



Baron-Cohen et al (2001) ~ The 'Reading the Mind in the Eyes' Test revised version: a study with normal adults, and adults with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism.

Extended Answer Exam Questions

1. The Cognitive Approach can study the effect of developmental disorders within mental processes on behaviour; describe what Baron-Cohen was studying in his investigation about autism.

(4 marks)

Cognitive processes such as a theory of mind have been investigated by Baron-Cohen, in this experiment he wanted to see if adults with High Functioning Autism or Asperger's Syndrome would be able to pass the 'Reading the Mind in the Eyes' test. He expected that given their lack of theory of mind they would struggle with this task. This revised experiment was completed following criticism of his previous research. He recruited four groups of participants (15 HFA/ AS adults, 122 adults from education classes in Exeter, 103 students from Cambridge University and 14 adults who were matched on IQ with the autistic group) and all participants completed the revised eyes test. All except group 2 (normal adults) did an Autism Spectrum Quotient test (AQ) in addition. Firstly they were shown 36 sets of eyes each with four choices of emotion and asked to select an appropriate option. They were given a glossary of words to help, they were also asked to judge if they thought the eyes were male or female. A high score on the AQ test indicated more autistic traits and poor performance on the eyes test indicated a lack of theory of mind. Baron-Cohen found the HFA/AS group identified fewer words in the eyes test than the comparison groups. They also scored highest on the AQ test as expected. From the findings Baron-Cohen was able to support all of his hypotheses.

2. In the Cognitive Approach researchers such as Baron-Cohen will use specialised equipment or materials in their research. Outline the two tests used in his study.

(8 marks)

Baron-Cohen used an eyes test revised from an original study in 1997 where participants were only given two possible word options to describe the emotion of the eyes giving participants a 50/50 chance of getting a correct answer. As this was deemed to be due to chance it was revised to include four possible options. In addition the original test only included 25 sets of eyes which had complex and simple emotions which meant that they were often too easy for participants, resulting in a ceiling effect, decreasing the validity. This was later increased to 36 sets of eyes; half male and half female. For each set there was one correct answer and three foils. Baron-Cohen believed that adults with HFA or AS would be impaired on this task, as reading emotions in eyes was seen as a cognitive process (theory of mind).

Baron-Cohen also used an Autism Spectrum Quotient Test to investigate the likely characteristics that individuals held that were related to Autism. If participants scored highly on this test it would indicate they may meet the criteria for a DSM diagnosis of Autism (having more autistic traits). Therefore, the AQ measures the degree to which any individual adult with normal IQ possesses traits related to the autistic spectrum. It is a self report with scores ranging from 0-50, and the higher the score the more autistic traits a person possesses.

