

Report by:

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IMFAR 2008 in London, UK proved to be a very exciting conference not only because it brought together a greater number of researchers and students than ever before, but because many of the speakers challenged us with new or different ways of thinking about autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Dr. Francesca Happé, a cognitive psychologist in London, described how research has tended to focus on “unifying theories” about ASD, such as theory of mind deficits (the ability to “read” the intentions of others), “weak central coherence” (difficulties seeing the “whole picture” instead of its parts) or executive function problems (difficulty planning and thinking flexibly). She proposed that these differences in the way individuals with ASD think about others and the world around them may all have important roles and instead form a constellation of strengths and differences that are somewhat separable.

Similarly, Dr. Bourgeron, a genetics researcher reminded us that only a very small percentage of cases of ASD can be attributed to differences in a single gene; instead combinations of changes in multiple different genes likely lead to the development of ASDs. He added that it is very important for genetic researchers to interact with brain scientists and clinical researchers to put together “stories” of how changes in particular genes lead to changes in the brain and finally to differences in how individuals with ASD think, perceive others and experience the world. He is very

interested in how the genetics of synapses (connecting points between neurons) in the brain may also play an important role in ASD.

As a research student, I was very privileged to hear both Dr. Happé and Dr. Lorna Wing speak to a room of new researchers about their own career paths and insights about ASD research. Both had been inspired by the children and adults with ASD with whom they worked. Dr. Wing reflected on her long career as a researcher and how, when she started, autism was not recognized as separate from more global developmental disorders and how individuals with autism who were high-functioning were unknown to clinicians and researchers. She discussed how she came to realize that her own daughter had autism and how important it was that parents organized themselves to convince physicians and researchers to focus on autism as a “brain disorder” rather than a psychoanalytic problem caused by parenting style.

Dr. Happé described how important it was to realize that individuals with ASD may not have “cognitive deficits” (or lack of abilities) but rather certain biases in how they tackle problems and social situations; biases mean that people tend to think or respond in certain ways but can be prompted or can learn to find alternative strategies. Some of her experiments have found that high-functioning individuals with ASD will tend

to focus on narrow details in solving problems but if asked to find other strategies can shift to “bigger picture” solutions similar to those first generated by typically developing children or adults. In conclusion, she reminded us that we tend to frame ASD is a disorder of social and other deficits; this should be shifted to seeing such individuals

as having unique strengths that are likely the result of special biases in thinking and perceiving.

Overall, my trip to IMFAR 2008 in London was a very motivating and energizing experience. I am very grateful to Autism Ontario for supporting my attendance!!