

Negatively phrased items of the Autism Spectrum Quotient function differently for groups with and without autism

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The Autism Spectrum Quotient (the AQ, developed by Baron-Cohen and colleagues) is a widely used questionnaire used to measure levels of autistic traits. However, comparing levels of autistic traits between different groups could be misleading. For example, comparing AQ scores of men and women could be misleading if the answers that people provide to certain questions of the AQ are not only determined by their autistic traits, but also by their sex. In that case, these questions do not measure only what they are supposed to measure.

In this article, the AQ questions were studied for this phenomenon, in a group of 408 participants (aged 19 to 79 years). Some of these participants were diagnosed with autism whilst others were not; the participants were of different ages; and we included both men and women in our research. Our results showed that a number of questions on the AQ are indeed answered differently between groups. Even when taking into account that there will be differences in levels of autistic traits between autistic and non-autistic adults, the way autistic and non-autistic adults answered these eight questions was still different. There were also differences in answers given by non-autistic men and women, and between autistic people below the age of 50 and over the age of 50. The eight questions that showed this problem were generally negatively phrased. There are shortened versions of the AQ and these do not include most of these questions, so these questionnaires may be more useful in making comparisons between groups. It is important that questionnaires that are frequently used (such as the AQ) are not biased in this way. This is because the conclusions of the research that uses them relies on the questionnaires accurately measuring what they are designed to measure.