that you are angry or upset with me. But I have no idea why. I think to myself that I should ask you what's wrong, but I know that I probably still won't understand after you tell me, and even if I do understand, I won't be able to figure out what to say to make it better. In fact, I am afraid that I will just make things worse. So I don't say anything at all.

I really care about you, but I'm tired of hurting you without knowing why, and then just blaming myself and feeling terrible about it. I know you have tried to be patient with me. But your way of being patient seems to mean pushing me to talk when what I really need is for you to leave me alone. When you keep asking me what's wrong, it completely stresses me out. Most of the time, nothing is wrong, but when I tell you that, you don't seem to believe me. I don't know why you can't understand that sometimes I just need to be alone or at least I just need silence.

I think it's best if we don't see each other anymore. I want you to be happy, but I don't think I can give you what you need. You say that I am “emotionally distant,” but I don't even know what that means. Although I hate that I hurt you, I feel fine with who I am. So, I think that breaking up is the only logical thing to do for us both to be happy.

James

The perspective expressed in this letter illustrates a counter-story to the frustrations experienced by NTs in AS/NT relationships. James' letter gives voice to some of the difficulties that AS men typically have in NT relationships and sheds light on how the fear of violating NT expectations can become oppressive to AS individuals. They know something is wrong, yet they do not know what it is and are afraid to ask because they suspect that they will not understand or know how to respond, thus making matters worse. Many, possibly most, AS men blamed themselves and felt guilty for this consistent pattern of painful behavior, yet they also felt helpless to change it. Some men also expressed resentment towards their partners for ‘punishing’ them – through withholding sex, giving the silent treatment, or by saying deliberately hurtful things – for something they could not help. Thus, many typical AS/NT relationships get caught in an endless cycle of mutual hurt. However, James' letter also serves as an important counter-narrative to the dominant idea that AS communication traits are the locus of the problem. Rather, as discussed throughout these letters, the central issue seems to be the consistent violation of communication expectations on behalf of both partners in the relationship. However, although both partners trigger and experience expectancy violations, much of the discussion seems to privilege NT communication needs, which serves to marginalize and oppress AS individuals in mixed AS/NT relationships. However, once these underlying expectations are surfaced, AS/NT couples can find ways to mutually adapt their communication styles and approaches.

Discussion

The main purpose of this project was to explore and articulate the complexities, issues, and perspectives on AS/NT romantic relationships. This project contributes to the literature on AS in at least two important ways. First, by taking a non-deficit approach to AS communication and behaviors in AS/NT relationships, I shed light on an often ignored aspect of AS communication. Specifically, my analysis revealed how many aspects of AS communication traits can provoke positively valenced reactions to violation of expectations. Secondly, by approaching this project and the data analysis from a standpoint informed by identity politics, my analysis challenged the negative framing of AS communication traits. My analysis suggests that the problems that arise in AS/NT relationships might be addressed through mutual adaptation.

Understood through EVT, many of the problems that arise in AS/NT relationships are caused by violation of expectations. This assertion implies that adapting or altering expectations may serve to remediate some of the communication issues. Several of the posts reflected the stories of happy AS/NT couples who had learned to understand and respect their differences and found ways to mutually adapt to each other, such as avoiding unrealistic expectations of each other and creating communication strategies that are comfortable for both parties. The strategies employed in the successful AS/NT relationships destabilized the idea that AS individuals are the only ones who need to adapt in order to make AS/NT relationships work.

There were many AS/NT stories similar to Jane and James' story. There were also much more extreme AS/NT relationship problems. Some NT women described emotionally abusive behaviors such as their AS husbands telling them they were stupid for not understanding purely logical and rational comments or exploding in anger because they felt smothered. Some of these women experienced depression and other physical/emotional problems. There were also many AS men (and women) who expressed pain and frustration because of their partners' unrealistic expectations to enjoy going to parties, showing adoration, or providing emotional support. In short, there are a multitude of experiences in AS/NT relationships and I make no claim that my insights are applicable to all such relationships. Nor do I assert that communication and realistic expectations are going to make all AS/NT relationships work because there are often so many other factors involved (children, mental health issues, financial problems, personality issues, etc.). I only claim that the story told here reflects the experience of some people in neurologically mixed romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations to this research, which provide questions for what I hope to be a growing body of fruitful research. My goal in this research project was to learn something about the particular nature of AS/NT intimate relationships, but I have only scratched the surface by presenting 'typical' stories. Future research could enrich our understanding of these complex relationships by exploring atypical stories, those that diverge in critical ways from the typical story presented here. Moreover, there are many other types of interpersonal relationships (friendships, parental, workplace) that also warrant exploration. Perhaps most importantly, I believe that what I have presented here is a representative construction of a White, middle class, heterosexual perspective. I urge scholars interested in AS to explore how gender, race, physical disability, sexual orientation, social class, and nationality intersect with AS communication and relationships. As awareness and attention grows, we must pay particular attention to how our discourse may serve to further marginalize those already in the shadows of public discussion.

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