

Welcome

to the short (!) presentation:

Autism – fight or flight

New perspectives on challenging behaviors

by Bernhard J. Schmidt

based on the book
Schmidt, B. J. (2018):

„Autismus – Flucht oder Kampf. Neue Perspektiven auf herausforderndes Verhalten“

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- a) the „classical“: **Flight** – withdrawal, rituals, stereotypes, autoaggression
- b) **the new perspective: Fight** – exploration, aggression ...

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1.a Social Psychology

There are two kinds of communication and interaction

1.) The (mainly) conscious Social Communication and Interaction

2.) The (mainly) unconscious Group Communication* and Interaction through

- facial expression
- gestures
- modulation of the voice
- synchronisation
- imitation
- small talk and gossip as „grooming“ **
- ...

*„In any group of individuals that gather together for a stated purpose there will exist a conscious, task-oriented group and an underlying, unconscious group; the functioning of this underlying group may be in conflict with the requirements of the task.“ ****

* Bargh, John A. (2014): Social psychology and the unconscious. The automaticity of higher mental processes.

** Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004): Gossip in evolutionary perspective. DOI: 10.1037/1089-2680.8.2.100.

*** Wetherell, Margaret (Hg.) (1996): Identities, groups and social issues. London: SAGE.

1.b Developmental Psychology

The development of children needs social interaction and communication.

Development needs the participation in groups.

Problems with social interaction and group participation will cause developmental delays and problems.

Diagnosis

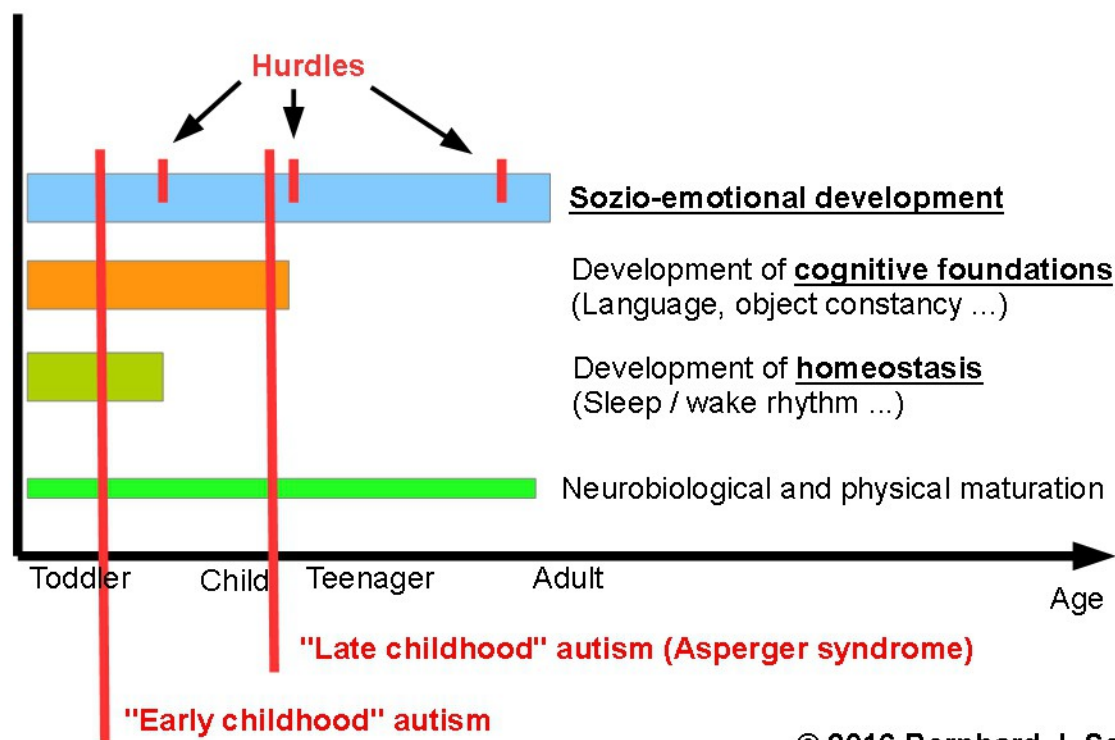
„Diagnosis might tell us what kind of puzzle it is, but doesn't give us a clue about how to solve it. In this respect, the diagnostic criteria provided in the most widely used diagnostic manual ... are not particularly helpful.“

Tantam, Digby (2009): Can the world afford autistic spectrum disorder?
Nonverbal communication, asperger syndrome and the interbrain.
London, Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

1.b Developmental Psychology

The anglo-saxonian concept of an „autism spectrum“ under an developmental perspective:

Sensitive phases of development



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The earlier the disturbance of social interaction takes place, the more areas of development are at risk.

2. Autism

The new definition

My social psychological definition of autism:

Autism is the impaired unconscious group communication, because of the lack of:

- facial expression
- gestures
- modulation of the voice
- synchronisation
- imitation
- small talk and gossip as „grooming“
- ...

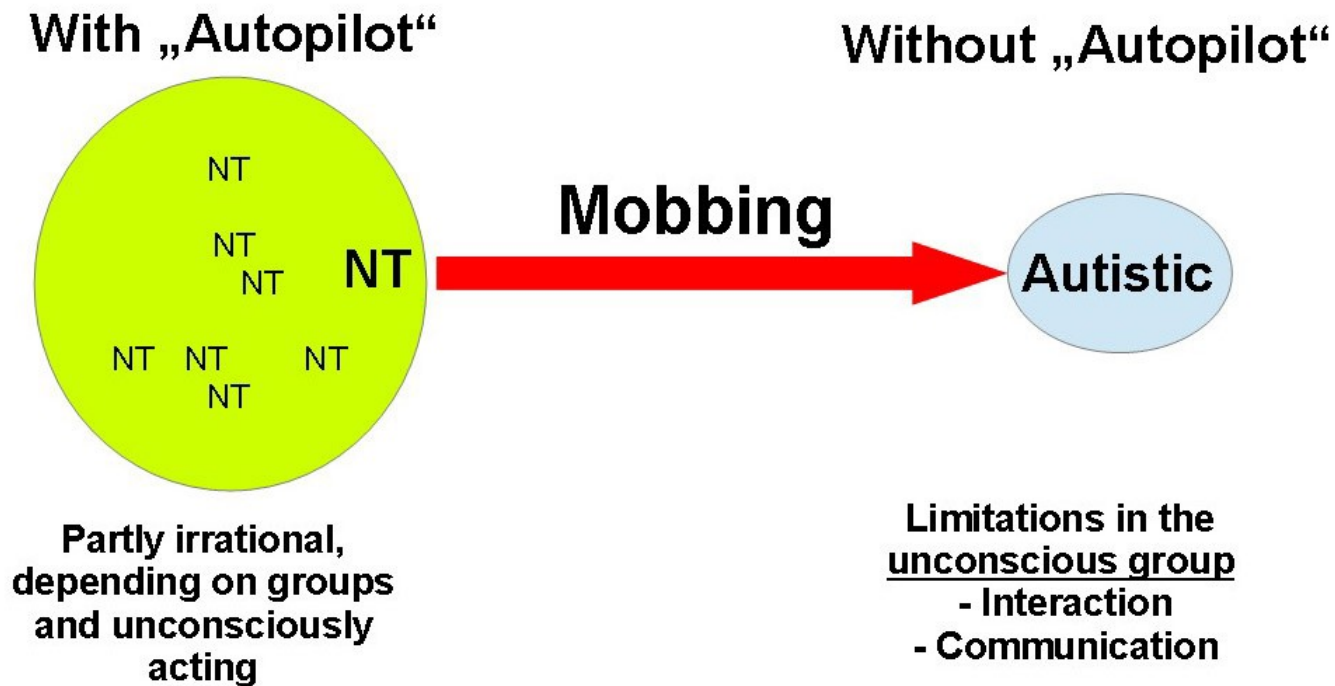
Autism is not a disease, but a vulnerability for problems with social communication and group participation.

And as a result a vulnerability to developmental and mental disorders.

3.a Interpersonal: Exclusion from social communication

Autopilot = The unconscious and automatic orientation on the group behavior

Group Behavior and Mobbing



3.b Intrapersonal: Anxiety and stress

„Anxiety is perhaps the most universal and persistent disorder associated with all of the PDD’s, so much that it has been suggested in the past that it is a cause of autism.

The author does not believe this, but anxiety is strongly linked to PDD from early age. The author’s view is that people with AS live in a world that is more unpredictable and uncertain than it is for others whose intact nonverbal communication enables them to pick up patterns in social behavior.

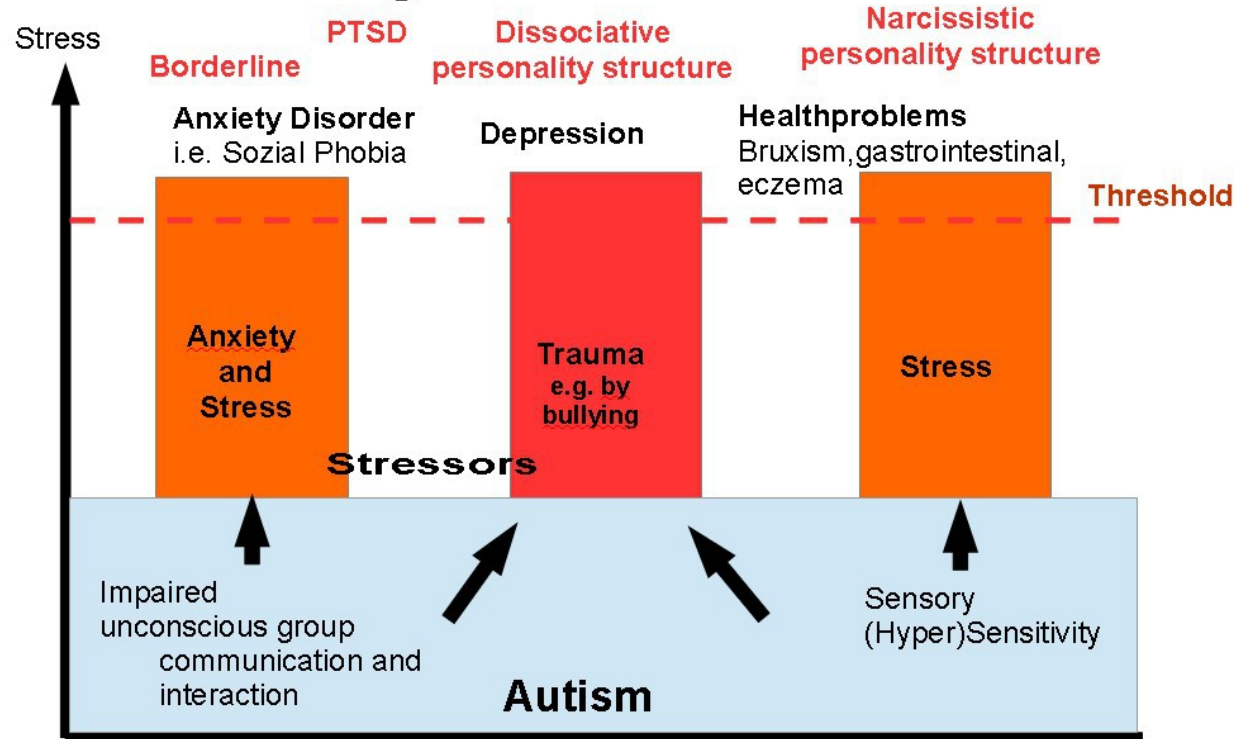
It is this uncertainty that produces anxiety, and not anxiety that causes AS. But it is certainly true that anxiety increases the social impairment that AS produces, by decreasing social skill performance and by increasing the frequency of any dysfunctional means that a person with AS might use in the face of anxiety. Repetitive questions, slowness, ritualizing, making social blunders, and aggression or irritability are all likely to worsen when a person with AS becomes anxious.“

Tantam, Digby (2003): The Challenge of adolescents and adults with Asperger syndrome. In: Child And Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics (12),

3.b Intrapersonal: Anxiety and stress

Anxiety and stress can result in health and mental problems:

Diathesis-stress model Stage 3: traumatization



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4.a Two types of possible reactions to anxiety and stress:

Fight or Flight

But through the phenomenological (and not theory based) approaches of **Kanner** and **Asperger**, so far only the „flight type“ has been seen.

with

- repetitive behaviors
- rituales
- stereotypes
- insistance on sameness
- avoidance of change

resulting often in withdrawal and autoaggression.

4.b The second type of possible reactions to anxiety and stress:

Fight

Through the theoretical approach, based on social psychology, the „fight type“ can be seen as well, represented through:

- massive exploration (scanning for danger)
- little attention spans
- aggression against others, instead of autoaggression
- ...

These children often show challenging behaviors, which so far were seen as „typically autistic“, so that there is no analysis of the reasons and causes and no intervention or support.

In Germany these children often get the diagnose „atypical autism“.

5. Different types of challenging behavior

Challenging behavior can be part of an

adequate development:

- e.g. provocations (exploration of social boundaries)

Or have cause in a

disturbed or delayed development:

- e.g. problems with
 - impulse control
 - frustration tolerance
 - emotion regulation
- In response to violence / bullying
- Overload / Melt down, because of hypersensitivity and filter problems
- mental disorders (e.g., phobia, dissociative personality disorder, PTSD)

6. New perspectives for psychology

So in my opinion psychology has to

- see autism as a vulnerability and not as a disease**
- identify the „fight type“ not as „atypical autism“**
- see challenging behaviors not as „typically autistic“**
- identify the reasons and causes for challenging behaviors**
- create interventions and support for autistics
with challenging behaviors, developmental delays
and mental disorders**

Thank you

for your attention!