

**Representations of “Self” and “Other”
Among Individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders
And Their Relationship Partners**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology, in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

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Mental representations of *self* and *other* are thought to develop in the context of early relational experience. This process appears to be profoundly disrupted in the case of Autism, impairing the sufferer’s ability to form a stable and coherent sense of *self* and *self in relation to other*. Affected individuals show deficits in social functioning, and often fail to form and maintain close relationships with other people. Within this population, however, there are a limited number of adults who have formed long-term partnerships, affording an opportunity to explore their unique experience in a dyadic context.

This study uses qualitative research methods to analyze narrative data gathered in a series of semi-structured interviews. The eight participants included four adults previously diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (High Functioning Autism, Aspergers Syndrome, and PDD-NOS) and their marital partners. Individual interviews explored how each participant has developed a sense of *self* in the context of the relationship, and how he/she has come to understand the subjective experience of his/her partner. A second interview asked each couple to jointly recount the history of their relationship.

Results identified similarities and differences in how participants verbally represent concepts of “self,” “other,” and “our relationship.” Differences were also observed in the quality of the couples’ dyadic interactions, which correlated with scores obtained using the Oral History Interview and Coding System (Beuhman and Gottman, 1996), an instrument previously found to

predict marital stability. While all four relationships show a measure of stability, only two of the couples appear to have achieved mutually need satisfying emotional bonds.

The author takes a dynamic developmental perspective, attempting to integrate aspects of neuro-cognitive and psychoanalytic theory. Narrative data are included as a series of case presentations, with clinically informed commentary. The findings are discussed from a standpoint of *object relations theory*, with the aim of identifying both individual/intrapsychic and dyadic/interpersonal patterns of thinking and behavior that might correspond to internalized constructs of *self*, *other*, and *self in relation to other*. Factors which both challenge and assist the participants in sustaining their relationships are also explored, and implications for treatment are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with autism occurred during the early nineties when I was working with “special needs” children in the New York Public School system. Among these students who were coping with diverse traumas, disabilities and behavioral challenges, a small number stood out as fundamentally different from the rest. Whereas most of the children desperately sought human contact and active response to their intense emotional needs, those labeled “autistic” seemed aloof and self-sufficient. They appeared content to ignore the people and activity surrounding them, and were, for the most part, either unwilling or unable to respond to social overtures. It was explained to me that this impairment in interpersonal relatedness was the primary symptom of autistic spectrum disorders. I found these children uniquely compelling, and seemed to have a knack for engaging them. As time passed I became ever more curious about their distinctive ways of being in (or hiding from) the world. The desire to delve deeper into their internal experience and better understand how to connect with them strongly influenced my decision to study psychology, and shaped the design of my academic programming.

My curiosity shifted to a more powerful personal interest, however, when my own son was diagnosed with an autistic disorder shortly after his third birthday. It seemed strangely appropriate that this unhappy discovery should coincide with my decision to enhance my knowledge of the disorder. With hindsight I can speculate about whether an unconscious awareness of my son’s difference played a role in my attraction to autistic

children. At the time the two seemed like parallel processes of discovery: one involved seeking contact with fascinating and elusive little strangers; the other, falling in love with the enchantingly odd little creature to whom I had given birth.

The idea that Samuel might have autism never occurred to us during those first years, because of the deep and affectionate bonds he had achieved with his parents and significant others. While he seemed “different” in a way that was hard to describe, his precocious verbal intelligence seemed to preclude the presence of a developmental disability. It wasn’t until he suffered a catastrophic regression during his third year, losing all language and sense of ease in the world, that we realized something was amiss. As a family who embraced eccentricity we hadn’t been troubled by early traits that developmental experts now recognize as “red flags,” such as Sam’s early obsession with appliances (autistic children are often fascinated by mechanical devices, and typically show more interest in inanimate objects than in people); we happily packed the *Cuisinart* instruction manual for airplane and restaurant trips, and made him ABC books by cutting pictures out of the Sears Catalogue. After all, he was just as interested in conventional story books, and highly articulate in his questions and observations.

Among the little quirks we had noted in Sam’s budding personality was a tendency to use an overly formal and pedantic style of speech. At age two he would say to his father: “No thank you, Daddy, I’m not planning to have a bath tonight,” when beckoned to the tub. Sam often had a strange way of referring to himself and others, as in this example of his request for a holiday gift: “Mommy, do you have a present for this beautiful boy?” Who could resist that endearing yet oddly impersonal plea? Because of his precocious vocabulary and obvious relish for words, we were unconcerned about the

early flaws we'd seen in Sam's linguistic precision. We laughed at his initial reversal of pronouns, finding it perfectly logical when he stretched up his arms and demanded: "You want me to pick you up." He hadn't yet recognized that pronouns were meant to convey a subjective point of view – that the word "I" embodied a discreet sense of personal identity and perspective.

Samuel's persistent and literal-minded use of linguistic labels for himself and others intrigued and amused us then. In retrospect, however, I am inclined to interpret those idiosyncrasies as indications of his developmental delays, specifically his failure to develop a subjective sense of *self*. On the surface Samuel appeared to be a remarkably self-possessed little boy: the purposeful architect of his own goal-directed behavior. Yet I now suspect that his mind lacked the intuitive sense that the thoughts and feelings which gave impetus to his actions were uniquely his, and that they had to be actively communicated in order to be shared by others. Mastery of this concept, which carries with it an understanding of oneself as a distinct and bounded individual in a world of similarly bounded and separate individuals, can be inferred from a variety of behavioral manifestations, including correct usage of the words *I*, *me* and *you* (Hobson, 1990a). Sam's early difficulty with pronouns turned out to be one of numerous developmental abnormalities shared by children with autistic disorders (Lee, Hobson & Chiat, 1994), many of which suggest an impairment in the ability to form a stable and coherent sense of *self* as differentiated from *other*.

Samuel's lack of intuitive "differentiation" was noticeable in other ways, including his apparent conviction that I was privy to the unexpressed contents of his mind. He seemed to operate on the assumption that I saw, heard and knew everything

exactly as he perceived it¹. While a certain degree of ego-centricity is to be expected in young children, even pre-verbal infants seem to know that others' perspectives differ from their own; they demonstrate this understanding when they gesture or point, in order to draw their caregiver's attention to an item of interest.² At an age when other children typically understand that each person has a mind of his own, and that inanimate objects have no minds at all, Sam was wondering about the thoughts and feelings of his building blocks and explaining his wish for privacy to the cat. "Does the truck want to go back in the basket?" Sam would ask while putting his toys away. I thought he was an example of his generation's cultural zeitgeist when, at age three, he demanded that I "turn on" a sleeping lizard at the zoo, until I learned that normally developing children show conceptual understanding of *animate* vs. *inanimate* well before age two (Mandler, 1993). Something was lacking in Sam's formulation of mental concepts, and it persisted beyond his learning to differentiate self from other, and things from animals and people.

On one occasion, after noticing his father's absence during an out-of-town trip, Sam asked: "Where did that guy called 'Daddy' go?" *That guy called Daddy*. Amused and dumbfounded, I wondered what other child had ever said such a thing. It seemed as if the word *Daddy* had no meaning for my son, beyond that of a simple label for a particular body. Years later Sam's words came back to me when I heard a young woman with autism describe her childhood view of her mother as: "That tall person who kept trying to hug me." It was hard to imagine how something as basic as the recognition of

¹ An explanation for this inability to differentiate between one's own and others' perspectives has been offered by cognitive theorists, who suggest that the core deficit in autism is "mind blindness," or an impaired "theory of mind" (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985). This idea will be discussed in detail in a later section.

² The newest diagnostic trends show that one of the earliest predictors of an autistic-spectrum disorder is an infant's failure to point, indicating a deficit in "joint attention" capacity (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1996).

familial bonds could be so elusive for these individuals, when it resonates deeply and emotionally within the rest of us almost from the moment of birth. My observations left me with the impression that their autism affected not only their behavioral and emotional responses to interpersonal contact, but also their way of conceptualizing people and human relationships at the level of basic mental representation. I now look back on Samuel's early utterances as indicators of a fundamental disturbance in his capacity to grasp the concept of *personhood* and the nuances of relational significance.

In time, both Sam and the young woman quoted above reached an understanding of the unique relationship between their parents and themselves. Yet it is clear that their achievement of this understanding failed to evolve in the typical fashion, and that their conceptions regarding the nature and significance of such relationships reflect an unusual process of constructing meaning out of interpersonal experience. Such processes, through which we form "internal working models" of relationships (Bowlby, 1977), are sometimes examined through analysis of narratives in which individuals describe significant figures and recount their interpersonal experience (Ainsworth, *et al.*, 1978; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Slade & Cohen, 1996). This suggests that the language (*i.e.*, usage of pronouns and other linguistic forms, as well as narrative construction) used by individuals with autism to describe or label themselves and others might provide clues to their underlying organization of information and ideas about people. With that in mind, I began to look more carefully at verbal material produced by my son and others like him, hoping to better understand the conceptual structures that influence the quality of their relatedness. By investigating the meanings they attach to words that identify people and objects, I thought, we might further

illuminate the connection between inner world and external behavior manifested in autistic symptomatology.

In attempting to characterize the core deficit in autism, several authors have noted a “reduction of personhood” as a significant component (Alvarez & Reid, 1999; Hobson, 1993a). These authors concur with theorists who describe autism as a disorder of *intersubjectivity*, one that involves an impairment in developing a sense of other persons as sentient beings worth engaging with (Mundy & Hogan, 1994; Roser & Buchholz, 1996; Trevarthan, *et al.*, 1996). Alvarez and Reid provide this description of autism: “We formulate it as an impairment of the normal *sense of emotionally-based curiosity about, and desire for, interpersonal relationships* [sic.]” (p. 2, 1999). A critical element in this definition is its reference to the emotional origins of human relatedness. The role of affect in all aspects of psychological functioning has been studied from multiple theoretical perspectives, and holds particular salience for those who study both normal and pathological development.

At the present time, I am inclined to believe that the explanation for much of what we see in the psychological functioning of individuals with autistic disorders stems from a disturbance in the process whereby affective valence is incorporated into basic units of information and experience, which are then organized into the complex mental schemata that constitute our thoughts, feelings and behavioral patterns.³ I view this process as embedded within the relational matrix in which psychological development takes place,

³ Here I have used terms familiar to cognitive theorists in describing the integrative process through which experiential learning leads to construction of internalized representations. Emotional responses are incorporated and “encoded” along with sensory-perceptual information to form associative networks that influence thinking and behavior. Freud himself, in Chapter Seven of his “Interpretation of Dreams,” suggested that each of the smallest increments of information retained in the mind contained an affective charge (1900).

in accordance with the principles of *object relations theory* (Fairbairn, 1959; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983) and the ideas presented by Stern (1985), Siegel (1999) and Schore (1994), who integrate cognitive and neurobiological theories into their view of the mind's maturation. In light of these compelling theories, which present affectively charged interactions between infant and caregiver as the organizing force underlying cognitive as well as emotional development, one can imagine the pervasive impact of a disturbance in the infant's capacity to engage in emotionally meaningful interpersonal exchange. The possibility that this disturbance might stem from a basic information processing impairment, involving an inability to integrate sensory-perceptual and affective experience into coherent networks of meaning, would account for the global nature of autistic developmental pathology. It might also help to explain observed deficits in symbolizing capacities in children with autism (Alvarez & Reid, 1999; Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985; Bromfield, 1989; Hobson, 1990a; Leslie, 1987; Tustin, 1983). Having arrived at this notion (one that is hardly original, although I have not yet heard it expressed in quite this way), which I will later elaborate on, I find myself only slightly less mystified than I was when I began my exploration of autism. In those early days I was truly bewildered.

As I learned more about the mechanisms of both normal and pathological development, the gap between autistic and non-autistic experience, as I understood it, seemed to grow ever wider. From a vantage point influenced by my orientation toward psychoanalytic developmental theory, I noted the gaping absence, in many autistic children, of the psychological underpinnings of normal relational development. How, for instance, could a child with autism negotiate the critical process of *separation-*

individuation without achieving even the pre-cursors of “object permanence,” such as the capacity to hold in mind a mental image of an object⁴ with a sense that it could remain stable and identifiable across contexts and the dimensions of space and time (Fraiberg, 1969; Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975).

While I have found many different and credible explanations for the causes and symptoms of the disorder, no single theory seems to adequately account for those aspects of the condition that most intrigue me: the disturbance in achieving a coherent and integrated sense of self; difficulty in recognizing and maintaining psychic boundaries between the self and external others; and the apparent deviation in the maturational process that forms the conceptual structure underlying autistics’ internal representations of human beings in relational contexts.

Decades of research have increased our understanding of developmental pathology and the constellation of deficits associated with autism, yet its precise etiology remains unclear, with causal interpretations ranging broadly according to theoretical orientation. Early theories posited that autism’s etiology lay in pathological disturbances in the infant-caregiver relationship, leading to irreversible psychic trauma (Bettelheim, 1967; Klein, 1930). Adherence to this explanation, which was originally put forward by psychoanalytic theorists, has waned with the emergence of evidence for a neuro-biological basis (Bauman & Kemper, 1994; Damasio & Maurer, 1978; Rappin, 1997; Volkmar, Klin & Schultz, 1996). However, psychoanalytic theories continue to offer a rich paradigm for understanding the dynamic developmental sequelae of the suggested constitutional deficits, and for conceptualizing the phenomenological experience of

⁴ Here I use the word “object” both in its sense as an internal image of a person, as well as in its more literal meaning.

autism, particularly in its sense as a “disorder of the self” (Cohen, 1980; Hobson, 1990b; Mayes & Cohen, 1994). A fragile, incoherent sense of self and disturbances in self-other boundaries often characterize the clinical presentation of the disorder (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Tustin, 1983). The social and emotional isolation associated with autism has been interpreted by classical theorists as a pathological defense against paralyzing fears of fragmentation and diffusion of the self (Bunster, 1996; Klein, 1930; Kluever, 1997). This interpretation has been given credence by vivid descriptions provided by autistic individuals themselves:

When my sense of ‘self-existence’ became too intense I got swept up and lost in it. When my sense of ‘existence of other’ (such as another person, animal or object) became too intense, I felt equally swept up and lost in it but also suffocated. For me, repetitive self-tapping seemed to consolidate my own body separateness (from the world around me) and was a sort of instinctual and self-calming statement of ‘I’m here’.⁵

I couldn’t maintain a sense of myself as a separate person when I was interacting with someone, I would feel myself merging into them... Things began to change when I discovered the meaning of ‘with’, that it’s possible to be *with* someone and still be your own self.⁶

... Thankfully, when I had to, I could appear interested, intrigued and motivated by the discussions and people around me. All I had to do was fragment myself. One of me could nod, interject and produce monologues of creativity. The other me heard only my inner thoughts, felt only my irritation at the situation, understood only the need to escape.... My mind would melt amid the noise and the light and the voices....when all else failed, I used to rely on a ‘fitting in’ trick.... Like a professional mimic I could catch someone else’s personality as easily as other people catch a cold. I did this by surveying the group of people I was with, then consciously identifying the person I was most taken in by, I would watch them intently, carefully marking their traits, until almost as easily as if I had turned on a light, I would turn their personality on in me.⁷

⁵ Donna Williams, in Williams, D. 1996. *Autism: an Inside-Out Approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd. London, UK

⁶ Donna Williams. Conference presentation, October 24, 1999
Seaver Autism Research Center, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, NYC

⁷ Liane Holliday Willey, in Willey, L.H., 1999. *Pretending to be Normal*
Jessica Kingsley Publishers. London, UK.

The images of fragmentation and identity diffusion are striking in these passages. Both the semantic content and the linguistic construction reveal the individuals' struggle to maintain self-coherence when faced with the disorganizing challenge of social interaction. The reader/listener can discern the speakers' urgent need to make sense of their experience and to convey that sense in a way that might resonate for others. Of particular note, in the second quote, is the critical importance of the speaker's understanding of the concept implied by the word "with" in her efforts to achieve a sense of boundedness. We begin to see here the compelling link between language and mental representation, where in this instance, the individual's mastery of a semantic form helped her to consolidate her psychic separateness⁸. The above examples convinced me that there is much insight to be gained by exploring narratives such as these, especially within a format designed to elicit reflection on those aspects of experience that have the most bearing on the capacity for relatedness. I therefore decided to investigate the ways in which individuals with autistic spectrum disorders verbally represent concepts of *self* in the context of their relationships with others.

I chose *object relations theory* (Fairbairn, 1946; Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983), which emphasizes the critical role of internal representations (psychic structures, which include concepts of *self*, *other*, and *self in relation to other*) in psycho-social development, as the primary theoretical framework through which to view factors that might influence the capacity to form meaningful relationships among individuals with autistic disorders. Researchers working from this perspective, and its close "cousin"

⁸ Through its linguistic representation, the preposition 'with' helped to make explicit a concept of separate selves which had previously eluded the speaker, making it available to her for conscious reflection, from which she began to derive a new sense of self-integrity.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1973), have studied internalized representations through analysis of narrative material gathered in semi-structured interviews (Ainsworth, *et al.*, 1978; Diamond, Blatt and Kaslow, 1987; Main and Goldwyn, 1984; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Slade and Cohen, 1996). These methods have served as models for the present undertaking. However, rather than maintain a strict Object Relational focus, I chose to incorporate an understanding of neuro-cognitive theory into my investigative process, in order to more fully capture the unique experience of this neurologically atypical population. This stance, which is based upon the recognition of an innate constitutional deficit as a contributing factor in the disorder, is consistent with the recommendations of a number of theorists and researchers who have considered autism from an Object Relations perspective (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Bromfield, 1989; Cohen, 1980; Hobson, 1993b; Mays and Cohen, 1994; Mundy and Sigman, 1989; Siegel, 1999). “Autism,” say Alvarez and Reid, “... is a mysterious condition, and no single professional tradition holds the key to its complete understanding. It is our firm belief that it is only in the synthesis of findings from research in epidemiology, biology, neurology and psychology with those from qualitative research ... that we shall gain a full understanding of the autistic condition.” (p. 246).

R. Peter Hobson, a prominent figure in the field of autism research, recommends the use of Object relations theory as an investigative framework because of its ability to conceptualize the primary deficits of impaired relatedness and sense of self in autistic developmental pathology (1990b). He cautions, however, that we must develop new ways of understanding representations of interpersonal relations in this population, assessing the quality of their innate symbolic capacity, not just in cognitive terms, but in

socio-affective terms that reflect our understanding that cognitive development proceeds from affective impetus in an interpersonal context. Hobson further recommends that we apply these ideas to the analysis of the forms of relationships that individuals with autism achieve.

With those recommendations in mind, I identified, as my research population, a small but significant group of individuals with autistic disorders, who have managed to form and maintain close personal relationships despite their considerable social deficits. I first discovered these unique individuals at an academic conference, where they had been invited to enhance the scholarly discourse with the addition of their personal perspectives. Most of us in attendance were impressed with the level of reflective insight and competence displayed by a few higher-functioning individuals, but remained acutely aware of the persistence of their autistic traits. Yet just when I was feeling overwhelmed by the intractability of autistic social dysfunction I made a crucial discovery: not all of these individuals were alone or socially isolated. Against all expectations, there they were – married couples, bosom buddies – with all the trappings of sincere and reciprocal affection. I wasn't entirely surprised, having watched my Samuel, now an adolescent, struggle through the emotional vicissitudes of building loyal friendships to add to his rich familial bonds. Most parents and clinicians know that autism does not preclude relatedness; it just stacks the deck very heavily against it. Here, happily, were a group of people who seemed to have beat the odds, not by defeating or outgrowing their autism (for they were all very recognizably still autistic) but in spite of it. It later occurred to me that they might be uniquely able to provide insight into the parameters of autistics'

relational functioning, and perhaps illuminate some of the mechanisms underlying the development of their internal object representations.

Through my personal and scholarly explorations, it has become clear to me that we must expand our notions of developmental process in order to assess the progress and the potential of high-functioning individuals with autistic disorders. Extensive observation has documented the significant disturbances in infancy and early childhood⁹ which we associate with their on-going relational deficits, and their difficulties in formulating coherent self-concepts. From these observations we try to infer a developmental path, basing our conjecture on what we *think* we understand about psychological development in the “normal” population.¹⁰ Our resulting theories seem to explain some of what we see among maturing individuals with autism, yet they leave many questions unanswered, including that of how to account for the few individuals who defy expectations and achieve a capacity for intimacy and relatedness that is commonly considered beyond their reach. What kind of representational structure underlies these capacities, and how has it evolved in the absence of normal patterns of affectively-laden interpersonal exchange?

Having watched my son struggle to make sense of himself and other people, I have gained some insight into the mechanisms that have enabled him to transcend many of the limitations that so discouraged us during his early years. At age eight Samuel discovered an intellectual pathway to inner emotional life through his passion for

⁹ Studies of abnormal development in autistic infants are too numerous to cite here. Relevant findings will be discussed in a later section.

¹⁰ Hobson notes that psychoanalytic theorists, who perhaps have the most to offer in conceptualizing autism’s core deficits and devising treatment approaches, are frequently hampered by their inability to relinquish classical formulations of mental structure in their discussion of autism. He calls for a “rapprochement” between analysts and their non-analytic counterparts. (p. 335, 1990b).

Shakespeare, which has taken us across continents and oceans (literally) in search of the definitive Hamlet or King Lear, analyzing and comparing each nuance of interpretation or characterization (Shakespeare explicates mental process through linguistic construction, making it available for textual analysis.). Far beyond acquiring a concept of “personhood,” Samuel has become so attuned to the uniqueness of each individual that our friends in show business call him for casting consultations (he has an encyclopedic roster of actors in his head, to compliment his eye for character). He seems to delight in the intellectual exercise of linking aspects of personality to patterns of thought and behavior.

Yet there are moments when his intellect fails to compensate for his deficits, leaving him in a sea of incomprehension, like a deer caught in the headlights. Only a few years ago, if I came home with a new hat or hairstyle Sam would ask, “Mom?” as if not quite sure it was me. For every measure of progress, an insurmountable brick wall awaits around the next corner.

Thus it would seem that any theory that might arise from the present inquiry ought to help us understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals in question. Noted autism expert Francesca Happé came to a similar conclusion during the course of her research. In one study she analyzed the published autobiographical writings of three individuals with autism (1991), with a view to answering the question: “How far can autistic children go in matters of social adaptation?” Happé’s investigation was predicated on the assumption that the material being analyzed represented the highest achievement of a small trio who, in her view, seemed to have outstripped their peers, by virtue of their appearance in publication and their “surprising” ability to reflect on their

own experience. “Surely,” Happé asks (or rather states), “the self-expression of writing, and especially of writing about oneself, must put to the greatest test those social, imaginative and communicative skills thought to be crucially impaired in autism?” (p. 207). Perhaps there is some validity to this notion, particularly if one subscribes to Happé’s implication that the reader constitutes an imagined social partner. But how much more might we learn from analyzing spontaneous discourse elicited in the context of real social interaction? (Happé herself raises the possibility of confounding editorial influence in her sample, noting that the authenticity of her subjects’ narratives may be compromised by the involvement of co-authors and copy editors.)

Happé’s approach, which is consistent with the view that narrative analysis can illuminate underlying representational structure, provided striking insight into the cognitive underpinnings of each author’s narrative process¹¹ (1991). However, her evaluation of her subjects’ emotional functioning and relational capacities cannot, as she suggests, be viewed as an accurate estimate of autistics’ achievement potential. Although the three authors represented in her article are obviously insightful and self-reflective to a degree, none of them has sustained a reciprocal relationship outside of their family context, by which estimate they fall short of the achievements of my research sample (at least on one important functional dimension). I concluded that a project aimed at exploring the experience of a group of autistic individuals who seem to have negotiated a pathway to a higher level of relational functioning would better serve the purpose cited in Happé’s study. Furthermore, by inviting their relationship partners to participate, I hoped

¹¹ Happé’s conclusions will be discussed along with the analysis of data generated in the present study.

to create an opportunity to investigate their interpersonal functioning, and its conceptual underpinnings, in a dyadic context.

A dyadic approach is in accordance with Alvarez and Reid's suggestion that we must apply the principles of a "two-person psychology" to our exploration of autism (1999). They point out that however deviant sufferers may be in their internalized representations of self and other, they still experience themselves in a social context: "A more personal, interpersonal and intrapersonal view of autism carries the implication that the self is in an emotional, dynamic *relationship* to its internal representations, figures, objects – however skewed, deficient, or odd this relation may be." (p. 53). It is clear here, that these authors have adopted an Object Relations perspective. Research instruments such as the *Adult Attachment Interview* (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985), and the *Object Relations Inventory* (Diamond, Blatt and Kaslow, 1987) have been developed within this theoretical framework, and that of attachment theory. These methods, which use open-ended questions to elicit spontaneous verbal responses, permit investigators to assess dynamic representational structures by analyzing narrative content, linguistic construction, and the quality of the interaction between the co-participants: subject and interviewer.

My project, which focuses on these same aspects of analysis, involved asking both partners in a relationship to describe themselves and each other, and to reflect upon their individual and shared experience in the relationship. By interviewing each pair together as well as separately the study generated both individual and "co-constructed" narratives, providing rich material for analysis. Its aim has been exploratory, rather than

to seek empirical confirmation of any pre-existing theory, a stance that I believe is appropriate given the uncharted nature of the territory.

During an early stage in my work I ran into one of my former instructors, who inquired about my dissertation topic. When I said that I was interviewing autistics in relationships, he replied: “Isn’t that an oxymoron?” ... Indeed, who knew?

BACKGROUND / LITERATURE REVIEW

Diagnosis of Autism

Autistic Spectrum Disorders, which include Aspergers Syndrome, PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified), and classic autism, commonly produce deficits across multiple domains of psychological functioning. Symptoms can include: mental retardation, motor stereotypies (*i.e.*, hand-flapping, spinning), restricted range of interests and behaviors, reduced imaginative capacity, verbal and non-verbal communication difficulties, and sensory/perceptual processing disturbances (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Kanner, 1943; Rutter, 1980; Wing and Gould, 1979). While affected individuals differ broadly in levels of cognitive and linguistic functioning, all show deficits in social relatedness and pragmatic communication. Observations of social and emotional isolation in a particular group of children led Leo Kanner to label them “autistic,” when he first identified the syndrome in the 1940’s. Recognizing the centrality of this issue, current diagnostic tools have been designed to measure functioning along the dimensions of *affective reciprocity*, *joint attention*, and *theory of mind* (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985; Mundy and Hogan, 1994; Tanguay, *et al.*, 1998), concepts that describe our capacity to be emotionally attuned and responsive to each other, and to recognize others’ internal experience as different from our own. Deficits in these areas lead to categorization along the

continuum of Pervasive Developmental Disorders, which include autism and Aspergers Syndrome.

Symptoms of autistic disorders appear in early childhood, generally before the age of three (Mezibov, 1997; Rapin, 1997; Rutter, 1980; Wing and Gould, 1979). Diagnosis is usually sought if a child shows a delay in meeting developmental milestones, and/or a marked inability or disinclination to engage in reciprocal social interaction, or a sudden regression in language and social functioning (Allen, 1991; Rogers and DiLalla, 1990; Tuchman and Rapin, 1997). In many cases parents note their child's "difference" during the early months of development, while in others the difficulties only become apparent when the child is placed among peers, where he or she seems unable to sustain the degree of relatedness achieved in the family environment (Greenspan and Weider, 1997). The disorder can be misdiagnosed or overlooked in higher-functioning children of normal or above-average intelligence. These individuals are often identified later in life as a result of difficulties in social functioning. Although they may function adequately in supportive environments, they usually have a restricted range of interests and behaviors (often displaying an uncommon degree of expertise in a particular area), and seem unable to form and sustain mutual attachments outside of their immediate family relationships. Diagnosis at a later age generally involves collecting information on the person's early developmental history, in addition to current functional evaluations (Attwood, 1998; Tanguay, *et al.*, 1998; Tantum, 2000). Classification along the spectrum is made on the basis of the symptom profile. Cases that do not meet full criteria for autistic disorder are usually classified as PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified), with those evidencing more moderate impairment accompanied by normal

language development falling into the category of Asperger's Syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Frith, 1991; Klin, Volkmar & Sparrow, 2000). This diagnostic category is named for Hans Asperger (1944) who identified a group of children similar to, but less severely impaired than Kanner's group during the same time period.

There are no definitive estimates of prevalence rates in the adult population, and efforts to assess the prevalence of autistic disorders in children have been compromised by inconsistencies in diagnostic criteria. The more severe form of classic autism appears to be quite rare, while its milder forms affect a much larger proportion of the population. Currently available estimates suggest that autism occurs in 4 in 10,000 children, Aspergers Syndrome occurs in 4 – 7 in 1,000, and that the disorders tend to aggregate in families (Fostein and Santangelo, 2000; Rapin, 1997). Rapin reports that concordance rates among monozygotic twins are over 90 percent, when diagnostic criteria are broadened to the full spectrum, allowing for a range of phenotypic severity, with some probands meeting full criteria for autism while others fall into related categories (1997). This data highlights the genetic component in autism's etiology, while suggesting that additional factors play an important role in determining the severity and developmental course of the disorder.

While efforts to divide the autistic spectrum into discreet categories continue, it remains difficult to assign accurate diagnoses in many cases, given the highly variable symptom profile among those who present for clinical evaluation. The overlap between Aspergers Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA) is such that many clinicians have raised questions about the validity of this diagnostic distinction (Frith,

2004; Kurita, 1997; Howlin, 2003; Miller and Ozanoff, 2000). However, some research has suggested that these higher functioning individuals might be grouped according to aspects of their neuropsychological profiles, with Aspergers cases showing higher verbal and lower visual-spatial skills, and HFA cases evidencing the reverse pattern (Klin, Volkmar & Sparrow, 2000; Lincoln, Allen & Kilman, 1995). Since many questions remain regarding this diagnostic issue, selection criteria for the present study overlooks the postulated distinction between AS and HFA, in the belief that there is sufficient commonality among individuals in both categories along the relevant dimensions of interpersonal functioning.

Theoretical Approaches to Autism

Autism has been variously conceptualized as a disorder of affect (Hobson, 1993b), a disturbance in sensory-perceptual processing (Dunn and Fisher, 1983; Ornitz, 1985), an impairment in social cognition (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985; Happé, *et al.*, 1997), and a disorder of attention (Fein, *et al.*, 1986), as well as a disturbance of psycho-genic origin, stemming from pathology in the primary relationship between infant and mother (Bettleheim, 1967; Klein, 1930; Roser, 1996). In the following sections several prominent theories will be examined, including those generated by cognitive and neuro-biological research. I will then focus on conceptualizing autism within the framework of Object relations theory, particularly as it depicts the development of internalized representations of the *self* in relational contexts. In presenting this material I will attempt to weave these separate strands together to provide a more complex and

integrated view of autism than that which is commonly offered by any one theoretical perspective.

When undertaken from an Object Relations perspective, work that examines internalized representations of self and other (as this project attempts to do) carries with it the implication that current psychological structure and functioning reflects life-long developmental process. From our investigations we expect to be able to make inferences about early experience and etiological factors, just as we tend to predict future functioning on the basis of our understanding of a person's developmental history. Since the population in question here deviates significantly from the norm in their maturational trajectory, I believe it is important to consider their experience within their unique developmental context. I will therefore endeavor to provide the reader with sufficient information to construct an appropriate contextual background. (Readers with thorough knowledge of the literature on autism may have sufficient theoretical background to forego sections of the literature review.) By postulating a developmental pathway for autism, which reflects the knowledge gained through diverse theoretical viewpoints and empirical findings, we might enhance our capacity to understand and interpret the phenomena being examined.

While the subset of individuals with autistic disorders who have participated in this study (high-functioning and more socially competent) might, by virtue of their relative achievements, be construed as differing significantly from the "average" individual with autism, all are likely to have experienced, to some degree, the disruptions in psychological development that will be described in the following sections. The ways in which my research sample might differ from the larger autistic population will be

addressed in a later discussion. I hope, in this way, to provide both a general background for the reader who is unfamiliar with the literature on autism, and a more specific context for the proposed study.

Neuro-Cognitive Perspectives

A group of cognitive theorists, led by Simon Baron-Cohen, have identified the core deficit in autism as an impaired “theory of mind” (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985). This hypothesis evolved from observations that many people with autism seem unable to grasp or make use of the idea that every individual has an internal mental life of his or her own, which influences their external behavior. Their lack of interest in (or incomprehension of) others as “minded” individuals is often apparent in the way they relate to people. Autistic social behavior can range from total withdrawal to moderate awkwardness. People with autism are commonly described as offensive, clueless, naïve, or socially “retarded.” The behavior of higher-functioning individuals who seem intellectually capable is often interpreted, by those who are unaware of their disability, as a willful disregard for the thoughts and feelings of others. The severely impaired tend to treat people the same way they would inanimate objects, and evidence little imaginative capacity, or awareness of others’ mental states.

Baron-Cohen and his colleagues suggest that these social difficulties stem from a cognitive impairment that interferes with the ability to conceptualize other minds (1985). A fully developed concept of “mind” includes the understanding that minds can encompass a range of hypothetical contents, dependent on the subjective experience of

the thinker. Normal social intercourse depends on our ability to take other people's perspectives, to imagine their thoughts and feelings from a point of view that differs from our own. An impairment in this conceptual capacity would have far-reaching social consequences, hence the proposal that "theory of mind" deficits underlie the difficulties in interpersonal functioning seen in autism.

In studies designed to assess "theory of mind" capacity, researchers have consistently found weaknesses among individuals with autism (Baron-Cohen, *et al.*, 1997; Kazak, Collis and Lewis, 1997; Leslie and Frith, 1988; Perner, *et al.*, 1989)¹². Many of these experiments have required participants to engage in *deception* in order to successfully complete the assigned tasks. The intention or ability to deceive implies an understanding that knowledge and perspective can differ from one individual to the next. We lie in order to make another person believe something we, ourselves, know to be false. Deception, therefore, requires a "theory of mind," hence its role in investigating that capacity. One study, designed by Sodian and Frith (1992), used a play scenario in which autistic and non-autistic children were asked to help a friendly seal puppet get a sweet out of a box with a lock on it, while preventing a nasty wolf from stealing the sweet. Like the control group, the autistic subjects were able to unlock the box for the seal and lock it when the wolf approached. The point where they failed in the task occurred in the second phase, in which the crafty wolf puppet asked each participant whether the box was locked. Even when the box wasn't locked, the normal children

¹² The appearance of these deficits in autistic individuals who show competency in many areas of cognitive functioning, including measures of memory, computational skills, visual-perceptual analysis, and verbal ability (language functioning is sometimes, but not consistently found to be correlated with "theory of mind" performance) has long intrigued researchers, leading to a strong focus on the role of "theory of mind" deficits in autistic pathology.

quickly learned to tell the wolf that it was, so he would go away. The autistic children, however, were unable to deceive the wolf to keep him from getting the sweet. They seemed unaware of the possibility that the wolf might not know what they themselves knew, and that this difference in knowledge could be used to protect the sweet in the box.

Parents of children with autism have frequently remarked on their apparent inability to lie, a phenomenon that seems to be confirmed by the experimental results described above. Other investigators, however, have discovered that minor manipulations in experimental conditions can improve the performance of autistic subjects, and enable them to demonstrate a more sophisticated conceptual capacity (Sigman, Yirmiya & Capps, 1995). A modification to the research design described above, for example, might be to insert a brief cue that prompts the child to reflect on his adversary's possible knowledge state, resulting in a correct response. The improvement in successful response rates suggests that factors other than an inability to conceptualize different minds may play a role in autistics' poor performance on "theory of mind" tests (Bowler, 1992; Frith and Happé, 1994).

Biologically oriented theorists have postulated a disturbance in impulse control as one explanation for the response patterns of individuals with autism on "theory of mind" tasks. Bishop, for example, proposes that the dysfunction is in the neurological mechanism that inhibits "pre-potent"¹³ responses when situations call for a behavioral shift (1993). This inhibitory mechanism, when operating properly, would permit an individual to formulate a novel response when necessary – to lie, for example, rather than state what he knows to be true. By this account, the autistic children who could not

¹³ A "pre-potent" response would be a habitual, heavily primed, or semi-automatic reaction.

deceive the wolf in the above described task (Sodian and Frith, 1992) were simply unable to over-ride their subjective perceptions in order to foil their adversary. When the box was locked they could not stop themselves from saying so, and perhaps were unable even to pause and consider what the wolf might or might not know. Those who succeeded in deception, were able to re-direct their attention to the wolf's hypothetical knowledge state and differing perspective. Unlike their normal counterparts, autistic children seem to need external support to inhibit the impulse to respond solely on the basis of their own concrete perceptions.

This apparent over-reliance on observable concrete information is consistent with the hypothesis that autistic behavior is, to an extreme degree, governed by external stimulation (Goodman, 1989). According to this theory, environmental triggers activate a system in which the response patterns and thought schemas have become rigidly set, leaving the individual unable to respond flexibly when presented with a novel situation. The mental task of selecting appropriate responses from among a variety of available schemas comes under the heading of "executive function." This form of higher-order cognitive processing requires organization and use of incoming information, as well as that stored in memory, for the planning and execution of complex behaviors. Executive function deficits, as measured by tasks (such as the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test and the Tower of Hanoi¹⁴) have been found in the autistic population by a number of researchers, and are implicated in many of the cognitive weaknesses observed (Bryson, Landry & Wainwright, 1997; Frith and Happé, 1994; Minshew, *et al.*, 1992; Ozonoff, 1995).

¹⁴ The WCST requires subjects to shift response patterns by adapting to periodic alterations in the rules involved in sorting cards, and the Tower of Hanoi calls for planning of actions and anticipating consequences.

It has been suggested that successful completion of tasks that measure executive function requires subjects to use mental representations of hypothetical situations (Ozonoff, Pennington and Rogers, 1991; Perner, 1991). Noting that similar imaginative processes are thought to be necessary for accurate performance on “theory of mind” tests, several researchers have wondered whether the same faulty mechanism is responsible for both types of cognitive weakness (Hughes, Russel and Robins, 1994; Pennington and Ozonoff, 1996). Leekam and Perner (1991) investigated the link between these two functions by devising a two part test. In one task they asked autistic children to predict what a photograph would show, after the initially pictured situation has changed. This directive required them to imagine the contents of a hypothetical photograph. Surprisingly, the subjects were able to do this. But when given a similar task, in which they were asked to predict a person’s mental representation of a hypothetical situation, they could not comply. In effect, the subjects could perform on a “theory of mind” task as long as a “mind” was not involved. Frith and Frith (1991) have proposed that these two processes might be differentiated in terms of “first-order” and “second-order” representations, those of the second order (imagining a mind as well as its hypothetical contents) being “representations of representations.”

The idea of a primary deficit in “meta-representational” capacity (processing that involves multiple levels of abstraction in formulating concepts) has taken hold among cognitive theorists who have explored autism during the last two decades (Baron-Cohen, 1991b; Frith and Happé, 1994; Perner, 1993), and also among psychodynamically oriented theorists who seek to integrate their understanding of cognitive and dynamic developmental processes in the construction of internalized representations (Alvarez and

Reid, 1999; Behrends and Blatt, 1985; Hobson, 1993a). I believe there is merit to the theory that increasing levels of abstraction pose a challenge to the representational capacities of individuals with autism. Yet I am not sure that I agree with Frith and Frith's proposed meta-representational distinction between the two task demands in Leekam and Perner's research design (1991). It strikes me that the process of constructing an imagined picture, to be contained in a hypothetical photograph, might not necessarily differ from that of imagining a picture in someone's mind, on the basis of first or second-order representation, but that something else may constrain the act of imagining – just as it interferes with the formulation of flexible behavioral responses. That “something else” may be the affective component involved in the development of these representational capacities. (In a later section, which will focus on early development, I will elaborate on the role of affect in the maturation of social cognition, and explore how certain disturbances might result in an impaired ability to conceptualize another's mind.)

Cognitive theorists who have explored the role of affect (emotion) in the social difficulties associated with autism tend to view it from an “information processing” perspective (Minshew, *et al.*, 1992; Tucker, 1981). This position is consistent with the view that autism is primarily a disorder of cognition which results in an impairment in interpreting others' social behavior and emotional expression. Deficits in processing socially relevant information, such as facial expressions, vocal tone and body posture, have been extensively documented in individuals with autism (Hobson, 1986; Mundy, *et al.*, 1986; Ozonoff, Pennington & Rogers, 1990). Studies have shown significant impairment in their ability to interpret both verbal and non-verbal social cues, including the nuances of language that convey subtle information about social/emotional content

(Davies, *et al.*, 1995; Jaedicke, Storoschuk & Lord, 1994; Lee, Hobson and Chiat, 1994).

According to one theoretical position, these deficits, particularly those that involve visual-perceptual processing, are the underlying cause of the “theory of mind” impairment postulated above. Sigman, Yirmaya and Capps note that normal infants begin to read facial expressions and gaze patterns by the middle of the first year, from which they derive a sense of what another’s mind might contain (1995). “For us, this behavior is a precursor to ‘theory of mind’ in that the child who does not have the opportunity to learn from others’ faces has to work particularly hard to construct an awareness of others’ feelings and thoughts.” (p. 161).

Biologically oriented theorists generally view the above described phenomena as a consequence of neuro-pathology, and have supported this thesis with research that shows functional and structural abnormalities in the brains of autistic subjects (Bauman and Kemper, 1994; Corchesne, *et al.*, 1987; Klin, *et al.*, 1995; Schultz, Romanski & Tsatsanis, 2000). Neuro-imaging studies show abnormal distribution of brain activity during “theory of mind” tests, and other tasks involving the perception and processing of social stimuli (Happé, *et al.*, 1997; Klin, 1999). Of particular interest are visual processing studies involving human face perception, an area in which people with autism evidence significant impairment (Boucher and Lewis, 1992; Schultz, 1999). Recent research reveals that, contrary to normal controls, autistic subjects activate the same brain systems for processing social/person-related information as those activated in tasks involving perception of inanimate objects (Schultz, *et al.*, in press). Developmentalists suggest that the human brain is pre-programmed, thus primed at birth, to respond selectively to human facial configurations (Schoore, 1994; Siegel, 1999; and Stern, 1989),

an idea that has obvious implications for infants who might be born without these neural systems intact.¹⁵ It must be stressed however, that our assumptions about innate neurological endowment, in both normal and pathological development, do not amount to *proof* of what brain functions are pre-programmed. My view, which is consistent with the majority of theorists and researchers in the field, is that we must derive our theories of autism from the understanding that native endowment and post-natal experience interact to guide brain development.

From this standpoint, which emphasizes neural plasticity, many of the functional and structural abnormalities found in the brains of individuals with autism could be either cause or consequence of the learning and behavioral patterns seen in those suffering from the disorder. This view therefore accommodates a strong role for environmental factors in its developmental course. The brain areas that are most implicated in autistic pathology include the limbic system (and its adjacent structures), the cerebellum, and the neo-cortex, all of which have evidenced abnormalities in both neuro-functional and post-mortem studies (Bauman and Kemper, 1994; Courchesne, 1997; and Schultz, Romanski & Tsatsanis, 2000). The role of the limbic system in linking emotion to cognitive processes has led researchers to associate its dysfunction with the social deficits and affective impairment seen in autistic disorders (Bachevalier, 1991; Damasio and Maurer, 1978). This neural system enables a person to evaluate stimuli, assign affective valence to incoming information, and coordinate appropriate responses. Its functioning is

¹⁵ Congenitally blind people are thought to rely on other sensory pathways, particularly the aural, to get information normally derived through face perception: "Character, mood and even person are constructed as fully from voice as in a seeing person from voice and sight." (Cole, 1997, p. 469). Autistic individuals, however, frequently have auditory processing abnormalities (Bettison, 1996) and also seem hampered in their ability to derive social/emotional information from vocal qualities (Rutherford, Baron-Cohen, and Wheelwright, 2002), leaving them poorly equipped to formulate compensatory strategies.

involved in primitive or minimally processed reactions (such as the “flight or fight” response), as well as in higher order processing, including the integration and organization of information stored in memory (LeDoux, 1996; Siegel, 1999). Schultz and his colleagues point out that these processes influence thought, behavior and subsequent learning and remembering – functions that enable us to make sense of ourselves and the external world (2000). Observations of cellular maldevelopment in limbic structures (specifically the amygdala and hippocampus) in autistic brains prompted a series of studies in which these structures were lesioned in newborn monkeys, producing social and learning deficits that were strikingly similar to those seen in autism (Bachevalier, 1991).

Studies have also shown that early experience of trauma can impact on the developing brain, disrupting cell migration and pruning processes. Long term consequences may include structural and neuro-chemical changes (Perry, 1997; Schore, 1996). Siegel quotes Alan Schore, in describing the “toxic effect of overwhelming stress” on children who are genetically at risk, which results in “...the developmental overpruning of a corticolimbic system that contains a genetically encoded underproduction of synapses.” (p. 85, 1999). In accordance with this view, several theorists have suggested that trauma might be an important etiological factor in a sub-set of children with autistic disorders (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Rapin, 1997; Tustin, 1981). I am inclined to agree with these authors, and would further suggest that the presence of certain vulnerabilities occurring in autism, particularly the intense fluctuations in arousal and hyper-reactivity to sensory input that have been documented (Dawson and Lewey, 1987; Miller, 1996), constitute an on-going experience of trauma in some infants born

with the condition. Difficulties in “sensory integration” are commonly described by people with autism. These symptoms, evidenced in measurement of abnormal thresholds in sensitivity to visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli (Martin, 1994; Dunn and Fisher, 1983; Greenspan and Weider, 1998; ICDL, 2000), create a significant area of disturbance for affected individuals, and figure strongly in their descriptions of what it is like to live with autism (Grandin, 1984; Shore, 2001; Williams, 1996). It may be that differences in the disorder’s course and developmental outcome will eventually be linked to the relative success of environmental support in building the autistic child’s capacity to modulate sensory stimulation and overcome regulatory difficulties.

Because of its role in modulating sensory input, the brainstem has been studied extensively for its possible involvement in autistic pathology. Abnormal brainstem functioning in response to auditory and vestibular stimulation has been documented in autistic subjects (Grillon, Courchesne & Akshoomoff, 1989; Ornitz, 1985; Thivierge, *et al.*, 1990; Wong and Wong, 1991). Orntiz suggests that “... pathophysiologic influence originating in the brainstem and diencephalic structures,” is responsible for the pattern of impairments seen in autism. He stresses “... the role of the brainstem in initiation of complex behaviors,” as well as its role in the modulation of sensory input (1985, p. 506). Noting that sensory disturbances are often the earliest and most obvious symptoms of the disorder, he postulates that the observed social and cognitive deficits may be secondary to the disordered perceptual processes. “The autistic child,” says Ornitz, “cannot make *sense* out of *sensation*.” (p. 523).

To date, the most compelling evidence of structural abnormalities in the brains of persons with autism has been found in the cerebellum, a neural structure known to be

critically involved in sensory-motor activity, as well as in higher-order functions like language processing (Leiner, Leiner & Dow, 1989). These findings are rapidly influencing the search for the disorder's biological causes. Hypoplasia (underdevelopment) of the neocerebellum has been identified in all post-mortem investigations of the brains of autistic individuals (Bauman and Kemper, 1994; Corchesne, 1997). Bauman and Kemper found severe reduction in the number of Purkinje cells (which are thought to be critical in the processing of sensory information), as well as reduction in the size of the lateral cerebellar hemisphere, the dentate nuclei and lobules of the cerebellar vermis (1994). As they found no evidence of atrophy, it is presumed that the hypoplasia is a result of primary neuronal loss associated with pre-natal maldevelopment. The severity of the loss of cells is thought to be related to the gestational point at which the trauma occurs. Studies in which rats were exposed to radiation at various stages of pre-natal development showed that the extent of the hypoplasia, involving loss of Purkinje cells and overall cerebellar hemispheric reduction, was related to the timing of the irradiation.

Like the above described abnormalities in posterior structures, another neurological malformation found in many individuals with autism – significant increase in cortical mass – can be traced to disturbances in pre-natal brain development. Schultz, Romanski and Tsatsanis point out that different factors (both pre- and post-natal) influence the growth and migration of cells that determine cortical volume. “The most potent influence on overall brain size, however, occurs very early in embryogenesis.” (p.183, 2000).

Despite the greater cortical mass observed, autistic brains characteristically show a decrease in neuronal connections (Bauman and Kemper, 1994; Courchesne, 1997), thus the network of communication between cells is impoverished, an aspect of neuropathology that has been linked to impairments in integrative function. As noted by Schultz and his colleagues, increased cortical mass has been associated with greater localization, or modularity, of brain function (2000). This effect may help to explain the uneven cognitive profiles of individuals with autism, including the “savant” skills that some evidence, as well as the lack of “central coherence” they tend to exhibit in cognitive functioning (Frith and Happé, 1994).

Capps and Sigman define central coherence as “...the ability to pull together disparate information into a coherent pattern, to give priority to understanding meaning.” (1997). The capacity to synthesize perceptual properties into a coherent and meaningful concept is what enables us to give meaning to virtually everything we encounter. The layering and gathering of associations through which we organize and structure our perceptions and experience into a coherent body of knowledge determines our understanding of ourselves and the world. People with autism, who frequently possess extraordinary (but discreet or isolated) perceptual processing and computational abilities, are nevertheless impoverished in their capacity to use abstract thinking processes. They can be sensitive to the most subtle featural properties, and often will make fine distinctions that others are unaware of. In many instances however, they fail to attend to the essential qualities in the things they perceive. What is most salient in the environment to a person with autism can be radically different from what the rest of us notice.

The “Weak Central Coherence” theory (Frith and Happé, 1994; Frith, 2004) is the most recent, and (to me) the most compelling account of the cognitive impairment seen in autism. Frith and Happé, who originated this theory, felt the need to extend cognitive inquiry “beyond ‘theory of mind’,” in their search for explanations that might account for the phenomena seen in autism. Among these features are a number that do not seem associated with the capacity to represent minds, such as: “idiot savant” abilities, extraordinary rote memory, and preoccupation with parts of objects. Compelled to look further by such observations, these researchers conducted a series of in-depth neuropsychological tests using tightly matched controls, and found a unique profile of cognitive strengths and weaknesses among their autistic subjects. What they discovered was an observable perceptual processing deficit in “central coherence” (which might, in fact, be just one manifestation of a more global information processing impairment). This weakness seemed to impair subjects’ ability to perceive and represent the *gestalt* of a visual image; they were unable to *see the forest for the trees*, so to speak. Importantly, this processing style seemed also to account for the strengths in their cognitive performance, such as that displayed on tasks that required piece-meal construction involving accurate perception of component parts (WISC Block Design), or detection of embedded figures, in which their tendency to ignore the “whole” resulted in superior performance. According to the study’s authors, these tendencies contribute to reported failures on facial recognition tests (Boucher, and Lewis, 1992; Schultz, 1999), and other tasks involving processing of social information, in which contextual cues and integration of various bits of information can enhance performance. Autistic subjects’ performance

on complex language tasks also showed their inability to use contextual features to inform response selection.

It is hard to imagine a task more reliant on integrating disparate signals into a coherent whole, than that of processing and interpreting social stimuli. Information contained in gestures, facial expression, body posture, vocal tone as well as semantic content, must all be deciphered and put together in order to make inferences about others' internal states. Add this challenge to the above described difficulties in processing of non-social information, and the world becomes a confusing place indeed. Without integrative coherence one can imagine a constant threat of everything falling into fragments. In this light we can easily see why an individual impaired in such a way might hesitate to relinquish his own perspective, especially if he has discovered a limited way in which to make sense of things. Others' points of view would likely create more "noise" than an already stressed system could handle. Thus the proposed weakness in central coherence might go some way towards explaining the social deficits seen in autism.

Perhaps the greatest attraction in the "central coherence" theory is that it might be applied to a broad range of cognitive functions, including the processes involved in encoding and retrieving memories, which underlie both reasoning and narrative skills. These mental operations rely on integrative processes, and impact directly on our capacity to make sense of our perceptions and experience. A neuro-cognitive impairment that inhibits the ability to make meaning out of life experience and impedes the creation of narrative structure would likely jeopardize the development of coherent representations of *self* and *other*. According to current developmental theory (the

position that will be endorsed here), these concepts are constructed as we experience and reflect upon the sequential unfolding of our personal and social histories (Capps and Sigman, 1996; Siegel, 1999). Through telling our own stories we build an idea of who we are. With this in mind, it is possible to see the theoretical relevance of “central coherence” to the present investigation, which uses personal narratives to illuminate each individual’s sense of self.

The Interpersonal Origins of *Sense of Self*.

The process of consolidating a coherent and continuous *sense of self* is thought to originate in the relationship between infant and caregiver. In this context mental representations are derived from patterns of reciprocal interaction, beginning with pre-verbal communicative exchange and proceeding to shared linguistic symbolization (Hobson, 1993a; Schore, 1994; Stern, 1989). As suggested by Siegel, it is the ongoing “co-construction” of narrative, as it occurs in the day to day exchange between parent and child in which they relate and reflect upon events, that gives continuity to the child’s sense of self over time and space (1999). Siegel locates these capacities in the development of cortico-limbic pathways (regions that, as noted above, show abnormalities in cases of autism), and proposes that interpersonal experience forges these neural connections. His theories regarding the interaction of neurological endowment and developmental environment can be applied to our understanding of the neuro-functional correlates of autistic behaviors, and the critical role of the relationship between infant and caregiver.

Spitz's seminal investigation of what happens to human infants in the absence of interpersonal experience clearly documents the devastation that can result (1945). Infants who are deprived of caring and consistent social contact, like those presented in Spitz's study, look 'autistic' to many observers. (Such observations no doubt contributed to the popularity of the "refrigerator mother" theory of autism's etiology). In the case of infants who are given a clinical diagnosis of autism, however, human interaction is not necessarily lacking, and may not even be as distorted as previously thought. Attachment studies, for instance, indicate that children with autistic disorders and their care-givers are just as likely to exhibit organized behaviors that result in the child's needs being met as any other group of children, yielding normal statistical distributions of "secure" and "insecure" attachment status (Greenspan and Wieder, 1997). These results indicate a degree of successful adaptation among the participating parent-child dyads, despite the presence of social deficits.

Those who make the effort to interpret autistic social behaviors with the individual's perspective in mind generally agree on their adaptive effectiveness (Attwood, 1998; Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Williams, 1996). Actions (such as failure to maintain eye contact or physical proximity with others) that might appear anti-social begin to make sense when seen as an individual's way of managing anxiety and confusion aroused in social situations. Our questions need not be concerned with the logic of these interactive patterns, but might more usefully center on the function of these patterns as affective self-regulators, particularly among the set of people who are the subject of the present investigation: those who have (presumably) managed to achieve a degree of relatedness. Additionally, our questions should focus on the quality of the

representational structure underlying autistic individuals' social behaviors. If these representations lack coherence, then we might ask: what "glue" is missing from the internalization process that might otherwise give integrity to the sense of self and the relevant concepts of *personhood* and *relatedness*.

The Role of Affect

Developmentalists who emphasize the interpersonal context of cognitive maturation cite *shared affect* as a critical organizing force that gives coherence and meaning to the experiences through which we derive our representations of ourselves and the social world (Beebe and Lachman, 1988; Greenspan and Weider, 1998; Schore, 1994; Siegel, 1999; Stern, 1989). What might cause a deficiency of this crucial ingredient in the developing child? Suppose that, due to a constitutionally impaired capacity to modulate arousal and organize sensory in-put into a coherent body of represented experience, affect becomes overwhelming and uninterpretable to the infant: the impetus to share it would then become fraught with danger. Such experience would necessarily inhibit the development of *affective reciprocity*, the emotional attunement that makes us feel connected to other people and evolves ultimately into a mature capacity for empathy. An early impediment or aversion to sharing affect would obviously have far reaching social-emotional consequences, and, if our theories regarding the role of affective exchange in cognitive maturation are correct, such a deficit would produce an abnormal representational system.

In normal infants the earliest interpersonal communications are thought to occur through the infant's perception of and instinctive reaction to the caregiver's emotive facial and vocal expressions (Beebe and Lachman, 1988; Bronson, 1990; Field, 1981), which often elicit a mirroring response from the infant, one that is presumably accompanied by felt emotion (Mundy and Hogan, 1994)¹⁶. This emotional interplay takes place before any concept of "mind" has been acquired, and therefore must be incorporated into the foundation of inter-subjective awareness and theory of "mindedness." It makes sense then, that an inability to share affect would create a disturbance in a child's developing awareness of and interest in other minds (not to mention his own). From this point of view the "theory of mind" impairment in autism could be considered secondary to a deficit in affective functioning.

The affective disturbance in autism has long been the subject of a "chicken-or-egg" debate (Which comes first?) among competing theorists. One point of view contends that autism is fundamentally a disorder of affect from which the broader constellation of deficits arises; the other view sees the affective disturbance as secondary to a basic neuro-cognitive impairment. Classically oriented analysts have tended to take issue with the neuro-cognitive stance, in the traditional belief that the pathology is rooted in emotional trauma sustained in an inadequate caregiving environment (Bettleheim, 1967; Klein, 1930). Although it has been modified (analysts have recently begun to allow that some infants might be born "overly sensitive"), this attitude persists among authors and clinicians who are currently working in the field. At the risk of straying from

¹⁶ Infants' mirroring of facial expression may in some instances be a purely imitative response, and in others be a manifestation of reciprocal affect. Even the former kind of events are thought to involve felt emotion, however, as proprioceptive feedback from the facial sensory system seems to generate corresponding affective response (Cole, 1995).

the path, I would like to comment briefly on this etiological controversy. Biological research has shed light on the relevant issues, but has not yet provided a resolution that can be accepted by all. While much of the material presented above points to the early gestational roots of the observed neurological abnormalities, other portions of it support the strong role of environmental impact on neural development. My belief is that both factors are involved, but many others who share my psycho-dynamic theoretical orientation are unwilling to allow that innate factors might play a role. As recently as 1996 an article in *The Psychoanalytic Review* criticized a shift in theoretical stance reached by the noted analyst Francis Tustin after her decades of work and publication in the field of autism (Roser and Buchholz, 1996). Tustin's eventual conclusion, based not on biological evidence but on her own experience of the individuals in question, that there are cases of autism in which the origins are constitutional, was treated as an unfortunate lapse in judgment by the article's authors. As one who seeks to further our understanding of autism so that we can better serve those affected, I believe that the matter bears mentioning here because of the destructive rigidity of the classical stance and of those who still adhere to it. If, rather than expand our thinking, we insist on spouting out-dated theory, we neglect our duty as scholars and clinicians.

People with autism suffer significant disturbances in affective functioning. Many theorists and clinicians have noted a lack of emotional responsiveness in autistic individuals, which is often interpreted as a defense against the disorganizing effects of emotional arousal (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Capps and Sigman, 1996; Mayes and Cohen, 1994). Even adults with autism who have made reasonably good adjustments tend to be emotionally labile and vulnerable to acute episodes of distress. Positive emotions can

also be manifested in heightened ways that seem incongruous in these (chronologically) mature individuals. I have seen autistic adults display rapturous pleasure or child-like glee derived from seemingly trivial events or sensory-perceptual experiences. In some studies, autistic subjects have proved comparable to control groups in degree of emotion experienced and expressed, but differed in terms of the causes of their emotional reactions (Baron-Cohen, 1991, Capps, *et al.*, 1993; Jaedecke, Storoschuk, & Lord, 1994.) In autobiographical accounts, people with autism have suggested that their apparent emotional isolation results from feeling misunderstood and unable to share their particular joys and sorrows with others who experience the world so differently (Miedzianik, 1986; Willey, 1999; Williams, 1996). All describe frequent experiences of being flooded with confusing and unmanageable affect that they seek to control by any available means (hence the repetitive rituals and compulsions that characterize autistic behavior). Their difficulties with emotion regulation have been documented through measurements of autonomic arousal in studies that involve presentation of affectively charged material (Dawson and Lewy, 1987).

These observations, leave unanswered the question of emotional primacy: do people with autism have difficulty regulating emotion because of a primary affective disturbance that prevents them from allocating attention and processing capacity to the task of understanding emotions; or are they unable to tolerate emotion because of confusion and anxiety caused by a cognitively-based inability to interpret emotion-related information? It may be that the two processes are inter-dependent, and especially so during infancy. Neuro-science has shown us that in some instances emotion can be separated from cognitive functioning, as a result of injury to the brain (Damasio, 1998),

but it has not yet shown us how (or if) the two processes might be separated in the case of abnormal neurological development. Scientists are hoping that studies of autism will shed light on the issue. In the meantime we might surmise, on the basis of behavioral observations and neuro-functional analyses, that the neural systems that link emotion to other aspects of information processing are functioning sub-optimally in the autistic brain. We can then further speculate on how this integrative dysfunction might impact on the construction of mental representations that form the basis of an individual's understanding of himself and the surrounding world.

With our current understanding of the need to integrate disparate aspects of experience and information (including, importantly, affect) in order to form coherent representations of people and relationships, we can begin to understand why people with autistic impairments, such as those described above, find it so difficult to make sense of the human world. Given their further problems in self-regulation of affect, and limited ability to use others for regulatory assistance, it is equally easy to see why such individuals might feel a need to withdraw from incomprehensible and over-arousing social contact. While so much has been gained in cataloguing and explaining the dysfunctions and deficits seen in the autistic population, we have only begun to explore the ways in which affected individuals might be able to achieve a higher level of functioning. By examining the experience of those who seem to have made significant developmental progress, particularly in the area of interpersonal relatedness, we might begin to formulate and answer the kinds of questions that could enhance our ability to address the well known deficits, questions such as: *What strategies and compensatory mechanisms do autistic individuals employ in their efforts to give coherence to their inner*

worlds? Theorists and researchers have observed certain outward manifestations – the need for strict order and routine, the compulsive categorization of people and objects according to identifiable and measurable properties – and interpreted these behaviors as attempts to impose order on inner chaos (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Bergman, 1999; Bunster, 1996; Tustin, 1981). Regrettably, the strategies that seem to assist many autistics in managing themselves and organizing their experience and information, are likely to also be factors that inhibit their social development by denying them access to the nuance and spontaneity of human behavior. Similarly, their over or under-reactiveness to both sensory/perceptual stimuli and affectively charged social experience could explain aspects of the internalization process that might impact the quality of their representations. For example, by reducing sensory input or selecting out only bits of information or interpersonal experience to attend to, are people with autism creating an inner world of distorted or partial objects rather than richly endowed, fully human figures? Clearly, in many cases, they are (Alvarez and Reid; 1999; Klein, 1930; Mahler, 1968).

But what of those individuals represented by my research sample, those who have managed to form and sustain personal relationships, and function (if not fully, by “normal” standards, at least adaptively) in the larger social world? *Have they found ways to broaden or dis-inhibit their social-cognitive schemata, and learned to link emotion with concrete information, so that they are able to “take in” and process more of their interpersonal experience? (And, if so, will these capacities show in how richly they describe their experience of themselves and significant others?)* A further question, which bears directly on all the others, and on the suitability of my research design is this:

What aspects of those relationships, and characteristics of their relationship partners have assisted them in the development of their achieved capacities, and how does their experience of the relationship color their representations of self and other?

Because of its ability to conceptualize psychological development and functioning as an evolutionary process embedded within the matrix of life-long interpersonal experience, Object Relations theory provides a valuable framework for considering the questions posed here, and for understanding the deviations in development that commonly affect individuals with autism.

Object Relations Theory

Psychologists who work from an Object Relations perspective, tend to focus their theories of psycho-social development on the representational processes that underlie interpersonal functioning, specifically the ways in which interactive experience shapes mental structure, and how those constructions in turn impact on further interactive experience (Fairbairn, 1946; Crittenden, 1990; Klein, 1930). This focus is not meant to exclude other aspects of mental activity from consideration, but rather recognizes the centrality of the *object relational* context in overall psychic development. Use of the term “object” – by which we generally mean “person” – adds an odd element to the discourse on autistic psychopathology, given that severely affected individuals seem not to distinguish between people and actual objects in the way they relate to the external world. While it may seem a strange way to refer to people, the word *object* does convey a sense of something that represents a goal: a *person* that is *desired*. It is this linguistic

aspect that hits on the central tenet of Object Relations theory: that the drive for interpersonal relatedness is fundamental to psychological functioning, and that personality is shaped according to the developing individual's unique ways of seeking to have his or her relational needs met (Geenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Horney, 1945; Wachtel, 1997). By virtue of its disruption of this fundamental drive, autism invites scrutiny from this theoretical perspective (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Hobson, 1990b).

Object Relations theory depicts the construction of mental representations of people as an interactive process that takes place in the context of our earliest interpersonal experience. The emotion associated with those early interactions is incorporated into the evolving conceptual structures, lending a dynamic flavor to the images. Object representations not only contain affective components; they evoke new emotion when they are recalled to mind, and when they are activated in the course of interpersonal interaction. Often referred to as "internal working models" (IWMs), these psychic structures are thought to be relatively stable, and therefore highly influential throughout the life-span (Behrends and Blatt, 1985; Bowlby, 1977; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985). The desires, expectations, and frustrations we bring to relationships originate in these mental schemata, which are forged during the early weeks and months of life. With this in mind we can view both positive and negative aspects of our relational patterns as rooted in the early interpersonal environment, and understand how the feelings connected to internalized images and memories continue to resonate. Efforts to illuminate and modify these internalized models through corrective experience form the basis of object relations-based psychotherapy (Altman, 1993).

The degree to which internal working models of relationships can be modified constitutes a critical component in the developmental course of any form of psychopathology, and poses specific challenges in the case of autism. Any investigative or therapeutic approach must include an effort to understand the quality of the autistic individual's representational system, and as Alvarez and Reid have suggested, the person's "emotional, dynamic relationship to [his or her] internal representations." These authors point out how the internalization process from which concepts of *personhood* and *relatedness* are derived is mediated by affect: "If she [the autistic child] treats us as a piece of furniture, she may be seeing us as something like a piece of furniture, but she may also *feel as though we are like* a piece of furniture." (1999, p. 53). The feeling associated with people, in this instance, is not enough to distinguish them from inanimate objects as they are represented and appreciated. In order to modify these representations then, the autistic individual must come to *feel* something for and about human beings.

According to current Object Relations-based theory, the desire for mother (or other primary caregiver) and the gratification she provides drives the formation of the infant's first mental representations, which are initially experienced as sensory motor schema derived from patterns of bodily sensation (Behrends and Blatt, 1985; Bergman, 1999). Encoding of these sensory-perceptual experiences into accessible memories allows the infant to anticipate and await the mother's responsive presence by providing a comforting image that can be held in mind in her absence (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). These primitive representations form the basis of more complex conceptual structures, including those of *self* and *other* and the inter-relatedness of the two. Blatt presupposes the role of affect in conceptual development by referring to these concepts as

“cognitive-affective schemas” (1995). Through linking mother’s appearance and his own active, instigating demands to cycles of frustration and gratification, the infant incorporates affect into representations of *self* and *other*. Implicit in this formulation is a degree of boundary integrity; desire for mother implies recognition of her separateness. Blatt points to the infant’s intentional smiling at 2-3 months, and discovery of mother as a person whom he distinguishes from the larger field, as evidence of the emergence of a differentiated sense of self. By this account we can see how intricately awareness of self might be involved in the construction of internalized representations. In order to acquire an *idea* of a self, the infant must experience *being* a self.

The Development of Self in Infancy

In the above sections I have attempted to link social and neuro-cognitive functioning in autism to difficulties in information processing, which may impede integration of experience and perception into coherent concepts of self and other as bounded and “minded” individuals. In the following section I would like to present a more detailed theory of the development of sense of self as it occurs in infancy, and discuss aspects of self development that might be particular to infants with autism, and which might impact on their capacity to experience bodily and psychic integrity.

Daniel Stern’s model of the infant’s development of a sense of self (1989), which stresses the critical role of reciprocal affect, provides a useful theoretical standpoint from which to consider the self-experience of the autistic infant. Through inferences based on extensive observation and experimentation, Stern has tried to give a plausible account of

what it must be like to be a baby. In depicting the origins of the sense of self, he integrates maturational processes in the domains of affect, cognition, motivation, and motor development. Stern postulates a sequential process of self-construction, involving the dynamic and on-going organization of experience and information. Like other analytically oriented theorists he stresses the interpersonal context of development, in which the self is nearly always experienced in relation to significant others. However, Stern departs from the classical model's notion of an early symbiotic phase during which the infant experiences himself as indistinct from and merged with the mother (Mahler, 1968). Rejecting this idea of primary fusion, he asserts that the infant's experience is of being "with" the mother, not a part of her. Infants may not know *who* they are in their earliest weeks of life, but they know *that* they are.

Margaret Mahler, in observing her clinical population and formulating her theories of "infantile psychosis" (1968), came to feel that many of her child patients likely suffered from an inborn deficit, but considered the debate irrelevant to the task of understanding and treating what she described as a failure or distortion of the infant's "normal" symbiotic experience. She postulated that the infant who cannot achieve a reliable need satisfying (or tension reducing) symbiosis from which to "hatch" (Mahler's word for the infant's discovery of his separateness) is unable to represent or internalize the mother, and therefore can't derive a sense of himself as a separate entity. Mahler stated that individuation, or identity formation, requires two pre-conditions: management of physical/affective states, so as not to be overwhelmed; and the assistance of a symbiotic partner in creating inner organization. Her assumption seemed to be that infants lack the inborn capacity to self-organize, and that a phase of experiencing a

fantasied symbiotic fusion with the mothering object constitutes an essential psychic building block.

My own instinct is to agree with Stern's position, at least in terms of normative development. But in the case of autism, with its attendant sensory processing and severe regulatory difficulties, the idea of a primary boundary disturbance such as described by Mahler (1968) becomes more plausible. Autistic infants may experience intolerable bodily discomfort due to sensory over-reactivity, chronic under-stimulation (due to under-reactive sensory systems), or intense fluctuations involving both. It follows, then, that their cycles of arousal and quiescence would require much greater and more flexible regulatory assistance from caregivers than in most normal infant-parent relationships. An abnormally heightened degree of attunement and synchronicity between care giver and infant might be needed to manage the infant's states. Such an extreme level of parental involvement in regulatory function, which contrasts with natural cycles of synchronous and non-synchronous activity (Beebe and Lachman; 1988, Stern, 1989), could interfere with normal experience of bodily integrity and separateness. The parents' inevitable failures in helping the child to cope with unmanageable bodily and perceptual sensations would increase the infant's sense of vulnerability. In cases where their success is minimal the infant would be left feeling constantly impinged upon by touch, sound, smell, or taste – an experience that is thought to underlie the acute distress observed in many autistic infants, who can neither be soothed nor engaged (Greenspan and Wieder, 1998; Mayes and Cohen, 1994). Given such disruptions, it makes sense that we might find symbiotic fantasies or distorted perceptions of self-other boundaries to be more

common in children with autism, making the need to differentiate more fraught with confusion and ambivalence (Tustin, 1981).

As illustrated in the introductory section of this proposal, individuals with autism frequently describe experiences of diffusion or fragmentation in the context of interpersonal contact. These reactions may, in part, be the sequelae of the early developmental experience postulated here, which could engender both fear of separateness and terror of engulfment. Psychoanalytic theories often view autism as a radical defensive reaction to fears of merger and annihilation (Kluever, 1997). Tustin suggests: "...childhood autism constitutes a massive formation of avoidance reactions that develop in infancy to ward off traumatic awareness of bodily separateness... [the] child defends against all 'not me' experience by means of self-generated bodily sensations that augment the illusion of complete bodily continuity with the mother." (1996). Such theories may ignore the biological origins of autistic pathology — biologically oriented theorists tend to interpret autistic social isolation as an aversive reaction to the nature and intensity of sensory stimulation generated by human contact — but they eloquently capture the subjective experience of some individuals with autism, and provide plausible explanations for the behaviors seen in autistic infants.

The neuro-cognitive impairment in communication in infants with autism (which constitutes a major component in the diagnostic profile) may further hamper the development of a differentiated self. Without the gestures, sounds or signals normal infants use to communicate their wants and needs, parents of autistic infants often become "mind readers" in their efforts to be sensitive and supportive caregivers. Having learned their infants' preferences, they may go to extraordinary lengths to pre-empt

disruptions and preserve the child's fragile equilibrium. This behavior may contribute to the previously noted illusion that many children with autism grow up with: that their parents actually know their thoughts and feelings without being told. Again, it is likely that cognitive limitations interact with regulatory and defensive vulnerability to preserve this distortion in the infant's sense of "mindedness." Rather than attempt to tease apart these different functions it seems more productive to explore the process of self-differentiation from an integrative perspective, as Stern and others do by depicting the intermingling of physiological, perceptual, affective, and symbolizing processes from which a sense of selfhood is derived (Stern 1985; Siegel, 1999; Schore, 1996).

During Stern's first stage of self experience, which he calls the "emergent self," the normal infant integrates motor and perceptual experience into organizing schemata; his movements in space generate predictable internal sensations, and cause external change (the mobile moved!). Here, already, the autistic infant is at a significant disadvantage due to his poor proprioceptive feedback (Greenspan and Weider, 1998). Another type of sensory experience thought to occur during this early stage are what Stern calls "vitality affects." Stern defines these events as intermodal experiences of surging, global affective and physical sensation, which stimulate the normal infant in ways that consolidate and encourage new learning. If we imagine an unregulated onslaught of such experiences we might begin to understand the sensory disturbances common in autism. While most of us experience occasional "rushes" of sensation that occur predictably (as in sexual activity), people with autism describe sudden "explosions" of sensation and affect as frequent and often disorganizing events, brought on by a variable array of sensory/perceptual stimuli. Autistic individuals have explained their

aversion to novelty, and compulsion to maintain strict routines and engage in ritualistic self-stimulating behaviors, as adaptive efforts to control and avoid such potentially disorganizing experiences (Grandin,1995; Williams,1994). These rigid behavioral patterns constrain development and learning in a myriad of ways, and clearly impact on interpersonal experience. Where normal children often delight in the unexpected and seek novel experience, the autistic child labors to ensure that objects in his environment remain fixed and predictable.

The early origins of this adherence to invariant contingencies has been elegantly demonstrated in the recent work of Gergely (1999). In studying the role of agency and the preference for contingencies in development of the social self, he tested infants at three, six and nine months. Infants were shown simultaneous video images of their own lower body movements that were masked by a chest-high visual barrier, and also shown video images of another infant's unsynchronized leg movements. At three months all the infants showed a preference for watching their own movements, indicating their fascination with their newly discovered self-generated motor abilities. By six months, however, most of the infants became more interested in the novel and non-synchronous video image. Significantly, though perhaps not surprisingly, infants later diagnosed with autism retained their preference for the video of their own strictly contingent limb movements, thus demonstrating that at six months of age they were already dominated by their need for self-verifying sensory input.

Stern also notes the preference for invariant properties and routines that is typical in normal infants during the first weeks of life (1989). From repetition of motor experience that generates predictable response, the infant develops what Stern calls a

“core self,” which is sensed and retained in patterns of bodily experience rather than cognitively conceptualized. Since affect is felt in the context of these experiences the infant learns to act in a way that brings pleasurable sensation, over time constructing a self-history— a sense of continuity based on cycles of affect over which he gradually gains some control. As he matures, the (normal) child develops his capacity to self-regulate through learning to titrate his level of arousal by either seeking or withdrawing from stimulation.

During this early period infants are already engaged in the constructive process in which featural elements of stimuli are abstracted and synthesized into recognizable forms. They begin this process by focusing on discrete visual aspects of stimuli, such as the straight edges of objects, or borders that delineate contrasting colors. When presented with a human face, however, they are not so attracted to features or parts as is the case with objects. Instead they appear to perceive the face as a consolidated percept at a very early stage (Stern, 1989). This early tendency to visualize facial features as an integrated whole enables infants to derive valuable social experience and information from face-to-face interaction. As previously discussed, human faces present unusual challenges to the perceptual processing capacities of individuals with autism (Boucher, and Lewis, 1992; Davies, *et al.*, 1995; Schultz, 1999), challenges, which if operating from birth, would severely limit the child’s ability to attend to and interpret the information and emotive response conveyed by others’ facial expressions. The impaired child not only misses out on the information available, but also fails to experience the emotional resonance of the other’s affect within himself.

The infant's ability to infer mental state from his caregiver's facial expression, and gauge her perspective by attending to her gaze trajectory, may (as suggested earlier) provide the initial clues from which he abstracts the concept of "mind" (Hobson, 1993a). Information derived through various sensory pathways enables the infant to sense his own bodily and psychic boundaries, and register when he and his caregiver are out-of-sync. Awareness of the need to actively engage mother in order to get her to share and accommodate his own desires and interests stimulates the infant's sense of agency.

Agency, as a fundamental component of self-awareness, appears prominently in virtually all theories of development of self-concept. A number of cognitive theorists believe that a "theory" of agency, under which concepts of causality and intentionality are subsumed, is part of the human infant's innate endowment. Mandler (1993) asserts that theory-building inferential processes are operating from the earliest stages of perceptual processing, creating meanings from abstracted information that continually enrich the child's conceptual structure. These processes function within the context of the infant's native endowment. Carey (1985) believes that infants are "...innately endowed with two theoretical systems: a naïve physics and a naïve psychology." (p.200) Knowledge in the first domain is based on primitive laws of motion, "mechanics," and the directionality of time. Knowledge in the second system derives from the infant's awareness of its own wants and needs. All of these capacities depend on an optimally functioning information processing system. Having postulated a theory of autism that includes a global impairment in the ability of the basic cognitive apparatus to abstract and integrate sensory/perceptual information to form concepts and make inferences, we can imagine its pervasive sequelae. An impaired sense of agency seems not only plausible,

but has been described as the core deficit by Greenspan and Weider (2000), two of the leading developmental psychologists in the field of autism. They suggest that the relating and communicating problems in autism may be secondary to an underlying inability to connect affect and intentionality to sequences of behavior and action.

Other theorists have also emphasized the role of agency in both normal and pathological development (Erikson, 1981; Freud, 1965; Stern, 1989). Barresi and Moore (1996) propose that normal infants apply their theory of agency from birth, first to themselves and then to external objects, and that it's representation is the basic unit from which concepts of self in relation to others is derived. They believe that the fundamental deficit in autism is an inability to simultaneously hold representations of self and other as intentional agents, a necessary capacity for achievement of "joint attention," which is notably lacking in autistic infants (Mundy and Hogan, 1994; Mundy and Sigman, 1989).

The normal infant displays his sense of agency from his earliest attempts at organized motor activity. He becomes purposeful in his efforts vis-à-vis his manipulation of objects in the environment. In the case of his caregiver, his manipulations become increasingly directed by his understanding of her mind, and his capacity to infer her knowledge and affective state. Stern's next stage, the sense of "subjective self," develops from the experience of desire for and pursuit of gratification, and the recognition that the gratifying object (mother) is herself an active subject (1989). The behavior of many infants and young children with autism, which is notably lacking in instances of actively engaging caregivers' attention for either pleasure or purpose, highlights their early deficiency in inter-subjective awareness.

With the sense of inter-subjectivity comes the desire and need to communicate. Early forms of intentional communicative exchange thus coincide, in the normal infant, with the recognition of separateness and the relationship between self and other. Awareness of these concepts, therefore, seems to exist before the child can linguistically label self and other. This supports the notion suggested here and elsewhere (Mundy, *et al.*, 1987), that the unusual verbal behavior of many autistic children might reflect an underlying conceptual deficiency evident in pre-linguistic behavioral patterns. If language acquisition takes place in the context of a developing system in which the capacity for inter-subjective awareness is deficient, we might expect to find some impact on linguistic functioning as a result. Hobson makes this point in his discussion of the autistic child's misuse of personal pronouns: "What autistic children fail to apprehend is a commonality between the experiences of themselves and others and then to appreciate the differentiation of people's affective-cognitive perspectives.... they will be less prone to identify with the other person who says 'I' or 'my' when acting or expressing attitudes, or adopt the pro-noun anchoring stance of being an agent, a possessor, or, more generally, a subject of experience." (p. 175, 1990a). The material presented in the introduction, which highlights the idiosyncratic and impersonal qualities of autistic language, can be seen in this light.

A full discussion of language functioning in autism is presently beyond the scope of this paper. However certain characteristics of the communicative impairment seen in autism are relevant in that they illustrate the fundamental nature of the social deficit, regardless of the level of language development reached. For example, while verbal skills may become quite sophisticated in many high-functioning individuals, their non-

verbal communication impairment seems to persist throughout the life span (Attwood, 1998; Frith, 1989; Klin, Volkmar & Sparrow, 2000).¹⁷ Even when verbal skills appear normal, people with autism seem to have difficulty using language for social communication, and often fail to master its “pragmatic” aspects, such as observing the normal give-and-take of conversation (Schopler and Mesibov, 1985; Landa, 2000). While some cases of autism might include a language-specific neuro-cognitive impairment, others clearly reflect a much broader communicative deficit rooted in relational factors. It may be that the delay in language acquisition that is characteristic of many autistic children results more from lack of motivation to communicate than from innate cognitive-linguistic impairment. Whatever the cause, a delay in language development would broadly impact social-cognitive functioning, and, as we shall see by returning to Stern’s theoretical framework, on the construction of a consolidated sense of self.

Stern’s (1989) last stage in the infant’s development of self is called the “verbal self.” The acquisition of language, Stern points out, not only enables the symbolization and communication of inner life, but allows construction of a sense of continuity of self-experience through the narrative process. Children use story telling for consolidation of learning and experience, a process that helps them to make meaning out of what they see and feel, and helps them to resolve confusion and conflict (Siegel, 1999; Stern, 1989). This process often takes place while a young child chatters to himself during solitary play. Yet even if he is alone talking to himself, we can infer (on the basis of our theory

¹⁷ This observation and other evidence of visual-perceptual processing abnormalities have led researchers to investigate the link between autism and non-verbal learning disability (NLD) (Rourke and Tsatsanis, 2000).

that linguistic representation follows upon the capacity for other representational forms) the presence of the “other” in the child’s mind. His intra-psychic dialogue evokes both real and imagined interpersonal experience for the child, maintaining the sense of self in relation to others. Real interactive verbal processing constitutes a critical and complementary component of self discovery. The dyadic “co-construction” of narrative by caregiver and child encourages elaboration of experience and reflection on events, providing an opportunity to explore and integrate related affect in a supportive interpersonal context. Their conversations allow the linking of affect with cognitive understanding, and explicate mental life and its role in behavior. On the basis of these on-going narratives, which describe both his own and others’ experience, the child can begin to construct an idea of the sort of person he is, and who he is in relation to other people (Siegel, 1999).

The role of personal and interpersonal narrative construction in self development has been noted by autism researchers. Capps and Sigman (1997) cite evidence that people with autism lack narrative skills, and comment on the resulting impact on self-understanding and social functioning: “The capacity to experience and understand ourselves, each other, and things in the world... seems to depend on a certain predisposition, a common impulse to organize and relate experience in narrative form. The aloneness that is often experienced in interactions with autistic individuals illuminates the critical importance of the push to narrate in establishing and maintaining connections between people.” (p.290). The narrative capacities of individuals with autism have been assessed in a number of studies with conflicting results, including some reports of deficient skills in comparison to control groups (Landa, *et al.*, 1995; Bruner

and Felman, 1993) and another, which failed to find significant between-group differences (Tager-Flusberg and Sullivan, 1995). In a study using tightly matched samples, Tager-Flusberg and Sullivan found only minimal differences between their autistic subjects and control groups, including one particular (and predictable) aspect of narrative functioning: a relative difficulty in appropriately connecting emotional states to actions and events within the narratives. This ability was found to be correlated with *theory-of-mind* score (as measured by a false-belief test) in the autistic group but not in the others. The authors suggested that this finding demonstrates a particularly strong link between linguistic and social-cognitive functioning in the autistic population. Tager-Flusberg and Sullivan also remarked on the surprising competence of a number of their autistic subjects, which, they said, “indicates that autistic individuals are capable of making significant developmental gains in the area of emotion understanding.” (p.253).

The linking of emotional understanding and “mentalizing”¹⁸ capacity to narrative skills returns us to some of the questions posed earlier: What might we learn about the quality of their object representations by attending to the construction and content of autistic individuals’ narratives? Can their achievements (or lack thereof) in formulating affectively resonant images of self and other as bounded and minded individuals be connected to how they convey these concepts in narrative form? Given the obvious disruption in the normal development of representational capacities experienced by individuals with autism, what pathways to understanding of self and other are available to them? Lacking (either fully or partially) the essential context of early affect-laden interpersonal experience, how do they construct an inner world of objects in relation to

¹⁸ Fonagy and Target’s use of this term is comparable to what is meant by “theory of mind” (1998): both refer to the capacity for conceptualizing others’ mental states (and, by inference, one’s own).

each other and forge meaningful connections in the real social world? Perhaps by examining their explicit representations as presented in narrative form, in which autistic individuals describe their senses of self and other, we might begin to gather clues that would permit us to make inferences about underlying conceptual structure

How to Investigate Self Experience in Autism?

Having presented a sampling of autism theory and a theoretical framework for the early development of self-other representations, I hope I have given a reasonable account of the possible origins of the *pathology of self* as it might occur in autism. My goal has been to provide a background from which to explore the on-going development of self-awareness and interpersonal relatedness in the autistic population. Exploring the experience of the small group of individuals who lie outside of the “autistic norm,” and discovering what types of variations distinguish them in their unique trajectory beyond the limitations predicted by their condition, seems a logical next step. This undertaking should serve to expand our theoretical framework in ways that other researchers have encouraged: Mundy and Hogan, who recognize the relational pathology as its core deficit, agree that autism should be understood as a disorder in self development (1994), yet they consider the question of impaired self development too simple at this stage. They suggest, on the basis of evidence of changes occurring with maturation, that we should try to incorporate an understanding of self development at different phases into our theories of autism, framing the question this way: “What aspects of self development are impaired in autism and how are these impairments manifest at different ages?” (p. 3).

This question invites a whole new body of extensive research, with so many potential avenues of exploration one hardly knows where to begin. One existing

reservoir of insight can be found in the published autobiographical writings of people diagnosed with autism and related disorders, as illustrated in Francesca Happé's work, cited earlier (1991). Since Happé's article appeared, many new books have been introduced by authors with autism (some examples have been quoted in the introductory chapter), which shed light on their experience of themselves in the social world (Grandin, 1995; Shore, 2001; Willey, 1999; Williams, 1996). Notably, a number of these recent publications are by authors who have formed and maintained stable intimate relationships (unlike Happé's subjects). Their stories detail the different ways in which they each gradually circumvented their areas of social difficulty in order to make meaningful and lasting connections with other people. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that those who have made such developmental gains also display the urge and ability to tell their stories.) The writings also illuminate each author's on-going struggle to maintain a sense of physical and psychic boundedness, and the roles of their relationship partners in their on-going development of regulatory capacities and consolidated senses of self. In many instances, their stories highlight the flexibility in developmental sequence and timetable that seems to characterize psycho-social maturation in this population. Their experience suggests that much can be achieved through maintenance of a highly supportive relational environment beyond the normal phase of adult independence (Attwood, 1998; Tantum, 2000).

My survey of autobiographical writings has generated a number of preliminary hypotheses about the developmental shifts and compensatory strategies that might facilitate maturational progress in the domain of social-cognition and affective reciprocity among some individuals with autism. All of the autistic authors represented in the

literature experienced the profound disruptions in early development that are typical in childhood autism (severe communication deficits, social withdrawal, sensory disturbances, restricted interests and rigid behaviors), and only slowly and painstakingly progressed toward social engagement and reflective awareness. Their ability to function interpersonally appears to have rested initially on their internalization of sets of rote-learned rules governing interpersonal interaction, which they learned to adhere to without understanding the internal emotionally based reasons for social behaviors; or alternatively, they simply mirrored the social behavior of others, inhabiting false personalities that they had absorbed from the external world, or constructed from fantasy. Most of these individuals did not experience any genuine sense of self until they began to relinquish these behavioral strategies, aided by social support in an environment of safety and trust, and a sense that others could identify with and appreciate their unique experience. Lianne Holliday Willey (1999) recounts her own progression:

Old habits are hard to break and sometimes I notice myself echoing [imitating] even though I work at home now and rarely feel compelled to fit in at all... A few very observant friends have noticed an occasion or two when I had lost myself in the shadows of someone else, but no one has ever noticed as quickly or completely as my AS [Aspergers Syndrome] daughter does. She recognizes the moment I bend my voice or my motions to match someone else's and it drives her to distraction... Funny that she, another Aspie, is often able to see my pretense before I am.

I have come to the conclusion that even though I need to stop doing it, it is simply easier to echo, more comfortable and typically more successful superficially to pretend to be someone I am not. It is like putting myself on automatic pilot and free floating without lending a care to whether or not I am fitting in with the crowd. I must be if I am momentarily someone else. It's a free ride until someone else notices. But it is a ride I have decided I need to get off. And with the help of my daughter and a few of my closest friends, I think I will, mostly because when I am with the people I really understand, the people whom I trust implicitly, I never have to take a free fall.

The people who have proven they will stand by me no matter what I say, think or do, have given me a finer gift than they will ever realize. They have given me the real gift of freedom that allows me to experiment with my development as I continue to refine and

sharpen my instincts and actions. These are the friends who do not wince when I fracture a social rule. The people who offer immediate dispensation should I offend them with my words or actions. The colleagues who call me to offer their support before I have a chance to tell them I am falling apart. I am aware these are the kinds of acquaintances everyone treasures, but for AS people, they are much more. They are our barometers and our mirrors. By their actions we see how we are doing and in their eyes we can find who we are. (Willey, 1999, pp. 71-72).

One hypothesis that might be derived from Willey's description of her experience is that she, as an adult, has benefited from a developmental environment that is akin to the kind of relational context ideally established in early childhood, whereby maternal support, acceptance, and affective feedback facilitate the young child's emergence of an autonomous sense of self (Bergman, 1999; Stern, 1989). We might postulate that early developmental delays, and/or a sub-optimal care-giving context, prevented Willey from experiencing such an environment during childhood, whereas later emerging capacities or compensatory strategies enabled her to process and internalize the supportive interpersonal experience that became available to her in adult life.¹⁹ In another passage Willey describes her earlier inability to forge emotionally rich relationships, and her struggle to become affectively attuned to her husband:

By the time I met my husband I was pretty well convinced I would never understand anyone well enough to maintain something everlasting. The men I had been dating were nice men who shared some of my interests and hobbies, but with each of them there was always an unspoken and unseen something that stood between us – like the curtain that kept the truth of the Wizard from the people of Oz. I never gave much thought to what the curtain was hiding because when I did, it led me to distraction. I could not intrinsically or intuitively fathom what lay in the shadows, things I can now identify as the cornerstones for patience, flexibility, empathy and objectiveness. Before I came to terms with myself, these emotions were held at bay, nearly in my vision but just beyond my reach. It took years with my husband before I could swim to each one. Years before I could catch them and store them safely in my heart. My AS behaviors – the sensory integration problems, literal mindedness, perseverance and rigid thinking

¹⁹ Certain forms of psychotherapy, particularly those based on Object Relations theory, are thought to operate in just this way, by providing a corrective emotional experience in the context of the therapeutic relationship, leading to psychic re-structuring.

tendencies – acted like arrows tipped in poison that stood poised and ready to pierce every relationship I ever found.

From the moment I met Tom, I sensed he was a great deal like me... Many things caught our mutual interest, but virtually every one was linked to a common need for solitude. Like me, Tom dislikes crowds and social gatherings. He does not care for environments that are charged with emotion or chaos, and he does not care how he fits in with the rest of the world. Like me, he is a loner. Quiet and calm became our glue. Now I know that sounds simplistic and maybe even too subdued to act as a catalyst for togetherness, but in our case it provided a strong bond. To this day, it is the very element that draws us together even when we are at our worst.

When I try to list all the cracks in our communication, I immediately focus on how hard it is for me to follow Tom's logic. He is a man of few words and I require grand elaborations, well calculated metaphors and strong visual images to understand language. For instance, if Tom were to tell me he was disappointed he had missed me at lunch, I would wonder if he meant to say he was sad – which is simply regretfully sorry; unhappy – which is somewhere between mad and sad; disheartened – which is lonely and sad; mad – which makes you want to argue with someone over what they had done; angry – which makes you want to ignore the person you are feeling this way towards; furious – which makes you want to spit; or none of the above. A succinct speaking and writing style is not nearly enough for me. Words by themselves are too vague. Rich elaborations sitting along side colorful words come to life in my mind drawing pictures as they pull my thoughts together. But sometimes, even the most telling and detailed sentences are not enough to help me comprehend what is being said to me. (1999, pp. 78-80).

Willey goes on to describe how she and her husband learned to communicate with each other as if each was acquiring a second language. That language is critical to her understanding of affective experience is made abundantly clear here, as is the “autistic” quality of her cognitive strategy of ordering and categorizing each emotional concept. By making these ideas explicit through linguistic representation, Willey is able to contemplate a range of affective experience and link it to its behavioral manifestations. What we can observe here is her process of cobbling together each concept from fragments of information and experience: semantic knowledge, remembered events, visual images – all in the service of interpreting one routine expression of “disappointment.” Her passage also conveys the charge of anxiety associated with her efforts, as if she is desperate to convey and comprehend the subtle nuances of experience

that habitually elude her. The integration of affect can be seen as an intellectualized process of gathering threads to weave an accessible emotional picture; an effort of will as opposed to the intuitive reading and registering of her own and others' affective experience that we imagine to be the foundation of "normal" relational functioning.

Another author with autism, Stephen Shore (2001), relates his own difficulty in comprehending emotion in himself and others, and describes the transforming event that enabled him to experience an emotional connection in a way that had previously eluded him:

I have always been mystified by people's ability to extract strong emotional meanings from words. The deep feelings brought on by poetry or music had always escaped me... It wasn't until about the age of 35 that, through text put to music, I learned the potential emotional impact of words. This occurred as I was teaching a course in music appreciation. After listening to "A Survivor From Warsaw" by Arnold Schoenberg, I was suddenly overcome by emotion and was not able to speak for a couple of minutes afterwards. My students asked me if I was okay. All I could say was that this was a very moving piece that deserved a few moments of silence when it was finished.

After this breakthrough, I was able to explore moving feelings from other songs such as "She's Leaving Home" by the Beatles and "Der Erlkönig" by Franz Schubert. I had known these compositions for some time but they seemed like new pieces to me now that I was able to decode their emotional content.

Perhaps my interest in studying feelings and emotions stems from the fact that they don't come "naturally" to me. The study of nonverbal communication helps me to build a lexicon to assist in decoding its meanings. Emotions and feelings get examined and analyzed in a similar way.

Decoding facial expressions of others is difficult. On occasion I display either an inappropriate facial expression or emotion or perhaps none at all. Several times I have been asked if I am feeling a certain way and the question came as a surprise because, in fact, that is how I am feeling. For example, people sometimes ask me if I "am alright" or if "everything is OK." I wonder if this is due to a disconnect between how I actually feel from what my body is displaying at that time, or whether my body is accurately showing an emotion with which I am out of touch. (Shore, 2001, pp. 107-108).

While Shore's (2001) experience seems different from Willey's (1999), in that he did not initially find linguistic representation to be as helpful in deciphering emotional content, we still can see similarities in their effortful constructive process. Both must seek pathways to emotional understanding through alternative means, not having the facility to affectively attune to others (or even themselves) without employing complex processing strategies in order to build the conceptual links that don't come "naturally." What is striking in Shore's description is that his "breakthrough" occurred at a moment when he actually *felt* something, with the aide of the composer's emotionally resonant communication, and became aware that the feeling was connected to the verbal content of the song's lyrics. Shore later analyzes the event: "... music can serve as a carrier signal to help organize and decode the meaning of words and language. I think that's what happened to me. I had read the text that goes along with the cantata, and the text itself is very graphic. It is fairly moving but the addition of music provides another dimension with which to experience affect." (p. 160). Shore's experience, as described, seems consistent with the theory that the normal pathways of incorporating affect into representational structure are disrupted in the autistic brain, and also demonstrates a process of circumvention, whereby an emotional link can be forged in the context of affectively resonant experience.

In addition to their struggles to formulate cognitive-affective concepts of emotional experience, autistic authors have described their strategies for regulating affect. Willey's approach taps the soothing function of creating internal order through visual imagery:

To this day, architectural design remains one of my most favored subjects and now that I am older I indulge my interest, giving in to the joy it brings me. In many ways it is the perfect elixir for what ails me. When I feel tangled and tense, I get out my history of architecture and design books and set my eyes on the kinds of spaces and arenas that make sense to me; the linear, and straight lined and the level buildings that paint pictures of strong balance. When I feel blighted by too many pragmatic mistakes and missed communications, I find my home design software programs and set about building a perfect sense of home. There is something about the architectural design process that makes my brain click and fit. (1999, p. 58).

Willey describes her husband's role in her regulatory function in a strikingly similar way:

Sometimes all I need to keep from falling over the edge is to look at Tom's face. I am stunned by the looks of his face, not so much because he is an attractive man, but more because, in the structure of his face, I see so many of the visual elements that appeal to me – linear lines, symmetry, straightness, perfect alignments. His face is firm and anchored and definite. It is chiseled and solidly cast. It is a visual respite for me. I am oddly calmed when I look at his features, so calmed that I find just seeing him puts me at ease, just as looking at a peaceful stream comforts others and a lullaby soothes a baby. (1999, pp. 90).

Donna Williams, who has published several books on her personal experiences and observations of autism (1992; 1994; 1996), has coined the phrase “sensory-experience based relationships” to describe the emotional connection between herself and her husband (who also has an autistic disorder), and how their contact serves as an affective regulator. She distinguishes her sensory perception of her partner from her cognitive conceptualization of personal identity, illuminating the disjointed processing of information that interferes with her formation of coherent object representations:

Sense of Self and Other

When everything is strung together and linear, it is hard to separate things out from the times and places in which they occurred. Because of this, it is hard to build any composite pictures independent of serial memory. This greatly affects the ability to perceive of yourself or anyone else as an ‘identity’. Being like this, you accumulate

experiences with people and facts about them, but these things don't translate into telling you what the person is like.

Serial memory and relationships

I can tell you personally about experiences had with someone. I can tell you facts about them based on these experiences such as 'Paul mows the lawn when the grass gets long' but can't tell you whether Paul is a person who likes mowing the lawn. I can even tell you that 'Paul has smiled whilst mowing the grass'. I cannot tell you if that meant he was happy...

I have serial memories that hold both Paul and I in them and can say 'Paul reads Donna stories at night'. I can't say 'Paul and I are interested in hearing stories'. I have been able to accumulate enormous strings of facts about people based on serial memories and can relay them all to sound like I have been intensely interested in someone or something but it could just as easily have been a relay of every experience I ever had with a toothpick as every experience ever had with a person. It is impersonal, factual and detached; part of a regurgitated category. ...

Sensory-experience based relationships

Aside from building up detached serial memories of my experiences with and of Paul, I have also developed sense-memories of him. Like some foods, fabrics and sounds, I have developed a taste for Paul and a familiarity with him as a collection of sensory experiences.

Paul's hair is the texture that I find sensorily pleasurable and it has a smell to it which I like. His nose has a texture that is like velvet, which I like too. He is the source of scalp massages which I find very pleasurable and calming and relaxing. He is a fun climbing frame and the source of gravity experiences such as holding me by my feet, which I like. He is the bringer of food that my taste enjoys. He is the source of pressure when my muscles need it. All of these are sensory experiences and I *do* feel very personally about them. They are the entire source of my joy and pain and all feeling of 'humanness'. (1996, pp. 188-190).

It might be said that both Williams' (1996) and Willey's (1999) representations of their relationship partners lean more in the direction of seeing them like objects, albeit engaging ones, rather than endowing them fully with the quality of *personhood*. These passages evoke Alvarez and Reid's suggestion (1999) that among individuals with autism, just as in the normal population, "... the self is in an emotional dynamic relationship to its internal representations, figures, objects – however skewed, deficient, or odd this relation may be." (p.53). It seems worth examining, through more focused

inquiry, whether those representations can indeed be invested with *personhood* by autistic individuals.

Like the many published clinical accounts of pathological functioning in autistic children and adults, these autobiographical writings provide valuable material for our investigation of autism as a “disorder of the self.” This material also provides insight into some of the ways in which autistic individuals make progress, through their relational experience, in their quest for self integrity and understanding. The temptation to use these writings as the basis for new theoretical formulations is great, given the richness and apparent candor of the material. However, as previously stated, because of my concerns about “confounding” editorial influence in the published works, and my wish to use a dyadic relational context for my investigation, I decided to generate new material for analysis. Before describing the methodology employed in my study, I would like to briefly examine prior research on the experience of self in autism.

Prior Research

To date, only a few studies have sought to examine the experience of self in individuals with autism. One investigative method that has been employed is an interview format devised by Damon and Hart (1982), which assesses the nature of self experience across four domains: the physical self, which focuses on physiological and material aspects; the active self, one’s activities and capabilities; the social self, derived from experience of interaction in the social world; and the psychological self, which

includes thoughts, beliefs, preferences and emotions. These dimensions are derived from their theory of the development of self concept through infancy and childhood.

Damon and Hart formulated their model on the basis of concrete and measurable developmental milestones, primarily in the domain of social/cognitive functioning (1982). The empirical work from which Damon and Hart drew their conclusions included a fair amount of solid and replicable evidence of consistent patterns of behavior from which internal processes could be inferred.²⁰ Following the ideas of William James (cited in Damon and Hart, 1982), they divide the self into two constituent parts, the “me” and the “I.” In this formula the sense of “me” is derived from material, active, and social characteristics that constitute the “self as known”; while the “I” is the “self as knower,” experienced through continuity, distinctness, volition, and self-reflection. Damon and Hart propose a hierarchical organization of conceptual components (the four described above) with both stable and flexible properties. Throughout development the order of hierarchy and the inter-relationships of component parts can change, with emphasis on different domains of self experience at different times. According to Damon and Hart, a shift from primarily physical and active domains in infancy and early childhood to emphasis on psychological and social qualities is typical but not invariable in normal development.

Damon and Hart’s (1982) interview format, with its four measurements of self-experience (the physical, active, social and psychological dimensions) covers a range of experiential properties of selfhood. Another model, devised by Neisser (1988) proposes that self-knowledge is derived from information gathered from five different experiential

²⁰ Stern’s theory (1985), presented above, is similarly derived from extensive observation and survey of experimental findings.

domains, each with a separate developmental path. Although he acknowledges that they are rarely experienced as distinct, Neisser feels that these five constituents, the ecological self, the interpersonal self, the extended self, the private self and the conceptual self, are essentially separate selves, subject to different pathologies and misapprehensions. This construction differs in quality but not so much in content from Stern's (1985) concept of self-experience, which endeavors to integrate all these elements into a coherent and complex picture, in keeping with how he believes they are experienced by the developing child. Stern's effort to capture a sense of wholeness, and discover some essential property of self-hood under which different aspects of experience might be subsumed, is consistent with Kohut's description of the *nuclear self* as: "...the basis for our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception, integrated with our most central ambitions and ideals and with our experience that our mind and body form a unit in space and a continuum in time." (1977). This way of conceptualizing the self appeals to those who prefer an integrative approach, as it emphasizes historical context, agency, and affective components, yet it still does not express the experience of self as embedded in the interpersonal world, as the Object Relational approach advocated here prescribes. (Paradoxically, Neisser's disjointed approach may more accurately capture the self as experienced in people with autism—a fragmented, unintegrated and labile construction.)

The investigative model constructed by Damon and Hart does not emphasize the intersubjective awareness that typically infuses experience of self in relation to the larger social world (1982). This omission likely follows from their disagreement with the notion that the development of understanding of self and others occurs simultaneously in the context of early interactions (Bergman, 1999; Stern, 1989). Damon and Hart

maintain that self and other are discovered in “different conceptual systems.” They note that an individual’s perceptual orientation is usually focused on the situational context: “They can’t see themselves performing.” (This position ignores the fact that there are multiple ways of perceiving oneself, which could be registered simultaneously through different sensory modalities as well as internally generated representations.) Asserting that “point of view” influences our interpretations of social interactions, Damon and Hart propose a fundamental difference in how we conceptualize ourselves versus others. Affect is seen as an important contributor to this difference: “...there may be profound affective differences between how one receives feedback on the self versus how one receives feedback on others. One simply is emotionally invested in the nature of one’s own identity in a different way than in the nature of others’ identities, and this may well lead to differences in how personal information on self and other is cognitively processed.” (p.844) Whether or not this notion applies to the general population, it is reasonable to suggest that this dichotomy might well be operating among individuals with autism, in view of their relational difficulties. An object relational approach, with its emphasis on accessing representations of both self and significant others, offers a useful paradigm for exploring these phenomena.

Damon and Hart’s formulations (1982) informed the research undertaken by Lee and Hobson (1998), in which they used the above described interview format to investigate self concepts among autistic adolescents by comparing them to matched controls. Results were largely consistent with their predictions, which were based on observations of social/cognitive functioning in people with autism. As expected, Lee and Hobson found that autistics’ conceptions of themselves tended to focus largely on their

physical and active characteristics, whereas normal subjects' self descriptions included many more references to themselves in relation to others, including explicit examples of social interaction such as "being bullied" or "helping others." Autistic subjects mentioned features that implicitly denoted social context, such as being "nice" or "fair," but only a few of them made explicit references, as opposed to nearly all of the normal subjects. Social references also frequently appeared in normal respondents' descriptions of the active and psychological dimensions of themselves, but only rarely emerged in the autistic subjects' responses. Many of the normal subjects referred to themselves in relation to friends or membership in social groups, while not one autistic subject made reference to friends in describing themselves as social beings. Lee and Hobson raise the question of whether their limited conception of themselves in relation to others results primarily from a fundamental lack of understanding or from a lack of experience in the social world.

The quality of emotional understanding and experience featured in Lee and Hobson's (1998) autistic subjects' self descriptions differed noticeably from that of their normal counterparts, but surprisingly the two groups did not differ significantly in the number of emotional references they made. In fact, contrary to their prediction, the researchers found that the autistic subjects' performance in the psychological domain showed no difference in the number of scoreable references, however qualitative differences were noted in the responses. In their descriptions of their mental states the normal subjects used a variety of terms denoting a broad range of affective experience including subtle or complex emotional states (ashamed, anxious, uptight...). In contrast, the autistic subjects referred only to "wound up" states such as upset, excited, and happy.

Again we must wonder if this reflects differences in their actual experience of emotions, or an inability to adequately label and describe a variety of feeling states due to the language problems that are common in the autistic population. Lee and Hobson expected but did not find a correlation between verbal ability and number of social and psychological references. VMA (verbal mental age) has predicted performance on tasks measuring emotional understanding and theory of mind in a number of studies (Eisenmajer and Prior, 1991; Hobson and Lee, 1989), leading to the proposal that autistics' achievements in these domains are largely mediated by cognitive/linguistic processes (Capps and Sigman, 1996). This relationship is not generally seen in normal or intellectually impaired controls.

In Damon and Hart's terms (1982), which suggest a maturational shift from physical-active to psycho-social orientation to self, the autistic subjects in Lee and Hobson's study (1998) might be said to be operating at a more primitive level. The large discrepancy between their conceptual profile and that of the normal subjects in number of references to self in relation to others, is perhaps indicative of a developmental lag, and may point to a qualitatively different construction of self. Yet their demonstrated ability to describe themselves in psychological terms points to capacities that are often thought to be categorically missing in this population. Lee and Hobson were notably surprised: "If theories of self-concept development are correct, it would seem that *all* the participants in this study had sufficient experience of others (and of themselves in relation to others) to reflect on themselves, and/or a sufficiently elaborated 'theory of mind' to achieve this. Therefore we are left with the need to account for the degree of self-reflective awareness some of them acquire." (p.1141).

The capacity for evaluative self-awareness in people with autism has been studied in the recent work of Capps, Sigman, and Yirmiya (1997), in which they investigated the relationships between three factors in a group of autistic adolescents: their perceptions of their own level of social competence, their capacity for emotional understanding, and parental reports of level of adaptive social functioning. “Subjects who perceived themselves as less socially competent demonstrated stronger intellectual capabilities, greater understanding of others’ emotional experiences, and were better able to access their own emotional experiences than were those who perceived themselves as more socially competent.” (p.137). In other words, it appears that those who had achieved a more “realistic” understanding of their own social functioning were more likely to be empathic toward others, and seem to have been aided in the development of these capacities by their intellectual competence. Like Lee and Hobson, this investigative team were impressed with the level of self-understanding their subjects had achieved.

People with autism and those who know and understand them are less surprised by these findings. Evidence of introspective capacity is ample in the published autobiographies of people with autistic disorders, and in unedited writing samples found in support-group newsletters and web-sites (as well as in the spontaneous discourse I have been privy to). Indeed, much of the relevant material I have encountered reflects each author’s intense desire to make sense of his feelings and experience, and his effort to consolidate a sense of personal identity. While struggle and conflict are evident in these accounts, so are considerable achievements in social and self understanding. There still remains, however, the question of why these individuals seem largely unable to use self-reflection in the service of understanding and relating to others. One explanation might

be in the difference Damon and Hart posit in forming concepts of self as opposed to conceptualizing others (1989): the investment in self-knowledge and identity outweighs consideration of others by virtue of its affective valence. Metacognitive deficit theories, which emphasize the critical capacity to simultaneously access multiple representations at different levels of abstraction in order to fully conceptualize self and other in relational dimensions (Perner, 1991; 1993), also offer plausible explanations for the autistic individual's interpersonal difficulty. While I would concur that these factors likely constitute important components in the social difficulties of some people with autism; I doubt that they are present in all cases, nor do I believe that they are immutable. In seeking out the missing pieces of the puzzle, I am inclined to look more closely at examples of "self-reflective" capacity, such as those noted by Lee and Hobson in their autistic subjects (1998). By attending to material in which each individual, in his own voice, tells us about himself, perhaps we can better understand how and why their self understanding differs from their capacity for interpersonal insight.

"Reflective function," (RF) as identified by Fonagy and Target (1998) refers to the individual's capacity to represent his own and others' mental states. The richness and flexibility of a person's conceptualization of the thoughts and feelings of self and others, and how those concepts inform understanding of behavior, is highly variable and thought to correspond to one's level of psycho-social development. Fonagy and his colleagues believe that reflective function can be evaluated through analysis of narrative material in which people describe themselves and their experiences in relationships with significant others (Fonagy, *et al.*, 1995). Here is one example of a verbal response considered indicative of reflective capacity, which shows the linking of mental state to behavior: "I

would say he behaved very badly, but he was very worried about his job and being unemployed again.” (p. 388). Evaluation of this type of material, gathered in interviews (current developments include an RF scale for use in scoring the Adult Attachment Interview) yields an assessment of the subject’s level of reflective function capacity.

According to Fonagy, *et al.*, developmental achievement in this area is made possible through early experience in healthy, secure attachment relationships (1995). Disruption and trauma in those relationships would therefore impede the development of reflective function. (This idea is consistent with the developmental theories that have been presented here, with the caveat that attachment “security” is not consistently found to be deficient in the population in question, despite the disturbance in quality of relatedness observed). Observations of social dysfunction and theory of mind deficits thus lead us to anticipate poor reflective functioning in autistic individuals. The degree to which such predictions bear out might be gauged by examining samples of verbal material such as the following, in which a woman with autism describes herself in the context of society:

Believe it or not, I have a hard time convincing people I’m handicapped. Anyone who sees me only when I’m doing something I like or excel in and at times when things are going smoothly will think I’m deceptively normal. People also have this misconception that math and computers are the most difficult disciplines and that anyone talented in those areas can do anything. Those who know of my knack for numbers can’t believe I have trouble with something a kindergartener can do, like getting the dishes clean. These people blame it on laziness and bad attitude. Even though they’re right about the latter, it’s the very autism that makes me lack interest in things like clothes, housekeeping and relationships. Even when I’m in a bad mood or in the midst of one of those spells when I absolutely need to be left alone, people around me see me not as a person with a disability but as an unfriendly one with a sour disposition. No matter what mood I’m in, my relatively advanced language skills lead the uninformed to think that I can’t be autistic because autistic people don’t talk.

Having a miserable disposition is certainly of no help when it come to seeking assistance. Handicapped people with sweet and endearing personalities win over the hearts of people

who then reach out to offer help without being asked. On the other hand, someone who is aloof and cold only drives people away. I have the misfortune of being one of the more hostile and aggressive autistics that others dislike.

Living with unmet needs is now taking its toll on me. The personality that others dislike is getting worse as a result. What starts as indifference to people and social matters turned into outright bitterness that shows. One might say I'm burnt out from all the frustration. My nerves are so raw that every little thing sets them off. I even sometimes think I'm becoming more autistic. (p. 21)

Although she is clearly most focused on her own experience and difficulties, this author does convey an implicit understanding of the ideas and attitudes held by others around her, and of how all parties' mental states impact on their interactions. Her social functioning, nevertheless, seems to be characterized by emotional distance and self-imposed isolation:

My social handicap goes way beyond lack of ability. In addition to not knowing how to deal with people, I don't like it. Although I seek support from mental health workers and wish to correspond to others like me, I have absolutely no desire for deep relationships. In contrast to the high functioning autistics who form friendships and even get married, I prefer to be alone. The love and caring others are capable of elude me. I never even knew what it was like to care for another human being. Being exposed to people had the same effect on my attitude as it did on my skills. The more I'm around people, the less I like being near them.

Despite these protestations the author reveals, in another section of her letter, a need for supportive contact: "In the area of support, I can't say I'm getting nothing because what must be one of the world's most understanding psychiatrists sees me weekly. The problem is that he's not always available. When he's away or off duty and after working hours I have nobody. Someone like me who is insecure and likely to panic

²¹ Letter to the editor by Marla Comm, to the *MAAP Newsletter*, Vol. IV, 1994.

when the slightest thing goes wrong needs more continuous support.” Here we can see, from an object relational standpoint, the woman’s inability to derive comfort and regulatory support from an internalized image of her psychiatrist/caregiver in his absence. We can also detect her failure to fully internalize a sense of other people, in general, as a source of emotional sustenance and companionship. We might surmise then, that her apparent capacity for self-reflection evolved in the absence of an optimal (or even adequate) inner relational environment. Her achievements may have been aided by her therapeutic relationship (which includes a positive sense of her therapist as an understanding and supportive caregiver) and her intact cognitive capability. What is missing, quite clearly, is the experience of shared affect, and in this case, even the desire for it. Without this she may be unable to fully develop a reflective capacity that would encourage and facilitate relatedness.

Lest my readers take this woman’s example as a typical experience among individuals with autism, I must point out, as others have (Attwood, 1998; Cohen, 1980; Frith, 1989; Mayes and Cohen, 1994; Tantum, 2000), that a large proportion of high-functioning autistic individuals clearly long for and seek out meaningful connections with others, usually with very limited success due to their social impairment. The desire alone argues that something about human relatedness has registered positively in this group, either through their observations of others or in the context of real interactive experience with sensitive caregivers. Such experience may help to fill the gaps left by these individuals’ early interpersonal difficulties.

Behrends and Blatt’s description of internalization processes, which occur throughout the life cycle, supports the idea that developmental progress may be achieved

at later stages through ongoing relational experience (1985). They point out that, even though the level of differentiation and individuation might vary among individuals, “every significant relationship, however mature, meets fundamental needs.” (p. 25). Behrends and Blatt define internalization as a process through which interpersonal interactions “are transformed into inner regulators.” They believe that what we internalize are *aspects of relationships* rather than objects, per se, and stress that these experiences can be either *real or fantasied interactions* (italics mine). Hence we can imagine the potential for ongoing development of internalized representations in the event of increased cognitive, imaginative, and synthesizing capacities, as well as through experience that forges affective links to evolving concepts. (We can also see, by this formulation, how an autistic child’s affectively charged relationship to an inanimate object can become an effective internal regulator.)

The crucial role of shared affect in the development of representational capacities, including reflective functioning, prompts us to focus more closely on the mechanisms by which affective experience is registered and integrated during early interpersonal interactions. Fonagy and Target (1998) believe that a critical component in a child’s capacity to register, tolerate, and regulate affect has to do not only with the caregiver’s ability to soothe and respond to the infant’s emotions, but her ability to allow the infant’s affective experience to resonate within her. This process, sometimes called “mentalizing,” is thought to depend on the caregiver’s own capacity for reflective function, and ability to convey to the child that his experience is understood in a corresponding emotional dimension. Such an affective exchange does not mean that the mother simply absorbs the infant’s emotion and expresses the same feeling in return;

rather she is said to “metabolize” the infant’s affective state, and reflect it back in a manner that shows the infant that his feeling resonates within her, but does not consume or overwhelm her: she can accept and contain the feeling yet does not own it. Through experience of his caregiver’s capacity to represent both her own and his mental state, the infant develops his own reflective capacity. He comes to know himself, not by seeing himself mirrored or duplicated, but reflected in the other’s perceived mind. Needless to say, in order to avail himself of this organizing interpersonal mechanism, the infant must be able to experience and process shared affect.

I would suggest that this aspect of relational functioning— achieving the sense that one’s own experience can affectively resonate within the mind of another— may pose the greatest challenge to individuals with autism and their social partners, given the profound differences in the way they each experience themselves and the world.²²

Whereas cognitive/linguistic capacities might mediate the development of reflective functioning to some degree, as is suggested by the achievements noted above, a reflective capacity that encompasses both self and other may require more real affective interpersonal exchange. It is clear to me, from numerous observations, that many individuals with autism seek this critical experience— that of seeing themselves reflected in the external world— in their quest for self knowledge, yet they often fail to find its source in other people. They’ve either tried without success, or do not think to try.²³

²² Here I am referring to autism’s unique neuro-cognitive profile and related sensory-perceptual experience.

²³ Some of those who do search for themselves in interpersonal contexts resort to primitive strategies, such as the aggressive cycles of “projection” and “introjection” that are typical in individuals with borderline personality disorder, many of whom have suffered their own forms of relational deprivation in early life, and have similar ego deficits. These features of “narcissistic” psychopathology often earn people with autism diagnoses of personality disorders (Tantum, 2000).

Donna Williams describes her fleeting emergence from her lack of awareness of *self* in relation to others, after years of inhabiting false personas:

... Certainly, it was the reaction of others to my ‘characters’ that encouraged reliance upon mechanical, disconnected expression in place of self expression, and helped develop a sort of defense of those characters as ‘selves’. Yet for me, it was that rare experience of seeing in someone’s eyes that they had seen me in there – beyond the suffocation of these distorting facades – that told me that I did exist. This was like oxygen to a flame about to go out and it fired the fight for expression of selfhood, for which I had almost exhausted all hope. (quoted in Cole, 1999, p. 479).

For some individuals with autism, who have failed to find themselves in the minds and hearts of others, creative gifts or savant skills serve as mediums in which they can see themselves reflected. They produce works of poetry and art, not only to organize and concretize their sensory/perceptual experience, but in order to receive external validation of their existence and identity. Autistic artist Michael Madore creates diagrams and maps that, he says, serve to “ ‘dimensionalize’ his being in the world.”²⁴ A poignant example of the search for self appears in Dowker, Hermelin and Pring’s analysis of the writings of an autistic savant poet (1996). In this study, poetry by ‘Kate’ was compared to the writing of a published (normal) poet and judged to be linguistically and artistically comparable. The two authors’ poems were distinguished by only one factor: “poems by the savant referred more often to aspects of self-analysis, while descriptions of people not related to the self were less frequent.” (p. 913). The authors suggest that their subject’s savant skills support the idea of extreme modularity of function in the autistic brain:

²⁴ Quoted in the *New York Times*, Sunday, February 10, 2002.

Kate appears to possess a high degree of meta-linguistic awareness and meta-cognition, but a very impaired communicative competence in everyday life. Yet such competence is amply expressed through her poetry... The present results from a savant poet seem to suggest that such talent related modular structures may, in addition, include affective and communication abilities which otherwise are severely impaired... Autistic graphic artists, as well as musicians, are also capable of communicating strong expressions of feeling states in their own media, which they are unable to express through other channels. Perhaps the savant poet herself should be allowed to sum up such a mental state:

*I lost the me
It got under everything
That was not in poems.*

What strikes me about Kate's story and that of other autistic writers and artists is the degree to which their psychic energy, however limited or isolated its domain, seems focused on the search for self-knowledge. I wish to honor and support this search through investigating understanding of *self* and *other* among the rare group of autistic individuals who have established stable relationships. In this way we might find out if (and how) autistic individuals can achieve a sense of *self* as amplified or reflected through experience of an *other*—one whose “personhood” is understood and acknowledged in reciprocal fashion. I hope, through this exploration, to learn more about the role of interpersonal experience in my participants' efforts to consolidate internalized representations of themselves in the relational world.

METHODS

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

Because this project attempts to illuminate the phenomenological experience of neurologically atypical individuals who bring a unique perspective to the world, a qualitative approach was thought to best suit the task (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990). Whereas qualitative methods are of limited use in studies that seek to test pre-constructed hypotheses, they are particularly appropriate in research that aims to generate theoretical questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). No quantitative analysis of the resulting data has been attempted (aside from “descriptive statistics” where relevant), removing the necessity of selecting and matching subjects for comparison on the basis of particular characteristics. The ability of qualitative methodology to accommodate differences among subjects is a significant advantage in studying this diagnostic group, whose heterogeneity has challenged researchers seeking to measure and contrast their functioning with other populations (Howlin, 2003). Since the criteria that must be met to receive a diagnosis within the spectrum of autistic disorders define a significant and pervasive impairment in relational functioning, such diagnoses suggest a sufficient commonality among the participants to permit a comparative analysis of the material. Differences among them are apparent, and form an important part of the discussion of individual phenomenology.

An important component of qualitative research methodology is its emphasis on incorporating contextual features into both the approach to collecting data and the

analysis and presentation of the material generated (Patton, 1990). In the present case autism itself can be considered a contextual element, as both an internal “characterological” factor and a “cultural” condition. People with autism often describe themselves as members of an alien culture (Grandin, 1995; Grandin and Barron, 2005; Williams, 1996), a perspective that impacts on their experience within their own community as well as on their interactions with the normal population (“neuro-typicals,” as autistics tend to call us). Qualitative research, with its roots in ethnography and anthropological study offers an ideal philosophical paradigm for investigating phenomena associated with the social experience of autistic individuals. The epistemological principles of this method of study emphasize the dynamic process of inquiry whereby the investigator, who functions as a “participant observer,” and her informants engage in a cross-cultural exchange, requiring the researcher to continually monitor her own biases and assumptions in the process of gathering and interpreting data (Adler and Adler, 1998; Fetterman, 1989; Kidder and Fine, 1997). This approach permits the investigator to explore how each individual informant constructs meanings out of his or her own experience. Considering that the very nature of thinking and perceiving seems to be recognizably different for this group of people, such a philosophical stance may be the only hope of appropriately capturing their experience.

Informants

Eight informants (four pairs) from among a score of volunteers were invited to participate in the study, having met the requirement that at least one partner in each pair

had been diagnosed by a licensed evaluator with High Functioning Autism, Asperger Syndrome, or Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified. Although other volunteers met criteria for inclusion, constraints of time and funding precluded further expanding the subject pool. The individuals selected had IQs within the normal to superior range (both formally and informally measured) and showed sufficient adaptive functioning to live independently, and to be able to give voluntary and informed consent to the procedures (see Appendix A). Each pair of informants were involved in a stable marital relationship that they had sustained for twelve years or more. Participants were recruited through research and treatment facilities, and organizations that provide support and advocacy for individuals with this type of disability (*e.g.*: The Seaver Autism Research Center at Mt. Sinai Hospital, The Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Autism Support Center of Boston, ASPEN of NJ.).

Procedure

The participants were each interviewed for approximately 2 hours individually and 1 hour with their partners. Each interview was tape recorded and later transcribed. Questions were taken from a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) formulated to elicit spontaneous reflection on personal and interpersonal experience. The questionnaire is similar in content to other instruments that have been used to evaluate representations of self and other (Diamond, Blatt and Kaslow, 1987; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985; Slade and Cohen, 1996), however its format is less restrictive in the manner of response called for. For example, rather than ask a participant to list five adjectives to describe

himself, as in the *Adult Attachment Interview* (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985), prompts were more general, such as: “Tell me about yourself,” or “What are you like as a person?”

The individual interview explores how each participant has developed a sense of him/herself in the context of a significant relationship, and how he/she has come to understand the subjective experience of his/her partner in the relationship. Participants were asked to describe themselves and their partners, and then to imagine how each might describe the other, reflecting on the unique ways they derived their knowledge. They were also asked to talk about what it is like to be in a relationship with their partner. The second set of questions, administered to both partners together, was designed to elicit a “co-constructed” narrative of the history of their relationship, during which they were asked to explore both positive and negative aspects, and then to imagine their future together. This type of approach, which uses open-ended questions, permits each informant to bring up whatever material he or she thinks is relevant to the inquiry, and allows maximum flexibility for the construction of responses in accordance with the individual’s own thought processes and associative linkages. The interviewer can prompt for elaboration of important thematic material, and restate the questions in different ways if necessary, to ensure that the informant has ample opportunity to generate rich responses (Patton, 1990). This methodology also affords participants on-going opportunities to clarify their responses to ensure that interpretation of the material includes accurate representations of their intended meanings. Such flexibility is essential with this population, as people with autism often have idiosyncratic ways of using

language (Tager-Flusberg, 1981; Twachtman-Cullen, 1998; Williams, 1996), which can lead to misinterpretations in both expressive and receptive linguistic functioning.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the interview data I attempted to strike a balance between highlighting content that corresponds to the theoretical framework of the inquiry, and permitting unanticipated themes and concepts to emerge from the narrative material without the imposition of a pre-constructed interpretive framework. Because of the high volume and often unwieldy nature of the verbal material generated by each participant, however, it was necessary to develop an organizing structure for the presentation of the individual narrative data. This exercise constituted the first phase of data analysis, in which each participant's transcript and audio-tape was studied and scanned for material that could be gathered under a group of headings that served as organizing themes for the individual narratives: *My Sense of Self*; *My Self in the Relational World*; *My Relationship Partner*; and *Our Relationship*. In each case sections of verbal material were extracted largely intact, with some license taken in selecting or paring the material for the purpose of thematic organization and maintenance of narrative flow. (Samples of the original transcripts will also be presented to illustrate the narrator's unvarnished verbal style.)

This process, often used in "psycho-biographical" research (McAdams, 1988; Ochberg, 1988), generated a set of "re-constituted" narratives, which though sacrificing a degree of objective accuracy, endeavored to preserve the unique and authentic voice of each participant. During the earliest phase of the project, my research group members sampled the transcripts and joined me in listening to the tapes, serving as collaborators and commentators in my effort to remain true to the participants' original presentations.

Because of the challenges of reaching my far-flung informants and fitting my data collection and analysis work around the demands of my two-year clinical internship, however, it was impossible to sustain a collaboration with a second coder for the sake of reliability. Material was therefore routinely submitted to members of my evaluation committee, Drs. Anni Bergman and Jeffrey Rosen, my Chair. Through each phase of data collection and analysis, Prof. Rosen's invaluable monitoring and feedback kept me focused on the task of illuminating each participant's unique experience in a manner that remained as true as possible to that person's subjective experience (from our subjective viewpoint!). The result is a set of first person narratives that aim to allow each individual to emerge as a unique and recognizable character in his or her own telling of significant life events, and experience in both their inner and external relational worlds. An individual analysis of each narrative was then undertaken, in which the major themes were extracted and discussed in terms of both theoretical relevance and their correspondence to themes emerging in the partner's narrative and the dyadic interview of each couple. These portions of the study can't help but represent the author's subjective viewpoint, which, for better or worse, must be embraced in the practice of qualitative research. A basic assumption in this methodology is that the researcher's subjective experience will influence all aspects of the data collection and analysis to a degree, but that what is lost in scientific objectivity will be compensated for by what can be gained from a personal perspective. In this case, an investigation of interpersonal phenomena among people who are generally thought to be socially detached, aspects that resonate personally for me in my role as interviewer and interpreter will be treated as "useful"

insights, with the understanding that personal bias (clearly a risk in my case) lurks as an inevitable pit-fall, to be negotiated by up-front disclosure and continual self-examination.

Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which involves the development of uniquely tailored coding systems, was used to analyze the content of the individual narratives. This approach is particularly suited to the present investigation, because most pre-structured methods of analysis have been developed for use with standardized instruments in a neurologically normal population. Since it is important to respect the fundamental difference in the experiential nature of interpersonal functioning in this population, my object was to develop a coding scheme that would permit new themes to emerge from the data unhampered by theoretical preconceptions and researcher bias. Recognizing that the latter statement represents a philosophical ideal that I have endeavored to hold in mind (in anticipation of a certain degree of failure) it was thought prudent to put some of the theoretical expectations on the table before gathering data, so that they could be recognized as pre-existing concepts rather than interpreted as unbiased revelations arising solely from the data. For instance, my exploration of published narratives and interview material lead me to expect certain themes to be present in the data, including fluidity of boundaries between self and other, instances of empathic failure, and variable levels of coherence in self descriptions. In analyzing the material I expected to be looking at previously conceptualized elements, such as level of “reflective functioning” (Fonagy and Target, 1998; Fonagy, *et al.*, 1995), emotional nuance, and evidence of social reciprocity. I tried, nevertheless, to remain prepared for heretofore unmeasured factors to present themselves.

Comparative data analysis involved coding the verbal material for content, then developing a scheme for categorizing the codes. The method of “constant comparison,” in which coded items are grouped according to similarity of content (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), formed the basic system of analysis. This method yields categories that can be further sorted and grouped into categories of increasing level of abstraction, from which emergent concepts can be derived for use in the interpretive process. A visual array was used to display the data codes, to aid in conceptualizing different coded elements according to hierarchical or other spatially represented relationships (Huberman and Miles, 1998).

In addition to coding the content of the narrative data, the analysis involved generating “process codes,” which describe the informant’s manner of formulating and presenting the material along dimensions such as affective nuance and linguistic style. “Theoretical memos” were recorded and catalogued throughout the process so that ideas for theory building, and content analysis could be monitored and used for adjusting the systems of coding and categorization as the data were increasingly synthesized. At different phases of the data analysis the material was scanned for thematic elements, so that the dominant themes could be identified and incorporated into the schematic development of the coding and analysis system. Emergent themes were also used to guide adjustments in the interview and data gathering process as it continued during the course of the study.

Particular attention was paid to differences in the way each participant used language to talk about him/herself at different points in the narratives while reflecting on various events and aspects of relational experience. My goal was to listen for the

conceptual underpinnings of the verbal material, and search for evidence of the various forms of representation that characterize the internalized sense of *self* and *other*, and *self in relation to other*.

The dyadic interview material was handled differently than the individual narratives, employing dimensions of a coding system previously developed for use in assessing the quality of marital relationships, and identifying factors that correlate with stability over time. *The Oral History Interview and Coding System* (Beuhman and Gottman, 1996) uses an interview that is almost identical to the joint interview administered to couples in this study. Although not part of the original data analysis plan, this system was adopted when it was discovered along the way, through the input of my third committee member, Dr. Peter Fraenkel, who has an extensive background in researching marital relationships as well as use of qualitative methodology. Use of the instrument is based on the notion that internalized representations of a marital relationship will exert a self-reinforcing power on how each partner in the marriage remembers events in the history of the relationship, and perceives his or her partner in the context of both past and current interactions. In this respect it is consistent with the tenets of object relations theory, the main conceptual framework for this investigation. One dimension of the system measures “We-ness,” the degree to which an individual conceptualizes self and partner as a single unit with shared experience and perspective, as opposed to two independent entities. Given the centrality of the question of how individuals with autism form internalized representations of self in relation to other, the concept of we-ness promises to add a significant contribution to the discussion.

The Oral History coding system emphasizes not just the content of the couple's memories, but the manner in which they jointly tell the story of their relational history:

....the focus is on the tenor of the description over the course of the interview. For example, when they are asked to describe what first attracted them to their partner, do spouses seem unsure, or do flattering descriptions of their partner's personality or appearance readily come to mind for them? In a similar fashion, the coding system takes into account how the spouses interact as they tell the story of their relationship. For example, do they tease each other? Do they finish each other's sentences and validate what the other person has said? Alternatively, do they snipe at each other, argue about the history of events, or describe their spouse or the history of the marriage in cynical or disillusioned tones? (Carrère, *et al.*, 2000, p. 47)

This type of assessment of the interactive patterns displayed during the dyadic interviews yields information that is not accessible through textual analysis alone, and permits observation of relational factors that may not emerge in explicit verbal content.

The most important aspect of the work has been to let the data speak for itself in giving voice to individual phenomenological experience that is, too often with this population, interpreted from the outside in.

PRESENTATION OF THE INTERVIEW DATA

In the following sections each pair of participants will be introduced with a paragraph of background information, following which each partner's individual narrative will be presented with its analysis. The analyses will explore dynamic trends in the narrative content, and will include a distillation of the major themes extracted from the individual texts, under the headings: *Representation of Self*, *Representation of Other*, and *Representation of Our Relationship*. Themes will be compared and discussed, with reference to relevant theoretical concepts where applicable, in the context of each successive analysis. A summary of the couple's joint/dyadic interview will then be presented, with selected excerpts from the original transcripts, and commentary on significant aspects of the interactive patterns that emerge in their narrative co-construction of the history of their relationship. The coding results for all twelve interviews (eight individual and four dyadic) will be presented in a subsequent chapter.

Susan and Tom

Background Information

Tom and Susan are a childless couple in their fifties, who have been married for more than twenty years. Neither had been involved in a significant romantic relationship prior to meeting. He currently works in a large electronics store and is the sole income earner for the family. They live (with their several dogs and cats) in a modest home, which they built themselves, on the outskirts of a city in the “Mid-Atlantic” region. Susan and Tom stay in regular contact with a network of family members who live in not too distant communities. They report that they’ve struggled to maintain financial security throughout most of their marriage, both having had problems sustaining steady employment. Susan was diagnosed with an autistic disorder after many years in treatment, during which a succession of counselors and psychologists disagreed as to the exact nature of her difficulties. Tom was recently given a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder. Both report feeling that their understanding of themselves and each other has been greatly enhanced since receiving their diagnoses, and that appropriately targeted treatment has improved their coping skills. They were invited to participate in the study following their response to an ad in a quarterly news letter for high functioning individuals with autism and their families. Susan’s eagerness to share her story was apparent from our first phone contact. When we met at a chosen location near her home town, she was immediately recognizable on the basis of her self-description (a plump ordinary looking woman) as well as her enthusiastic and unguarded approach. Susan

hailed me when she saw me, saying that I looked just like I'd sounded on the phone. She had a slight air of excitement about her, and explained that she'd just come from the yarn store where she'd been especially stimulated while gazing at the array of colored wool. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, we settled easily into the first interview. A few hours later Tom, a lanky bearded man with a shy smile and gentle manner, joined us for their joint interview. Tom's individual interview took place at a separate time a few weeks later.

SUSAN'S NARRATIVE

MY SENSE OF SELF

It's hard to describe myself as a person because I'm a "multiple." I feel like I'm a lot of different people all thrown together in one mind and body. Unlike the case of typical "Multiple Personalities" we all know each other. Some of us are male, some are female; some mature and some very young. There is one who I call the Observer, and it is her job to keep track of everybody else. She is an entity within me that I've always been aware of. The Observer monitors EVERYTHING: our emotions, thoughts, and physical feelings, and especially our behavior. She can be inhibiting and rather annoying at times, which makes the others resent and sometimes rebel against her. I think she is, in part, an internalization of my mother's voice telling me what to do and how to act. There's also an adult personality in me who is very compassionate and aware of other (outside) people. She is more aware of others' needs than of her own. She's the part of me that's judgmental of myself but is very understanding and forgiving of others.

The little ones inside me feel frightened and vulnerable, and often get overwhelmed by "sensory overload." One I call Joshua, a boy of around twelve, comes out when danger is perceived. I call him the Guardian because he's feisty and protective.

Last year I had an experience when it seemed that they all joined together to oppose the Observer, who was scolding me for crying over a sad loss. She said I shouldn't cry alone, because there was no one there to impress with my emotions. But the others told the old witch to back off and let us cry. This was an occasion when I was able to recognize a real emotion and feel it as my own experience – not just a superficial

demonstration. It's often hard for me to locate and identify my feelings. I look for external cues, from other people or from my exterior self, to let me know what's going on inside me. Sometimes I get very mixed messages and find myself disoriented and confused. My mother used to be a powerful source of confusing and contradictory signals. She would tell me things about how I looked and what I felt that did not coincide with what I perceived. Two people in my life have helped me to sort out this confusion by paying attention to my emotional states and letting me know what they observe in a way that makes sense to me: my old friend Marty, and my husband Tom. They helped me to interpret my own sensations and behaviors and to find words to describe what I feel. But before they came into my life, I didn't really know there was a "me" at the source of all the thoughts and feelings flashing through my mind.

All through my life I have looked for cues in the world around me to show me who and how to be. My family moved around a lot, because of my father's career as a military doctor. Through all the successive changes of people and environment, I continually re-invented myself in each new location. All of those different Susans remain separate beings to a great extent, still waiting to be unified. Being Jewish in a world of others who were not, sometimes helped me to differentiate myself from those around me. My Jewishness and my connection with animals are the two aspects of me that extend across the different personalities and time periods. But there were times when we adapted to non-Jewish communities by blending in and altering our traditional customs, and also times when I found myself surrounded by other Jews who appeared to be nothing like me at all. I lost track of myself, and didn't know how to act or think at those times. During one period in my middle childhood I found a way to be by learning about

the Kiowa Indian culture. The Kiowas never looked people in the eye, so this is how I behaved. My mother did not understand this. She thought I was crazy. But it made sense to me, and I was glad to have been given a pattern of behavior that seemed appropriate.

Taking part in religious ceremonies or practicing religious traditions has helped me experience a sense of “rightness.” I consider myself to be a very spiritual person, and I do believe in the presence of a higher being. I used to be troubled and confused by having experienced so many different religious and cultural traditions and perspectives, but my therapist and my Rabbi have tried to help me feel a sense of “okayness” about all those spiritual entities residing in me. This is a relatively new way of looking at myself. I used to be more rigid about what characteristics I considered part of my personal identity. I needed very clear definitions and boundaries to tell me what was me and not me. I tried to get that information from my interactions with people in the world around me. But the idea of me in my mind was unstable and fragmented.

I still find that I need reassurance that I’m not just a transient speck of matter. When I get distressed I can’t clean my house, because I need the clutter around me to remind me that I’ve been there a while. My emotions erupt and evolve in ways I can’t predict or stay connected to. But the dirt feels permanent and reassuring, and gives me a sense of rootedness and of presentness. Cleaning upsets me, and it upsets the animals too, which they must be getting from me, because why else would they care if the house is clean?

It all used to be even more of a struggle. Sometimes I had to withdraw into a shell to hold onto myself; at other times I needed to attach to other people to keep from

losing myself. As I grew older, became a teenager, my parents stopped touching me. I began to lose touch with reality, began to lose me. And so I found someone else to touch me, my older brother-in-law. I used to snuggle close to him on the couch, and then his hands started wandering. It took a while before I understood that this touching was molestation. He was the first person to do that but there were others. I experienced a lot of date rape. I could never see it coming or figure out how to stop it, until I learned not to put my key in my door until the guy went away.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

Just like changes in location – physical and cultural environment – affected my sense of myself, changes in people and my contact with them altered my self concept. When I got older I began to see that things that I'd thought were essential aspects of me were actually located in other people. For example, my identity as a Jew resided in my father and my brother-in-law, Eli. They were the ones who said all the blessings.

As a child I unconsciously banked, or invested myself with my father. He was the validator, not my mother. My mother was the invalidator. When my father became ill and began to decline, I felt my existence was threatened. I was nineteen, and I had begun to understand, on an intuitive level, that I didn't have a core like other people did, and that somebody else carried it for me. So I moved it from my father, who was very vulnerable, to my brother-in-law. Later, when I started working with Marty at the stable, I moved part of it to him. I used to confuse these two men, and had to be careful not to call each by the other's name.

But eventually they emerged as distinct individuals in my mind. The inappropriate physical contact happened with Marty too, but that was partly my fault,

because I fell madly in love with him. My relationship with Marty was the first one in which I began to maintain a sense of personal boundary. He could observe me and understand what I felt, and convey his understanding without confusing me or spilling his own thoughts into me.

I'm a very fearful person. Marty could see my fear and recognize my strength and courage at the same time, and respond in just the right way. He'd put me on a horse he could absolutely trust, then send me off to make my way back home. When my monthlies came on, Marty would always know it before I did, and send me home before my horrible cramps put me in bed.

I began seeing a therapist when I was twenty-one. There have been a number of them since then, some better than others. Talking in an analytical way is what soothes me and helps to organize my thoughts. My thinking is very abstract. But I'm very specifically oriented and concrete. If I can't relate a problem to my own experience – figure out how it might affect me – then I can't care about the problem. This affects my learning as well as my social functioning. I flunked the first semester of biology because it was all plants. I had never been a tree, or wanted to be a tree. But I got straight A's in genetics, because it was related to how my body works. That practice of relating everything to my own self is what enables me to be so compassionate toward other people. Lots of people tell me I go too far with that. I feel too deeply what other people feel. They tell me I should build a boundary, but that would essentially change who I am. There was a time in my life, before I went into therapy, where it felt like I was standing in a tube, and that my eye-sockets were portals through which I looked out at the world.

And my body just carried my eyes around. I don't ever want to go back to that. That's the only way I know how to have a boundary.

During the course of my long relationship with Tom I have learned to differentiate my experience from his, and come to know him and myself as distinct individuals, in a way that wasn't possible before.

Even though people said to me all my life: "You're *really strange*," I don't think it registered with me what they meant. But I suppose there were times when I recognized that I experienced things differently. I was the only child that would stand at the top of the hill at recess and pretend like I was a stallion watching the herd, and the only one who didn't know the names of the other kids in the class. I was probably the only one who couldn't ever recognize herself in the mirror. I'd be looking and think: "That's what I *look* like? I don't *sound* like that." It's very scary not to be able to recognize yourself in the mirror.

There was a time when I worked in the barn, spending most of my time with the animals, when I thought I must look like a cat. I had this little nose. I *felt* like a cat. I can feel tree too. Sometimes I get a sensation, when I'm looking at something, like a telephone pole – instead of just the perception, I'll get the feeling of it in my body. I sometimes get the same sensation when I'm watching people on TV. That's why I've always needed the Observer inside me – to be the director and keep me in my part.

During all of my years in therapy I kept trying to get a handle on things. Medication has helped. Before that I couldn't even stand for people to look at me. Their looks felt like knives cutting into me, a tremendous painful pressure. I used my will and intellect to hold myself together. I constantly said: "I am," while the observer monitored

my behavior, telling me when to talk slower or lower my volume. It was scary, and it was lonely. Yet the tension of being in a room with other people was sometimes so great I had to throw-up.

But it's different with my husband. He doesn't intrude on me. Somehow, he gives me the space to have my own bounded perspective. It's a freedom I've never had before.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

I felt that I could trust Tom from the very beginning. His sincerity and openness made him different from other men I had known. He has a sweet nature and an easy-going temperament. These are qualities I appreciate in him, but I can see where they have kept him from getting ahead in life. Sometimes his niceness and generosity have even caused me to feel embarrassed by him. It used to embarrass me when he'd go around cleaning up other people's trash in addition to ours, when we were out for a picnic. People easily take advantage of Tom, because he's always willing to do what anyone wants.

In the beginning of our relationship his passive nature seemed to fit well with my own need to be in control of everything. But that quickly became a major source of irritation between us. I was furious when he wouldn't fight with me, so I taught him to fight. I could see how much he needed to learn to stand up for himself. I also came to understand some of the reasons for his passivity, and his tendency to back down in any argument. It was because he couldn't marshal his thoughts to make his own stand. That problem comes from his Attention Deficit Disorder. Since he started taking medication it has improved tremendously.

His mind works very differently from mine. There are things he simply can't get his brain to master, especially if it has to do with money. I've tried to explain things to him, but he's just too block-headed. We've agreed that I should handle all the finances.

On the other side of it, there are ways that he's truly gifted where I have absolutely no ability, like with mechanical things or his building projects. He can describe something he wants to make, or draw a picture of it, but the only way I can get it is if he makes a three-dimensional model out of foam core. It takes him forever to get anything done because he gets caught up in all the little details. It has to be perfect or he's not happy. He's such a dreamer. His visions are always beautiful but not very practical. Despite all the creative ideas he comes up with, he'll never be successful in business. He gets frustrated with himself, because he wants to do great things, but I don't need him to be a millionaire. The only thing that's important to me is for him to be the good man he is, and make an honest living. Unfortunately, neither one of us has very good job skills. The only real job I ever managed, besides working with the horses, was working for a little while in a camera shop. Tom had a steady job for years, as a printer, but that was only because his father owned the business. He was always trying to do things his own way. We're both the "black sheep" of our families. I'm always trying to get him to pull himself together so he can keep his job at the computer store.

When he's at work he gets easily distracted. He gets involved in helping someone, but ends up neglecting his responsibilities. Again, it's his niceness that gets him in trouble. Sometimes he's just oblivious – doesn't notice that his shirt's torn, or that he's standing between a salesman and his customer. He just marches to a different

drummer. I can see that so clearly. It's funny that, of the two of us, he's the one that's normal.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

My husband would say our relationship is a very loving one, But I have often been unsure of whether I truly love him. For the first ten years of our marriage I had to ask him all the time: "Do I love you? ...Do I behave like I love you? ...Do I do loveful things for you?" And he'd very patiently answer "Yes, Susan, you behave very much like you love me." I really needed him to tell me that because I had no idea. I couldn't identify or recognize this feeling of 'love' in me. Most of my experience of life came from reading novels, and I couldn't relate the sense of feeling I had to the way love was described in the stories. There was this discrepancy between my experience and my perception of reality, which came from movies and books.

Before Tom, I'd been through years of being confused and overwhelmed by my feelings. Other people often acted like my feelings weren't real, and my mother always said I over-reacted to everything. Then along came this man who said: "You're just good the way you are. You are a loving person." Even now I'll say to him: "Do you think the animals know I love them?" He'll say: "Oh, they're convinced." And I say: "Do you think it's over the top?" And he'll say: "Where's the top?" So now when I have a strong reaction to something, I can say: "This may be a strong reaction, but it's my reaction and I own it."

Even though I still have trouble understanding it, I've come to accept that I'm a loving person, and I know that's one of the qualities that attracts Tom to me. He must feel very sure of it, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to tolerate all the fury and

firestorms I can produce. My emotions have calmed down a lot since I began taking medication a few years ago, but we had terrible fights when we were first married, and they escalated easily because he always backed down, and that just got me madder. Our couples' therapist helped us figure out how to break that cycle. He said: "You know, Tom, if you just tell her to stop yelling at you she will," and he was right. Another thing that helped was my ability to see what he was really feeling by paying attention to his body and his voice, so I could call him on it if he was holding back. He would just try to block everything out, but I'd show him that I knew what he was feeling behind that curtain of indifference, so eventually he stopped hiding.

I've always been able to see both sides of an argument, which used to make it hard for me to win one. But now that ability has finally paid off, because Tom gives me the space to *have* my side. I could even let out my physical anger. We used to have this rubber dust pan, and I would pick it up and start smacking the sink, and I'd say: "You see how angry I am? This is how angry I am. This is your head."

It does distress him when I'm upset. He sometimes tries to jolly me out of it, which occasionally works. Early on in our marriage I told him: "You know, when I get down in the dumps I need you to recognize it, but I don't need you to *join* me. Don't participate." Sometimes, when it's really bad, and I can see that he's getting distressed, it becomes a sort of circular-feed and gets worse and worse. When I realize this is happening I call a halt, and say: "Look, we're both distressed. Why don't we just be quiet for a few minutes." It's interesting how the Observer seems to have moved her shields around him too, watching and monitoring him to protect him, like she does in me.

We both had to learn to adjust our expectations and to communicate our needs and desires. Our therapists encouraged us to talk things through and find ways to deal with conflicts, sometimes with simple solutions like getting a second alarm clock so we could each have the amount of time we required to get ready in the morning. It has always helped that Tom has such a giving and accommodating nature, and that I am a natural-born problem solver. We used to worry a lot about disappointing each other. Both of us had grown up being told that we never did anything right. It took me years to convince Tom that I didn't need him to give me a life of luxury; that the pleasure of his company was all I wanted. I get so much from him just by being able to talk with him. I can tell him *anything*, even my deepest darkest thoughts. And our conversations aren't trivial or mundane. He's a very bright man, and I thrive on intellectual stimulation. He even takes it when I make fun of him or tell him that his jokes aren't funny.

One thing I feel bad about is my inability to deal with as much physical intimacy as he would like. I get enough physical reassurance from hugs and kisses on the cheek. I generally don't need more contact than that. That's one of the reasons why I wasn't sure I loved him. Our marriage is more based on companionship. But he'd probably have sex every day if he had the choice; it's never far from his mind. It may occasionally pass through mine, but it doesn't stay there or get enough focus for me to want to actually do it. That's because my mind is always multi-tracking; it won't single-track, so getting my mind into bed is *really* difficult. It's been especially hard during the last five years or so, because I've had a bunch of health problems and have had five different operations. It's fine if I initiate it myself, but if he gives the signal I often just shut down. That kind of intimacy can be difficult and painful for me. It's physically challenging; it's mentally

challenging; and it's emotionally overwhelming. Tom could easily have made me uncomfortable over all of it, but he's never done that. There's no anger, no recrimination, no pouting. I feel bad that my physical limitations have to impact on him this way.

I always worry that I'm not loving enough, that I'm not as good for him as he needs. Sometimes I'll ask him: "Are you sure that you're getting enough love?" I have to ask because I still don't know how to judge it. I fault myself for yelling at him so much, but I always say I'm sorry if I've used a nasty tone of voice, or said something that's critical or attacking. I try to do like our therapist said, and "stay on my own railroad tracks." I try really hard to phrase it in "I" terms: "*I* want ... *I* need ... *I* feel ..." I can tell when he's upset by my tone of voice, because that's when he gets really quiet and passive. He makes me feel very loved, very protected, and very validated. And I just worry that I don't do it well enough for him. Fortunately he's gotten pretty good at telling me how he feels. He can say: "I need a hug." We have a hard time crossing the room without putting our arms around each other.

Sometimes I know when he's upset before he does, because he tends to hide stressful things from himself. I'm not sure how that works, because I don't do that myself. There's too many people in there to hide it for very long. One of us is gonna come across it. I'm very open with my distress. I know that Tom's always available, and I let him know when I need comfort, like when I found out I was going to need a biopsy. He was sleeping, and I crawled right into his side of the bed and just cried for over an hour, with him spooned around me. If I were to wake him up for a frolic in the hay he'd be up for that too.

Some of the ways that we're alike create problems for us. For example, we're both really "now" people, so we sometimes have trouble planning for the future. I don't think either of us views the future as something that's really going to happen. For me it's a sense of always feeling that I'll be terminated soon. I was always afraid that I would die before this or that could happen, probably because I was exposed to so much death through Daddy's work during the war. Tom's a "now" person in a different way. He's always looking for instant gratification, and has a lot of trouble dealing with frustration. Our families are always telling us that we're jeopardizing our old age, because we don't make enough money. But I always say: it takes two of us just to get one of us to work. We've never both had a job at the same time. Our siblings fault us heavily on that. But, as I said to my girlfriend: "Look, God has kept a roof over my head, and a car under my backside all these years; I have got to believe that he means to continue this." I mean, God made me the way I am, but I don't believe he makes bad things happen. I think he gets angry right along with us when someone treats you rottenly. But, you know, you can't wish something undone. After all, God isn't magic.

Tom is of the magical thinking variety, which is hard to deal with at times. He'll dive into something just because he wishes for it to happen. If I can anticipate where his mind's going I can stop him from getting started on hopeless plans. But I don't do any of this in a judgmental way. I've *been* through all these problems of organization, of not living up to people's expectations, not being the person they expect me to be. I don't expect him to be superman. I don't want him to have a high-pressure executive-type job that kills him. It's much more important that he do honest work for honest pay, and yeah, I'd like it to be more, but I believe that God gives us what's sufficient to us each day. We

don't go on cruises or trips, but then I don't like cruises or trips, so it's fine by me. I guess we basically accept each other for who we are, and because of that we don't worry so much about what other people think of us. My self-esteem has grown considerably during the course of our relationship.

I think he gets good feelings from it too. He needs people. He needs to be needed, and I need somebody I can depend on. He's very dependable. And even though I worry about it, he seems to have no doubts about my love for him. Once I confessed to him that I had a crush on another man, and he said: "That's what I love about you. You have a heart as big as all outdoors, and you have enough room for *everybody*."

Analysis of Susan's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Of all the “reconstituted” narratives generated in this study, Susan’s required the most extensive labor in order to create some semblance of organizational and thematic coherence. Because of this, a number of quotes from the original transcript are included, to provide a more authentic picture of her unvarnished constructive (or de-constructive) process. Susan’s diffuse cognitive style isn’t so critically relevant to our specific recognition of her autism (though it could certainly be one of its manifestations), as it is in contributing to our impressions of her struggle to cobble together some sort of conceptual integrity around the idea of a self. In presenting her self, through an impressive mixture of factual, historical, speculative, and richly emotional information, Susan falls all over the place with enthusiastic abandon.

Theme #1 Inner fragmentation

It’s hard to describe myself as a person because I’m a “multiple.” I feel like I’m a lot of different people all thrown together in one mind and body.

Susan’s feeling that she is a collection of distinct individuals, rather than one multi-dimensional personality, prompts comparison with the experiences described by other autistics cited in the introductory chapters (p.67-73). Both Donna Williams (1996) and Lianne Wiley (1999) recall feeling fragmented, and prone to shifting among different “selves” in the context of interpersonal interactions. In their cases, however, they seemed to be accessing “roles” they had learned, using structured patterns of behavior in order to meet the demands of social exchange that they couldn’t otherwise comfortably negotiate.

Both authors suggested that these patterns of learned or imitative behavior actually obscured their true personalities. While Susan's various selves may have originated in part through observation and absorption of others' behavioral patterns, she claims to experience them as genuine self representations. Each "person" within her, has a set of personality characteristics that seem to embody her different emotional responses and relational strivings. Susan seems to have created internal structure by organizing fragments of experience into discreet personalities who can be identified by recognizable traits. This appears to aid her in dealing with emotional conflict and the need for self monitoring and impulse control. Her "Observer" seems to function as a pseudo-superego, un-integrated and often punitive, but perhaps less threatening than it might be, due to Susan's sense that her other selves can openly challenge and grapple with the Observer's rigid expectations. Notably, Susan describes the Observer as: "...in part, an internalization of my mother's voice telling me what to do and how to act," thus she has a fairly complex and psychologically astute understanding of the origin and function of this aspect of her inner life.

Susan experiences and acknowledges a broad range of emotions, which often confuse and overwhelm her, according to her report. One could postulate that the affective richness that emerges in her narrative might at least in part be attributable to her sense of embodying multiple selves.

Alvarez and Reid's suggestion that each of us experiences an: "... emotional, dynamic relationship to his or her internal representations," (1999, p.53) is illustrated in Susan's narrative. Susan reveals her affectively charged response to these internalized imagoes, experiencing her "selves" *in relation* to these inner representations. By

attributing her feelings to recognizable aspects of her self, Susan seems to be better able to “own” and reflect on her emotions, and link them to her behavior and experience in the external world. As she notes, it has not always been easy for her to distinguish between her own feelings and those of others around her, or to feel whole and bounded in the world of other people.

Theme #2 Identity diffusion

I needed very clear definitions and boundaries to tell me what was me and not me. I tried to get that information from my interactions with people in the world around me. But the idea of me in my mind was unstable and fragmented. ... Sometimes I had to withdraw into a shell to hold onto myself; at other times I needed to attach to other people to keep from losing my self.

Susan’s historical narrative depicts her efforts to identify herself as someone or something recognizable to her. Unable to take in and integrate the responses or perspectives of others around her in a way that might have aided her in constructing a sense of herself as a unique individual, she adopted rituals and attitudes that provided a superficial structure to guide her behavior. Thus she could not internalize a coherent sense of herself as a stable and continuous entity, but rather fluctuated in accordance with external conditions. This experience is again consistent with that depicted by the autistic writers cited above (Willey, 1999; Williams, 1996). Susan was able to feel a sense of “rightness” when she adhered to specific behavioral patterns, and achieved a transient sense of identity each time she fit herself into a new mold, however a “core” sense of self continued to elude her. She often experienced herself as merged with significant others, or incorporated as a part-object (Ogden, 1997), particularly among those from whom she sought nurturing. It must be noted that Susan’s recollections of herself throughout her life span include a drive for meaningful contact or affiliation with others. Whether this

could be called a drive for “relatedness” seems to depend on what era in her life she’s describing. Susan doesn’t endow herself or others with a sense of “personhood” in her recounting of early life events. She seemed more pre-occupied with distinguishing “me” from “not me” than with discovering how to experience emotional connection to others. As she notes in her narrative, her experience of seeing her thoughts and feelings not “mirrored,” but perceived and responded to by another, didn’t occur until she was eighteen (at least in her recollection). It was her relationship with Marty that first allowed her to feel understood, rather than psychically attached to or engulfed by another. While we don’t know whether it was something about him and his way of relating to her or an unrelated developmental shift that permitted Susan to experience a sense of interpersonal exchange, we can tell that she felt something for him and from him that seems to have been absent, or beyond her awareness, prior to that relationship. Throughout her childhood Susan seems to have experienced herself as surrounded by other people, but not *in relation* to others as actual persons. She describes how she needed physical contact with trusted figures in order to feel real and present, yet how exposed and intruded upon she could feel by the mere presence of other people:

There was a time in my life, before I went into therapy, where it felt like I was standing in a tube, and that my eye-sockets were portals through which I looked out at the world. And my body just carried my eyes around. ... I couldn’t even stand for people to look at me. Their looks felt like knives cutting into me, a tremendous painful pressure. I used my will and intellect to hold myself together. I constantly said: “I am,” while the observer monitored my behavior, telling me when to talk slower or lower my volume. It was scary, and it was lonely. *[verbatim from transcript]*

Susan’s early history, as depicted in her self description, compellingly illustrates the disturbance in self-development among autistics postulated by psychoanalytic theorists (Cohen, 1980; Mundy and Hogan, 1994), and highlights her early relational

impairment. The fragmented quality of her self representation, and piecemeal construction of her narrative are more apparent in the unaltered text of the original transcript:

The Observer's definitely an entity within me and always has been. ... She's partly my mother's voice internalized... You know: you do this, you do that; ladies act like this way, you don't act like that. Um, a lot of that. And then there's the little ones. Um, they range in age about three to ten. They're probably all female, and they're the ones that get afraid of things. They're the ones the sensory overload happens to the most often. Um... it's hard to explain .. Um.. I think that... that there's also an adult one in there who's very compassionate... passionate... um, more aware of other people's needs than her own. Which she'll be doing when the little ones try to ask for balance. And, um, one of the ways we've been working on maybe achieving unity, of a singular person, is that I was studying with Rabbi Klaus and doing a lot of spiritual work. And with Carol [therapist], we work – Carol's Christian, and so she has a slightly different fix on things – but, she asked me once if we all believed in God, and I said "Oh yeah." I mean, I can remember going to sleep at night during the Korean war and saying, "Please, God, don't let anybody die tonight." And I didn't care on whose side I was talking about. You know, I had this feeling that I should talk to God and tell him that people were in danger. And I would never ever treat different any of these people, to my knowledge. I don't know how many seven-year olds have those kinds of thoughts. Um, but.. so there's part of me that's extremely judgmental of myself, but not of others. Uh, my friend Mary Ann went to prison for embezzling some money out of a company, and um, so I had to stop working at the barn 'cause her husband's a catastrophizer and I couldn't take that. And uh, I went to visit her almost every week, you know, and, um, wrote to her everyday, and – 'cause she needed support, she needed somebody to be in her corner, and, um ...

Susan's later developmental accomplishments are equally apparent in her telling of her story, not only in the quality of the relatedness she has achieved but in her ability to reflect on her life experience and understand how it contributed to the formation of her personality.

But... but... because of who my mother was... she helped me become a strong person... because some of me is totally defined by this need to... her making me speak to authoritarian figures... that it was my job to take care of me. And that is a strength that I am blessed with... because the other part of her didn't want to help me get hurt bad. When we moved to Fort Mead it was the first time she knew that I was going to be horse-back riding, and she went with me – I was eighteen years old – and she goes up to Marty, and she says to him: "My daughter is going to come riding here, and I hope you'll look after her because she's such a klutz, she gets hurt all the time." I mean, I was a legal adult and my mother is telling this stable owner: take care of her daughter [smiles, laughs] like she was about twelve. He did, But (laughing) it was.., (still laughing) she would do things like send me out of second grade to speak with the principal, and at

eighteen, take me and say: "Please don't let her out of your sight, she's gonna get hurt if you do."

Theme #3 Lack of continuity of self

Through all the successive changes of people and environment, I continually re-invented myself in each new location. ... I still find that I need reassurance that I'm not just a transient speck of matter.

The historical account Susan spontaneously provided during her interview details frequent changes in physical and social environment, a consequence of her father's military career. Any child in this situation would have experienced stress, and perhaps conflict around issues of identity and social belonging, issues that in Susan's case were magnified significantly, as her autism left her with inadequate coping skills. She continues to struggle to define herself as a holder of spiritual beliefs, as seen in this section from her interview transcript.

S: The strains of who I am are confusing, in that in Arkansas there was extreme prejudice against Jews, so my sisters were enrolled in a Catholic School. ... and um, we went to Mass every morning, and because there wasn't a synagogue close by, because it was a poor parish, my parents tied us to the parish and we went to all the parish functions, so in Arkansas we were essentially Catholic. Yeah, it was muddy, very muddy. And then when we went to California we started going to a synagogue. Again – no explanation – all of a sudden now we're gonna be Jewish. And then in eighth and ninth grade and tenth and eleventh grade I went to St. Mary's Hall, which is an Episcopalian school. And my class at St. Mary's hall was more that half Jewish.

P: So was that significant to you, being among all these people who shared this with you?

S: But they didn't share. Their Judaism was civilian Reform, and mine was Conservative military. That's when the dichotomy of Jewish and not Jewish, what is a Jewish belief, became a fight for me. Because the Trenton kids didn't recognize me as one of them. So I was a minority still, of one. But coming East and finding out that there were hundreds and thousands of us was disorienting. Because I'd been used to being totally unique. Though I still was totally unique (laughs), but only in a sense of being rejected, and I'd never felt a sense of rejection, other than teachers' ill-timed comments and such.

P: Sounds like this idea of being rejected by a group of people who, in theory, ought to have been more embracing of you...

S: It was very distressing. In fact, um, Rabbi Miriam and I have been working on this to bring a sense of okayness to the fact that Catholicism, Judaism, Episcopalianism, and actually Kiowa Indians all simultaneously reside in me, as spiritual entities. As a consequence I react to all of them spiritually.

Susan's feelings of rejection show her vulnerability to others' response to her in the situation described, and her need to feel a sense of shared experience. We don't know whether she was aware of and accurately reading the reactions of her peers at the time, but can see that during her current process of recollection the memories evoke painful emotions. She continues to defend against these painful feelings, by quickly reverting to the self-regulating process of cataloguing and identifying with the different "spiritual entities" she's incorporated into her self concept. Notably, Susan also called to mind an image of a positive helping figure, Rabbi Miriam, showing that she has internalized a sense of her as an available and supportive guide. Susan also describes a collaborative intellectual effort to bring order to her internal chaos, which suggests that she has come a long way from the child who stood before a mirror expecting herself to look like a cat, simply because she inhabited the same barnyard as the animals. She still betrays her fluid boundaries (attributes her emotions to her pets), yet she displays a meta-cognitive or "mentalizing" capacity to reflect on her process of orienting herself to space and time and managing her emotions.

When I get distressed I can't clean my house, because I need the clutter around me to remind me that I've been there a while. My emotions erupt and evolve in ways I can't predict or stay connected to. But the dirt feels permanent and reassuring, and gives me a sense of rootedness and of presentness. Cleaning upsets me, and it upsets the animals too, which they must be getting from me, because why else would they care if the house is clean?

Susan's narrative paints a vivid picture of her early autism and its impact on her development of her sense of self, but gives only fragmented hints at the process through which her relational capacities emerged. She stated that she'd been in psychotherapy for twenty-one years, but only elaborated on a few issues dealt with in her treatment during her interview. Nevertheless, we can surmise that one thing gained during more than two decades in treatment, must have been the opportunity to verbalize her experience, tell her story to an interested other, and thus reconstruct memories of her past with increasing (though not necessarily accurate) insight. Like Lianne Wiley (1999), Susan finds verbal reasoning and discourse a regulating and organizing exercise in itself, as well as in solving specific problems and communicating with outside others. Her narrative seems overly rehearsed or recycled in some places, but reflects an ongoing effort to linguistically represent her internal experience and her sense of her evolution as a person in the context of the social world. [Susan's over-reliance on verbal processing and reported visual-spatial processing deficits suggest a diagnosis of Aspergers as opposed to HFA]. Susan comments not only on the impact of early relationships, but also adds the larger context of culture and historical events:

...then we went to Japan and we were the only Jewish family there, so we hosted all of the service men, like after Friday night services we would have our Shabat. that's where we met Eli [sister's husband], and um, it was conversations that I overheard my parents having, um... that I realized that Eli had been in a bigger tragedy than just the war. But as I got older and learned more about the Holocaust, I couldn't be anything but a Jew. You know I had to stand up for those who had no voice. So my Jewishness and my spirituality run really deep and strong. But I don't always know the formalities.

If we compare Susan's verbal description of herself to the results obtained by Lee and Hobson in their study of autistics' sense of themselves (1998), we can see a significant difference in Susan's construction of self-representation. In contrast to Lee

and Hobson's subjects, Susan's self concept contains many more references to social/relational experiences than her physical or active self, and she incorporates social and relational experience into her references to psychological function. While she uses many emotional terms, they refer to both subtle/complex [*i.e.: inhibited; disoriented; appreciative; rooted; soothed; etc...*] and intense emotional states [*furious; overwhelmed; sense of freedom; madly in love...*], whereas Lee and Hobson's subjects referred primarily to "wound-up" states. Had she attempted this exercise at their age (most in their teens), however, her narrative may have looked very different.

Susan's interview contained many lapses in narrative coherence, sometimes seeming to reflect a disjointed cognitive style with limited capacity to regulate and maintain focus (consistent with theoretical formulations about autistics' cognitive profile), while at other times suggesting the disorganizing impact of heightened emotion. In either case she consistently attempted to pull together the threads of information to convey something significant about herself or her relationship with her partner. In this respect she met the task demands. Through looking at Susan's representations of significant others in her relational world we can see discreet stages in the evolution of her capacity to endow herself and others with rich internal lives, constructing multifaceted images and exploring her own affectively charged relationship to them.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

As Susan taps her earlier memories, in which her parents and brother-in-law figure most significantly, she conveys her struggle to maintain psychic integrity. Her feelings about them as people are poorly elaborated, however there is affective resonance in her descriptions:

Theme #1 Significant figures from early life

As a child I unconsciously banked, or invested myself with my father. He was the validator, not my mother. My mother was the invalidator.

Again Susan's words evoke an existential struggle, but this time convey a sense of her parents in an affirming or evaluative role. Her parental representations are split simply: mother as bad object; father as good. Most figures from her distant past are poorly differentiated. In her descriptions of early life Susan's depictions of humans, animals, and inanimate objects have a similar flavor, as does her sense of herself in relation to them. Susan's boundary issues, and her failure to differentiate among individuals are apparent, as is the more primitive nature of her representations of figures from childhood. She describes these people with broad strokes, and only rarely endows them with inner life. Her linguistic choices also convey a fragmented sense of her parents, resonant of her view of herself as a collection of parts. She states, for example: "... the other part of her didn't want to help me ...," referring to her mother; and: "... part of him resented ...," in describing her father [original transcript].

Theme #2 It's different with Tom.

During the course of my long relationship with Tom I have learned to differentiate my experience from his, and come to know him and myself as distinct individuals, in a way that wasn't possible before.

In contrast, Susan provides a fairly integrated and complex dynamic representation of her partner, Tom. Her representation of Tom seems to retain its integrity, and isn't colored by fantasies of symbiotic merger. He retains his essential personality characteristics across different situations and is understood as someone with a rich internal life and unique personal history that has influenced his development.

Susan backs up her assignment of character traits to Tom with extensive descriptions of behaviors and attitudes that illustrate why she sees him in each particular light.

According to the approach used in other studies of people's internalized object representations (Main and Goldwin, 1984), this ability to link mental states and character traits to observable behavioral patterns implies a higher level of conceptualization. In instances, such as the following [directly from the transcript], Susan's recounting of experience with Tom flows in a more logical and organized fashion than that which characterizes her earlier recollections:

He's block-headed about the strangest things. He knows no more about money than a guinea-pig. Like I was telling you, that time he said to me: "You could write a check," and I said: "We don't have any money in our account." (laughs) "What is this?" he said, "You go into the super-market and write a check. I see you do that all the time." I said: "Yes, but I do that when there's *money* in the checking account to cover the check. We have spent our money." (laughs) Um.. he also felt at the beginning that he should be able to provide me with the utmost luxuries in life. He was gonna become rich and famous. (smiles). You can see from my expression how much I thought of that idea. (laughs) Uh, I had a really, really hard time telling him, convincing him that the pleasure of his company was worth more than all the money he could make, that the companionship that we share was so much more important to me than any money he brought home. I didn't care what he did for a job.

Susan's warm feelings toward Tom come through in the smiles and laughter that accompany her words. She even invites the interviewer to share her amusement by calling attention to her facial expression – a gesture that most people would find unnecessary, but one that makes sense for an individual who doesn't intuitively monitor such data during conversational exchange.

Throughout the interview Susan describes Tom in ways that evoke his emotional and psychological functioning, as well as his role in the larger social world. She also attends to his way of understanding the world around him and his mode of solving practical problems as well as inter-personal issues. She sees both strengths and

weaknesses in his character and innate abilities, and can hold both in mind as she describes what she values in him along with what causes her frustration. Most importantly she can describe her own responses to Tom, and how they impact on each other in a reciprocal manner:

In the beginning of our relationship his passive nature seemed to fit well with my own need to be in control of everything. But that quickly became a major source of irritation between us. I was furious when he wouldn't fight with me, so I taught him to fight. I could see how much he needed to learn to stand up for himself.

Susan explicitly describes the ways in which she and Tom are different, yet she conveys a tangible sense of shared experience and emotion. She attunes to Tom's affect through attention to behavioral cues, as well as inferences based on her understanding of him as a person. Susan shows a capacity for more intuitive awareness of Tom as a person than in her references to other people. She seems also able to look beyond his manifest behavior and make inferences about his patterns of defense and affect regulation:

Sometimes I know when he's upset before he does, because he tends to hide stressful things from himself. I'm not sure how that works, because I don't do that myself. Another thing that helped was my ability to see what he was really feeling by paying attention to his body and his voice, so I could call him on it if he was holding back. He would just try to block everything out, but I'd show him that I knew what he was feeling behind that curtain of indifference, so eventually he stopped hiding.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Susan describes her relationship with Tom as one of mutual trust and affection, in which they complement and sustain each other, in spite of significant areas and episodes of conflict.

Theme #1 Trust and security

I felt that I could trust Tom from the very beginning. His sincerity and openness made him different from other men I had known.

Susan's positive feelings for Tom were strong and immediate, and seem to have been sustained through many challenges. Yet when it comes to labeling the feeling she has for Tom, Susan gets stuck, because the feelings she experiences with him are not those depicted in the films and romance novels that introduced her to the concept of "love." His patience and acceptance seemed to have allowed a safe exchange of genuine feeling between them, through which Susan could seek clarification of confusing affective signals and come to understand Tom's perception of her. She could also more consistently experience the "metabolizing" function (Fonagy and Target, 1998) provided through Tom's acknowledging and responding to her emotions without losing her sense of him as a separate person with his own discreet emotions.

Theme #2 Affective reciprocity

He makes me feel very loved, very protected, and very validated. And I just worry that I don't do it well enough for him. Fortunately he's gotten pretty good at telling me how he feels. He can say: "I need a hug." We have a hard time crossing the room without putting our arms around each other. I'm very open with my distress. I know that Tom's always available, and I let him know when I need comfort

Susan's narrative focuses much more on Tom's support of her emotional needs than on her support of his. This likely reflects an actual imbalance in their relationship, in terms of the frequency and intensity of Susan's episodes of distress. We can only speculate on the degree to which he might have felt unsupported during the long course of the marriage, and turn to Tom's own representation of the relationship to gain more insight into his experience. Tom's narrative, along with direct observation of the

couple's interaction, convey the sense that he feels loved and supported by Susan, however it's clear that they had to endure stressful disruptions as they negotiated a way of managing emotional upheavals. Susan states that she told Tom at the start not to "participate" in her distress, but other material seems to hint at her efforts to stir up his emotions in order to feel that he understood and shared her state.

Even though I still have trouble understanding it, I've come to accept that I'm a loving person, and I know that's one of the qualities that attracts Tom to me. He must feel very sure of it, because otherwise he wouldn't be able to tolerate all the fury and firestorms I can produce. My emotions have calmed down a lot since I began taking medication a few years ago, but we had terrible fights when we were first married, and they escalated easily because he always backed down, and that just got me madder.

Theme #3 Emergence of reflective functioning in the relational context

Before Tom, I'd been through years of being confused and overwhelmed by my feelings. Other people often acted like my feelings weren't real, and my mother always said I over-reacted to everything.

Susan and Tom seemed to have learned how to communicate affect through explicit learning strategies, supported by their therapist, and strengthened by their determination to master the challenges of their relationship. Their rule-governed approach, with its emphasis on verbalizing and analyzing their own and each other's viewpoints, seems well suited to Susan's innate limitations, as well as Tom's apparent tendency to minimize his own relational needs. Notably, Susan had to establish and maintain firm boundaries to resist the sort of affective "contagion" she is constitutionally vulnerable to:

Sometimes, when it's really bad, and I can see that he's getting distressed, it becomes a sort of circular-feed and gets worse and worse. When I realize this is happening I call a halt ...

Susan conveys genuine concern about whether she is meeting Tom's relational needs, and describes her own limitations around physical intimacy as they might impact negatively on Tom. Her sense that he can accept this disappointment does not seem to minimize her regret, indicating a relatively mature acknowledgement of her obligation to attune to his needs. She feels badly about this, and had difficulty reconciling her restriction of physical intimacy with the notion of loving him. But, again, through explicit self monitoring and feedback from Tom, Susan works on holding up her end in the realm of emotional support.

I always worry that I'm not loving enough, that I'm not as good for him as he needs. Sometimes I'll ask him: "Are you sure that you're getting enough love?" I have to ask because I still don't know how to judge it. I fault myself for yelling at him so much, but I always say I'm sorry if I've used a nasty tone of voice, or said something that's critical or attacking.

Susan's capacity to understand and accept Tom seems to have developed in the context of his extending himself to her as an available and accepting relationship partner. His ability to tolerate her emotional "firestorms" may have been one of the most important conditions for establishing Susan's sense that she could trust him. The payoff seems to have come in the form of Susan's genuinely empathic stance toward him. Having achieved a complex and integrated representation of Tom in her mind, Susan can appreciate his perspective and respond to him in a manner that takes their mutual needs into account.

Tom is of the magical thinking variety, which is hard to deal with at times. He'll dive into something just because he wishes for it to happen. If I can anticipate where his mind's going I can stop him from getting started on hopeless plans. But I don't do any of this in a judgmental way. I've *been* through all these problems of organization, of not living up to people's expectations, not being the person they expect me to be. I don't expect him to be superman.

Susan's autism still figures prominently in her day to day life, as she struggles to ward off intrusive sensory stimulation, and negotiate a larger social world that still leaves her bewildered and disoriented without the safety of familiar structure and boundaries. Her self concept as she describes it seems to lack a sense of coherence and continuity, yet as she relates the story of her relationship with Tom she emerges as a solid and recognizable personality. One of Susan's goals in her psychotherapy is to achieve more of a sense of unity or wholeness in her sense of herself. In the meantime she appears to be managing her self-regulatory needs and ongoing search for self-coherence in a manner that makes adaptive use of her "multiple" self representations. Susan's representation of her partner and their relationship suggests a significant developmental achievement. She shows a capacity for empathy, reflective function, affective attunement, and mutuality – the ingredients of healthy relatedness.

Tom's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

I guess I'm basically a reasonably intelligent guy who's never really lived up to his potential. That's something people have been telling me since I was a kid, but for most of my life I wasn't really able to take a look at myself to see what they were talking about. I suppose that on some level I was smart enough to know they were right, but I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to be doing to work up to that potential. It was extremely frustrating. But since getting diagnosed with ADD a few years ago, and starting medication for it, I've become a lot more aware of things I only dimly or intermittently perceived during my reckless youth – which has lasted for most of my nearly fifty-six years. You might say that I was stuck in a state of arrested development. I've realized that a person can be smart in a number of ways, and still be totally clueless about whole important areas of life. It's been very humbling to discover how much I didn't know, that everyone else was aware of. Before this big change in my level of self awareness, I might have come up with all kinds of words to describe what sort of person I was, but they'd all have been superficial.

One of the hardest things about my current process of self-discovery is having to own up to all of my shortcomings. I used to deal with that by making excuses for myself, and by claiming the right to be who I am. And now – it isn't exactly that I have a different personality – but that so much of my way of thinking and behaving has changed that a whole new world of possibilities has opened up to me – as long as I take these little pills every day. I don't feel like I'm an old washed up person; I feel more like a young

person ready to start a career, who happens to look strangely old. It's a little scary, frankly, it's like somebody has handed me all the tools for success and now I have to keep myself from screwing it up. And I don't have a whole lot of time to get it together. It's hard to keep a realistic attitude about it. I know I don't have a good handle on what's reasonable to expect of myself. I feel like I'm Rip-Van Winkle, or one of those people in that movie "Awakenings," coming out of a coma. And I'd like to experience something big and dramatic.

I've always liked to think of myself as a moral person, someone who tries to do the right thing. But with my new awareness, I've had to face up to the fact that I haven't always done the right thing at all. That I let many people down over the years. I would always think of myself as kind and generous, and looked down on other people's hypocrisy. But even back then I was aware of not really accommodating other people, and of not considering the effects my behavior had on others. It's uncomfortable to have to acknowledge one's own hypocrisy. I never could handle all those feelings of failure, so I dealt with it by shutting it out of my awareness. So I have to admit that part of my arrested development is self-inflicted.

Understanding all that and starting to deal with it has been possible because of two factors: being medicated and being married to Susan. She always understood what I was going through because she shares so much of it herself. I used to feel overwhelmed by the demands of human interaction, so I avoided it. I've always had this strange mixture of being both shy, and desperate for any kind of attention at the same time. I've seen examples of that in famous people like Robin Williams and Steve Martin, whose public personas are so outrageous and energetic, while underneath that they feel very

unsure of themselves. Their careers are a kind of therapy, aimed at trying to work through that. I can identify with that. In fact, on occasion I've been "possessed" by the spirit of Robin Williams, and made quite a spectacle of myself in front of my young co-workers. I'm the old young-kid among all the genuinely young kids at the store. It's pretty weird to be the old guy with no seniority or status, and have my managers all be youngsters.

That immature part of me, the one who was always the class clown, still has a pretty strong influence. It might have something to do with the tradition of theatricality in my family background. Several family members, including my mother, have been heavily involved in amateur theatre, so I guess it might be considered an acceptable form of self-expression.

I have a cousin who left a lucrative career to write plays. He hasn't been financially successful at it but he's learned a lot about himself. I'm not sure I have it in me to be creative or original in that way. My style has always been to start with someone else's idea, and then to put my own unique stamp on it. I use to do that when I worked as a printer – go way beyond the scope of the original project and add all kinds of elaborate details. Of course, invariably, I'd end up spending hours in labor I couldn't charge for. But I've gotten so much satisfaction out of taking my own approach to projects.

My biggest achievement along those lines is the house I built for me and Susan. We started with a "kit," but ended up modifying almost every aspect of the original design. We made it to fit ourselves; not with a fixed plan, but one stage at a time, arranging each detail as it came up. Our relatives criticized us for making unusual choices, saying that we'd never be able to sell the house. But we figured: Why should we

design it for the next owner – we’re the ones who’re going to live in it. We’re building it, we’re gonna stay here. It fits us very nicely, in fact, although there are a number of things that I haven’t gotten ‘round to finishing yet. That’s one of the problems with my meandering approach to things. A lot has been left unfinished because of my tendency to get distracted and general lack of decisiveness. I like to improvise as much as I can. Let everyone else be practical.

One area I neglected is the landscaping of the property. As a result we have some young “volunteer” trees growing in places where we would never have planted them. But I have to confess to a certain affection for them. There’s something about a volunteer... One of them has grown up right against the porch, and it’s about as tall as the house now. It snuggles right up against the porch post and goes right past the edge of the roof on its way up. When the wind gets really strong, it rubs against the railing, but I still can’t see any reason to kill the darn thing. It’s gonna be providing shade and a place for birds to perch right outside our bedroom window, so I’m sort of inclined to let it be. I’m thinking of building a sort of brace for it so the house can support it while it’s growing, and so the wind won’t bend it around too much and make it rub up against the house. There are several more volunteers around the yard, and we’ve treated them the same way. If I could orchestrate a forest, I’d have the trees grow in a way that they could support a tree-house for us to live in. It’s too bad we humans don’t live long enough to make that a practical approach.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

I can remember feeling all my life that I was not living up to everyone’s expectations. Of course, they were always telling me that I could do better, so I couldn’t

really escape the feeling, or the extreme frustration of not being able to figure out how to change it all. But I certainly tried to escape it. I got really good at shutting it all out. I would justify everything I did, and convince myself that there was integrity in being unconventional and creative, and ignore the grief I was causing to everyone around me. My outward quest to do right was covering up the inner desire to be selfish and do whatever I wanted, without owning up to the consequences – the collateral damage. It's hard to deal with all the shame and regret I've come to feel. I think the best way to deal with it is to genuinely change, so no one – for instance, my wonderful wife – will be hurt in the future by my blindness to the consequences of my behavior. At my age, old habits are hard to change. They're like trees: the bark thickens and they don't sway with the wind. The roots go deep.

I used to complain about other people's selfishness and hypocrisy and ignore my own, but that's become impossible in light of all the generosity that Susan and I have encountered in our lives. So many people have gone out of their ways – above and beyond the call of duty – to help us. I don't know where we'd be without them – or without each other. It's almost scary to imagine what our lives would have been like if we hadn't met.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

My wife is very sweet and loving. She has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known. It's at the core of her inner strength – the love she lavishes on everyone around her – people, animals... And the love is usually returned. And it's more than the core of her inner strength; it's also the source of mine. She's generous, and accepting of everyone, including me – which isn't to say that she's always nice. In fact, her honesty

can be pretty brutal, but without it I'd never have faced up to the things I've learned about myself since she's been in my life.

She's the first person I ever felt able to talk to, in the way that I'm talking now – about personal things. From the moment we met I felt that I could tell her anything without being afraid. One reason that was easy is that we shared many of the same difficulties. Neither of us had to pretend to be perfect. But on the other hand, we're very different in a lot of essential ways. Lucky for us – most of our differences are complementary.

Susan's an extremely complicated person. She can be volatile and unpredictable, especially when her medication isn't working right. A lot of the changes she goes through are related to whatever medication she's taking at a given moment. But even before she started the meds, she was pretty moody and changeable.

She's always thought of herself as having multiple personalities – like a whole gang in there, going around together. But I've always seen her different personalities as parts of a whole. I think her experience of feeling like different people at different times is part of a coping mechanism she developed during her childhood. She had a lot of challenges growing up: physical challenges, like her mal-formed feet that made it painful for her to walk; problems with her eye-sight when she was an infant; and all the changes that the family went through, constantly moving from place to place because of her father's career. Her strategy, when it came time to move, was to leave her past totally behind, and to arrive at the new home as a new person. She also got some pretty strange cues from her mother, who seemed to have had a lot of problems of her own. For me, though, there's only one Susan – one who has a lot of moods and quirks, depending on

what's going on. It's sometimes hard not to think of them or speak of them as different personalities; I've gotten so used to the way she talks about herself. When I see her trying to be in control, I get a sense of someone stern and commanding in there, sort of acting as chaperone. But, since I've always felt so in tune with her in all her moods, she's never seemed like separate people to me. I hope that's been a help to her.

Her current therapist seems to be helping her to feel more integrated. The therapist is someone who specializes in that kind of thing. Another recent occurrence seems to have caused her to feel more integrated: something that happened when she awoke from anesthesia following a surgical procedure. When she woke up, she said, she couldn't sense which personality was awake and walking around. Now that she's gotten used to her new self, she senses that those little girl personalities – the ones that sprouted off each time she moved – have become more unified, and receded into the background. I'm not sure what it all means, or whether the anesthesia really made something change, but it makes sense to her somehow.

I think there are some ways in which I understand her better than she understands herself. I don't have a problem with the autism thing. I'm learning about it – about how big a range of severity there is. She's definitely in the “higher-functioning” category. It's been great discovering a whole network of people and information to tap into. Life hasn't been easy for either one of us, so every little bit of extra insight and support helps.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

Our relationship didn't begin in the usual way. In fact, our engagement started out as a misunderstanding. We were talking on the phone after our second date, and she asked me what I thought about marriage, and I said I was for it. She says she meant it as

a general question, but neither one of us seems to have been clear about that. So when she asked if I was proposing marriage, I said: “I guess so.” She’d already bought the dress, so there must have been something intentional going on. For my part it was exactly what I wanted. From the moment we met I don’t think either one of us had a single doubt. I was absolutely euphoric at the beginning. I thought: if I can get this wonderful girl to marry me then I can do anything I want with my life. Of course, that didn’t turn out to be a very realistic view of the future, but I was right about her being the perfect choice for me. I’m still amazed at how right it was and how it happened so quickly – I’ve never been one to be decisive about anything, but this was obvious on a gut level, which was a totally new experience for me. Call it fate, karma, chemistry or whatever – we were sure.

There was an immediate sense of security, a sense that each of us would be understanding of the other’s problems and shortcomings, and both of us would be willing to help each other. On our first date I revealed my history of failures and mistakes to her, and that didn’t seem to phase her at all. It’s that sense of being unconditionally loved and accepted that’s enabled me to let go of all those defenses that allowed me to hide my head in the sand.

I can’t say it’s been an easy road. The first two years were pretty difficult. We had to learn so much – not just about each other, but about ourselves. When I married Susan I had no idea how to communicate – not even to myself. My way of handling emotions was to ignore them. I was like: If I don’t acknowledge that I’m upset, or scared, or apprehensive, or anxious – I won’t be. But Susan could see what was going on even when I couldn’t. She usually picks it up before I do, and she’ll put subtle pressure

on me to open up, until I finally do. Sometimes it takes a day or two, but I think that usually works out okay. I often think she understands me better than I understand myself.

I sense when her moods shift too. With her it can be a surface change brought on by whatever wind is blowing at a given moment. At other times I can tell that there's something more going on underneath, and I'll try to find out what that is. I try not to be too quick to challenge her, or ask what's wrong. I just accept her the way she is at any given moment, and try to help if I can, and if I can't – to stay out of the way – to be there for her when she needs me and stay out of the way if she doesn't. I think she knows that I have that same kind of unconditional love for her that she can trust in, and lean on when necessary. She never has to worry about whether I'm going to be there for her. It's not always easy, but I feel like I can sense when she needs me and when she doesn't. In any case – she's not shy about letting me know.

She's not shy about letting me know what she thinks I need either. I suppose that can feel intrusive at times. She sometimes has a way of taking the wind out of my sails. She can be a lot more conservative in her estimate of what I'm capable of than I am. When we first got married I thought anything was possible. I thought: If I can meet a wonderful girl and marry her, and be happy like this, I could be a nuclear physicist, the next Einstein, or a world renowned author. Needless to say, I've been forced to come down to reality. It can be tough at times – a point of conflict between Susan and me. I might think I've found the perfect job opening or get an idea for starting a business, and she'll say no, it's too big a step, too risky. She's the one who monitors my progress. She knows if I've reached a plateau, or if my medication needs changing. Like all those

others in my life, she tells me when she thinks I'm not working up to my potential – and she's always absolutely right!

There's a part of it that feels very comforting, and feels like I'm being loved and supported, and there's another part that wishes it would just go away and leave me alone. But I'm pretty confident that we'll always be able to work through these things. I know one thing – I'd rather be a happy failure with Susan, than be a lonely success without her. Even if I ran away from her – inconceivable as that may be – I don't think I could run away from what I know. There have been moments when I've thought I might be a happier person if I was a happy idiot – if I could blot out the awareness of any further potential and just enjoy what I've got now.

I couldn't say that being married to Susan has made my life easier. Maybe it's made it harder. But I wouldn't have it any other way. I only wish I'd been younger when we got started. The way we fit together, and support each other, how we compensate for each other's shortcomings and work together as a team – it's really beyond what either of us can really fully comprehend, or are even fully conscious of.

Analysis of Tom's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Tom's self-representation contains descriptions of his relational experience and social role, his cognitive style and capability, his active self, and his temperament or self-regulatory function. It is weighted somewhat more towards his view of himself in his functional/active capacity, reflecting his need to evaluate his creativity and coping skills. At middle-age, Tom has not yet mastered the developmental tasks of achieving adult independence according to the accepted social standard. He notes that he has yet to reach a level of productivity and self-sufficiency that is expected in men his age, and struggles to maintain a positive self-image in view of his perceived failures.

Tom's narrative emphasizes a process of change and growth in his understanding of himself as a person, however he seems to recognize a core self that has retained its continuity and dominant characteristics throughout his life span. He frequently refers to himself as he perceives others view him, and evaluates himself in terms of his ability to fulfill others' expectations. While he states that he has always been socially awkward, Tom seems attuned to the responses and attitudes of others, and sees himself as part of a larger social world. Tom's self representation includes insights about his defensive attempts to cope with negative feedback from others. He describes how maturation and positive relational experience have allowed him to relinquish some of his more infantile traits and become a better person and relationship partner.

Theme #1 Arrested development

I guess I'm basically a reasonably intelligent guy who's never really lived up to his potential. ... One of the hardest things about my current process of self-discovery is having to own up to all of my shortcomings.

Much of Tom's self description is concerned with explaining his lack of career achievement while maintaining a sense that he is a decent and capable man. In describing which characteristics hindered his success both in personal and professional realms he emphasizes his lack of emotional maturity. Tom's understanding that his youthful insistence on doing things his own way was more driven by a selfish disregard for others' standards than a genuine need for creative expression has aroused painful feelings of shame and regret. He seems to recognize that his earlier way of coping with such negative feelings – avoidance and primitive denial – only increased the cycle of negative interactions, leading to deeper feelings of unworthiness. Having admitted his failures, however, he can begin to construct a more positive sense of self by expressing his resolve to make fundamental changes in his behavior. His current commitment to his relationship with Susan provides motivation and a context for developmental growth, as seen in this excerpt from his interview transcript:

... in my, uh, outward quest to do the right thing, the inward quest to just be selfish and do whatever I wanted to do, uh, without having to own up to any of the consequences of that, uh, uh... – that's a source of shame and regret that I'm just going to have to deal with. Uh, the best way to deal with it would be to genuinely change, so that, uh, for instance, my wonderful wife [Susan] is not among the people that are going to be hurt in the future by my continued.. uh, same-old-same-old: not changing my ways.

Tom also shows insight when he suggests that his lifelong tendency to “clown” stems from self-doubt and need for approval. His identification with famous comedy stars gives him reassurance, and permits him to retain a sense that he is indeed creative and gifted in his own unique way. Tom's declarations of humility seek to balance his

remaining wish to hold onto fantasies that his creative genius will one day lead to success and recognition. He still resists accepting a more reality-based image of his potential, and shows his longing for child-like pleasure and simplicity in his fantasy of living in a tree-house. Tom seems to realize the costs (“collateral damage”) of his self absorption and impractical goals, and is struggling to find a balance between the need for sober self-evaluation and comforting self-acceptance. Notably, he displays his most mature consideration of these issues when he discusses himself in the context of his relationship with Susan – his responsibility to address her needs, and their shared pleasure in defying convention to suit their unconventional preferences. As will be discussed in more detail, Susan seems to be a catalyst for both painful self examination and healthy validation.

Theme #2 Self in transition / Self discovery

Before this big change in my level of self awareness, I might have come up with all kinds of words to describe what sort of person I was, but they'd all have been superficial.

Tom places a big emphasis on receiving his diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder as a major turning point in his life. In selecting a label and creating a framework for understanding his life-long difficulties, he could begin to make sense of his personal history. The picture he paints doesn't suggest a drastic transformation, but rather a lengthy and complex process of reflecting on life-long patterns from a fresh vantage point. Again, the pitfall for Tom is that his sense of renewal has as much potential for pushing him down the “garden path” as for grounding him in reality:

... so much of my way of thinking and behaving has changed that a whole new world of possibilities has opened up to me – as long as I take these little pills every day. I don't feel like I'm an old washed up person; I feel more like a young person ready to start a career, who happens to look strangely old. It's a little scary, frankly, it's like somebody has handed me all the tools for success and now I have to keep myself from screwing it up. And I don't have a whole lot of time to get it together. It's hard to keep a realistic

attitude about it. I know I don't have a good handle on what's reasonable to expect of myself. I feel like I'm Rip-Van Winkle, or one of those people in that movie "Awakenings," coming out of a coma. And I'd like to experience something big and dramatic.

However much he continues to struggle for mastery, Tom shows a conceptual grasp of the essential aspects of developmental maturation: that we must relinquish our childish wishes and ego-centric world view in order to face adult reality. He acknowledges that he needed external support in order to achieve insight and begin the process of change.

Theme #3 External support/validation

Understanding all that and starting to deal with it has been possible because of two factors: being medicated and being married to Susan.

Tom's relationship with Susan seems to function as a "holding environment," similar to what Winnicott (1965) describes as a healthy context for a child's psychological development, an atmosphere typically provided by sensitive maternal care. Ideally, over time, this type of relational environment provides enough nurturing and security to enable the child to cope with the hardship and disillusionment that comes with facing the harsh realities of life: "It's that sense of being unconditionally loved and accepted that's enabled me to let go of all those defenses that allowed me to hide my head in the sand."

Tom's description of Susan's role in his life evokes strong maternal images, however several passages suggest more parity or mutuality in their relationship. At these times the narrative takes on a sense of "we-ness," (Beuhلمان and Gottman, 1996) as evidenced by the broader use of first-person plural pronouns, and it is in these sections that Tom refers to his highest achievements. We sense that he experiences significant

validation in the emotional support and stability of the bond, which strengthens his confidence in and acceptance of himself. As he describes his approach to the task of building their house the narrative switches from “I” to “we” and “our” terms. Tom states their shared goals without apology or defensive self-deprecation. When he refers to outsiders’ criticisms in this context he remains assertive rather than repentant, as he was in describing earlier instances of others’ disapproval. This does not preclude a realistic appraisal of the impact of his shortcomings: his “meandering approach” and “tendency to get distracted.” Tom’s description of building a house for himself and Susan seems to symbolize their construction of a safe and sheltering relationship.

Perhaps the most telling diversion in Tom’s narrative occurs as he describes his affection for “volunteers,” the young trees that have sprung up around the house and taken up residence without invitation. Tom accepts and protects these vulnerable beings, showing a tenderness and sentimentality that belies his identification with these unwelcome mavericks. He and Susan embrace them as they wish to be embraced, and Tom indulges in a regressive fantasy that a community of misfits might shelter and sustain them: “If I could orchestrate a forest, I’d have the trees grow in a way that they could support a tree-house for us to live in.”

Tom’s youthful grandiosity is offset by declarations of humility, as he struggles for self-realization and maturity. Importantly, these opposing forces become most balanced and integrated as described during the course of his and Susan’s marriage:

She’s not shy about letting me know what she thinks I need either. I suppose that can feel intrusive at times. She sometimes has a way of taking the wind out of my sails. She can be a lot more conservative in her estimate of what I’m capable of than I am. When we first got married I thought anything was possible. I thought: If I can meet a wonderful girl and marry her, and be happy like this, I could be a nuclear physicist, the next Einstein, or a world renowned author. Needless to say, I’ve been forced to come down to reality. It can be tough at times – a point of conflict between Susan and me. ...

There's a part of it that feels very comforting, and feels like I'm being loved and supported, and there's another part that wishes it would just go away and leave me alone.

What appears to be lacking, given the degree of rejection and criticism Tom has absorbed, is any overt anger or hostility toward Susan and others who have belittled him throughout his life. Tom uses a broad range of affective terms, conveying mild, moderate and extreme levels of intensity (*i.e.*: unsure; satisfied; apprehensive; euphoric), however none of them convey any sense of aggression. It is likely that this is one area in which Tom's stated tendency to deny or hide from negative feelings continues to operate; quietly subverting Susan's agenda via the passive stance that she finds so infuriating. Conveniently, Susan's affective lability and permeable boundaries allow her to give full reign to Tom's hostility, saving him the trouble and risk of having to express it himself.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Tom's narrative contains few explicit references to significant figures from his early life. As the interview did not specifically probe for this information, but rather allowed subjects to choose what topics they felt were relevant to their self-descriptions, we can only speculate about why significant figures from his past were left unelaborated. Tom's limited references to "everyone" or "other people," and "our relatives" generally occur in his description of feeling as if he wasn't living up to others' expectations. It may be that his feelings of shame around these perceived failures make it too painful for him to provide more detail about the people he might have harmed or offended, however Tom suggests a different explanation for the recent change in his ability to verbalize insights: He notes that since starting medication for his attention deficit (he takes Aderal, a

stimulant frequently prescribed for ADD) and gaining access to an available and committed conversation partner (Susan) he's able to marshal his thoughts in a way that permits him to reflect on life experience that had previously been unexplored. He has also more recently experienced the care and generosity that others can provide, in a way that wasn't possible for him when others were primarily a source of guilt and feelings of unworthiness.

Theme #1 Relating to others induces pain, pleasure, and a sense of responsibility.

I can remember feeling all my life that I was not living up to everyone's expectations. ... I got really good at shutting it all out. ... I used to complain about other people's selfishness and hypocrisy and ignore my own, but that's become impossible in light of all the generosity that Susan and I have encountered in our lives. I don't know where we'd be without them – or without each other.

Tom's narrative gives only minimal information about his interactions with others besides Susan. Additional information can be gleaned from Susan's characterization of his gracious and accommodating nature, both in the context of their relationship and outside of it. Susan reports that Tom is kind and generous to a fault, which may be one indication that Tom still feels a need to compensate for earlier transgressions. Alongside of Tom's recognition of his own culpability seems to come the insight that others are, in fact, deserving of his consideration.

Tom's description of his employment at his father's printing business provides a glimpse of his interpersonal functioning beyond the context of his relationship with Susan. As he recounts how he ignored financial and practical constraints in order to follow his creative whims, Tom takes responsibility for inflicting "collateral damage" and describes how he gained insight:

T: ... Well I had limits on how much leeway the customer was willing to give us for me to put my own personal touches on it. ... anything from a single sheet of paper to, uh – to binders with dividers and three-dimensional pop-up things, all kinds of very strange and wonderful things that you don't ordinarily associate with a printing press...

P: So to pursue these... sort of creative impulses you were willing to do it on your own time, and sacrifice .. /

T: Hm. Well it wasn't – you can't really call it a sacrifice when you're doing what you really want to do, in stubborn opposition to every practical consideration that anyone might throw at you [smiles].

P: What do you think makes you like that?

T: ... Well, actually, ... the way I saw myself pre-medicated was – I wanted to always think of myself as someone who was doing the right thing, um, you know, for the planet and for everyone around me. And in reality, uh, my carefully trained blind eye to what I couldn't deal with caused a lot of grief in the people around me. ... the collateral damage I would ignore by insisting to myself that, that, um, you know, I had some kind of justification for doing it my way, and that everyone else could be conventional but I was going to be creative, and to hell with the consequences. Sometimes the consequences would weigh rather heavily on other people, and I, uh, my way of dealing with that was choosing to ignore those little side effects.

P: Now, you – you're very insightful when you describe all of this /

T: Well being medicated has helped quite a bit.

P: But it's hard to imagine that only medication has brought you to so much understanding.

T: Understanding is one thing. On a – I think perhaps on some deep level I'm, I've – these are – none of these are new ideas to me, but the ability to put them into coherent words that someone else can understand, and that I can bear to listen to myself – that's something new.

P: Is it hard for you?

T: Not now. Of course, .. this interview is a unique experience. I mean, I agreed to be here, and I planted myself on this spot to do precisely that: to, uh, to communicate to another person what I've been going through, because the other person is interested, either personally or academically or both.

.....

P: It sounds like [Susan] has had a real impact on this course of development that you're talking about.

T: Yeah, she's probably the only – the first and only person I've, uh, ever been able to talk to the way we're talking now. Uh, including therapists, and counselors, and doctors and psychologists, and um, of any kind.

P: What do you think makes her the right person in that way?

T: Uh, we share enough in common I think, that, uh, we can both empathize with each other's struggles.

Tom's sense that Susan is an empathic partner, with whom he shares common ground, is validated in Susan's comments about their relationship: "If I can anticipate where his mind's going I can stop him from getting started on hopeless plans. But I don't do any of this in a judgmental way. I've been through all these problems of organization, of not living up to people's expectations, not being the person they expect me to be. I don't expect him to be superman."

Theme #2 Susan is safe.

She's the first person I ever felt able to talk to, in the way that I'm talking now – about personal things. From the moment we met I felt that I could tell her anything without being afraid. One reason that was easy is that we shared many of the same difficulties. Neither of us had to pretend to be perfect.

Despite recurring conflicts and challenges in the relationship, including what appear to be many instances in which Susan has been critical of him, Tom seems secure in his sense that he is deeply loved and highly regarded by Susan. The accuracy of his assessment is supported throughout Susan's narrative and in their manner of relating to each other throughout their joint interview. Tom and Susan held hands, listened attentively and gazed lovingly at each other during our conversation. Tom emphasizes her sweet and loving nature at the outset of his description, and sustains this image despite a catalogue of deflating episodes in which she cuts him down to size.

My wife is very sweet and loving. She has the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known. ... She's generous, and accepting of everyone, including me – which isn't to say that she's always nice. In fact, her honesty can be pretty brutal, but without it I'd never have faced up to the things I've learned about myself since she's been in my life.

Theme #3 Susan is complicated and emotionally labile.

*... my Funny Valentine is very sweet, and loving and caring, and... complicated as hell.
[original transcript]*

Tom's description of Susan conveys a sincere respect for her unique way of representing her self-experience as a "multiple." He attempts to make sense of this notion by linking her fractured inner world to her need to continually re-invent herself during her early history of disruptive changes in environment:

She's always thought of herself as having multiple personalities – like a whole gang in there, going around together. But I've always seen her different personalities as parts of a whole. I think her experience of feeling like different people at different times is part of a coping mechanism she developed during her childhood. She had a lot of challenges growing up: physical challenges, like her mal-formed feet that made it painful for her to walk; problems with her eye-sight when she was an infant; and all the changes that the family went through, constantly moving from place to place because of her father's career. Her strategy, when it came time to move, was to leave her past totally behind, and to arrive at the new home as a new person. She also got some pretty strange cues from her mother, who seemed to have had a lot of problems of her own. For me, though, there's only one Susan – one who has a lot of moods and quirks, depending on what's going on. It's sometimes hard not to think of them or speak of them as different personalities; I've gotten so used to the way she talks about herself. When I see her trying to be in control, I get a sense of someone stern and commanding in there, sort of acting as chaperone. But, since I've always felt so in tune with her in all her moods, she's never seemed like separate people to me. I hope that's been a help to her.

Tom's ability to accept that Susan's way of thinking about herself is valid – not because he agrees with it but because it makes sense to her – shows a mature level of empathy that contributes to a rich and complex object representation. He draws on his observations of her behavior, his familiarity with her history and family dynamics and his own emotional responses in his efforts to understand her inner life. He describes her in terms of her personal strength, capabilities and coping strategies, but characterizes her predominantly in terms of her relational functioning, temperament and affective experience. In labeling Susan's emotions Tom tends to minimize their intensity (*i.e.*:

moody, secure, physically challenged), however he seems to acknowledge their real range and impact on him in his comment that it isn't "easy" being married to her and in his description of her as "volatile." In general, Tom's representation of Susan and their relationship seems somewhat "Pollianna-ish." The positive aspects that he emphasizes seem genuine enough, however Tom's predominant defensive style suggests that more negative material may be lurking less obviously. He notes that while he makes himself available and wants to understand what's behind her moods, he often chooses to "stay out of the way." Given Susan's vulnerability to emotional contagion, and her ability to be explicit about when she feels she needs his involvement, Tom's avoidance seems a reasonable adaptation, which likely reduces stress in their relationship.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Theme #1 We were sure from the very beginning.

From the moment we met I don't think either one of us had a single doubt. ... I'm still amazed at how right it was and how it happened so quickly – I've never been one to be decisive about anything, but this was obvious on a gut level, which was a totally new experience for me. Call it fate, karma, chemistry or whatever – we were sure.

Tom and Susan's immediate certainty that they were right for each other was reiterated in both their individual interviews and joint conversation. Tom's powerful need to be accepted and loved set the stage for his response to meeting Susan, who shared similar longings, and propelled them into a commitment that they have sustained for more than twenty years. It isn't unusual for an individual or a couple to subscribe to a "mythology" that evolves as they struggle to hold onto or justify a relationship, however in Tom and Susan's case the image clearly has substance. This was most apparent in their joint interview, during which they recalled their first meeting (Excerpts will be

provided in the next section). After decades they were still able to recount significant details, compare their impressions, and explore thoughts and feelings that were unspoken at the time. More importantly, their joint recollection evoked an emotional response that was tangible – an atmosphere of warmth and closeness evident in their body language and affective tone, as well as in the words they chose.

Theme #2 Mutual trust and security

There was an immediate sense of security, a sense that each of us would be understanding of the other's problems and shortcomings, and both of us would be willing to help each other.

While Susan's narrative suggests that Tom provides her with more emotional sustenance than she gives to him, Tom's text conveys a sense that his needs are being met in the relationship – first among them a need for basic trust. Again, with Susan's limit setting and ego-supportive role in his life, the image evoked is one of an idealized maternal bond – one that provides an environment for developmental progress.

On our first date I revealed my history of failures and mistakes to her, and that didn't seem to phase her at all. It's that sense of being unconditionally loved and accepted that's enabled me to let go of all those defenses that allowed me to hide my head in the sand.

The regressive aspects of this dynamic are balanced, however, by the mutuality Tom and Susan seem to have achieved:

... I guess that I have the same kind of unconditional love for her that she can trust in, and lean on when necessary, and, uh, she just never has to worry about whether I'm gonna be there for her. We really do hold each other up in some very real senses.

Theme #3 Affective Attunement

My way of handling emotions was to ignore them. ... But Susan could see what was going on even when I couldn't. ... I sense when her moods shift too.

It seems that from an early point in the relationship Tom learned to tread carefully to minimize the disruptions associated with Susan's explosive emotional episodes. This response is in keeping with his historical way of managing his own emotions. Tom's avoidant pattern initially served a defensive function, it seems, but over time this pattern seems to have evolved into a more open and sensitive availability.

It's not always easy, but I feel like I can sense when she needs me and when she doesn't. In any case – she's not shy about letting me know.

Like Susan's, Tom's narrative suggests that they worked through a gradual negotiation of response strategies that permit her to exercise whatever self-regulatory capacities she can, while he monitors and remains ready to intervene when she needs his support. This aspect of their relationship was most visible during their joint interview, which will be excerpted in the following section.

Theme #4 We compliment each other.

...we have complementary strengths and weaknesses, so that when we're joined together we're stronger than either one of us is separately, and, uh, it's a very good match that way ... – except, perhaps, for housekeeping. [laughs]

Tom's repeated assertion that their differences constitute a strength in the relationship echoes Susan's view. The complementary qualities they cite exceed their respective skills in different functional domains. What seems more important in Tom's estimation are the ways their different personalities make for a functional relational dynamic. Tom's tacit acquiescence to Susan's overbearing guidance seems to fit with his

need to earn the approval he didn't experience in his early life. Likewise her over-investment in this aspect of his functioning reflects her own need to see herself as capable and influential, as if she were the patient mother of an adored problem child. In their care-giving roles and empathic identification with each other, Susan and Tom seem to be nurturing their inner selves. More than Susan, Tom seems to recognize that a significant amount of discomfort must be endured as the price of maintaining the relationship and the potential for personal growth it affords him.

I wouldn't even go so far as to say that being married to Susan has made my life easier. Maybe it's made it harder. But, uh, I just wouldn't have it any other way, at this point. I wouldn't go back and change anything, except maybe to accelerate it a little bit, and be younger when I went through all this.

Tom seems to feel that the negative feedback he tolerates, and submissive stance he must assume, are a reasonable trade-off for the narcissistic gratification (as the good enough child) he receives along with his security and trust in the relationship. Tom seems to work hard to convince both himself and his listener that he is satisfied. He holds tight to an image (one of questionable realism) of his "potential" in his effort to maintain a positive sense of self. In linking this idea to his relationship with Susan, he seems able to tentatively face the possibility that he will fail to fulfill his dreams. Even while Susan is pulling him down to cruel reality, she is shoring him up with her genuine esteem for him. By committing to the relationship Tom appears to have successfully warded off the threat of feeling alone and unworthy, and gained the immeasurably gratifying position of being the light of her life. The regressive aspects notwithstanding, theirs appears to be – from Tom's point of view – a mutually need satisfying bond. He is more than willing to settle for it:

... if a fairy godmother were to pop up and say: "I can send you back in time. You want to change places with somebody? Your cousin, your brother-in-law? Robin Williams? Richard Nixon?... [laughs] Albert Einstein?" .. I'd turn 'em all down. I think I'll go with what I got. ... Gee, I feel good about that [laugh]. ... I'm not even making that up.
[transcript]

Summary of Tom and Susan's Dyadic Interview

During their interview Tom and Susan leaned toward each other, frequently joined hands and would sometimes gaze adoringly at one another during stretches of positively toned dialogue. While Tom was sometimes hesitant, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking in a somewhat measured tone, Susan's words tumbled forth, punctuated with laughter and tonal changes for dramatic emphasis. Although she produced a greater volume of narrative than Tom, she referred to him frequently to encourage his input and conscientiously paused to allow him conversational space. Some of this behavior gave the sense of their interactions being, not rehearsed exactly, but learned and practiced, likely during the couples' therapy they attended during their first two years of marriage. Both agreed that they would not have arrived at their present level of functioning without the counseling. They freely described how their therapist had helped them learn to speak a "common language." In the intervening twenty years, this interactive style seems to have become fairly spontaneous rather than effortful. During the interview they monitored not only the content of the exchange, but also the process, as if they were the ones analyzing its quality. Susan, in particular, seemed buoyed by perceptions of successful marital interactions and called my attention to them as if seeking validation (and perhaps reassurance). Both seemed to have adopted the view that "good communication skills" were an essential ingredient for a healthy relationship, as demonstrated in this passage, where Susan comments on Tom's success at explaining his early misconceptions about dating and the eventual insight he gained:

T: it was not only our first meeting, but it was my first .. encounter with a person of the opposite sex that approached being a dating kind-of relationship in .. years. Uh, – not the social butterfly, me. [*gives brief history*] I was attracted to a lot of classical “pretty girl” types at some level I knew that, uh, I was never really going to connect with anyone unless it was primarily, or initially, uh, mind to mind, and not gland to gland.

S: .. That tells you he’s made a lot of progress. He’s never verbalized that before.

P: Does that surprise you?

T: Only in as much as that he was able to express it [laughs].

P: I can see that you’re used to being the one with the gift of the words.

S: But, see, I’m giving him space [laughs]. I’m patting me on the back too [laughs].

T: And besides, uh, talking to a third party such as yourself, I can’t make any assumptions about what you already know about me....

Their transcript proved to be the longest of the four couples interviewed, perhaps for several reasons, including a less honed approach on my part, this being the first joint session conducted in the study. But another factor was the obvious enjoyment they were experiencing, telling their story to me as well as exchanging ideas with each other. In several instances they seemed to be probing each other, discovering new interpretations of past events or revealing underlying motivations for their behaviors. Throughout the interview they both displayed warmth and humor, balancing gentle teasing with mild self deprecation. All of this came off as unguarded and genuine, despite the sense that they (Susan especially) wished to present themselves as a happy couple.

When reporting on times of discord and stress Susan was more open about the negative emotions she experienced, while Tom was more likely to minimize or gloss over those aspects in his reports. He did not, however, seek to invalidate or contradict her point of view, and often accepted her prompt for revelation of more negative aspects of events recounted. In general, these sequences served to illustrate aspects of their

relational dynamics that both cited in their personal narratives, lending authenticity to their individual representations. Tom's acceptance of Susan's emotional dominance – with its implicit corresponding greater emotional need – was fairly evident throughout, indicating the stableness of this adaptation. He tacitly deferred to her need for validation, but also accepted with graceful appreciation her outpouring of affection and regard for him. Susan would beam at him with approval, which Tom would modestly digest, with only the slightest trace of docility. In this respect Tom seemed somewhat more solid in his overall stance than might have been expected, given their independent characterizations of his submissive role in the relationship.

Tom and Susan shared the tasks of answering interview questions, maintaining a steady flow of information. For lengthy passages they spoke in turns, clarifying and elaborating on each other's points, or contradicting when they disagreed on a point of fact. Neither was shy about challenging the other's recollection of details, yet both would graciously concede an identified mistake. At times these somewhat nattering exchanges would divert the focus of the narrative, but what they revealed about their method of maintaining synchronicity and mutual regard made these sequences valuable, with respect to the interview's objective – which was not just to gather information but to observe how the two of them *together* construe their relational world. The following example provides little by way of significant explicit information, but shows a qualitative aspect that was evident throughout:

T: Well, one of the first books I read was, uh, .. by – I forget the pair of women authors – but the title was “You mean I’m Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?”

S: Two guys wrote that.

T: No, two ladies wrote that.

S: No, that's the book I heard on the radio.

T: [smiling] We'll look it up when we get home.

S: [Laughs]

T: And send you a – send you a telegram (to P.). .. I'm not going to concede this [all laugh]. I can picture their pictures, and they're female persons.

S: I think you got the wrong book. [laughing]

T: There's a book by Holliwell and.. /

S: Okay, what's that one's name?

T: That is "Driven to Distraction." Another very good book.

S: Ah, okay. That's the book that was talked about by Dr. Gottlieb, probably.

T: Yeah.

S: See, he can remember things like that. That's the kind of thing I can't remember.

P: Yeah, you were telling me.

S: And he can remember names of songs, lyrics. Uh, we once went to a restaurant where they were playing Country & Western music, with no words, and he doesn't really /

T: ... like elevator music.

S: Yeah. And he doesn't really listen to County & Western music, but I love it. I kept saying to him: "What are they playing now? What are they playing now?"

T: And I could tell her the title of the song.

S: And I had no clue.

T: They'll be singers she must have heard.

S: No clue, no clue. When I used to go riding by myself, uh, I would sing: [sings brief snatches of a song] I'd keep singing these phrases.

T: None of the rest of the lyrics of the song really stuck, or was .. accessible to you.

S: No.

T: But you – you could say, uh, "Let me know. I need snippets," and I could give you the whole song.

S: Right. Except for this one [sings]:

Shally Wally, you're the one for me ...

T: Well, that's one you made up yourself.

S: [Laughs]

T: That's cheating.

There were many instances in which Tom and Susan spoke directly to each other during their interview. While doing this they generally remained aware that their task was to provide information to me. As prompted, they told the story of how they met, in a way that provided historical context (briefly summarizing each of their "dating" backgrounds) as well as a description of the immediate social environment where the meeting took place, a club for singles, most of whom had been recently divorced.

S: He and I were the only two in the room who had never been married.

T: And therefore never divorced.

S: [smiles] And therefore never divorced [laughs]. No long term commitments, you know, none of this bit.

P: How old were you guys at the time?

S: He's six months – yeah – he's six months younger than I am. That's how come I can boss him around. 'Cause I'm older.

P: All of six months.

S: [Laughs] By six months. Well with men previously nearer my age, this was definitely something that was a – a point of contention. Anyway, then afterwards there would be wine and cheese, and people would mix and mingle. And after that we'd go into the Country House Inn and dance. Well that – that first evening that we met, um I, um, tracked him down, backed him into a corner and spent the evening talking to him [smiling].

P: What was that like for you, Tom?

T: Well I didn't feel "backed into a corner" at all.

S: You kept backing up on the stage steps.

T: Oh, well, that's because I have always been shy and you were maybe just three quarters of an inch inside my – my personal space comfort zone.

S: *[laughs]* But you never said anything – just kept backing up these steps – almost at the stage door *[laughs]*.

T: Probably I was – didn't know – didn't realize what was happening at the time.

S: And then we /

T: I just enjoyed your company very much.

S: And then we went out in the parking lot and we talked until one in the morning. *[They look lovingly at each other.]*

Susan and Tom's recounting clearly evokes positive emotion for them, some of it attributable to actual feelings experienced at the time, and some likely arising from the mutual pleasure they take in the present opportunity to confirm their feelings for each other. They later went on to describe the immediate hope that had been awakened in each of them, that drove them to marriage within a scant three months of meeting:

S: And so when this warm and loving – not distant, austere, put me down – but reaching out person .. swam by, I hooked him. You know, and I – and I – I understood that he had qualities that I knew I needed, and I chose to – to – to, uh, be a part of his life. Because, we were talking on the phone and I – Dr. Barbara had taught me, you know: don't give people six to eight months of your life, you don't have six to eight months to waste on somebody – you don't know whether they're coming or going or left yesterday. And so she – I said: "What do you think of marriage?"

T: And I thought .. that, uh – that she was asking me if, uh, if I wanted to marry her. .. Now, later on – months later, after we were married I found out that she was speaking in – in very theoretical terms. Like: what do you think of the institution of marriage? Meanwhile, we're on the phone together, and uh, I'm not expecting such a bold proposal. Uh, but I think about it for about five – ten seconds, and I think: Well, I thought it was too soon to ask.

S: That's what you said.

T: So our entire relationship is based on a – on a complete misunderstanding, of our mutual intentions.

S: *[laugh]* He said to me: "I thought it was too soon to ask," and I said: "Are you asking me to marry you?" Long pause .. long, long pause. .. and he said "Yes, I am." And I said – no pause – "Okay."

As they recalled their early years together Tom and Susan described their process of coming to understand one another, detailing the assumptions that had to be dispelled and the realities that had to be accepted. The picture that emerged of the beginning of their marriage showed the struggle they had to endure to achieve the synchronous and reciprocal quality of interaction they now exhibit. Each expressed a slightly different view of those early upheavals, highlighting the discord they'd experienced at the time, and also the evolution of their characteristic ways of responding to conflict: Susan needing to have her painful feelings acknowledged; and Tom tending to absent himself from the drama until the tension could be safely diffused. In this example, I'd asked them to talk about a time during the relationship when things had been difficult for them:

S: I think the first two years. I think especially the first year. I was really startled at how much work being married was. I thought I was all ready mentally. And then there he was, every day. He came home every day. He was in my face every day. It was – it was /

T: You weren't used to it.

[tape change]

P: Now, would you agree, Tom, about the first year being a particularly difficult period?

T: Well .. I'm – I knew – I think it must have been more difficult for Susan than for me.

S: It took you six months to realize you'd been homesick all that time. What do you mean, it wasn't difficult for you?

T: Well, if you don't know you're homesick how difficult can it be? The tape recorder can't record that Susan is laughing silently, about to ... [*All laugh*]

There's a sense here of Susan's tendency to "project" her emotions into Tom, but also a demonstration of how he's learned to maintain a boundary and use humor to help

smooth over the bumps. Susan happily joins him in making fun of what had the potential to disrupt them. This is likelier easier to manage when speaking of events at two decades' remove than it would be in more immediate circumstances, but our impression is that much of this regulatory strategy has become second nature. Following that exchange, Tom dutifully owned up to his having been "homesick," and talked of how Susan helped him to face it.

T: ... Since I'd never been acutely self-aware of anything in particular, uh, .. it took me a while to realize that – that there was something I was missing, and to identify what that was. It wasn't until Susan really had me talk about it that I recognized what that was.

Whether or not the original feelings were ever truly Tom's, he has since developed a fairly reliable way of containing the emotion that Susan stirs up, taking care to give her the validation she craves so that they both can maintain equilibrium. This achievement was clearly hard won, as they illustrate throughout their recounting. Even when asked to talk about the best moments of their life together they interject references to hardship, in one sense revealing a continued underlying vulnerability, while in another showing a capacity to integrate positive and negative experience to achieve a more complex and realistic representation.

P: Is there anything that stands out, as a particular high point?

S: Getting married? [Laughs]

T: Yeah, that time was a high point. The honeymoon was really – real downhill from there. We had – we had a classic sit-com sort of a honeymoon. Uh..

S: Two cats , one rabbit, one dog .. pick-up truck .. went to Maine.

T: And, uh, Susan, uh, .. rapidly started feeling really, really bad – physically.

S: Went – went through a withdrawal. I – I used to, um, – it's gotten better since we got married, although this last five years has been a real challenge. But it used to be that I would have like a two-year running cycle, and then be six months in bed. And I

would gather up .. the dust and the ashes, and get up, run for two more years and crash. And when I married Tom I crashed. I had held it together as long as I could, and .. I turned it all over to him.

T: Well there were – there were some – I – I can remember the summer we were – we got, uh, two bicycles working, and went, uh – and drove down to, uh /

S: Chesapeake.

T: Chesapeake Canal? [describes] ... But, uh, with the beautiful scenery, I enjoyed it. Susan seemed to like it too.

S: Yes, I did.

T: The best times I can remember – the most enjoyable memorable times, were the times when we were doing things outside together. Walking dogs, or hanging out – didn't have to be anything really .. remarkable.

S: There were times /

T: Outings with the dogs, picnic-like things.

S: Actually, even though this is a difficult time, it's also one of the best, ..because – because of how much work we've put into it consistently. We have a good strong, solid, loving relationship, and that's – that's really good. Um, there's been a lot of loss over this – this year.....

Susan and Tom detailed many challenges they'd had to face during the course of their marriage (financial down turns, family crises, and loss), showing how both their individual and joint capacities must have been repeatedly taxed. In surviving each of these disruptions they seem to have built an increasing sense of the relationship's value, as related to their investment. Susan described one point in the marriage during which she'd gone to counseling, following a family member's death, and encountered a therapist who questioned the viability of her marriage:

S: And I told her I was coming in for grief counseling, and that my marriage did not need adjusting, and that I was not looking to be adjusted out of my marriage. And she, um ...

T: She probably didn't believe you, or didn't want to.

S: She couldn't – she couldn't see .. she wasn't able to put herself into seeing how we complimented each other. All she could hear was, that intimate relationships hurt, that he was abusing me, she thought. And that he wouldn't pay attention to money, that he was being irresponsible with it. .. Um.. /

T: This was all pre medication?

S: Yeah. All totally pre medication. And, and um, so what happened was – you know, she said: “Well, he has to hit rock bottom.” And I thought: We've hit enough rock bottoms here. Um, and I just stopped seeing her, because I wasn't going to be manipulated into not being married.

Their mutually arrived at representation of their marital bond bears the heavy imprint of Susan's determination to believe in Tom's goodness, and validate the wisdom of her choice. Although it has clearly been a battle each step of the way, they both seem to have followed a path aimed at forging a reality based on their earliest co-constructed fantasies. Susan simply would not hear otherwise and Tom appears to have been borne along in spite of himself.

S: somebody also said to me, or I figured it out: if a man tells you how bad he is for you, believe him. And let go. Just walk away. And – and Tom just kept telling me how wonderful he was. Don't you remember saying that you were Mr. Comfort and Mr. Wonderful?

T: Oh, well, in a self mocking sort of way.

S: I believed you! What do you mean *mocking* – you were mocking there?

T: No?

S: No! [laughing] No!

T: This changes everything. We can't stay together. [*All Laugh.*]

Most stressful, according to both of them, was a three year period during which Susan fought serious illness – with Tom at her side. I asked how each of them had coped with what Susan described as “a terrible roller coaster.”

T: Well, um, I'd say, uh, I guess it's a good thing that I need someone to look after. And I – it's nice to be able to help someone that you also love. .. And, uh, maybe in an odd way, Susan's medical traumas, uh, .. just, uh, helped me to lock on to her tighter. It's, uh.. /

S: It certainly didn't drive us apart.

Both expressed the opinion that Susan's string of illnesses had provided many opportunities for them to test their joint strength and re-affirm their mutual commitment. This difficult phase also seems to have stimulated the evolution of a more refined set of communicative skills, allowing them to read some more subtle signals and recognize recurring patterns. Ultimately, though, explicit verbalization of needs and intentions remains their most reliable and effective communicative modality, as seen here:

S: And the other problem that Tom has had with me is that I will argue myself out of going to the doctors, because I was taught that a doctor's daughter is supposed to be healthy. For what reason I do not know. But it was a *failure* to go to the doctors. It was – that was admitting defeat, that was as bad as dying.

T: You have to set an example for other people.

S: Yes. Because you're a doctor's daughter. You have to lead the way in health.

P: So who's won that battle? Have you convinced her?

T: Well, I – I know that it's a, uh – it's a cycle and a process, and that, uh, it will work out in good time. But there's gonna be a period of .. of, uh .. of "I don't really know," and a period of "Well, we better get it checked out," or "Maybe if I just wait a little bit longer," and then "No I'm not gonna wait any longer." And then I – then you see.

S: But then I'll have *him* call.

T: Yeah. I – it reaches the point where she is asking me for help to make it the rest of the way to the – getting to the final resolution of whatever it is.

S: When I – When I've definitely gotten to the point where I'm upset enough to go to the doctors, I'm too upset to call, so I need him then.

T: But, on the other hand, I depend on you to tell me when to call. [laughs] You have to tell me that you're – when – and, of course, when I have, uh, – when I prompt you to tell me when to call, I realize that you're hesitating, and therefore you must really need me to step in at that point. It's sort of mutual, uh, cue-card raising.

This last comment suggests some degree of initiative on Tom's part, as opposed to a strict "follow the leader" approach, a delicate "prompt" which leads to the desired result, perhaps calculated to insert himself without arousing too strong a reaction. These response patterns not only seem to serve a regulatory purpose, but also appear to evoke the "shared meanings" that have evolved between Susan and Tom. They have reached an understanding of what constitutes supportive intervention, by one to assist the other, and maintain awareness of the historical and contextual elements that influence day to day behaviors. Though they frequently highlight their differences and separate interests and activities, they stress their togetherness in facing the world. The ways in which they are more alike give an important dimension to the relationship that seems to enhance their attunement to each other. In both individual and joint narratives Susan and Tom evoke a sense of shared experience, which is conveyed in the following excerpt:

S: I think that basically the biggest change in our marriage was just the two of us growing up together. I don't think we were adults when we got married.

T: Like Dick Clark, America's oldest teenager.

S: *[laughing]* Oldest teenage couple! Not much sophistication, and an emotional age of maybe fifteen or sixteen.

T: *Or maybe nineteen?*

S: No *[smile]*. If you stretch it. *[laughs]*

B: Well, a dumb nineteen.

This sense that they both started on equal footing (as in developmental level, perhaps), and with comparable deficits, seems to have contributed to a sense of the appropriateness of their alliance. In "growing up together" they allowed for each other's

weaknesses and capitalized on each other's strengths, much like two closely bonded siblings might have done through the course of their development. This feeling that they compliment one another is cited by both as a main ingredient of their marital success.

T: That's one of the things that made it quick and easy for us to see that we would make a good match, because we both fill gaps or deficiencies in the other's abilities. The two of us working as a team add up to more than the sum of our parts.

S: It feels to me like we have a growing, evolving relationship. Not big seismic jumps and changes, but just more and more good parts as time passes. There's more acceptance, more real dividing of chores – either mental or emotional. He's learned from me how to say: "I don't care what you spent. Don't tell me, I'm not interested." (laughs) Because I sometimes say that to him when he's giving me some long explanation of something I find incomprehensible. I'll say: "You know, Honey, I really don't want to talk about this anymore. I don't understand what you're saying, and I don't even care that I don't understand." (laughs)

P: (to Tom) What's that like for you?

T: Oh well, um ... I guess it's just a reminder of the reality of the way Susan's mind works. I'm not really telling her these things with the illusion that I'm educating her, or enlightening her, or even entertaining her. It's just for my benefit that I want to talk about it (smiles). I suppose it's the way my mind works. I sometimes have difficulty extracting abstractions from the ether when I need them. Like in a piece of music, there's a tune and a rhythm that the words go with, so you can find the patterns and remember it all. So it's a process – to work out problems and get a hold of the big picture. It can be hard for me to retrieve information when I need it. And if I can manage to tell Susan, in a half-way reasonable way, what I'm thinking about or trying to solve it might help me. I don't really care if it's important to you. I just want to put it out in the air so I can hear it myself, and maybe it'll stick a little bit.

S: Oh. Well, I wish you had explained this earlier. I wouldn't have shut you down as quick if I'd known there was good reason behind all these things.

T: Well, it took me a while to figure it out too.

Tom and Susan have here demonstrated the function of *theory of mind* in their relationship (Baron Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985), not just in the ability to take another's perspective, but in the much broader sense of *reflective function* (Fonagy and Target, 1998): the process of integrating reciprocal emotional and historical experience into an understanding of themselves, each other, and the relationship.

As I ask them to imagine their future together, Tom – this time – produces a lengthy and rambling digression about the entrepreneurial skills he will tap to raise their household income, and it is Susan who recognizes his conflict and vulnerability and both challenges and secures him. She also “takes the wind out of his sails” in the manner he alluded to in his individual narrative, yet keeps him afloat with her rock solid belief in his goodness and value:

S: The problem with the marketable skills is – love of my life, human that I adore
...

T: Yes? [smiles at her]

S: [smiles back] ... is that your learning disabilities create great stumbling blocks.

T: Yes. Perhaps some of which I have not, uh, thoroughly faced up to, as of yet.

S: Well, you know.. it's a good /

T: There are people who have, uh, ADD, to at least as great an extent that I do /
[tape change] ..To pick up: There are many people with ADD, who by good fortune, uh, or, uh, sheer determination, that manage to become very successful financially, have their own businesses, and get around their shortcomings largely by getting into a position, and maintaining a position where they can have .. uh, employees – underlings – do the things that they can't do very well. They can give the commands. The commands are executed by competent people, that get paid.

S: Yes. But..

T: And, uh .. this is not an easy situation to get into if you're starting from ground zero.

S: And you're 56 years-old.

T: Um-hm.

S: And the last two training courses you signed up for, you have never ever completed, and actually never really have started on.

T: Well I started /

S: Only one.

T: I've started – I've started more projects than anyone else .. that I know has ever even imagined.

- S: No, Sweetie. I'm talking about /
- T: I just haven't finished any of 'em.
- S: I'm talking about the ones that the State signed you up for.
- T: Ah. Yes.
- S: And when you ran into difficulties, .. you ran.
- T: .. Well I just found a lot more interesting things to do with my time.
- S: Like making computer /
- T: And my computer – than actually using the computer to teach myself these .. marketable, certifiable skills.
- S: And you know something?
- T: What?
- S: I still do not expect you to become a billionaire.
- T: Good. I'll settle for millionaire.
- S: And I don't even expect that.
- P: So we have a little trepidation here, about the future.
- T: Mm – Yes.
- S: Yeah, .. but I don't think it's unfaceable. I just think that .. [laughs] We have to get a reality drink. [laughs]

Tom fights to maintain his fantasy in his attempt to deal with his considerable anxiety, while Susan holds him to the ground. In the end he is able to accept her criticism without becoming hostile or defensive, because she soothes his anxiety with her unconditional positive regard. If the situation were reversed, Tom would probably, wisely, let her “have at it” and eventually come back to reality on her own, with him right there to pick up the pieces. Because they endow each other with unique and complex individuality, they can safely inhabit a shared and real world. We get the sense that, even

if their self-constructed house falls down around their ears, their relationship will remain intact.

Stanley and Barbara

Background Information

Stanley and Barbara live in a spaceship. Their small circular home is a novelty item that he acquired back in the Seventies, which sits perched on a residential lot zoned for trailers in a small town on the Eastern Seaboard. Their eleven exotic birds (parrots and cockateels) are housed in two small sheds on the property, and three cats share the space ship with the owners. Barbara and Stanley had been married for thirteen years at the time of their interview. Their relationship, which they embarked on as strangers who were each seeking to have a child, is the first serious romantic partnership for both. Unable to conceive, they decided they would be agreeable partners anyway and decided to marry. Barbara, a registered nurse (presently unemployed), was aware of Stanley's reputation as something of an odd-ball before they met, but she thought he was "alright." Stanley had a long history of social failures, despite superior intelligence and impressive academic credentials. He has a doctoral degree in physics, pilots and builds airplanes but has never managed to hold onto a job. His persistent social and emotional difficulties led the couple to seek professional help several years ago, prompting an investigation into Stanley's early history. It was at this point that Stanley's mother disclosed his childhood diagnosis of infantile autism, which helped him to make sense of his troubled past, that had included a period of institutional care and years of treatment by a child analyst. As an adult Stanley had simply tried to muddle through, never understanding why others had

so much difficulty accepting him. He and Barbara are struggling to make ends meet, and at middle age, with very limited income, face the future with some trepidation.

Stanley's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

I suppose one way of describing myself would be to talk about my history. I did not speak until I was five years old. I may have been aware that that was unusual, but I didn't dwell on it. People didn't know what to make of me. My first grade teacher was convinced I was retarded. I thought my way of thinking was quite logical, however, and didn't get what all the fuss was about. I had my own way of making sense of the world around me. For example, there was the "Up Higher State Building," because it was up higher than every other building in the world. And there were "hollow days;" they were hollow because they didn't contain any school or going to work. Sometimes when I'd give answers in the classroom, the other children would start laughing, and the teacher would get irritated.

There was a lot of bullying. At that time, the 1950's, the attitude was that the victim was to blame. If you were bullied it meant that you weren't trying hard enough to get along with others, and it was supposed to be good for you to learn how to survive that. So I discovered a way to escape getting beaten up. I found I could get thrown out of school by drawing pictures of naked people with sex organs. It was the depiction of sex organs, specifically, that appeared to achieve the desired result. I could test pictures by chalking them in the street where I knew the principal's car would go, and I could tell by the loudness of the squeal of the tires whether they were effective. I drew organs of both sexes all over the bodies, in a manner that would have done Hironymous Bosch proud. That's how I escaped being beaten up, by getting myself expelled from school.

After that I was sent to a number of private schools, and managed to cause some sort of an upset in each setting. I could never predict which miniscule detail of my behavior would provoke censure. Once it was a pair of cotton gloves that I wanted to wear. This was reacted to in a manner similar to that of a hypochondriac who finds a pimple and thinks it's terminal cancer. I was eventually sent away to a residential facility. They used corporal punishment there, and kept things very precisely structured. There were a small number of rules, and you could know exactly what each one was. You could very easily thrive in an environment like that. I made the honor roll.

When I left there, after a few years, I was able to manage myself in a regular school setting by attempting to emulate the rules I had learned in the residential school. I went to a Catholic high school, where I was impressed by the long history and sheer majesty of the Church, however I disagreed with some of their doctrine, such as the claim of Papal infallibility. Certain of the Church's views struck me as small minded and superstitious, but I didn't get too worried about it. I had more trouble dealing with the rules and customs of the popular teenage culture, especially the social rituals of dating and recreation. I couldn't understand the popularity of alcohol, cigarettes and rock-and-roll music. I couldn't see the point of all that mindless stupidity, but I realized that I'd have to conform to some of those behavioral norms if I were to have any sort of social interaction. I tried to tolerate the loud, repetitive music, and even went so far as to put on black socks, when I would have much preferred to wear bright green, but none of my efforts led to success.

My college years were marked by conflict with those around me, in my attempts to shield myself from the continuous assault of ear-splitting noise, poisonous fumes, and

the mind-numbing drone of radios and televisions spewing low-brow nonsense. When my complaints were not responded to in a helpful and appropriate manner, I invented my own strategies for survival. For example I might build an electronic device that would jam radio signals so that the neighbors lost their reception. I was putting to use the skills and theories I'd learned in math and physics classes. On several occasions the police were called. People often objected to my assertion of my right to peace and quiet, as if I was the one committing the offense instead of the other way around. By then I knew that I might be considered a little eccentric but I didn't see the crime in it.

After college I entered the Airforce, where there was a little bit of friction with some people, but not everyone. People used to talk about getting a "WF" discharge. WF stood for "weird fucker;" that was their expression for someone who seemed somehow a little different. I wanted to train as a pilot, but my motor skills weren't permitting me to learn very quickly, so I decided to become a navigator. The skills of navigation were much more interesting because you could calculate things. There were a few people who didn't want me to qualify; they didn't like some of the unconventional methods I used to find solutions during the examinations. I was rather inventive at times, and this seemed to divide people in their opinions about me. To some, I had broken the spirit of some rule dictating how things were to be done. What I did was unexpected. But those who had more education appreciated the success of my novel approach. I began to notice that educated people were easier to get along with.

I managed to get through the Vietnam War without being blown up, however there were a few close calls. On one occasion our plane came under attack without warning, as we were on the runway ready to take off. A radio message told us the airport

was shutting down, but our plane was getting shot at, so I said: “Well, this is an emergency so we’re going to take off anyway.” It was shocking, what we did, dropping rules and procedures, and, instead, doing something creative and brilliant to save ourselves. The others were feeling quite a bit of stress, and saying: “Get us out of here,” so I gave a series of headings that extricated us from the fire fight. I think that contributed to my being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Later on I did some reading on psychology and learned that it’s fairly common for people to feel somewhat stressed out after an incident such as that. I didn’t have any sort of reaction. Maybe I should have. I suppose it’s normal for someone in that situation to feel jittery, but at the time it didn’t occur to me. I did, however, notice that some of the other guys got somewhat absent-minded and made a few errors after that. So when a person had that type of incident I’d say: “The next few days you may be accident prone when you’re taxiing the plane, or doing things that are routine, so that’s what you have to watch out for.” And it was comforting to share that with them, to say: here’s something you can do. And something else you can do is to make a plan before you do something you’re worried about, and think about it in advance so there’ll be no surprises. I thought that mastering some of those kinds of things would help to prepare me for life back in the United States, however it didn’t turn out that way. I thought I had paid some sort of dues, done what I was supposed to do, and deserved a better deal, better treatment, and maybe an easier time finding employment. It didn’t work out that way.

When the war ended I was laid off. I might have wanted to stay in the service, but I wasn’t sure I could serve in good conscience, because of some of our government’s political alliances – siding with murderers and torturers for the sake of fighting

communism. I couldn't forgive the stupidity of it. I don't know if I could have fought the discharge, even if I'd wanted to, because there were a number of people who wanted me out. The more intelligent ones said: "Well, he does his job very well, and that's all that counts." But others had complaints about me, because of my behavior, or the way I dressed – I liked very bright, neon colors – or the things I said. I used to tell stories that I thought were quite amusing, but it seemed that some people were distressed by what I said. I could never tell at the time that they were bothered, though. For a while they were convinced that I must be taking LSD, and kept testing me and examining my eyes and such. I think that these were probably poorly educated people, who rose high in power and could not tolerate any sort of difference. People who are better educated may be able to see that there are some people who can't be exactly conventional, and that there may be a scientific explanation, a physical brain reason why they can't, and that there's no sense in assuming they're evil or punishing them. It didn't occur to me at the time, that I was neurologically different. I just thought I'd had an abnormal start growing up, and had made adjustments. I felt as though I'd become as proficient at social intercourse as would be proper to ask of a person. I felt that what I could do ought to have been good enough, and it didn't seem right to be asked for more. Maybe I shouldn't be a used car salesman – and that was perfectly fine – but I'd paid my dues, and taken my risks.

After my discharge I went back to school for a graduate degree in physics. I wanted to get graduate degrees, because the people I had the most trouble with were the uneducated ones, and so I wanted to be the opposite of them, because their whole culture was absolutely evil. Things didn't work out at the first university where I enrolled, so I

moved to another. I had a teaching assistantship there, but I ran into trouble when I challenged the administration's grading policy. They used to predict how many students would fail a particular course, and actually instructed professors to fail a certain percentage of students, in order to match their statistical predictions. Well this was morally reprehensible, in my opinion, especially as it was being perpetrated by those who were supposed to have integrity, but instead they were no better than criminals, murderers even. After all, they knew that students who failed might be driven to suicide, and even said that they were aware of that risk. So when I sent the document stating this policy to the local radio station, they retaliated. They took away my teaching position, and later found a way to drive me out altogether. I'd made a gorilla suit out of fake fur, a bright fuchsia color, which I wore to keep warm. I used to ride around on my bicycle in that suit and a Charles Dickens style hat. This was deemed unacceptable, apparently, and they asked me to leave. By that time I was no longer able to tolerate that atmosphere anyway. There'd been an incident in the town in which a mental patient had killed a local hooligan who'd tried to beat him up. When the man was acquitted of the crime, the local people lamented and protested, which I found unbelievable. I felt it physically – it was as if the whole world had joined some sort of satanic cult. Yet I was the one being treated like a criminal. It didn't matter that someone who got to know you might discover that you're a perfectly alright person. There seemed to be a moral issue at stake: should the things I couldn't do or couldn't tolerate be considered a defect for which I deserved punishment? In the end it was a relief to say: "Well to hell with them and their world. They're absolutely evil. It's time to abandon them."

It's never been easy for me to find employment. Unlike the folks who live in trailer parks, I am aware of my limitations. I don't have the qualification, for example, to make a reliable, accurate reading of a social situation, so I know when to turn that task over to someone who can do it better than I can. I'm good at calculations, and I can do the sort of technical things that other people try to get out of having to do. They'll choose "abstract expressionism" if they can't paint realistically, as I can. My style is realistic – I'll even use a dissecting needle and a magnifying glass to make tiny accurate images – but my paintings always contain a lot of symbolism. I love satire and symbolism in art. People often find the content of my paintings a wee bit shocking. I like to write also. When I have an idea for something I often feel driven to keep working on it until it's in the most perfect form I can achieve. It can be enormously stressful at times, the pressure to complete the work. I don't concern myself with whether it will sell or not.

I suppose I'd call myself eccentric, and independent – not in the manner of one who rebels, though. I've always been respectful of authority, when there's at least a reasonable possibility that the person has earned the position of authority. I do my best to be obedient, unless there's something really malignant about what I'm being told to do or about the person telling me. One thing I'm not is a "jock-o-crat." I respect sportsmanship, but I don't go in for the notion that you have to beat somebody out of something in order to prove yourself. I don't try to sell myself as someone I'm not, and I try to be honest. Of course language has limitations that make it possible to give inaccurate information, but I try to be as precise as I can.

I couldn't say that I'm intelligent, exactly, because I don't really have generalized intelligence. I have some isolated forms of intelligence, that are much higher than most people's, but they're isolated skills. I don't know of a word to describe that. My thinking and my behavior are fairly disciplined, and I try to be ethical. I rely on logic and proof in forming my opinions and beliefs, perhaps to a rather extreme degree, as I've begun to understand it. This notion first occurred to me during college, when a classmate said to me: "You're a computer that needs to be re-programmed." This was a new discovery, the idea that I was computing things like some sort of robot, using a strict and limited logic.

I think my understanding of myself is still rather limited, especially with regard to the difference between myself and other people. I don't know if I'm fully capable of understanding that difference. The biggest step in that direction took place when my counselors attempted to find the reason for my problem with getting and keeping jobs. That's when the psychologists came up with this idea of autism, which they later confirmed. I remember hearing about the condition back in college, when I took a psychology class. We read about Bruno Bettelheim and his psychoanalytic theory about autistic children, but I didn't pay too much attention to it because it seemed like a subject I didn't want to touch or have anything to do with. There was just something chilling about it. Bettelheim claimed that one girl became autistic because her mother would tap on her mouth to stop her from crying, and that this turned her into a wild monster. Later, when I spoke to my mother about it she said she knew it was a ridiculous theory, because as soon as I was born – I was her second child – she knew something wasn't right, because I didn't look into people's faces the way babies are supposed to. Learning about

autism has had the biggest impact on my understanding of myself and the way I am. It's given me the right to stand up and say that it's not a crime. It was always a crime before. It was my wife, Barbara, who pushed to find that explanation. She set the whole thing in motion.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

Other people have described me as distant and aloof. I don't think I've ever experienced closeness and intimacy the way the majority of people seem to experience those feelings, but I do enjoy being with people, if they're the right sort of people. When I was growing up we used to have cats in the house all the time, and it was a wonderful thing, especially on a chilly winter night when they'd crawl under the covers and curl next to me. I often felt closer to the cats than to the people who were available, because I was socially isolated.

I didn't have friendships during my childhood, but as a teenager I became interested in dating. Through television and popular songs, and watching those around me, I learned about the different procedures for meeting girls – most of which were not viable, as I discovered. To begin with, it was impossible to have a conversation with anybody. Even if you could hear what a person was saying, over the loud music and flashing lights, you couldn't be sure of what they were telling you, because what they would say was often the opposite of what they meant. For example, a girl was supposed to put up resistance if you asked for a second date, to say "no" and really mean "yes." Then you were to overcome her resistance, through a sado-masochistic ritual that was eventually supposed to make the victory more satisfying in the end. I could make theoretical sense out of the whole business, but I couldn't apply any of it. I'd arrange to

be introduced and invited to someone's home, but no matter what I did I always managed to commit some unforgivable offense. I never realized what I'd done wrong, but suddenly my hosts would say: "We're going to bed now because we have to get up at five o'clock."

I wasn't ready to give up, though, so I figured out a way to introduce myself in a less intrusive manner. Rather than simply walk up to a girl as a stranger out of nowhere – after all, how would she know you're not Ted Bundy or the Son of Sam – I built a transmitter that enabled me to introduce myself over a car radio. I selected a location where teenagers were known to drive around in their cars. This "cruising," as it was called, was a traditional way to meet persons of the opposite sex. So one night, after rigging my car radio with a microphone and transmitter, I identified a group of girls in a convertible as potential candidates. They were smiling and giggling and seemed in the right mood for me to approach them, and their radio was playing loud enough for me to hear it, which was perfect. When I found the right frequency I attempted to introduce myself, saying: "I'd very much like to meet you in person, perhaps here in the traffic square or any place you would choose, and maybe we could get to know each other and become friends." I tried to assure them that my intentions were honorable, but I think they were a little shocked. I said: "I see you're driving a yellow convertible," then they changed their radio station. I surmise that they did that in order to emulate what was called "playing hard to get." So I found another frequency and tried again. I said: "I have the utmost respect. Perhaps one of you might like to get to know me and we could go to a movie together, and meet each other's families," and so forth. At that point they floored the gas pedal and went through a red light, and nearly had an accident. So in the

end, for all its cleverness, my strategy was a failure. I guess the girls were very concerned about their reputations among their peers, and wouldn't want to be seen with anyone considered to be unconventional. It made things feel very hopeless.

I became very resentful about the teenage popular culture, which preached individuality and freedom, but was in fact very rigid and restrictive. Even if I had the right clothes and information, I couldn't achieve more than a crude imitation. There was much more to it than studying what one dared speak about, or figuring out what to wear. I began to pay attention to the lyrics of popular songs, and what I heard made me outraged. They weren't right. "One kiss, and I knew I would love you my whole life through." That couldn't be possible. "Do you love me now that I can dance?" He could be a serial killer who boils toddlers in oil, but he can kiss and he can dance. And then the songs started getting more aggressive: "Girl, I've made my mind up, you're going to be mine." How dare anybody *demand* like that? There's no mutual choice. It isn't fair, or right. But if you challenged or questioned it you could get into trouble. Rock-and roll is like a religion; if you blaspheme against it people get really mad.

During my time in the military I alienated a lot of people. By the time I figured out what it was that I did wrong it was usually too late. Often it was simply the way I was dressed, which on one occasion provoked a rather extreme reaction: the individual was ranting and raving. I thought he was crazy, but a friend explained that his condition was, at least partly, related to the fact that he'd been drinking alcohol. I know that the dangers of war usually affect people; they can react to the stress. In retrospect, I can recognize which behaviors indicated stress among the other people in my unit, but at the time I didn't notice that their reactions were any different from what I was feeling. It did

feel good to share with them what I'd heard and noticed about what to expect following a stressful experience.

I had a friend in the Air Force, who introduced me to the family of a young woman he was dating. We visited their home, and it turned out that they were the sort of conservative fundamentalist Christians who believe that π is equal to 3.0, because of a passage in the Bible, and to hell with mathematical reality. I was conversing on various topics, such as the limited wisdom of spending a fortune to prosecute marijuana use when cigarette smokers are permitted to poison other people's bodies, and the family apparently became very distressed. My friend was surprised that I didn't notice, he said: "Didn't you see them squirming?" The young woman wanted to watch her favorite television program, which was *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, and I could always predict what they were going to do or say on these programs, even though I hadn't seen many of them. For example, I predicted that they would use the word "terrific," because, for some reason, they always seemed to like to use that word, and of course as soon as I conjectured that this would happen they said it twice. Anyway, the young woman had to leave the room and speak to my friend in private, and apparently she gave him an ultimatum, that he had to take me out back and defend the honor of her television show if he wanted to continue to see her. In the end he was glad to get out of that relationship. He was a person of very high intelligence. He'd majored in physics but wasn't concerned with collecting graduate degrees. In the Airforce he would read philosophy, and was often amused by how far they went with some of their ideas. He seemed to like Frederic Neitzche. I tried to read what he wrote, but I found it hard to tell what he was up to. I'm still in contact with that friend. He gets paid well as a financial consultant, but he also

has periods of unemployment. He gets through those periods, and seems to do so with a certain peace of mind and ... almost, an amusement.

I expected to have an easier time of it after my military service. I remember my father saying: "If you walk into a room in an officer's uniform with some medals, then the women are instantly more friendly." It didn't work that way. The worst cruelty I experienced didn't come from people that were high up; the worst of it came from the people on the bottom. You have to constantly defend yourself from the people at the bottom. I don't have as easy a time identifying people that are dangerous as most people do, which is why I have to be more afraid of them. They're the most dangerous, the ones who might physically attack you, try to run you over with their car, because you've insulted their rock music or complained to the police about their barking dogs. They're the Pepsi Generation, the worshippers of television, soap operas and Wonder Bread. You have to be frightened of them because of the mob mentality, and the cultural world they've created, where they condemn and ruin the life of anyone who doesn't conform. They're like crabs in a pot, where the idea is to grab the one who's trying to climb out, and pull him back down. If you get into that crab pot it's all over. That's why I wanted to get an education, to escape from all those people who made my life what it shouldn't have been, just by their behavior around me that made the place where I lived so frightening, so much like a siege. I wanted a doctoral degree in order to create a barricade that would protect me from being dragged into one of those crab pots.

It's hard to avoid being assaulted by low-life individuals, because they insist on having their music blaring loudly, or cigarette smoke blowing around you, even in work environments where everyone's rights should be respected. The symbols of low-life

culture are everywhere, in magazines, on billboards. What frightens me the most are the fundamentalist churches, people who persecute homosexuals, and want to punish anyone who doesn't conform to their rigid beliefs. They want us to believe that homosexuals are evil or deviant. Well I don't know if it's deviant or not, but I'd need some proof – the same kind of proof you'd get in math class, where there's a series of logical steps – that there's an actual victim, before I could say it was immoral. I find it especially disturbing to see the torture and murder of homosexuals.

I've been distressed and morally offended by social customs that seemed to promote a fundamentalist agenda, such as the wearing of bathing suits. The bathing suit has no other purpose than to cover certain parts of the human body, as if those parts of us are bad or evil. Well that just seemed like superstition to me, so I took off the bathing suit and threw it away; I just felt ashamed to be wearing such a thing. When I learned about the Naturist Society, where they promote a different life-style, one that accepts the value and beauty of a person's natural state, I felt as though I'd found a sanctuary of some kind. And the people who are involved in it usually are highly educated; some of them are members of MENSA. It was a safer place to go, where you didn't have to walk on eggs, or wear black socks. And if you had a new or colorful expression, you could use it, instead of having to measure or guard your words.

As is the case in any large group, there were a few people with peculiar ideas in the Naturist Society, a few radical feminists and such, but by and large, there were people one could converse with and feel friendly toward. And there were regular events, retreats and picnics, that you could look forward to. It was a friend in the Naturist society who arranged my introduction to Barbara, my wife.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

Barbara would probably be considered eccentric by most people's standards, including those of her own family. She doesn't follow the fashion trends or wear a lot of make-up. Her family members are more conventional, especially her sister, who's something of a "social margarine-fly," a country-club type, always trying to achieve greater wealth or status. Barbara doesn't care about those things. I'd say she's very independent, and can also be pretty stubborn at times. For example, she won't give up the birds even though she's wearing herself out caring for so many of them. She'll say: "I've had it. I'm exhausted, and I'm going to find them a new home," and then she won't follow through with it. Another thing I'd say is that she's a very tolerant sort of person. She won't take over and try to boss somebody around, because, I think, she has a sense that it isn't right to try to run another person's life. I've heard of women who tell their husbands what to wear and how to comb their hair, and Barbara would never do anything like that.

She says she would like to never have to do any work at all, ever, which I find a little hard to understand, because she's working all the time taking care of those birds. So that's a little confusing to me. Maybe "work" is the wrong concept here. She doesn't have a problem with work, it's that she doesn't want to have a "job." In fact she has good reasons not to, so I don't blame her for that. She's trained as a nurse, but nowadays hospitals always overload the nursing staff, and she doesn't want to be beaten down in that way.

She can be rather disorganized, in a way that would send me into a panic. If something is lost she can be relaxed about it, and say: "It'll eventually be found," whereas I would be terrified of never finding it again.

She has a rather naughty sense of humor. One of her favorite movies is a comedy by John Waters called *Serial Mom*. His films often shock people. Barbara's tolerance for people sometimes allows her to accept things that I would reject more quickly, such as some of the teachings of the Bible, as they are interpreted by certain religious groups. She used to attend the Seventh Day Adventist Church, where you were expected to believe that the universe is only 6000 years old, and that Jesus was sacrificed to soothe God's rage over everyone's sins, and I couldn't go along with that. That's too blasphemous for me. I can go along with the kind of religion that admits that we can't entirely understand all that, and can only arrive at an approximation. Barbara understands my thinking. She likes to study the Bible but she doesn't insist that it's infallible.

When magazines and newsletters show up touting the latest miracle cure or health craze, she's pretty quick to join the band wagon, whereas I'm more skeptical about such things. I will state my objections when a claim seems implausible, but it isn't my place to tell her what decisions to make for herself. Marriage is not meant to permit one person to mold the other.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

I suppose the thing that drew me to Barbara most strongly is that she accepted me pretty much as I am, and that's something that no one had ever done before. And she cares about my well-being. If she were to describe me she'd probably say that I'm difficult, and certainly stubborn at times. I think she finds me a challenge to live with. She'd say that I'm peculiar, and that I'm sensitive. Oh, and she'd also say that I'm a snob. "Stuck up" is an expression she's used. I suppose these characteristics could be

considered vices, but she doesn't consider them to be malignant, at least not such that they would rule out her being with me.

I think she loves me. One thing she appreciates is that I try to tell the truth, as accurately as I can, although there are some occasions when I feel under enormous pressure to provide her with accurate information that I simply don't have. If it's something that could possibly have any importance I get very anxious and upset, and I complain: "I'm not the CIA. I don't know these things about these people, please don't ask me." It feels as if I'm being held responsible for knowing things, things that are completely surprising, such as: has this person been married before; or how many children do they have? These things seem to come out of nowhere, and it startles me, because I feel as though I have to concentrate and try to make the best answer to her questions, even though I realize that she doesn't actually hold me responsible for knowing such things.

Another thing that gets me terribly anxious is thinking about money, which can be a problem because Barbara would like us to have more, but it's something that I just can't talk about. I feel that if I've gotten all the bills paid, then I've just bought the right to not have to think about money. And so I try to put off those conversations. I beg of her: "Please don't ask me questions about money; I don't want to speak of it." It helps me if I have a definite plan for dealing with financial matters, and as long as everything adds up on paper then I'm okay. I don't feel the need to split hairs over nickels and dimes, the way she sometimes does; it's not worth that much suffering to save a few dollars. If she wants to do that it's perfectly alright; that's her choice. But sometimes I ask her not to expose me to it because of how nervous it makes me – the way somebody else might feel

nervous if they were walking on the balcony of a twenty-story building. Financial issues used to come up when I was trying out a dating service; there were always questions about income. I remember a bumper sticker that said “I’m single if you’re rich.” That seemed so hostile, a feeling similar to being shouted at. So, Barbara and I are okay as long as she doesn’t ask too much about money.

Barbara might find me to be excessively controlling when it comes to our living environment. Our home is our only shelter; our only sanctuary, and I have to have control so that I can make sure that everything is physically secure. However, one thing that I’m very strict about – because I’ve read about how the FBI and forensic psychiatrists view such things – is that I do my utmost to avoid controlling where she goes or what she does. I don’t ask her unless there’s a practical or functional reason for my needing to know. The attitude of treating a spouse like she’s a piece of property is, I think, a disease in some cultures, parts of Western Civilization and even more so in the Islamic World. Barbara has the right to choose for herself. In fact, in some matters I trust her judgment better than my own, especially in dealing with strangers, because I can’t always tell what a stranger might be up to as easily as other people can.

I think that our marriage has an unfair advantage over others, because neither of us are fashionable people. Neither of us would have a chance if we left our marriage and tried to find another partner. So it wouldn’t be fair to ascribe our marital stability to our virtues or determination. It’s our understanding of the reality of the situation that motivates us to stay together. So, even when I’m expressing shock at the terrible divorce rates in our society, I do realize that we ourselves have an unfair advantage. Because of all the inaccurate things we’re taught about relationships, many people go into them with

unrealistic expectations that they inflict upon the marriage and on each other. Our marriage is not a romantic storybook kind of thing. We're more like everyday practical partners who work at solving problems so that things work functionally between us. Maybe it's not conventional, but it works for us.

Sometimes we have trouble sleeping in the same bed, if one of us is snoring, for example. But that doesn't mean that two people don't love each other, just because one moves onto the couch in order to get those last few hours of sleep, or if one has to limit the kissing if the other has eaten onions or garlic for dinner. We express our love for each other in a number of ways. For example, if it's Barbara's birthday I'll get her a card that I think she'll enjoy, perhaps something with cats on it, because she likes them, or bird feathers, which she likes even better than she likes cats. Or we'll find a restaurant to go to if we have something to celebrate.

There are things that require us to make adjustments. One thing that can be a problem is if she gets too excited. I get alarmed if she's scolding the cats, or if she's complaining about something in the house, because I feel as if I might be held responsible for the problem. It's hard for me to adjust to that unless I know exactly what it is that has to be done, and have a plan or schedule for fixing it. I'm very sensitive to tones of voice, so there are times when I have to beg her to stop talking to me in a certain tone of voice, because it upsets me, and I can't get anything that's being said anyway, if it's an alarmed or angry tone, because it's too hard for me to hear. It's as though there is an emergency. In fact, in some ways, it's even more alarming than a real physical emergency, like in an airplane or in a war. It feels more distressing than that. I think it's the emotion in the tone that's problematic. Or maybe it's the sound and the emotion

together, because I've learned to identify some emotions pretty well, but not all of them.

I learned a lot from watching filmed opera where I can see the facial expressions.

Perhaps they're a bit more exaggerated than normal, but it's better than nothing. In opera nothing is hidden.

I think I understand Barbara pretty well, especially her values and her independence – the fact that she doesn't worry about being fashionable or doing what everyone else thinks is normal. You have to be careful about defining something as “normal,” because a lot of what's considered normal turns out to be just the opposite. So you don't want to jump to conclusions, because the more you try to understand such things, the more you realize you don't.

Values and ideas that we share – those are things that I can safely talk about in her presence. There are some things that are hard for her to tolerate. For example, my stories sometimes contain material that can be quite disturbing. In my last novel there's a character who turns out to be Satan's Messiah, and in order to do it right, to take the reader into that world of pure evil and despair, I had to describe how he would torture animals and children to death. So the brutality of it is such that she really doesn't want to hear or read it; she'd rather I just summarize the story for her. I can completely empathize with that, because it's hard for me to write those things and read them myself. But as hard as it is I have to do it. If I have something to write or paint it feels like an assignment. It's something I have to do.

Barbara and I disagree about a number of things, but we don't feel the need to convince each other to change opinions. For instance, she's very particular about what she'll eat, and thinks there are many things in food that we ought to be afraid of. She'll

reject something because it has sugar or toxic chemicals, whereas I'll buy anything, as long as it's not made by bad people who are mixed up in shady business. If it isn't Wonder Bread or Pepsi-Cola or made by Kelloggs, then chances are it's safe. So we might have to keep out of each other's way when we're fixing meals, but it's a mechanical problem. It's not a social or emotional problem.

There are times when our emotions cause difficulty. If I'm in a panic or upset, like if the plumbing breaks or an electrical circuit goes out, I can get heavy handed or act aggressively in my effort to solve the problem. If something feels like an emergency you may have to be aggressive and heavy handed, like in an emergency in an aircraft, because that's how lives are saved. But that can be a danger itself, as it was when I reacted too quickly the last time the lights went out. I knocked over a chair and hurt Barbara, because I was in a panic thinking one of our angry neighbors might have come to cut our power off or set the house on fire. So, in that case I was guilty of injuring Barbara because of my heavy handed reaction, which I regret. It's hard to know how to avoid those incidents, and still feel safe and in control. I couldn't survive outside of a controllable environment. That sense of emergency creates a physical type of fear for me. So, for example, the idea of taking a home mortgage loan would feel like suicide to me.

I suppose these kinds of things do create some tension between Barbara and myself. When she gets silent and tense I can tell that she's displeased. It can create a depressing type of feeling that seems to fill the entire house, that happens to both of us. It's especially terrible if it's a problem that I have no answer for. At those times it's best if she simply talks to me directly about it. After I hear her and understand it I end up

feeling better. When I'm trying to figure out how to fix a problem or carry out a repair job, I need to be left alone and not be interrupted by anything that might demand my attention. We've learned how to arrange for that. I decide which things are most difficult for me and require the most quiet and concentration, and she'll schedule an errand or outside activity for that time. Now, a person who believes in a perfect world might say: "No, you should learn how to work while you're both together and in each other's way," but that's not a reasonable or realistic expectation. I'll bet that some marriages have ended in divorce because of that kind of attitude.

There have been times when I've thought that Barbara didn't understand me very well, but then she'll say something – like she'll quote something I said with astonishing accuracy, when I didn't even think she was listening – that I realize that she's heard me after all. For a long time I didn't realize how well she could grasp my ideas, or that she was even doing it at all. She seems to also be able to predict how I might feel at times. I don't know how she does it, .. perhaps by the similarity of situations. I have gotten a few ideas about what will please her by going over our history. One thing that's easy to predict is that she'll be pleased if I bring home a little extra money and give it to her. She has a rule about not letting the cats into the bedroom, because she's afraid of the germs they carry on their feet. She's worried that it'll cause skin infections, and I don't know if it would, but I wouldn't expect anyone to take that risk, so that rule has to be allowed.

I know I feel closer to Barbara than I do to anyone else, simply because that's bound to happen if you maintain a marriage for this many years. I don't know if it's the degree of closeness that other people feel – it's more of a theoretical guess. There are friends that I'm somewhat close to, people who will tell me very personal things about

themselves and apparently feel safe. So that feels close, having won their trust like that, and also being able to tell them just what I think. It feels safe to me when I can say something that might be shocking, and it elicits a honest response, like: “That’s the most outer-space, twilight-zone thing I’ve ever heard,” because there’s a truthfulness about it and I feel I can trust that. What I can’t trust is someone who may be smiling, but they’ve heard about me and might be waiting for me to do something dangerous or crazy.

One thing that has helped us in our relationship is knowing that the things you’re taught through popular songs and movies are completely invalid. Knowing that has opened us up, freed us to make things up, find our own solutions. Psychological counseling has also helped. It was good to be able to say: “I’m not experienced at marriage; I’ll take all the advice I can get.” Finding out about the autism created the biggest change in my life, and that was something Barbara was responsible for, at least indirectly. She worked with the psychologist to set things in motion. But even before my diagnosis I felt like Barbara accepted and understood me. And now she’ll point it out when something I have trouble with, like the noise from the birds, has to do with the autism. So I guess her understanding contributes to my understanding of myself in that way.

Analysis of Stanley's Narrative

Stanley's self representation captures his experience of himself in a number of different domains including relational and social realms. Many of the descriptive words and phrases he uses convey a sense of himself in relation to other people (*i.e.: victim, obedient, aloof, honest, respectful of authority, socially isolated*), but virtually all of these terms hold a negative or passive valence. His description of his problem solving/intellectual function is more varied (*i.e.: inventive, precise, reliant on logic, fairly disciplined, computer that needs to be re-programmed*), and shows his tendency to reflect more on cognition rather than affect or temperament in characterizing himself. Many of the "relational" descriptives noted above carry implicit affect – one seems to acknowledge *feeling* victimized when describing oneself as a victim – but not the overt affective connotations inherent in this sampling of self-descriptive terms used by the other seven subjects: *feisty, courageous, laid back, naïve, patient, nervous wreck, shy, introverted*. In noting the disorganizing impact of strong emotion Stanley describes in his narrative, we can see why he might avoid more affectively charged self descriptions.

Stanley orients himself within the larger social-cultural world and shows awareness of how others see him by his use of the terms "eccentric" and "unconventional," however his depiction of himself and others in social interaction shows his strong reliance on structured rules and categories rather than intuition or shared perspectives. Despite his obvious deficits, Stanley gains considerable insight into his own and others' inner worlds by bringing his considerable intellect to bear on the task of conceptualizing the thoughts and feelings that underlie human behavior. Like Lee and

Hobson's (1998) autistic subjects, Stanley's narrative self representation focuses more on his experience of being an active agent – in a fight for survival – than on his identity as a relationship partner. Stanley refers frequently to his “psychological self,” how his thinking and feeling guide his behavior and response to others. Another major feature in his narrative is his “historical” perspective on his self development. As Stanley tells his life story he notes that his early experience must have influenced his later behavior: “I just thought I'd had an abnormal start growing up, and had made adjustments.” Yet for all the information he provides, he rarely reflects explicitly on how his experience might have shaped his personality. Instead he presents a picture of himself as a fairly consistent and rigid entity surrounded by hostile and inscrutable adversaries. As outsiders we can see how his bewilderment led to the construction of a fixed and simplified internal object world, and how his interactions with others evoked the pervasive bitterness and disappointment apparent in his narrative. But the kind of verbal indicators given by other autistic participants, such as: “I used to see myself as ...,” (Susan) or: “When you grow up with people telling you ...,” (Dave) which convey a sense of dynamic experience-driven growth, are largely absent in Stanley's text.

Stanley organizes his narrative around depictions of life events and changing circumstances, emphasizing his struggle to make sense of the world around him and to find a place in it. He reflects mindfully on his internal experience, however his early childhood recollections emphasize the logical goal-driven underpinnings of his behaviors rather than the emotionally charged motivations that emerge in his later descriptions. Stanley's narrative is rich with descriptive imagery, evocative language and use of metaphor (*i.e.*: “a hypochondriac reacting to a pimple”), a style that seems oddly

paradoxical when he is describing his early reliance on the strictly concrete and literal cognition that is typical of autistics (Frith, 2004). While he is clearly capable of conceptualizing his own and others' mental states, he often fails to integrate that aspect of experience in his efforts to make sense of his early history, perhaps because the capacity was grossly lacking during his childhood. In some instances it seemed as if his discreet capacities were sealed off from each other – with affect, social awareness, and logical analysis operating simultaneously but not in concert. While this kind of disjointedness isn't exactly what is being referred to by cognitive theorists who cite a "lack of central coherence" in autistics' thinking (Frith and Happé, 1994), it may be another manifestation of the postulated functional deficit. Another theoretical perspective, however, might attribute Stanley's failures at integration to pathological defense. We see evidence of Stanley's defensive denial or avoidance of affect throughout his interview, yet at other times one senses that his mind simply cannot accommodate the layers of consciousness that, were they there, one might plumb to gain deeper insight. During the interview, attempts to probe for evidence of Stanley's early social/emotional awareness rarely hit pay-dirt. The following exchange occurred as he told the story of his escape from persecution by school bullies:

S: And so, in order to not get beaten up, I found I could get thrown out of school by drawing pictures of naked people with sex organs. And uh, I found out what seemed to work is apparently the sex organs, which I didn't know any more about other than had to do with going to the bathroom, uh, which would make things very dirty, messy, .. uh, but would do the job. And I could test pictures by chalking them in the street where I knew the principal's car would go, and I could tell by the loudness of the squeal of the tires. And so I had – so I had organs of both sexes all over the bodies, in a manner that I guess would have done Hironymous Bosch proud. And, so that's what I did when I was , uh, getting, nose bleeds and the like. It was that I'd find protection that way, and then eventually I was expelled ...

P: It sounds like you were very much aware of the reactions that they were generating.

S: Yes.

P: Was that part of your goal?

S: Uh ... yes, to not have to go to school and get beaten up.

Stanley doesn't reflect on the underlying anger or aggression one might infer (either correctly or not) from his action, nor does he mention arousing emotion in the people he targeted with his drawings. In another example he again focuses on the concrete goals and results of his efforts, but doesn't seem to "get" the emotional impact of his behavior on others. At this point in the interview he has described, in great technical detail, how he managed to broadcast his voice over a car radio to address a group of teenage girls he had spotted from his own car while driving behind them. I asked if he thought the girls were aware that he was watching them:

S: Yes. I identified them. I said: "I see you're driving a yellow Chevrolet convertible." And then they changed the frequency. Well I guessed, or I surmise that the reason they changed the frequency was to emulate what they call "hard to get," which was supposed to be the normal way of doing things. But not necessarily the normal way, but .. you just have to try and guess and see what happens. And so, uh, I readjusted, and changed the frequency, and .. then uh, and tried again. Uh [clears throat], I was saying: "I have the utmost respect. Perhaps in time as one of you gets to know me and if you would like me we could go to a movie together, and meet each other's families," and that sort of thing, while trying to be as respectable as possible. And so they, uh, they floored the gas pedal, 'cause they were right up to a traffic light, and went through a red light and almost had an accident. And .. then, uh, it – it just made things feel very, uh, hopeless. That – how does one meet and, uh, get to meet people. And, so I knew by then that I might be considered just a little eccentric, but I couldn't see the crime in it.

P: At this point in your life, as you look back on that, do you have any thoughts about what they might have been thinking or..

S: I guess that they were very, very concerned about their reputation with their peers, and would not want to be seen with anybody that would seem too, uh, unconventional. That would wear the wrong clothes, listen to the wrong music. That the teenage culture is extremely rigid, and restrictive, and it pretends to express individuality and freedom, but nothing could be further from the truth. .. And I don't have the, uh, the connections to the information to even try to emulate this ... culture. I can't even imitate it accurately, any imitation I'd have would be very crude. There's much more to it than studying what you dare speak about and figuring out what to wear.

In this case Stanley failed to understand that he had frightened the girls he was trying to approach, and could only interpret their behaviors according to formulas he'd adopted as social guides. We see that he senses that logic and rules are not enough here, but Stanley has no viable alternative for making sense of others' behavior.

Throughout his narrative Stanley describes how others reacted to him, and tries to imagine what they might have been thinking, however he generally does this by scanning a repertoire of inflexible schemata rather than attuning to their affect or individual character. Nothing in his recollections suggests that Stanley experienced a sense that others were registering and empathizing with his emotional states. We can therefore postulate that he was largely deprived of the "metabolizing" function described by Fonagy and Target (1998), through which a child can sense that his emotions resonate with his caregiver, who reflects back her understanding of his state. Even in his current relationship, despite his own ability to register his partner's emotional signals, Stanley believes her understanding of him occurs only through explicit verbalization.

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Theme #1 People didn't know what to make of me, but I made sense to myself.

People didn't know what to make of me. My first grade teacher was convinced I was retarded. I thought my way of thinking was quite logical, however, and didn't get what all the fuss was about. I had my own way of making sense of the world around me.

Stanley makes numerous references to others' reactions to him, noting that no one seemed to understand why he acted the way he did. He remembers feeling only dimly aware of being "unusual" or "a little eccentric," and having little concern about this at all. While he eventually sought a place within the social world, his recollections don't suggest that he was actually seeking a sense of relatedness involving mutual attunement and reciprocity.

Stanley was aware of being rejected by others but could not conceptualize how they might be confused or offended by him, other than to note that unconventional behavior or preferences seemed unacceptable to the majority of people. Despite his desire to "escape" the persecution inflicted by others – whether actual (as in his being bullied) or subjectively perceived (as a result of his inability to modulate sensory input) – Stanley maintained a pro-active stance toward the world rather than retreat into an "autistic" shell. His narrative provides little information that could yield an explanation for his outgoing drive, other than the obvious strength of his determination and intellect. We can assume that Stanley's intellect is an innate capacity, but we're left wondering about the role of his early relational environment in seeking to explain his drive for achievement and social success. According to most theoretical perspectives, personal ambition and feelings of self-efficacy evolve in an interpersonal context that includes feedback from significant others. Whether the environment's response is punitive or demanding, or appreciative and narcissistically gratifying, one's affective and personal investment in the other's response forms the characterological building blocks of life ambition. The origins of Stanley's ambition remain something of a mystery.

While Stanley's early interactions with the world, as depicted, indicate a consistent need to screen out and manage aversive stimuli, they also convey a drive for expanding knowledge and dynamic interaction with the outside world. Thus it seems likely that significant support was provided in his early caregiving environment. However, the only clues as to its nature come from our knowing (through my conversations with him) that Stanley was diagnosed with autism in early childhood, and had an extended period of individual therapy as well as institutional treatment as a child. While his mother reportedly kept from him information about his diagnosis (until his recent evaluation process), his family likely tried to provide some sensitive support along with the professional services they engaged. From the given material we can infer the following: that Stanley could only make limited use of early relationships in forming dynamic object representations, but must have internalized some positive aspects of relational experience, as evidenced by his high level of functioning (for a severely autistic individual) and achievement in a number of significant domains. It is notable that in his lengthy narrative, which he begins by recounting his "history," Stanley makes virtually no reference to his family of origin.

From his current vantage point Stanley attempts to characterize himself according to the ways in which he is different from those who think and behave in conventional ways, but through most of his life he seemed unable to conceptualize these qualities beyond noting external features or concrete behavioral manifestations of more complex underlying issues (*i.e.*: his preference for colorful socks). He seems to have been as bewildered as others as to the real nature of his difference, yet he held tight to the notion that there was nothing wrong or bad about himself:

People used to talk about getting a “WF” discharge. WF stood for “weird fucker;” that was their expression for someone who seemed somehow a little different.

For a while they were convinced that I must be taking LSD, and kept testing me and examining my eyes and such. I think that these were probably poorly educated people, who rose high in power and could not tolerate any sort of difference. People who are better educated may be able to see that there are some people who can’t be exactly conventional, and that there may be a scientific explanation, a physical brain reason why they can’t, and that there’s no sense in assuming they’re evil or punishing them. It didn’t occur to me at the time, that I was neurologically different.

Theme #2 Living by the “rules”

There were a small number of rules, and you could know exactly what each one was. You could very easily thrive in an environment like that.

Stanley’s childhood years in a residential facility, with its “precisely structured” environment, seemed to have provided him refuge for a time, and gave him some tools with which to negotiate the demands of the external world. Since he gives no detailed description of what life was like for him there, we might surmise that its positive aspects didn’t register significantly except by comparison to his life outside of that sheltering structure. While rules protected Stanley in some sense, and allowed him to function in a rudimentary social manner, they mostly reinforced his sense of alienation from other people:

I had more trouble dealing with the rules and customs of the popular teenage culture, especially the social rituals of dating and recreation. I couldn’t understand the popularity of alcohol, cigarettes and rock-and-roll music. I couldn’t see the point of all that mindless stupidity, but I realized that I’d have to conform to some of those behavioral norms if I were to have any sort of social interaction. I tried to tolerate the loud, repetitive music, and even went so far as to put on black socks, when I would have much preferred to wear bright green, but none of my efforts led to success.

Stanley’s reliance on rules is a consistent feature of his psycho-social functioning, including the beliefs and values by which he structures his sense of himself – often adhering to the premise that what is typical and therefore aversive in the surrounding

(alien) social world is “not me.” From there Stanley adopts the opposite as “me” and deems it good:

I wanted to get graduate degrees, because the people I had the most trouble with were the uneducated ones, and so I wanted to be the opposite of them, because their whole culture was absolutely evil.

Stanley’s dynamic self-representation appears, from this material, to be arrested in a primitive mode of defensive attempts to rid himself of toxic “introjects” [perceived negative aspects of others that are taken in and incorporated into one’s own self (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Bunster, 1996)]. He is helpless to move beyond this mode, as he (probably) lacks the experience of himself as a loved and esteemed object in the eyes and mind of a care-giving other. This revolving dynamic cycle includes instances in which Stanley seems to alternately identify with fellow victims like himself as well as their persecutors. With no source of internal comfort, in the form of a nurturing other, Stanley must fight a lonely battle against the impinging world:

People often objected to my assertion of my right to peace and quiet, as if I was the one committing the offense instead of the other way around.

Stanley does not admit to himself, or to us, the level of aggression inherent in his anti-social behavior. There are obviously instances when he un-knowingly offended, as he says: “I could never predict which miniscule detail of my behavior would provoke censure.” Yet his deliberate provocation, elaborated in many episodes of overt defiance of social convention, argues a more knowing and calculated pattern of behavior. If we attend to Stanley’s reports of feeling flooded with unmanageable emotion, keeping in mind the likely factor of his failure to internalize an experience of a comforting and

regulating “maternal” environment, then we can understand why he must seize the active initiative in his battle for psychic survival. That his attempts to control the cycle most often leave him still at the mercy of potentially annihilating emotions, as well as alone against the world, shows vividly in this passage:

I'd made a gorilla suit out of fake fur, a bright fuchsia color, which I wore to keep warm. I used to ride around on my bicycle in that suit and a Charles Dickens style hat. This was deemed unacceptable, apparently, and they asked me to leave. By that time I was no longer able to tolerate that atmosphere anyway. There'd been an incident in the town in which a mental patient had killed a local hooligan who'd tried to beat him up. When the man was acquitted of the crime, the local people lamented and protested, which I found unbelievable. I felt it physically – it was as if the whole world had joined some sort of satanic cult. Yet I was the one being treated like a criminal. It didn't matter that someone who got to know you might discover that you're a perfectly alright person. There seemed to be a moral issue at stake: should the things I couldn't do or couldn't tolerate be considered a defect for which I deserved punishment? In the end it was a relief to say: “Well to hell with them and their world. They're absolutely evil. It's time to abandon them.”

Theme #3 The continuous threat of assault

Our home is our only shelter; our only sanctuary, and I have to have control so that I can make sure that everything is physically secure.

Like many individuals with autism, Stanley appears to be acutely vulnerable to aversive sensory stimulation. Elements of this have obviously been linked to his experience with people, who carry their own brand of over-whelming perceptual stimulus in the form of emotive behavior. While it isn't in itself abnormal for perceptions of people to remain entangled with the sights, sounds and smells they emit, such associations seem to have become grossly over-determined and reified in Stanley's case, as is often typical among individuals with autism (Tustin, 1981).

It's hard to avoid being assaulted by low-life individuals, because they insist on having their music blaring loudly, or cigarette smoke blowing around you, even in work environments where everyone's rights should be respected.

The threat of externally generated sensory assault remains a constant for Stanley, however a much more disorganizing potential exists in his own poorly regulated emotions, many of which arise in the context of his antagonistic interaction with the social world. He describes dealing with affect through reliance on logic and intellectual skills, which aid him in devising strategies to “escape” aversive experience:

My college years were marked by conflict with those around me, in my attempts to shield myself from the continuous assault of ear-splitting noise, poisonous fumes, and the mind-numbing drone of radios and televisions spewing low-brow nonsense. When my complaints were not responded to in a helpful and appropriate manner, I invented my own strategies for survival.

Inevitably, Stanley's strategies involved aggressively seizing the upper hand in order to maintain a sense of control. Because of his limitations, both in social skills and object representational capacity, Stanley doesn't seek understanding of others as part of his coping/regulatory strategy. He tries to ward off awareness of others' emotion when he senses a demand for response, or when he himself feels emotionally vulnerable. When feeling calm and in control of his state, however, Stanley seems more open to others' affect, and even tentatively seeks connection. His statement that it was “comforting” to offer support to fellow soldiers in the aftermath of a life threatening trauma includes the telling remark that he “didn't have any sort of a reaction” himself. From his present vantage point, decades after the event, Stanley wonders about the meaning of his lack of emotional response: “Maybe I should have. I suppose it's normal for someone in that situation to feel jittery, but at the time it didn't occur to me.” In noting the signs of stress

in other soldiers, Stanley may have, in part, been projecting his own affect (placing it outside of himself) in order to maintain equilibrium. Unfortunately, feeling close to or more like other people seems to elevate the risk of destabilization for Stanley. His obvious identification with the “mental patient” in the episode described above left him acutely vulnerable, as he “felt it physically” when the community aligned against the man.

Through much of his narrative, Stanley’s use of emotion words seems to minimize affective experience. He describes others as feeling “quite a bit of stress” when in mortal danger, “some sort of upset,” or “somewhat stressed out.” This underplaying likely helps him to regulate his own affect and avoid being disrupted by that of others. Stanley’s avoidance went as far as primitive denial when the topic of autism came up in his college psychology course: “I didn’t pay much attention to it because it seemed like a subject I didn’t want to touch or have anything to do with. There was something chilling about it.” Like other autistic participants, however, Stanley’s narrative begins to resonate with stronger emotion in the context of his discussion of his long term relationship with his wife Barbara. His depiction of Barbara’s character also markedly differs in richness and nuance from that of others in his history.

Theme #4 “I am aware of my limitations.”

Learning about autism has had the biggest impact on my understanding of myself and the way I am. It’s given me the right to stand up and say that it’s not a crime. It was always a crime before.

Stanley’s recounting of life experience shows his continuous effort to make sense of the world around him and to fit himself in somehow, but doesn’t suggest that he was engaged in much introspection. At present, however, he seems to be actively searching

for more understanding of himself, often indicating his enriched perspective with phrases like: “In retrospect ...,” or: “... at the time it didn’t occur to me.” Over time Stanley has acquired a cognitive framework within which he can explore aspects of his own mental functioning.

I rely on logic and proof in forming my opinions and beliefs, perhaps to a rather extreme degree, as I’ve begun to understand it. This notion first occurred to me during college, when a classmate said to me: “You’re a computer that needs to be re-programmed.” This was a new discovery, the idea that I was computing things like some sort of robot, using a strict and limited logic.

The “discovery” Stanley describes here is not the first instance in which he recognized his “difference,” but it is notable in that it offers him insight into the nature of his difference. What is most telling is that he could understand something by comparing his mind to a computer that he had not been able to glean through comparison with other minds – probably because, at that point in his life, Stanley had experienced only limited contact with other minds. Even with his evolving capacities and increased focus on understanding and accommodating the thoughts and needs of his relationship partner, Stanley senses his continued impairment:

I think my understanding of myself is still rather limited, especially with regard to the difference between myself and other people. I don’t know if I’m fully capable of understanding that difference.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Stanley’s internalized representations of other people are typically organized at what psychoanalytic theorists call “borderline” level (Fonagy, *et al.*, 1995). From an Object Relations perspective (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983), we would note the rigid categories people fall into in Stanley’s inner world, and the general lack of nuance or

insight in his descriptions of character or patterns of behavior. His narrative contains ample evidence of “splitting” (Klein, 1930), viewing figures as either “all good” or “all bad” according to set ideas of class, intelligence, or educational level. Stanley also “personifies” the threat he feels in response to societal attitudes and behavioral demands, creating an army of adversaries – *The Pepsi Generation, ... folks who live in trailer parks, ... people on the bottom* – against whom he can wage a righteous battle for survival.

Theme # 1 Other people are dangerous, especially if they’re the wrong kind.

It’s hard to avoid being assaulted by low-life individuals... The symbols of low-life culture are everywhere, in magazines, on billboards.

Throughout his life Stanley has felt misunderstood and victimized by other people, an experience shared by many individuals with autism (Examples of personal accounts are too numerous to cite.). His efforts to cope with these feelings have resulted in the creation of an internal object world inhabited by monsters and villains who he can easily identify by their external features and behaviors, so as to avoid falling prey to their presumed hostile intentions.

The worst cruelty I experienced didn’t come from people that were high up; the worst of it came from the people on the bottom. You have to constantly defend yourself from the people at the bottom. I don’t have as easy a time identifying people that are dangerous as most people do, which is why I have to be more afraid of them. They’re the most dangerous, the ones who might physically attack you, try to run you over with their car, because you’ve insulted their rock music or complained to the police about their barking dogs. They’re the Pepsi Generation, the worshippers of television, soap operas and Wonder Bread. You have to be frightened of them because of the mob mentality, and the cultural world they’ve created, where they condemn and ruin the life of anyone who doesn’t conform. They’re like crabs in a pot, where the idea is to grab the one who’s trying to climb out, and pull him back down. If you get into that crab pot it’s all over. That’s why I wanted to get an education, to escape from all those people who made my life what it shouldn’t have been, just by their behavior around me that made the place where I lived so frightening, so much like a siege. I wanted a doctoral degree in order to create a barricade that would protect me from being dragged into one of those crab pots.

Stanley's hopes for refuge from the hostile world he inhabits lie in his wish to position himself among the "right sort of people." He seems to have achieved a measure of success in establishing meaningful connections in a few strategically chosen social circles. Stanley's apparent progress in this area is shown in his reference to friendships. Significantly, he describes the basis of these relationships in reciprocal affective terms:

There are friends that I'm somewhat close to, people who will tell me very personal things about themselves and apparently feel safe. So that feels close, having won their trust like that, and also being able to tell them just what I think. It feels safe to me when I can say something that might be shocking, and it elicits a honest response, like: "That's the most outer-space, twilight-zone thing I've ever heard," because there's a truthfulness about it and I feel I can trust that. What I can't trust is someone who may be smiling, but they've heard about me and might be waiting for me to do something dangerous or crazy.

Stanley tells us here that, in order to feel something for another person he must feel safe. In seeking trust, however, he must tolerate the risk that his trust might be betrayed, as happened when a group of academics broke the moral code Stanley has attributed to persons who are "better educated" or "of very high intelligence:"

Well this was morally reprehensible, in my opinion, especially as it was being perpetrated by those who were supposed to have integrity, but instead they were no better than criminals, murderers even.

Theme #2 People's interactions are governed by complex and rigid rules. Social success requires learning all the correct procedures.

I could make theoretical sense out of the whole business, but I couldn't apply any of it. There was much more to it than studying what one dared speak about, or figuring out what to wear.

If Stanley were a real-life example of the characters played by Ray Walston and Robin Williams in the old television sit-coms *My Favorite Martian* and *Mork and Mindy*, he'd have been viewed with tender amusement and likely taken under someone's wing,

as he struggled to adapt to the alien world. It can't be an accident that he's chosen to live in a space ship. Unlike his fictional counterparts, however, Stanley's never been granted the allowances he might have deserved in the larger social environment. While having a label might have smoothed his way, there was little accessible support available for individuals like Stanley during the time of his early adulthood. We can only guess at what might have been different for him had he been identified as an autistic adult or remained in continuous psychotherapy, as Susan did through her adult life. It's possible that having a label might have inhibited his genuine achievements, which he values so highly. On the other hand, his social experience might have been considerably less painful given appropriate support – but even that promise, in all probability, would have born little fruit for a person like Stanley. As has been noted by many in the field of autism theory and research, the higher functioning affected individuals have generally had the most difficulty in adapting to society, because their abilities and consequent goals inevitably raise the bar too high (Tantum, 2000). Stanley can't help but feel that he's been done an injustice:

I just thought I'd had an abnormal start growing up, and had made adjustments. I felt as though I'd become as proficient at social intercourse as would be proper to ask of a person. I felt that what I could do ought to have been good enough, and it didn't seem right to be asked for more. Maybe I shouldn't be a used car salesman – and that was perfectly fine – but I'd paid my dues, and taken my risks.

Stanley's often poignant recounting of efforts to socially engage suggest a surviving belief in the potential for pleasure in human relatedness, in spite of a lifetime of frustration and disappointment. While he rails against the restrictive and illogical "rules" of popular culture, he retains a sense of personal worth and integrity through adherence to his own set of rules and values, many of which are informed by his ability to use his own

experience as the basis for empathic consideration toward others. Admittedly, Stanley's unmodulated response to perceived threat constitutes a major factor in his distorted and negatively skewed object representations. Nevertheless, his painful experience remains useful in the service of a higher level of psychological maturation, the construction of a system of moral values and governing principals which are an important – if not quite *integral* – part of his character.

In noting the odd disparity between Stanley's primitive inner imagoes and his carefully considered and relatively balanced moral stance, we are again reminded of Alvarez and Reid's admonition to look at the individual self as experienced in relation to its internal representations (1999). Stanley's one-dimensional inner villains are a source of fear, devalued objects of utmost scorn; his comic-book heroes, a motley crew of eccentrics with Ph.D.'s. Yet his moral self, which governs his actual behavior, remains balanced and relatively restrained, all things considered (the fuchsia gorilla suit notwithstanding).

Perhaps this odd fragmentation of character most clearly reveals the difference between people with autism and those with true personality disorders, whom autistic individuals are often mistaken for (Tantum, 2000). If Stanley were a neurologically intact individual, whose personality was organized at a Borderline level around narcissistic issues, his object world might look much as we see it here. We might even see all manner of inappropriate behavior and disregard for social conventions and others' sensibilities, as Stanley exhibits. But, surely, we'd also see a trail of betrayals and wounded hearts, an illusion of relationships, if not the genuine article. Instead we see a wounded but courageous soul, struggling to be good and right in a world that is often

incomprehensible. His intense vulnerability and emotional immaturity might cause Stanley to over-simplify conflicts or over-identify with those he perceives as victims, but it doesn't cripple his capacity to reason and exercise moral judgment:

What frightens me the most are the fundamentalist churches, people who persecute homosexuals, and want to punish anyone who doesn't conform to their rigid beliefs. They want us to believe that homosexuals are evil or deviant. Well I don't know if it's deviant or not, but I'd need some proof – the same kind of proof you'd get in math class, where there's a series of logical steps – that there's an actual victim, before I could say it was immoral. I find it especially disturbing to see the torture and murder of homosexuals. [transcript]

I'm with you, Stanley, they frighten me too. Indeed, any one of us is likely to find common ground with Stanley and others like him, making it all the more difficult to witness his struggle to maintain hope through a lifetime of bitter defeat. Having served his country with honor during a time when he, like most of his generation, recognized the shame of government corruption, Stanley faced another unending stream of rejections. He is not alone among veterans of the Vietnam War in his pain and disillusionment:

I thought I had paid some sort of dues, done what I was supposed to do, and deserved a better deal, better treatment, and maybe an easier time finding employment. It didn't work out that way.

The difference between Stanley and his fellow veterans is that they'd known all their lives that it took more than mastering the rules to earn a place as a valued person. Stanley's discovery that he could gain the admiration of certain individuals with his unconventional skills seems to have constituted a turning point in his life:

I was rather inventive at times, and this seemed to divide people in their opinions about me. To some, I had broken the spirit of some rule dictating how things were to be done. What I did was unexpected. But those who had more education appreciated the success of my novel approach. I began to notice that educated people were easier to get along with.

Although in one sense this conclusion merely added another cut-out figure to Stanley's inner world of cardboard characters; in another, it seems to have created an environment for developmental growth. Much as an idealized mirroring parental environment is thought to facilitate the child's process of forming a positive self-image (Kohut, 1977); so an environment of "educated people" seems to have served Stanley's need for positive feedback. We could quibble about the illusory nature of this mirroring object world, but that would be missing the point – our psychoanalytic theories of development postulate a psychic reality separate from the external world, one whose dynamic interaction with reality drives personality formation (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Blatt, 1995). Again, it's Stanley's experience of self in relation to his object representations – manifestations of but not equivalent to real individuals – that set the stage for his progress towards forms of interpersonal relatedness.

Theme #3 People who are intelligent and educated can appreciate and accept eccentricity. They tend to be morally superior. People who are unconventional, like my wife Barbara, are safe to be with.

When I learned about the Naturist Society, where they promote a different life-style, one that accepts the value and beauty of a person's natural state, I felt as though I'd found a sanctuary of some kind. And the people who are involved in it usually are highly educated; some of them are members of MENSA. It was a safer place to go, where you didn't have to walk on eggs, or wear black socks.

Stanley's discovery of fellow eccentrics seems to have provided a sense of community and friendship that had long been lacking in his life. While the quality of those relationships can't be assessed with the given material we can detect a shift in tone in Stanley's descriptions of social encounters:

As is the case in any large group, there were a few people with peculiar ideas in the Naturist Society, a few radical feminists and such, but by and large, there were people one could converse with and feel friendly toward. And there were regular events, retreats

and picnics, that you could look forward to. It was a friend in the Naturist society who arranged my introduction to Barbara, my wife.

In speaking about his partner Barbara, Stanley shows that he has learned to more fully conceptualize the inner processes that drive another's behavior, including the paradoxes that indicate psychic conflict, although he admits that he is confused by these inconsistencies and doesn't identify "conflict" as such. For example, he attributes her acceptance of religious tenets to her "tolerance for people" rather than any emotionally-based need for certainty, a notion which he himself rejects. In discussing Barbara's exhausting commitment to caring for her birds, Stanley ignores the emotional underpinnings of her behavior, but this time, not because he's oblivious, but because he can detect the devotion she feels – towards his rivals for her affection.

Stanley's use of descriptive terms in characterizing Barbara conveys his sense of her as a thoughtful and active agent, as well as within her social and relational context. Among the ten descriptive words/phrases he uses, his emphasis on qualities that give him a feeling of comfort is apparent. The terms: *eccentric*; *independent*; and *unfashionable* fit neatly into his concept of "the right sort of people." In describing her as *tolerant* and *not bossy*, Stanley identifies Barbara as someone he can feel safe with. He characterizes her in muted, not particularly value-laden terms, and elaborates with concrete behavioral descriptions. His representation seems somewhat colored by his need to view her as like himself, yet he does seem to have achieved a genuine respect for her as a person in her own right, one who differs from him in fundamental ways. Because she is real and valued to him in a way that others aren't, Stanley strives to hold Barbara in "unconditional positive regard," making allowances for her shortcomings and

accommodating her practical needs. On a deeper level, however, Stanley appears to ward off certain aspects of Barbara, in particular those indicative of emotional need.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Theme #1 I think she knows me.

I suppose the thing that drew me to Barbara most strongly is that she accepted me pretty much as I am, and that's something that no one had ever done before.

What Stanley values most in his relationship with Barbara is consistent with what he sought from others during his earlier attempts to connect socially – acceptance and validation of his worth. At times, when Stanley talks about his virtues and shortcomings within the context of their relationship, he seems relieved from the acute anxiety and more primitive narcissistic need and rage expressed in his recounting of earlier social experience. He freely lists negative qualities that likely make him difficult to live with.

I suppose these characteristics could be considered vices, but she doesn't consider them to be malignant, at least not such that they would rule out her being with me.

Within the relationship Stanley can face his demons more honestly and maintain a more integrated and positive self image, which, in periods of calm equilibrium, allows him to be more open and relaxed in his way of relating. At one point during my interview with Stanley, Barbara interrupted to argue with a remark she'd overheard him make, voicing his skepticism toward her alternative health theories. "True," Stanley responded, with a broad smile, then anticipating our joint interview: "... we'll get to that, and you can demolish what my thoughts are on the matter (all laugh) ... and I accept that."

In many ways Stanley seems to have a fairly accurate sense of how Barbara views him and how she experiences their relationship. His estimation shows that he can consider himself from her (hypothetical) perspective, although he admits that he doesn't entirely get how she has come to understand him. He attributes to her the same formulaic analytical processes that characterize his own cognitive efforts, but seems often surprised – even jarred – by the thoughts she expresses, including those that pertain to his own thoughts and feelings. Stanley remarks on the “astonishing accuracy” with which she quotes him:

For a long time I didn't realize how well she could grasp my ideas, or that she was even doing it at all. She seems to also be able to predict how I might feel at times. I don't know how she does it, .. perhaps by the similarity of situations.

At other times Stanley is disrupted by the demands of simple conversation or sharing of information with Barbara, as if mere recognition of her separate and unpredictable psychic reality is more than he can tolerate. He describes being made anxious and upset by her seemingly benign questions:

These things seem to come out of nowhere, and it startles me, because I feel as though I have to concentrate and try to make the best answer to her questions, even though I realize that she doesn't actually hold me responsible for knowing such things.

Throughout Stanley's depiction of his and Barbara's relationship, there are signs that he feels extremely threatened by her expression of affect. In this instance the “enormous pressure” he feels is not from another's emotion or appeal to have needs met, but from the imposing demands of simple intercourse with another mind. Barbara's questions literally “startle” Stanley, who doesn't see them as arising from any

recognizable “organic” processes. We are reminded of Donna Williams’s description of the disorganizing impact of “contact with other minds,” (1996).

Stanley’s difficulty prompts us to consider again what is meant by “mentalizing” as described by both cognitive and psychoanalytical theorists (Fonagy and Target, 1998; Frith, 2004). From the present perspective, employing a “theory of mind” connotes more than the intellectual exercise of forming hypotheses about another’s knowledge state or unique perspective. To serve a true relational function this capacity must be grounded in the experience – and take its cues from the concept – of another person’s inner “narrative.” This likely requires a level of attunement that can be sustained, as well as a corresponding narrative capacity of one’s own that can be synchronized with one’s relationship partner. Attachment researchers have explored the significant link between narrative functioning and relational capacity using the Adult Attachment Interview, which has demonstrated a correlation between narrative coherence and attachment security (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985). Stanley’s impairment or vulnerability in this domain is amply demonstrated in his original interview transcripts, in his disjointed monologues and conversational discontinuity. (The imposition of a more organizing narrative framework has forced an unfortunate trade-off in how the data are presented in the present study, limiting our ability to fully explore this aspect of the material.) He demonstrates significant variations in organization and coherence of verbal output during the course of his interviews. At times his conversational lapses seem to result partly from lack of a common frame of reference, or shared experience – most particularly the experience of shared affect. In the following section we will look at the variability in Stanley and Barbara’s co-constructed narrative. In the meantime, the present material

clearly illustrates the impact of Stanley's difficulty in tolerating and sharing Barbara's emotion, especially when her emotional tone raises the specter of her possibly being dissatisfied with Stanley.

Theme # 2 Sharing emotions can cause intolerable distress.

There are times when our emotions cause difficulty. ... Values and ideas that we share – those are things that I can safely talk about in her presence.

While constitutional deficits obviously figure strongly in Stanley's regulatory impairment, the pattern of disruptions around his perception of relational demands, and threats to attachment security, point clearly to the major locus of the anxiety he experiences in the context of his relationship with Barbara. In the last passage quoted above, Stanley reasons that Barbara couldn't hold him personally responsible when he feels unequal to her demands, however the failure of this (perceived) capacity to adequately shield him from potentially annihilating anxiety clearly emerges throughout the text. In the following transcript excerpt, we can see how Stanley struggles against any awareness of his need for Barbara, and his fear of losing her positive regard, as well as how disorganized his thinking and language become in response to his underlying panic:

S: ... So there are, uh, things that have to be adjusted to. Another thing that can happen, if she gets excited; I'm sensitive to tones of voice, and I have to, uh, beg or ask her to stop talking to me in a tone of voice that is hard for me to, uh, hear, 'cause I'm not going to get anything – it upsets me, and I'm also not going to get anything about an alarmed tone of voice, uh, .. I think it's about time to put on a light. [gets up to put light on] And, also I get alarmed if – if she's, uh, scolding one of the cats. And I'll often react to it pretty strongly: please don't scold the cats where I have to hear it.

P: So that tone does something /

S: Yes. Yes. .. Or if it sounds like a complaint of something in the house, that's also very alarming, because I feel as if I might be held responsible for it, or .. if something in

the house is broken and has to be, uh, fixed, it's hard for me to adjust to it, until at least I know what has to be done and I that I can have some definite schedule of it.

P: What do you think makes you so sensitive to those tones, or to that feeling that you're .. – I mean it sounds like the stress comes from your sense that you're not fulfilling /

S: Well there's another source of it, uh ... Most environments are environ- ah, apartments or other places to live, are places I just couldn't possibly live. I couldn't possibly live in downtown Milford, because of the constant noise, and the types of noise. I have trouble with people if they drive by here with their, uh, their stereos turned up in their cars. And it's much worse in a, uh, town or a city. And – and so our house is, uh, our only shelter, or our only sanctuary, and I can adjust better to something where I have the control of the – the sanctuary and the environment. And I have to have everything, uh, physically secure.

P: So there's particular stress around those kinds of issues.

S: Yes.

P: What about when she's yelling at the cats, or when she raises her voice to you? Does she speak to you sharply?

S: Uh, the tone of voice .. it's, uh, it's as though there is an emergency or an alarm. And in fact, in some ways, it was even – it's even more alarming than a real physical emergency in an airplane or in a war. It feels more distressing.

P: Do you think that it's actually the sound of it – the pitch, the volume? Or is it the emotion that's overwhelming?

S: I think it's the emotion. [clears throat].. Actually I think it's both. .. 'Cause there are some emotions that I can identify pretty well, uh, .. and some I've learned to identify, uh, that, I learned much from seeing the expressions on faces when I watch, uh, a filmed opera, that I can, uh, see – that they maybe exaggerate more than most people are, but it's better than nothing.

Stanley seems to avoid my attempts to focus on relational themes, blurring the distinction between “noise” in the auditory environment and the emotional “noise” generated by another person. Nevertheless, he makes clear what he needs from Barbara in order to maintain equilibrium: he needs her to eliminate any trace of negative affect or attitude that can possibly be construed as placing a demand on him. In return he tries to extend to her the respect and rights any relationship partner would be entitled to, and has

the grace to acknowledge that the intensity of his need for control must be a hardship for her. In order for Stanley to grant Barbara her “personhood,” he has to negate her emotional needs and cling tenaciously to his faith in her tolerance. When he can’t block out her emotions he feels enveloped and invaded by negative affect.

When she gets silent and tense I can tell that she’s displeased. It can create a depressing type of feeling that seems to fill the entire house, that happens to both of us. It’s especially terrible if it’s a problem that I have no answer for. At those times it’s best if she simply talks to me directly about it. After I hear her and understand it I end up feeling better.

Barbara can put Stanley at ease by placing the problem out in the open for cognitive/verbal processing, but perhaps predictably, Stanley only notices the improvement in his own feelings.

Theme # 3 Practical partners.

Our marriage is not a romantic storybook kind of thing. We’re more like everyday practical partners who work at solving problems so that things work functionally between us.

Stanley’s representation of his and Barbara’s relationship fails to coalesce around the different facets of their life together. Instead we sense the layers and gaps that indicate its uneven, “modular” construction, as well as his efforts to maintain these internal divisions lest the spill of affect disrupt the functional stability of their bond, as he sees it. His internalized image of Barbara provides a certain degree of comfort as long as he separates out the emotional needs that pose a threat to his own equilibrium. The marital bond offers him a measure of security – this person is obligated to stand by him – that has been lacking through most of his life. He dutifully shows his “love” by doing and giving things that he’s identified as pleasing to her. Stanley’s investment in

preserving the relationship is tangible; all his life he's longed for companionship. One could debate whether that longing constitutes a real "relational" drive in Stanley's case, given his failures in emotional reciprocity – his is not the form of relatedness our theories hold up as ideal. Stanley hasn't demonstrated a mature capacity to form a mutually need satisfying bond, however he has, at the present stage, gained a sufficient understanding of his partner's own inner workings to know that he impacts on her. He puts his most reliable capacities to work in the service of the relationship, his gifted intellect and rational judgment. Stanley attempts to assign mutual rights and responsibilities the way he would balance opposite sides of a mathematical equation. That he does this with integrity and fairness implies a form of emotional commitment, one that Barbara expresses appreciation for and derives her own sense of comfort from. But Stanley's positive emotion, in this case, seems to derive from its correspondence to a theoretical concept of what is right and good, rather than experiencing the emotional resonance of Barbara's perceived comfort or pleasure within himself. It is here that we see the limits of his "reflective functioning" (Fonagy and Target, 1998).

The good feelings that Stanley derives from his interactions with Barbara are no small achievement, and they appear to have spurred developmental progress in his ability to represent another person in a more fully dimensional way. Barbara appears to retain her integrity in Stanley's mind, in a way that others have not. She is inevitably an adversary at times, as their beliefs, wants and needs collide. Yet Stanley holds his and her boundaries relatively intact. She does not become a repository for his toxic projections the way he typically uses representations of others to embody his own rage and hostility. However his efforts to avoid falling into this particular abyss necessitate

building a wall to ward off her disruptive affect. Stanley does show a need to see Barbara as like himself, however this doesn't cross into the realm of unrealistic idealization.

Barbara emerges as a real person in Stanley's mind, a significant achievement indeed, in his case. The degree to which Stanley's commitment to preserving Barbara's integrity and rights within the relationship derives from awareness of his own affectively charged experience in the social world confirms his capacity for empathy. This form of empathy oils the machinery of Stanley and Barbara's relationship, but doesn't fulfill the function of true affective reciprocity. Stanley doesn't seek the echoing tug of feeling that strikes unbidden in the presence of another's emotion. We might be inclined to see the problem as one of avoidance rather than incapacity, but we know how Stanley views the matter. As he himself says: " ... it's a mechanical problem. It's not a social or emotional problem."

In Stanley's view his marriage is exemplary. His concept of marriage appears to be an effort to counter his negative representation of relationships as mutually coercive, self-annihilating prisons, an image colored by his primitive object representations. Because he has found a way to keep Barbara uncontaminated in his mind, he can grant her a level of autonomy and consideration that could, frankly, be the basis of considerable envy from many a married woman's perspective:

Barbara and I disagree about a number of things, but we don't feel the need to convince each other to change opinions.

Marriage is not meant to permit one person to mold the other.

Barbara has the right to choose for herself. In fact, in some matters I trust her judgment better than my own, especially in dealing with strangers, because I can't always tell what a stranger might be up to as easily as other people can.

She has a rule about not letting the cats into the bedroom, because she's afraid of the germs they carry on their feet. She's worried that it'll cause skin infections, and I don't

know if it would, but I wouldn't expect anyone to take that risk, so that rule has to be allowed.

Stanley makes assertions about his and Barbara's love for each other but isn't really clear on the nature of their emotional bond. As is typical among individuals with autism, he describes his difficulty in recognizing others' feelings, yet has an abundant repertoire of emotional terminology with which to label his own. He describes a myriad of ways in which Barbara evokes emotion in him, but fights desperately to disembodify both the source and the object of her affect – her voice is simply another noxious auditory stimulus; her target the cat or the electrical circuit. In doing all this, Stanley cuts himself off not only from the force of negative feeling, but from her pleasure in him as well – he doesn't show us that he registers her appreciation of his thoughtfulness, intelligence and humor (see next section), and hence does not incorporate these reflections into his representation of himself or of the relationship. To gauge whether this is enough to satisfy Barbara's relational needs we must turn to her statements. Stanley, meanwhile, seems content to experience the bond in the "theoretical" realm.

I know I feel closer to Barbara than I do to anyone else, simply because that's bound to happen if you maintain a marriage for this many years. I don't know if it's the degree of closeness that other people feel – it's more of a theoretical guess.

Barbara's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

There's a lot of things I could tell you about myself. I don't know if there's any one or two words that would describe me. Maybe I should tell about things I like and don't like.

I like to be comfortable. I like animals, and movies, and I like to ride my bike. I like to do what I like to do, and I don't want to have a job. During the last few years I've worked on and off doing private-duty nursing and nutritional counseling, on a free-lance basis. But my last job wore me down so badly that I know I could never go back to working full-time. I'm not a hardy person. I'm a registered nurse, with a bachelor of science degree, but most of the work I'm qualified for is just too draining the way the jobs are set up now. Hospitals put you in charge of too many patients and place all that responsibility on the nursing staff – they even tell you to carry malpractice insurance, because nurses get sued nowadays. It was too much for me. The whole idea made me a nervous wreck. I knew I'd fall apart emotionally under that kind of pressure, I'd be a bundle of nerves. Private-duty work was manageable, because you had only one person to look after. But there wasn't enough of that kind of work to keep me steadily employed. So I eventually had to get a regular job. I took a night shift position at a psychiatric hospital, because on night duty, even if there were rough nights where you never stopped, it wasn't crazy like the day shift, especially with having a whole floor of twenty-five people to look after.

I was lucky to be given the chance when they hired me for that job, since I didn't have much experience. For the first six months I was a nervous wreck. My mother told me: "You are really nervous. You are really scared." But after that I was okay. But I never adjusted to the hours. I ended up with osteoporosis after all those years of working the night shift, because your hormone levels drop when you don't get enough sleep. It was exhausting. I never wanted to have a job like that anyway. What I really always wanted was to get married and have some kids, and not have to work to support myself.

It isn't that I'm lazy. I try to help people when I can, when I think that things I've learned might help them to get better, whether it's a job I'm hired to do, or just someone I've heard about who might benefit from my advice. Usually people appreciate my help, but now and then a person will decide I'm not very credible, and not have a good opinion of me. I do my best to be helpful anyway, because a lot of people don't know about all the things that can help with their health problems, and if I have the information I'll share it. Another thing I sometimes do is get them vitamins and nutritional products at a discount, because I buy mine at places where they'll sell them to you half-price if you're a licensed health practitioner, which I am. It might be considered cheating, I suppose, because I tell them I do nutrition counseling, but I'm not, like, in private practice with an office. But when I sell things to people I don't charge any more than what I paid, so even if it's a little dishonest I am also helping other people too. I don't know if God'll consider me a liar and a thief for that. I'm just trying to get by.

A lot of people appreciated the way I tried to use my knowledge to help people feel better, like if I knew about some kind of natural treatment that the doctors hadn't tried. There was one family who couldn't find anyone who knew about the kind of

cancer treatment their mother had been getting in a clinic out west, so they could hardly believe it when they discovered I knew all about it and was willing to do it. After the woman eventually died they wanted me to care for another family member, I guess because they trusted me and they liked the way I had cared for their mother. In situations like that it was clear that the people had a good impression of me. They seemed to like me. I like people, but there always seem to be problems.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

I've been hurt in relationships. Unless you find someone that you're really compatible with things always end badly. So I don't spend a lot of time socializing. I'm so busy with my birds I don't have much time. Maybe that's why I got so many birds – so I wouldn't have to bother with anybody. I don't know why, really. I mean, I like animals but I'm sorry I have so many. If I hadn't gotten the last two birds I'd be happier, but they were so precious I couldn't stop myself. I'd have more time to do other things if I didn't have so many birds.

I had a lot of unhappy experiences with people. It was painful. I was pretty shy for a while, when I was young. That started to change, though, after I spent some time living on my own in California, where I finally managed to meet some nice people. But before that I was miserable. I was working at a hospital. People there would talk about me. I had problems, and people used to make comments, the not-so-nice kind. Some of them were people I didn't even know, so I figured they must have heard things from somebody else. I became paranoid. I was unhappy, and needed to get away from it. That's why I went to California.

It wasn't easy to leave my home, because I was very attached to my mother. I was scared. I'd been taking medication for my nerves. There was a reason for it; I wasn't crazy. I had reason to be nervous and paranoid around those people from the hospital. But once I got out there and relaxed and started meeting people I got off the medication. There was a little period of withdrawal, but I made it through that and never went back on it. I was staying at the girls Y there, and I finally met some nice people and had some fun. Luckily God was watching over me and it all worked out. Little by little I got better. When I went back out there a second time with the Moonies I met more nice people.

There were more bad times after I moved back East. With people there are always risks. If you really like somebody, and then they dump you, you know, it's hurtful. I saw people that had things, that were married and had children, and some didn't even have a job. I wanted that for myself, but I just wasn't making a success at life. And I wasn't happy. I was miserable. Once I met somebody at a party who had just got engaged to a rich man, and she said she'd introduce me to a lawyer friend of hers. The man called me and talked for a few minutes, but I could tell he was just doing it out of obligation; he might as well have been talking to the wall. And I figured I had an inadequate personality, and people didn't want to be around me. There was one guy, Joe, that I dated for a while, but we really weren't compatible. He had money and he would take me to nice restaurants, but I wasn't the type of girl he liked.

When I did private-duty nursing a lot of people liked me, some of them rich people. There was one family who said they were going to take me to Florida to care for a relative who had cancer, but then they changed their minds. It eventually came back to

me, what the woman said: “No, I can’t take her because we can’t introduce her to any people. She doesn’t know how to act with people.” Since then I don’t feel comfortable around those kinds of people. They don’t accept me.

My husband was friends with this couple – both of them had Ph.D.’s – and they invited us over once, but I didn’t go. I said I had to work. I didn’t want to put myself in a situation with those successful people, because they’re not gonna like me anyway and I’d rather go to work. We were gonna take a plane ride and go to a beach or something. I should have gone. They probably would have treated me alright, but I don’t know for sure. They’d like my sister. She seeks those people out – rich, fancy people. She finally became one of them – divorced her husband and married her old high school sweetheart when she discovered he’d become a chief surgeon at one of those big hospitals. My sister always put me down a lot. She told me I should dye my hair “eggplant” – a purple-ish color – and then she said: “Oh no, you better not, Barbara, you couldn’t carry it off.” My sister was cruel to me. My mother called me a nebbish. She said I wasn’t “with it,” you know, not “hep” or something like that. So I guess I wasn’t.

All I ever wanted was to get married. I was depressed. I tried going to a psychologist, and ended up being in therapy for about 25 years. I realized toward the end that most of the therapists I saw didn’t care about me; they just wanted my money. The good ones aren’t like that, but a lot are. They keep you going, by keeping you a little insecure so you think you need them. The last one I had was a bad one, and kind of abusive, so I stopped seeing him. I joined a seminar instead, for about eight months, and got a lot better. But in the end, it was a minister at the church I was attending who helped the most. In the Bible it says that whenever two or more are gathered in the name of

Jesus, then if you pray for something, and it's God's will, you'll get your wish. I wanted to get married, so I went to a couple of Christian ministers and a Messianic rabbi, and they prayed for me. Pretty soon after that I got married. So I believe in that. And if I ever need a counselor, I'll see someone at a church.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

My husband has a lot of good traits, but his autism makes it difficult to live with him, a lot of the time. Some people pick up on the nice things about him. He's funny, witty, and he's smart. He's well educated, and he's interested in many things, like art and music, science, and history. I like listening to him, because he says interesting things. He always tries to be fair. Stanley likes truth. If you tell him something, like about a new health claim or a world crisis, he would want to look into it before he accepted it.

I didn't even know he was autistic when I met him. I couldn't understand why he couldn't get a job, but I figured he had the potential for being employed. He was intelligent, nice, and hard working, and qualified to do all kinds of things. I knew that other people found him strange. I'd heard about the funny things he did, like flying naked in an airplane, and about the television people who wanted to interview him about his unusual behavior and his space-ship home. But I guess I was pretty oblivious to his problems. He always had lots of nice friends – rich ones, poor ones, all kinds of friends – in spite of his autism.

My sister begged me not to marry him. She said: "He's gonna make you miserable. He doesn't even look at people. He keeps looking all around the room." I've been wondering why autistic people have trouble making eye contact. A lot of people noticed that about Stanley. They'd say: "He won't look at you. He looks different,

strange.” But he seemed alright to me. I liked him. I knew he had a bad reputation. He had maced people – these people in a post office who blew smoke in his face after he’d asked them to please take their cigarettes outside. With the autism there were things he couldn’t put up with, and had to deal with. People wanted to arrest him when he rode his bicycle in his pink gorilla suit. They thought he sure had a lot of nerve, might cause a commotion. People are very intolerant, red-necks and low IQs. He got fired from a substitute teaching job at a high school, because somebody there said: “Hey, Stanley, I heard you jumped out of an airplane with nothing on,” and Stanley said: “I did have something on; I had my boots on.” I think he also had a top hat on, but the fact that he was naked, well, the parents had problems with that. The students liked him, but he was controversial.

His last employer said he was very reliable and a hard worker, and that’s true. He was getting his Ph.D. in physics when I met him. That was important to me, because I wanted to get married and have a child, and it seemed like Stanley at least had the potential of making a living. I liked him. I’d met a lot of people. I liked Stanley.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

It was my friend Art who first introduced us. I’d been going to a fertility doctor, because I wanted to have a baby. Most women want to have a child, and a lot of them will do it even if they have to do it alone. I was ready to do that, but I probably couldn’t have managed too well, in the end. Anyway, the doctor said that it was possible, so I thought I might use Art as a donor. Then Art suggested that I meet Stanley, because he was single and looking for someone to have a child with. Stanley was tall and good looking, and getting a doctoral degree, and I guess I just appreciated being with him. He

said that I was a non-conformist, and that I wasn't real critical. I did like him and I thought I could be happy with him. He was alright. And after I spent time with him and we got to know each other he looked at me with his eyes. I think what worked for him was that I accepted him. I treated him well, and I wasn't joking.

I wanted to give the whole thing a chance, because I wanted a child and I wanted to get married, and if I waited any longer it would be too late. Stanley thinks – he said: “The reason you never got married and had kids younger was because your parents scared you out of it. They scared you out of it with things that were happening while you were growing up.” And that's probably true. Anyway, we tried to have a child, went to the fertility doctor for months. Well that didn't work out, but we decided to get married anyway.

There were a few things that had happened along the way that made me nervous. The worst was one time when we were driving to his house, and I asked him to stop at a convenience store, because I hadn't brought any drinking water with me. I asked if he could buy me a gallon of drinking water, which cost about 99 cents and he said “No.” This really upset me because I had spent all this money on him, and I wondered if I should even continue to see him. So I called him up and said: “I feel real funny about our relationship.” Then he flew in – I used to pay for his fuel and landing fees too – and I told him I couldn't understand why he couldn't spend 99 cents for a gallon of water for me. He said: “I don't really have it.” So I went and I put a \$500 water purifier on the sink in his house, and he said: “This doesn't mean I'm going to marry you.” But, anyway, we ended up getting married. I did get him to take me to a movie once, but it was like breaking his arm to get him to do it. I guess I didn't realize how darn broke the

man was. I was so upset that he wouldn't even spend 99 cents on me, but I guess I was just so scared about the possibility of never getting married that I let it go. I don't know why he wouldn't do it. It wasn't very nice. I don't know.

When we decided to get married people tried to talk me out of it. My nursing supervisor said: "Carol, how can you marry a man who can't even support himself, let alone you?" My mother said the same thing, and then shortly after the wedding she said: "Barbara, you're in trouble." That made me nervous. I mean I was 45 and it had taken forever, and I didn't know that I'd ever find anyone else. People kept saying I should divorce him, and they upset me, because I didn't want to get divorced! I'd rather help Stanley, work on him, so things might eventually get better for both of us, than divorce him, and maybe end up with nothing, because I know what it's like to have nothing for 45 years.

People said things to him too. His friend, who he used to date, noticed that he wasn't treating me so well, and she told him: "When you were single and you didn't have anybody, you were always talking about how you would really like to have somebody, and now that you do, you're not treating her very well." That was around the time after my mother had died and left me some money. I gave Stanley a big chunk of it, around \$15,000, so he could build the Flight Wing. He thought that if he could build this plane and make it fly, then people would want to hire him. And it was beautiful, except it didn't fly. It fell apart on the ground. So all the money I gave him went down the drain.

Even then I didn't consider divorcing him. In fact I helped him through it. He was behaving like people do when they're going to commit suicide, giving a lot of stuff away, setting his life in order. He was all broken up about it. He couldn't face anybody

because they all knew about the airplane that he'd been building. When he went to church he'd sit up in the balcony so he didn't have to be around anyone else. Well, I had this cassette tape from a seminar I'd been to, and in it the guy was talking about how Thomas Edison had made about 10,000 failures before he got his light bulb to work. So I played that part for him, and it made him feel better. I told him: "You know, you really shouldn't blame yourself for what happened. It's just that we don't have the resources to try again." I didn't have another \$15,000 to give him. The light bulb was cheap to work on, but an airplane is expensive. He finally began to come around. But he had thrown away all of his pictures except for a few that I managed to save. He was glad to have those to show his friend Gerhardt in Germany, who'd made his own Flight Wing. Gerhardt wasn't at all surprised that Stanley's plane didn't fly the first time, he's still trying to get his own to work right.

That was a lot of money to lose, but I understand why he needed to spend it. When my mother died, and the money came to me, he said: "Share your money with me, and I'll share mine with you." So I paid off the Visa bills and paved the driveway, and bought the overhead projector for him, which was about \$3,500. But that was okay because I like to watch movies too. I put a lot of money into making the place comfortable for both of us. Then when he eventually got a job, I reminded him of what he'd said, because he used to say to women, and even to me: "If you don't work you're just a prostitute," or something like that. It was a turn off.

When we got married he was wearing a wedding ring of my father's that was too big for his finger. I could have afforded to buy him a wedding ring that fit, for thirty or forty dollars. I had a job then. But he didn't buy me any ring, so I didn't feel it was right

for me to purchase a ring for him. That's what I felt, to be fair to myself, I could emotionally do, or give. I'd been lavishing on him, and to keep lavishing would be sort of like betraying myself. I mean, it was hard for me, because he broke my spirit, you know, just about dragged me through dirt – not even spending 99 cents on me, after all I did for him. I mean, I wanted a baby too, and I liked being with him, you know, but I didn't think he was going to refuse me 99 cents. He's more generous now. He's not stingy any more. He gives me whatever he can, after he makes sure the bills are paid. When we got a tax return of \$600 he gave it to me. He said he would, and he did.

Sometimes it's not all that easy because of the autism. But one thing I've learned that makes it easier, is if I pretty much accept him and try to stay out of his way, when he needs space or whatever it is, and allow for what he needs. I don't play any music around the house, don't bring any dogs home. When he's doing something that's important to him, he likes to be alone so he can concentrate. That can be annoying at times, if I don't have someplace else to go, but generally I can find something to do, so it's not so bad.

It helps to know what kinds of things are hard for him to handle. Getting his diagnosis made it easier to understand. But that's never something that you can take for granted. I don't expect him to automatically know what I need or how I feel. I took seminars, and I learned that you can't assume a person understands you. You have to tell him where you are and what you're thinking most of the time. You can't assume anything. And I tell him: "You need to tell me how you're feeling, explain things to me because I'm not a mind reader." It works better that way. You just have to let people know what you like, how you're feeling, and what you would like them to do for you. And you try to do things for them, and try to have them let you know how they're feeling.

There's something, though, about the way he reacts if I'm feeling bad or tired, or if I've hurt myself. A lot of times he doesn't want me to talk about it. He says: "If I can't do anything about it, don't bring it up." It's like he thinks I'm blaming *him* for whatever it is. That's one problem I've noticed with his autism: he thinks I'm blaming him for things when it's not his fault. I used to blame him for not having a job, but I realized you can't blame him for that. He really likes and wants to work. And, now, I have a better understanding of that. That was the problem we were trying to solve when we went to the psychologist, and then found out about the autism. After he talked to Stanley's mother, and they did all those tests at that place in Pennsylvania it all started to fit. Stanley's mother was concerned about speaking to the psychologist. She didn't want to be accused of abuse. But he assured her that we were just trying to find some kind of understanding that would shed light on his problems.

Right now he has no job, but at least he can collect his disability check. The people who diagnosed him gave him the papers he needed to set that up. Sometimes when he goes up to collect his check he'll put on a bunch of funny looking clothes, so nobody will question him. He wants to look like he deserves it. He wants to work, but what's he gonna do if they won't hire him? So he has to dress up like a clown so they'll give him some money.

I'd really like to learn more about it all. I know everybody with autism is different. With Stanley, I think there are some things that he can improve on, and other things that he can't really change much. It still gets scary sometimes, like when he wanted to move out into a hotel recently, because of the noise from the neighbor's barking dog. I was really nervous, because if he had to do that it would use up all his

money and there'd be nothing left for me to live on. I called one of the girls at church and asked her to pray for me. What ended up happening was that the dog dug his way out of his pen and went wandering up on the road, and when I saw him loose, I coaxed him into Stanley's car and drove him over to the SPCA. I hated to do that, because I like dogs, but Stanley was threatening my life, with moving out and me having no money to live on. So it stopped the barking dog, which was good because Stanley couldn't take it.

There are things we'd like to change. We haven't been physically intimate for a few years. Part of the problem is my physical limitations. Having sex is painful for me, because after all those years of working nights my hormones just gave out, and everything down there got dry and shrunk up. I'm willing to get myself together physically, though, and I believe there are doctors that can help with that. Stanley's been very patient considering. He doesn't want to hurt me so he masturbates, and I rub him. But that's not very nice, if you're married, to live like that. But the other problem is that Stanley needs to learn how to be a better lover. It was great for us the first time, but things got worse after that. He doesn't know how to touch me the right way, and he just gave up. He said: "Look, I've had to perform all my life. I don't want to perform in bed. I want to relax and enjoy myself." He said he didn't know what to do and he couldn't learn. And I thought, well maybe he just doesn't have it in him. I don't know if other autistic people have problems like that in their marriages, but I wonder if someone could teach him or help him with that. I'm willing to work with it, but he doesn't think he can learn.

We're living from hand to mouth right now, but we love each other, and we appreciate being married. We like to watch movies together, and I like to hear him tell

me about different things. I appreciate learning things from him. There are a lot of good things about Stanley, good enough things that I'm willing to help him with the things he has problems with. If it's not ideal, I'll try to help him, give him his space and give him what he needs.

Stanley doesn't ask me to be anything I'm not. He doesn't expect me to dress up or put on make-up when we go out, and I'm glad for that. I can be comfortable. That's a big relief.

Analysis of Barbara's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Barbara begins her self description by noting her likes and dislikes, thus from the start, she shows an intrinsic understanding that feelings are significantly linked to personality. She makes few references to her childhood experience, but seems to consider the impact of familial relationships in her descriptions of comments made to her by her mother and sister. Barbara does not, however, despite some twenty-five years of therapy, explicitly link her early relational experience to the development of her character. When she says: "... I figured I had an inadequate personality, and people didn't want to be around me," she doesn't explore how she originally came to feel that way about herself, although as outsiders we can surmise that her internalization of negative responses from others around her likely began at an early age. What Barbara does recognize is that feedback from others is critical to her sense of herself, yet doesn't entirely negate her own power to self-evaluate and assert her autonomy and individuality.

The quality of Barbara's narrative conveys the depressive cast of her psychic engagement with the object world. One senses a hollowness inside Barbara, as if an empty space has developed around her tender core, which has shrunk itself away in fear of hurt. Although she has plenty to say about her life experience, there is an impoverishment of self-acknowledgement in her narrative material. Of all the participants Barbara uses by far the least number of descriptive terms to characterize herself, presenting only six words or phrases, in contrast to the others, which range up to 19. This verbal paucity is consistent with her estimation of having an "inadequate

personality,” as if there simply isn’t enough of a person to spark others’ interest. Yet Barbara is not an uninteresting person – at least from my perspective, having spent some time with her – though she is certainly one who thinks she is. During our interview and the surrounding contact, Barbara’s social manner was slightly awkward, and noticeably lacking in the area of friendly chit-chat or the superficial niceties one might expect between people meeting for the first time. Nevertheless, she conveyed a sincere interest in other people as well as a desire to interact, despite being inhibited by her fears of social rejection. She also described a broad range of emotional intensity, most of it is negatively skewed, though in person she appears to be disconnected from this affect. Her conversational tone had a flat, withdrawn quality, despite a fairly thoughtful and complex content. In her interactions with me and those I observed with Stanley, Barbara showed much consideration but very little warmth.

In her narrative Barbara openly conveys her experience of misery, rejection and defeat, yet retains a discernible pluck – a kernel of self-worth that survives the most brutal of buffets, and gives her the courage to forge on in her bid for survival. Now, having linked her fortune with Stanley’s, she must also cope with the burden of his vulnerability. Although it isn’t the relationship she had dreamed of, her marriage seems to have rescued Barbara from the worst of her nightmares. With that in mind, one can’t help but wonder what sense-of-self her narrative would have conveyed fifteen years ago before he’d appeared on the horizon. Whatever she has gained from Stanley, it hasn’t mitigated her depressive character traits or allowed her to express and share her emotions with a supportive and caring other. It may be that the Barbara of today experiences herself in much the same way as she always has, only now in the presence of another

person, who, rather than contribute to a new and more positively valued sense of personhood, colludes with Barbara in maintaining the status-quo. Barbara wouldn't be the first person to languish in relational limbo after getting what she wanted.

Theme #1 “I’m not a hardy person.”

It was too much for me. The whole idea made me a nervous wreck. I knew I’d fall apart emotionally under that kind of pressure, I’d be a bundle of nerves.

As Barbara discusses her experience of enormous physical and psychological stress endured during her work as nurse, she describes her affect vividly and elaborates on its causes. She is able to make insightful links around the impact of this acute stress and relate her response and coping strategies to her personal strengths and vulnerabilities. Barbara calls to mind an image of her mother during this recounting, notably, one devoid of any comfort:

For the first six months I was a nervous wreck. My mother told me: “You are really nervous. You are really scared.” But after that I was okay.

Throughout her ordeal Barbara appears to have maintained some sort of grasp on the demands of reality, and organized choices and adaptations that ensured her physical survival. Her decision to escape, in order to preserve her psychic existence, seems to have been an appropriate choice, which ultimately led to a measure of independence and relief from the pervasive environment of negative feedback she had experienced. Unfortunately, Barbara doesn't elaborate on the “nice people” she met in California, or her period with the “Moonies,” however she does relate a number of social encounters around her work as a private-duty nurse, which convey a more positive sense of herself as

someone with something valid to offer. She links this improved level of comfort to positive feedback, in this instance an offer of employment:

... I guess because they trusted me and they liked the way I had cared for their mother. In situations like that it was clear that the people had a good impression of me. They seemed to like me.

Theme #2 I'm decent and capable, but know my limits.

I'm a registered nurse, with a bachelor of science degree, but most of the work I'm qualified for is just too draining the way the jobs are set up now. ... It isn't that I'm lazy. I try to help people when I can.

Barbara's experience of feeling physically drained by the demands of her work appears to be, in part, a manifestation of her tendency to somaticize her emotional distress. Her narrative contains references to feeling depleted and "shriveled up" inside, which correspond to her depressed state and feelings of inadequacy. On another level however, Barbara's health issues seem to give her a sense of connection to other people, and provide her with shared experience that reinforces her sense that something meaningful can occur in interactions with others, even when she feels rejected.

Usually people appreciate my help, but now and then a person will decide I'm not very credible, and not have a good opinion of me. I do my best to be helpful anyway, because a lot of people don't know about all the things that can help with their health problems, and if I have the information I'll share it.

As is evident in many other passages, Barbara's altruism travels hand in hand with her masochistic tendencies, holding the balance while she seems to unconsciously ensure that she is punished for her perceived shortcomings. One doesn't have to look far to see where she has directed her unconscious anger at the cold and rejecting object world; her aggression has mostly been turned inward, it appears.

Theme #3 Inadequate personality

The man called me and talked for a few minutes, but I could tell he was just doing it out of obligation; he might as well have been talking to the wall.

The message of Barbara's unworthiness seems to have come from all directions, in her telling of the tale, but it isn't possible to determine how much of that resulted from self-fulfilling instigation. Her familial environment seems a plausible source, however, as illustrated here:

My sister always put me down a lot. She told me I should dye my hair "eggplant" – a purple-ish color – and then she said: "Oh no, you better not, [Barbara], you couldn't carry it off." My sister was cruel to me. My mother called me a nebbish. She said I wasn't "with it," you know, not "hep" or something like that. So I guess I wasn't.

Once again, Barbara seems to have succumbed too easily, perhaps because it was already too late – the blueprint for interpersonal contact having been laid down, we might conjecture. In any case, her family members fit the prevailing schemata of denigrating objects, and Barbara herself is likely perceived by people much in the way she imagines, more often than not. However much she dwells on how others have viewed and treated her, Barbara seems to take responsibility for her own behavior and its outcome. When she says, "I had problems," it seems honest, straightforward, and enough – we don't need the details in order to appreciate Barbara's awareness of her own contribution to the social stigma attached to her. Likewise, her use of the word "paranoid" suggests a kind of meta-awareness of the cognitive distortions she and others can become mired in.

People there would talk about me. I had problems, and people used to make comments, the not-so-nice kind. Some of them were people I didn't even know, so I figured they must have heard things from somebody else. I became paranoid. I was unhappy, and needed to get away from it.

Barbara seems to recognize the gray areas and complexities of social perception, in a way that her partner Stanley can't come close to. Both have experienced themselves as social outcasts, yet what they make of that experience in terms of self and object representations is vastly different. Barbara may have been overly sensitive to external feedback, which she clearly incorporates into her self-concept, but she doesn't rely on external forces and rules to micro-manage every encounter between self and world, as Stanley does. However much she might feel victimized by a demanding and critical environment, Barbara knows where the buck stops: "I just wasn't making a success at life."

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Barbara shows some tendencies to categorize people in simple, one-dimensional ways ("red necks ... low IQ's" – Stanley's influence!), when she's feeling vulnerable or victimized, but she also shows more sophisticated capacities. She uses her awareness of typical social values and standards to interpret feedback from others and make inferences about their thoughts and feelings. She is attuned to social cues, perhaps to the point of hyper-vigilance around the potential for rejection. Having internalized negative feedback she anticipates more and has prepared herself for it. Barbara can recount being rejected with a sense that people are not unfairly victimizing her. She describes them as discerning, and responding to different qualities in her, thus they are endowed with their own inner perspectives. As per the above speculation, Barbara may be incorporating her own projections when she justifies this social rejection, yet it allows her to give others some benign credibility, and maintain some belief that people are not all bad.

When relationships with people fail, Barbara turns to her pet birds for comfort and closeness, endowing them with human qualities, and lavishing care and attention on them (much to Stanley's dismay). She can step back to a degree, and observe her investment in these alternative relationships with a (limited) degree of insight:

I've been hurt in relationships. Unless you find someone that you're really compatible with things always end badly. So I don't spend a lot of time socializing. I'm so busy with my birds I don't have much time. Maybe that's why I got so many birds – so I wouldn't have to bother with anybody. I don't know why, really. I mean, I like animals but I'm sorry I have so many.

Barbara exhibits a tentative awareness of inner conflict here, as she does when she describes her view of Stanley and their relationship.

Theme # 1 People can hurt you.

With people there are always risks. If you really like somebody, and then they dump you, you know, it's hurtful.

Barbara appears to have had many opportunities to interact socially, despite her obvious discomfort and less-than-optimal social skills. She describes encounters with co-workers, employers, and other people's "friends," but doesn't identify anyone as her own. Barbara says several times that she likes people, both generally and individually, and feels gratified when she perceives that people like her. Though her work gives her satisfaction when it feels manageable, it is people who arouse feelings in Barbara, mostly painful ones. All terms that connote strong affect in her transcript are negative ones, and of the 33 different words/phrases used to describe emotion only seven are positive.

Barbara refers to past relationships and reports having been hurt by people countless times, but doesn't provide a lot of detail or emotional resonance in the actual telling of these episodes. She says she was "attached" to her mother and found separation

hard, and experienced her sister's treatment as "cruel." From the limited material it's impossible to assess the quality or depth of her prior relationships, but her desire to connect with others is clear. Barbara's need for people doesn't seem overly determined by narcissistic wishes or righteous demand for what others have, though she envies others and sustains wounds when she is rebuffed. The more powerful motivation for seeking a partner seems to be a simple wish not to have to face life alone. That she sees others as having the potential to care for her is evident in her reaction to Stanley's failure to do so. Having secured the proximity of another, and embarked on what is assuredly a relationship from her point of view, Barbara has no trouble telling us how it feels. It hurts.

Theme #2 Certain kinds of people make me feel inadequate.

... Since then I don't feel comfortable around those kinds of people. They don't accept me. ... They probably would have treated me alright, but I don't know for sure. They'd like my sister. She seeks those people out – rich, fancy people.

Like Stanley, Barbara has identified a particular category of people as the group who are likely to judge her critically, and therefore engender bad feelings. She doesn't demonize or distort these representations, neither does she fill them out beyond the superficial traits that categorize them in terms of wealth, social class, or education. Instead she elaborates her representations with concrete real-life examples of the behaviors and interactions from which she formulated her concepts. They are "successful people," which Barbara is not. What is most striking in Barbara's discussion of her experience with these individuals is the lack of anger or resentment she expresses toward them. Her reaction is one of acceptance, along with acknowledgement of her disappointment and need to protect herself from further pain. Her real-life interactions,

are basically consistent with her internalized representations of self in relation to other.

As our starting premise assumes the dynamic and reciprocal influence between internalized “working models” and experience in the external world (Fairbairn, 1946), the question of interest here bears repeating: what happens to the working model in the course of a new and significant relationship?

Theme #3 Stanley was alright.

I knew he had a bad reputation. [pause] ... I liked him. I'd met a lot of people. I liked Stanley.

Barbara shows a fairly integrated and complex view of Stanley. She validates her assignment of character traits with examples of his thinking and behavior, and shows a strong investment in understanding his internal world. The things she admires in Stanley are genuine attributes, and his negative qualities are acknowledged as such, and tolerated for a variety of carefully explained reasons. That much of her tolerance is beyond others' understanding is no secret to Barbara. She believes she has an indisputably valid vantage point: she understands the role his autism plays in limiting his potential as a relationship partner; and she has realistically faced the prospect of what her life would be like without him:

My sister begged me not to marry him. She said: “He’s gonna make you miserable. He doesn’t even look at people. He keeps looking all around the room.” I’ve been wondering why autistic people have trouble making eye contact. A lot of people noticed that about Stanley. They’d say: “He won’t look at you. He looks different, strange.” But he seemed alright to me. I liked him.

... And after I spent time with him and we got to know each other he looked at me with his eyes. I think what worked for him was that I accepted him. I treated him well, and I wasn’t joking.

In her descriptions of Stanley Barbara alludes to multiple dimensions of his personality: his social role; functional capacities; relational style and temperament. She recognizes some growth in his capacity to show her consideration, calling him: “more generous now, ... not stingy anymore,” but doesn’t sugar-coat the basic lack of generosity she has experienced from him. With her understanding and appreciation of his enormous struggles in life, Barbara can stand with him against the harsh and unforgiving evaluations of others, and hold in mind the aspects of his character – his maverick audacity and irreverent wit – that truly attract and amuse her:

He got fired from a substitute teaching job at a high school, because somebody there said: “Hey, Stanley, I heard you jumped out of an airplane with nothing on,” and Stanley said: “I did have something on; I had my boots on.” I think he also had a top hat on, but the fact that he was naked, well, the parents had problems with that. The students liked him, but he was controversial.

Barbara sees Stanley’s shortcomings and seems to be settling for what she’s got. She grants him allowances for his disability, but doesn’t give a blanket dispensation:

I used to blame him for not having a job, but I realized you can’t blame him for that. He really likes and wants to work. And, now, I have a better understanding of that.

I know everybody with autism is different. With Stanley, I think there are some things that he can improve on, and other things that he can’t really change much.

Barbara indicates that she feels let down, disappointed that Stanley can’t be more generous, but appreciates his basic decency and finds some comfort in his positive regard and acceptance. That this isn’t enough to truly satisfy her relational needs is apparent throughout, as she struggles to reconcile her circumstances with her present idea of the intimacy and reciprocity a married couple should enjoy. She expresses hope of improvement and a resolution to “work on” Stanley, but on another level we can sense

that she's given up on being actually loved by him. In later material we will see more of how she turns to her pet birds as substitute love objects to fill the emotional gaps that she lays out in her narrative representation of her relationship with Stanley.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Barbara's tone was remarkably even as she described events and feelings that occurred throughout her courtship and married life with Stanley. Her narrative stance is paradoxically matter-of-fact, even as she describes the lengths that she still must go through in order to stave off the threat of disaster. Like Stanley, she is – or has become – one to catastrophize at the first sign of disruption: her life was in danger when Stanley threatened to move himself (with his income) to a hotel to escape the neighbor's barking dog, and Barbara was forced to commit a troubling and uncharacteristic act to rescue them from the brink of disaster. She delivered the dog to the SPCA.

I hated to do that, because I like dogs, but Stanley was threatening my life, with moving out and me having no money to live on. So it stopped the barking dog, which was good because Stanley couldn't take it.

One senses that there will be no end to these episodes, just as they have always plagued them from the beginning.

Theme #1 Reservations

"I feel real funny about our relationship."

Barbara's description of her reaction to Stanley's refusal to buy her a bottle of drinking water conveys the full force of her distress and bewilderment, as well as the blow she sustained to her own sense of being valued and cared for. Barbara makes it

clear that when she found Stanley, getting a husband – any one who would have her – was more important to her than finding a worthy relationship partner. Having deemed herself undesirable, the “ideal husband” wasn’t even a wished for abstraction in her mind. Like the fantasied “baby” that had brought them together, the desired object required no personhood. Barbara’s relational model was simply one in which the other individual agreed to be with her, for which gift she expected to pay. Even so, her rude awakening to the actual price was a bitter disappointment that still lingers in her mind:

... I was so upset that he wouldn’t even spend 99 cents on me, but I guess I was just so scared about the possibility of never getting married that I let it go. I don’t know why he wouldn’t do it. It wasn’t very nice. I don’t know.

When she takes a stand for herself and lets her resentment over that and other slights influence her behavior toward Stanley, we sense that she’s making a healthy choice. We also sense a shift in Barbara’s concept of what a relationship should be – and not be. She was in one with Stanley, and working hard at it. She had more than met him half-way, and done so willingly, and in the process Barbara had discovered that as a person who gives, both materially and emotionally, she had a natural wish to receive.

I could have afforded to buy him a wedding ring that fit, for thirty or forty dollars. I had a job then. But he didn’t buy me any ring, so I didn’t feel it was right for me to purchase a ring for him. That’s what I felt, to be fair to myself, I could emotionally do, or give. I’d been lavishing on him, and to keep lavishing would be sort of like betraying myself. I mean, it was hard for me, because he broke my spirit, you know, just about dragged me through dirt – not even spending 99 cents on me, after all I did for him.

However the dynamics were to be enacted, Barbara had consolidated an idea about herself: her gifts were worthy of appreciation.

Theme #2 The idea of divorce is unthinkable.

My mother said: “Barbara, you’re in trouble.” That made me nervous. I mean I was 45 and it had taken forever, and I didn’t know that I’d ever find anyone else.

Having made her choice, Barbara tried to ignore her reservations and concentrate on making the relationship work. In some respects, though dismayed by the characteristics she now knows are related to his disorder, Barbara seems to have embraced Stanley’s vulnerabilities as a way of reinforcing positive qualities in herself. She has told us that she likes to help people, even when they dismiss her worth, and now she has someone round the clock providing endless opportunities for self-sacrifice. Those who point out that she is suffering in the bargain miss the point.

People kept saying I should divorce him, and they upset me, because I didn’t want to get divorced! I’d rather help Stanley, work on him, so things might eventually get better for both of us, than divorce him, and maybe end up with nothing, because I know what it’s like to have nothing for 45 years.

We can’t help but notice that Barbara says “nothing” here, rather than “no one,” as if the relationship with Stanley isn’t quite personal. The specter of loss seems to take her back to the realm of the hollow object in her mind when she sought him out. By this comparison, Stanley is indeed, better than nothing.

Barbara’s most tangible sense of satisfaction emerges when she describes nurturing Stanley through his period of depression following the demise of his Flight Wing, the airplane that he’d built by hand. Her attention to his behavioral signals and empathic understanding of his feelings of loss and shame led to sensitive support and intervention. Barbara’s reward was her chance to exercise an attitude of tenderness and compassion toward Stanley which yielded a result. He was helped to regain his positive

spirits, and may also have gained something from her ability to assign significant value to his failed effort. Barbara describes a series of financial investments in their shared environment around that time, which concretely demonstrated her physical presence in his world, and intention to stay. In return Stanley began to relinquish his “stinginess,” and in the process discovered that it could feel good and right to please her:

He’s more generous now. He’s not stingy any more. He gives me whatever he can, after he makes sure the bills are paid. When we got a tax return of \$600 he gave it to me. He said he would, and he did.

Theme #3 My husband has autism, but we try to work things out.

We’re living from hand to mouth right now, but we love each other, and we appreciate being married.

Barbara seems to have accepted Stanley’s limitations and has found value in what they can provide each other, simply by negotiating their co-habitation, which involves a complex dance of financial, culinary, and “veterinary” accommodations, through which they signal a willingness to hold each other in mind. Stanley’s autism provides another framework within which they can jointly rise to face a significant challenge. The importance of this aspect of Stanley seems to be such that Barbara’s concept of the relationship often gets expressed in terms of what it’s like to be married to a man with autism:

Sometimes it’s not all that easy because of the autism. But one thing I’ve learned that makes it easier, is if I pretty much accept him and try to stay out of his way, when he needs space or whatever it is, and allow for what he needs.

It helps to know what kinds of things are hard for him to handle. Getting his diagnosis made it easier to understand.

My husband has a lot of good traits, but his autism makes it difficult to live with him, a lot of the time.

I don't know if other autistic people have problems like that in their marriages, but I wonder if someone could teach him or help him with that.

That's one problem I've noticed with his autism: he thinks I'm blaming him for things when it's not his fault.

This selection of passages doesn't even begin to capture the scope of the couple's problems which are rooted in Stanley's diagnosis. Barbara's emphasis on these issues is appropriate, and likely critical to their being able to continue together, although many of the adaptations they've made as a couple were well in place before they realized what they were dealing with. Barbara had long since subjugated herself to the tyranny of Stanley's need to maintain control of his environment, her own characterological idiosyncrasies fitting neatly into his self-regulatory system. Her sense that he could learn to overcome some of his resistance to accommodating her needs is accurate. For example he could choose to make the effort to be a more considerate lover, though it would likely be a much harder exercise for Stanley than a non-autistic individual. Barbara herself seems to benefit from the more explicit exchange of social and emotional information that Stanley requires, which she had conveniently mastered at a seminar before they met.

You just have to let people know what you like, how you're feeling, and what you would like them to do for you. And you try to do things for them, and try to have them let you know how they're feeling.

This form of relationship management carries a positive valence for Barbara because it is something that she has brought to the marriage independent of Stanley's need as a person with autism. When combined with her many supportive interventions on his behalf this capable coping constitutes the very thing Barbara has lacked for most

of her life – success. Keeping Stanley intact and by her side is her mission, which she can carry out with integrity because she values him as a person.

There are a lot of good things about Stanley, good enough things that I'm willing to help him with the things he has problems with. If it's not ideal, I'll try to help him, give him his space and give him what he needs.

Much of what passes between Stanley and Barbara is still hard for her to explain, and must be even harder to endure. It's clearly a failure in their relationship that he cannot tolerate her negative affect, yet remarkably, she's willing to allow that this, too, might be something he cannot help. Barbara accurately notes that Stanley's aversive reaction to her carping tone arises from his internal fear that she is blaming and rejecting him, even when her attention is focused elsewhere. At such times Stanley's representation of Barbara becomes distorted in his mind, contaminated by all the other punishing objects that inhabit his internal world. And yet there is a piece of reality in his perception of her; she is angry and frustrated with him, though not intentionally expressing it when she's yelling at *his* cats. In this respect Stanley's attunement to Barbara's affect is penetrating and accurate, reminding us that he is open to her on an underlying level, yet too vulnerable and in danger of being flooded with unmanageable emotion. Barbara seems to sense that Stanley has empathic capacities that he's not using to put her at ease, but stays locked into her own self-negating role for reasons she has made abundantly clear: "It still gets scary sometimes."

Her relationship with Stanley hasn't made life any easier for Barbara, nor has it provided the financial security she was seeking when she met him. Barbara remains fearful that her basic needs for survival are at risk. She seems to pay a high price for the

modest comfort she derives from the relationship, but finds something to value that is undeniably real:

Stanley doesn't ask me to be anything I'm not. He doesn't expect me to dress up or put on make-up when we go out, and I'm glad for that. I can be comfortable. That's a big relief.

Summary of Stanley and Barbara's Dyadic Interview

During their joint interview, which took place in the living area of their home, Barbara and Stanley positioned themselves in a way that communicated volumes: while he sat facing me in an arm-chair in the center of the room; she lay prone on the couch barely moving and making little eye contact with either of us. Barbara's lack of energy was evident in her speech and vocal quality as well as her posture, suggesting a spiritual as well as physical depletion. She nevertheless remained attentive to the flow of the conversation and contributed information in response to direct queries, as well as to supplement Stanley's descriptions of significant events, and to present her own viewpoint when it differed from his. Stanley dominated the discussion, however, in a way that seems to reflect his position within the relationship.

While Barbara generally attempted to answer the interview questions as she understood their objective; Stanley would constantly digress, following his wandering train of thought with little heed to the implicit task of focusing on their experience of the relationship. Occasionally Barbara would attempt to re-direct him back to the topic, or insert her own more relevant points, but often she would simply recede into the background until I drew her back with a directly addressed prompt. During several passages, however, she became more fully engaged with the discussion or recounting of events. At a few points she became slightly more animated, showing traces of humor and positive affect. This usually occurred over relatively benign topics, such as their negotiation of separate dietary preferences and sensory aversions, or their supportive mutual alliance in the face of unsympathetic employers or government agencies. At other

times Barbara allowed more negative affect to surface during their exchanges, showing flashes of exasperation, or a more pervasive and weary resignation as she marked the successions of disappointments she'd had to absorb during the course of their history together. In contrast, Stanley remained relatively up-beat throughout, clearly relishing the opportunity to expound on favorite topics and engage his listener's interest. While Barbara seemed willing to confront his mis-attributions (as she perceived them) or inconsiderate stance, Stanley's response was most often to withdraw from or minimize her displeasure, or to simply shut it out of his awareness. He did, in a few instances, acknowledge her experience of hardship and, to a limited extent, his role in it, but these moments mainly occurred around events in the past that had been previously processed (emotionally) and organized in memory. When Barbara's discomfort was more immediate or brought to the surface in her own recollection of painful experiences, Stanley showed little inclination to offer comfort or understanding in response. Despite this he showed a gentleness of manner and overall consideration that wasn't entirely impersonal.

As the interview commenced, Barbara offered the first response to my inquiry about how their relationship began, by naming the people who introduced her and Stanley to each other. Stanley stepped in as if he'd barely registered Barbara's comments and took the conversation down an entirely irrelevant path:

B: [*speaking of social occasion*] ... And Ginny showed me a picture of Stanley. She told me he was, um, kind of nice and that he was educated.

P: And that appealed to you?

S: What had appealed to me about Art was that he was, uh, a friend of a somewhat famous Dr. Prescott, uh, a psychologist who was close to the experiments with the monkeys that had either a cloth, or a – a terrycloth mother or an actual mother, and .. however Art himself was not a formally educated scientist, but imagined himself to be

one without going through all the work. So, often in his life would creep various, uh, carbuncles of crackpotitude, so he could easily believe in paranormal things, however, he and Dr. Prescott – who I think kept him from introducing paranormal stuff – had a retreat that I read about for a weekend up in Pennsylvania, in the summer, and, one of the things that attracted me to it is it had people who believed that competition is not the way to live, and who would want to meet somebody, are invited to this retreat. So.. I went ..

P: And is that where you met Carol?

S: No, that's where I found out about Art. And .. eventually Art had the idea – he knew that I was looking to meet somebody – and I was hoping I might be able to have a child. ...

Similar breaks in continuity occurred throughout the interview. During brief stretches where Stanley and Barbara were taking conversational turns, without interviewer input, they often had difficulty sustaining the continuity of the narrative. Even when they were able to maintain a single theme or successive string of information, there was usually little agreement about what was most salient.

The couple described what had brought them together initially. When they embarked on their relationship, Stanley and Barbara had similar objectives: both desired a baby and a partner; and each conveyed a wish to stave off the specter of loneliness ahead, following years of longing for affiliation. Stanley's explicit narrative of events focused primarily on his determination to overcome the "institutions" of social injustice, which excluded undesirable people (like himself) from the rituals of mating and reproducing. Barbara, on the other hand, emphasized her need for security and companionship. It seemed that for each of them the "baby" represented a chance for security of a different sort:

P: And is that how you two came together, around this idea of producing a baby?

S: Yes.

P: And what did you imagine your involvement to be?

B: We would get married afterwards.

S: That's what I had hoped would happen, but I had no faith in anything.

B: I didn't think he was gonna marry me unless I got pregnant. But then he said he fell in love with me.

S: And I said that if there is marriage, if it is possible, then, uh, we marry and we stay, whether, uh, whether it's for better or for worse. ... *[Here Stanley embarks on a diatribe against unstable marriages based on "high school fantasies" without confirming her report that he "fell in love" at all. He later dismisses this possibility, as being inconsistent with his personal beliefs.]*

....

P: So when you guys got together, then, you didn't think there was going to be a sustained relationship there unless you produced this baby.

B: That was because of him. I was looking for just any relationship (little laugh). I also wanted a baby.

As they told of their early months together, Stanley talked of their "compatibility" and ignored Barbara's recollections of the terrible stress she suffered over their failed attempts to conceive a child (through artificial insemination). She spoke of her ongoing worries about Stanley's history of unemployment while Stanley provided lengthy explanations of his decision to fly his plane to and from their visits instead of driving ("I didn't have to be exposed to highway bullies and cowboy truckers, and have my life threatened. And it had a privacy and dignity that is not possible on the highways."). One of the most significant causes of Barbara's reported distress and anxiety was Stanley's lack of financial security. When I asked how they had overcome this obstacle Barbara replied that she had "worked on" Stanley, utilizing prayer and steady counsel, gleaned from 25 years of her own therapy. "Between prayer and working on him, he finally got better ... and began to find employment." I asked Stanley to comment on this shift:

S: Uh, I was motivated to do that long before, but I just didn't believe it was possible, and apparently she caused some things to happen, or her presence did, that made that possible.

P: Can you tell me more about that? How you think her presence helped to make that possible?

S: Uh, I can only speculate that the fact of being married makes one appear more, um, desirable as an employee.

While they were meeting monthly around their efforts to conceive they began to spend social time together. As they talked of getting to know one another, Stanley derisively described traditional courtship as "salesmanship" while Barbara conveyed her fleeting hope for romantic feeling. One thing the two expressed agreement on was the decision to wait until they'd made a decision about marriage before engaging in sexual intimacy, as this should follow upon a firm commitment. Despite their failure to conceive, they achieved a level of comfort with one another that allowed them to proceed:

P: Okay, so the pregnancy didn't occur, so how was it that you decided to go ahead and marry? Barbara, you said that he fell in love with you, during that time.

B: That's what he told me.

S: Yes.

P: What about you?

S: Did I? ... I don't say – I wouldn't say "fall in love," because "fall in love" is when you meet somebody, and within 24 hours or less you have a – you feel a fantasy about. But instead that you get to know people well enough to say: yes, I could make the – I could spend the rest of my life with this person, and want to.

P: The wanting to – is there a feeling that accompanies that, a feeling about her?

S: Uh, not as much, as I could tell, as, uh, I used to expect there was when I was a teenager, and had some faith in movies and what songs had to say. But, uh, .. but, uh, the romantic type of falling in love has always been described as something that evaporates in a few weeks or months, and that that's not what you can make a marriage out of. But the other kind of feeling that you decide, uh, will – you can have confidence will grow, if you decide to go ahead and stay together, and you make it a choice instead of, uh ..

thinking you're following your heart. So it's a choice and not a.. and not a .. our passions say this, our feelings are this, and ...

P: And for you Barbara? Choice or .. what was the feeling about Stanley at the time?

B: Both. Both choice and wanting to marry him. I mean, I really liked him a lot, and I wanted to get married to him. So, it was that I had feelings and also I wanted to get married.

P: The feeling that you're talking about (*to Stanley*) – that could grow after a commitment is made, and a process of getting to know somebody – did it grow for you, did something evolve out of that?

S: Yes, it did. And it's something that – I know is real. If you've had bad experiences with this romantic, uh, flashy type of business,

B: (*talking to her pet bird making noise outside*) Joey, I do love you.

S: ...then, um, if you have any, uh, sense or any brains, pretty soon you realize that such things are only illusionary, are completely invalid ...

Stanley has hit on an inarguable point here: his representation of the “feeling” that evolves from personal choice is real to him in a way that the nebulous concept of “love” will never be to him, though we can't be entirely sure whether that's because he has never felt it, is incapable of feeling it, or has simply given up hope of ever receiving it and therefore rejects it. Barbara too makes a significant – though unconscious – point in calling out her “love” to her pet bird: that she has registered Stanley's denial of love, and must turn elsewhere for comfort. Stanley reiterates his rejection of romance:

S: Uh, I don't think I have, uh, much of it. We went to a honeymoon, we went to Disneyland and Universal Studios, and .. it was a romantic experience, but it was – what was romantic was Disneyland and Universal Studios that we both visited as people in the beginning of a marriage, and we didn't .. connect each other to those romantic experiences, because we're not Pavlov's bell to each other, instead it was a vacation that we both enjoyed. Another thing we both enjoyed was: one time we got a discount ticket to go to St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, where my cousin lives, and in many of the beaches that you visit you don't have to wear a swimsuit there, and you don't have to be bothered with .. and , uh, sometimes she and my cousin and her husband and her family – sometimes they would and sometimes they wouldn't wear a swimsuit to swim in the ocean – but, uh, it was very much nicer because people were allowed to do what was comfortable for them. And .. I think .. you don't want to depend upon those things to

bring two people together, but you should certainly enjoy these things, uh, for your own benefit.

Stanley's repeated use of "we" in this passage seems somewhat paradoxical. As he describes their simultaneous enjoyment he resolutely maintains their emotional separateness – from each other as well as from the surrounding "romantic" environment. He demonstrates no sense of shared experience and emotional attunement as a vehicle for relatedness. It's almost as if he refuses to allow the emotional context to contaminate an internalized ideal: that a relationship should consist of a mutual regard based solely on the intrinsic value of each as a person. A worthy notion, but one which isolates the two of them, in Stanley's mind, from an entire realm of experience. The rigidity observed here is consistent with the "modular" quality noted in his representation as constructed during his individual interview. However he might represent his relationship with Barbara, he is unable to integrate the idea of shared affect into his concept of being *in relation* to her.

We have noted before what is reinforced here: that Stanley's expression of his attachment to Barbara consists primarily of external mannerisms and behavioral adjustments calculated to reduce tension between them. In the following brief exchange, we can see how Barbara has joined with him in adopting this modality, as well as her very tepid report of its success:

P: Would you say that the quality of your relationship has changed during the course of your time together?

B: I don't know. I think it's sort of got better.

S: I think it has.

P: In what way?

S: Uh, more work on adjusting to difficulties. For example. there is gradually less clutter, and I get less anxious and upset about the clutter. Uh .. removal of problems has made things easier. There always will be problems, but you work on reducing them. Uh, I still am worried – if there’s one or two hours left to sleep – if she’s going to start to snore. And I wake up, maybe to go to the bathroom, and I’m just afraid of the snoring stopping me from getting back to sleep, and I still, often, come out here for the last two hours. And that has a couple of advantages: if I’m getting up early to go to work, I don’t have to go wake her up, and disturb her, and .. uh, then I also don’t have to hear the snoring. And, if she’s asleep I don’t wake her up to kiss her to go to work, but if she’s up then we will tell each other we love each other before going to work.

P: Barbara, you agreed that there have been changes in the quality of your relationship along the way. How would you characterize that?

B: I try to keep things cleaner, and try to keep him employed, so he’ll keep me happy, and I’ll keep ... *(trails off with a little laugh)*

Again Stanley briefly evokes a “we” and states their love for each other, but the singular pronouns dominate, quite notably in Barbara’s response, in which even she can’t find togetherness. While mutual “love” has now been mentioned by Stanley, a follow-up inquiry about “closeness” reinforces its lack and both of their feelings of disappointment around that.

P: Would you say that, during your time together, you’ve experienced closeness, the emotional feelings of closeness?

B: Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes, I think.

P: Sometimes, you think. You sound not sure.

B: Sometimes.

S: Sometimes, uh, there are things that set more of a distance. For example, when she’s involved much with the birds, that puts her at a distance.

As Stanley and Barbara’s interview progresses their pet birds come up as a recurring theme, most often as a tacitly agreed upon way of symbolizing their emotional disconnect. In this regard their joint interview reveals an aspect of their representations of the relationship as “co-constructed.” This quality becomes evident in several sections

of the interview where they sustain a more synchronous narrative flow. In one passage, which begins with a mutual acknowledgement that the stress on their relationship might be reduced by a limited culling of their “brood” of exotic birds, they discuss their respective views on the birds’ personalities and which ones might be most difficult to part with. It is evident from the conversation that although he respects the birds’ importance in Barbara’s world, he openly views them as a threat to his security in the relationship:

S: I was worried that the birds could have split us up, uh, for a time. Because she was, uh, so intent on them that I was afraid she’d let everything go to hell, that I couldn’t do anything about. And ..

P: And how did you manage that, how’d you get through that?

S: I think she realized, or we realized that she just has to .. uh, .. just limit all the time and sacrifices made for the birds. And although we’re not in any danger of losing our marriage, she is, I think, having less than the best deal out of life and less than the best possible health from being able to rest and sleep when she would like, that by having a little bit too many, uh, birds.

Here Stanley invokes “we” as a corrective, to reassure himself that they have agreed on a course that will keep them together. While he feels that the birds are threat to him, Stanley doesn’t explicitly admit that Barbara turns to them to fulfill a need that he can’t meet. He can vaguely associate the lack of “closeness” or the “distance” between them with her attachment to the birds, but doesn’t go on to make the additional connections. Having formulated his concept of what a relationship should be without the ingredient of mutual emotional support, Stanley does not acknowledge that need in her. More sadly, perhaps, he does not register or take in her investment in his comfort, as illuminated in her rich account of nurturing him through his depression. It may be that this aspect – the fact that he doesn’t even seem to register her emotional investment – as

opposed to his lack of reciprocation, turns her most emphatically toward her birds. At least they can answer back, in a “language” that she experiences as emotionally resonant.

While the vast majority of their transcript is characterized most often by affective as well as narrative disconnection, Stanley and Barbara produce another sequence of narrative synchronicity as they describe their wedding. They maintain the flow of the chronology and follow upon each other’s verbal cues in elaborating detail to paint a coherent picture of the day’s events, yet they again demonstrate an underlying discrepancy in how the event evoked emotion in each of them, which continues to resonate years later. This discrepancy is revealed in narrative disruptions or failures to validate one another’s points of view:

S: And we were a little late to the marriage itself, and I had to keep calling up and saying: “We’re a little delayed, but we’ll be on our way over there.”

B: I was up with his mother. I was working at Temple Hospital, on a case, and I had to get up and finish the cake the morning of the wedding. I had like three hours sleep, I was exhausted. It was hell, it was horrible.

S: Yes.

B: And I had stuck contact lenses in my eyes, on top of that, and they always used to hurt me, and I had to have ‘em in so I could see for the wedding.

P: No glasses?

B: I didn’t want to wear glasses for the wedding. I even put make-up on, and eye shadow.

S: There’s also another thing about weddings too..

B: Mascara on, lipstick and blusher ..

S: (laughs) ... that neither of us think is such a good idea – I’ve heard, even the celebrated – but not necessarily having all the answers – Dr. Slessinger speak of buying an expensive engagement ring and an expensive wedding ring, to demonstrate commitment. Well, a marriage is not supposed to be a money-wasting potlatch. The rings are but symbolism, if that’s the symbolism you choose to use, and a wedding dress that costs thousands of dollars and is only supposed to be used once –

B: I bought it in the thrift store, for forty dollars.

S: And .. then a reception that costs tens of thousands of dollars is so vulgar an exercise, that I think it destroys the dignity of a wedding, and I don't think that making a wedding reasonable and dignified takes any of the color or fun out of it. On the contrary it allows it to have whatever color or fun ..

B: We made our own food. My mother and sister made a wonderful fruit salad. And our wedding cake was a banana cake with whole wheat flour and honey, and didn't have any sugar, the icing was cream-cheese, vanilla and honey.

S: You couldn't hire an over-priced caterer to do those things. Or the labor you would do to pay for it would far surpass the labor of baking some of your own things, and other people baking things.

B: But we didn't have any alcohol, or coffee or tea, because he didn't want it there, so we didn't provide it for the guests.

S: Yes. So, we didn't think the purpose of something that has religious implications is to go out and get drunk, or to smoke, or do any of those sorts of things that really are not..

P: Well, you don't enjoy them.

S: No.

P: And you're supposed to enjoy your wedding.

S: And we went to her sister's son's bar-mitzvah, and we had to walk out of the reception early, because a couple of the smokers decided they should be allowed to smoke indoors, around children and around everyone, at a religious occasion. And they allowed smoking in the lobby of the synagogue too, which I thought was, uh, really most unreasonable. If you bring something like that to – you just don't bring that to a place of worship. In a bar room or a strip joint I suppose, but not a synagogue, or a church.

B: He can't even stand it at Wal-mart or anywhere else, nearby (*laughs*).

S: Yes. And this was a very, very very expensive type of party, renting this huge hall, at an over-inflated rate.

B: They tried to keep it as cheap as they could. It was a fire-house, upstairs of a fire house. And his friends and then the family came.

In this example we can see that, although Barbara allows him to voice values and perspectives as shared, she doesn't entirely experience them as he does. Although she verbalizes her dissent, (and explicitly identifies some decisions as reflecting what "he" wanted) he doesn't acknowledge it or the emotion that might accompany it unless it is

safely in the past. The following excerpt contains their most mutually validating and affectively positive narrative sequence, but ends with Barbara's assertion of her own emotional response to behavior he enacted on the basis of supposed shared values:

P: We got onto the subjects of weddings when I asked you about feeling close.

S: So, because we are of one mind, I think, on what is reasonable and appropriate for a wedding, our idea of how a wedding should be done, with simplicity and dignity, and in a sober way. And that – and when we are of one mind on something, I think that brings us, I think, close.

P: What about when you're not in agreement?

S: Um, we do have disagreements on the most probable theories about religion. For example, uh, she believes that Jesus ...*[describes theory]* ... but these are beliefs .. the differences. ..

P: So do the disagreements about beliefs or other things effect how you feel about each other?

B: No, because we, you know, know the real truth is that nobody's seen God to be that positive about it.

S: Yes. It's speculation, it's conjecture, and we're not allowed to know while we're alive, that I know of...

B: I do believe that Jesus is the son of God, and that he died for my sins. But, um, I don't know that Stanley – Stanley doesn't believe that.

P: So you're able to accommodate each other in those ways, maintain respect and regard.

S: Yes.

B: Well I can't fight him over it. I mean, a person can't help how they feel. You can't force a person to feel any way.

S: Yes. He probably – well he did sacrifice his life for us, and, uh ..

B: He let himself be killed for us.

S: Yes, very courageously.. and I don't think, though, that he was a sacrificial lamb, that God needed to see some blood spilt to get it out of his system because he's pissed off about sin, and he doesn't care whose blood it is.

B: Well, he does care, because he's the only sinless one. He's the only one that could have done it.

S: Yes, that is what is said. I'm not prepared to say that I can understand well enough to ... *[digression @ example of famous politician's accommodating marriage]* ... So no two people that are married can be expected to have all the same opinions.

B: We don't even eat the same foods.

S: Not exactly the same.

P: You smile at each other when you say that.

S: If she has any onions or garlic, well then kissing is out, so ..

B: He can't stand salmon.

S: So, you like to kiss, but ..

B: .. or tuna fish..

S: Oh, yes, tuna fish is a nightmare in the nose.

B: For him (smiles).

S: Yes. And salmon is pretty rough too.

P: Can you think about a time when things were particularly difficult for you, in the relationship?

B: Yeah. In the wedding. After I was up all night with his mother. And then I had to get up early in the morning to, uh, while it was still dark out to try to finish the wedding cake, and I was working at a job. I told 'em I could only do it for a day or two, because I was getting married and I had to prepare food. And between working and then seeing his mother, and then having to get up .. and then he had a party back here after the wedding, and he flew back, and I was gonna drive back with the rest of the food that was left over, to bring it to the people here. I couldn't make it to the party. I was so exhausted I was afraid I'd have an accident if I got behind the wheel. It was horrible.

S: Yes, but the people here understood, uh, though we didn't understand as much, but .. uh .. people understood. And I told them: well she has to sleep a little more before she can come here.

B: He had no idea what I went through.

S: No, I had no idea how bad.

B: He had no idea.

S: But it was: let's not have her go get killed. And then we had a little party here, and then she came back, uh, ..

P: So it was a rocky beginning to married life.

B: Yeah, he didn't take me on a honeymoon, and he couldn't buy me a ring, and I gave him my father's ring. It was too loose on him. Yeah it was rough.

S: For me the roughest part was when I thought that she would be so deep into the birds that there would be nothing of the marriage left a few years later.

B: Well, I don't want to be so deep into the birds. I mean, I care for him. If you knew them, you know, he's been trying to get into our conversation here, we were talking and Joey was trying awfully hard to get an answer out of me, you know, 'cause I call back and forth to him sometimes. But I do .. kind of rude, you might think .

P: Don't worry about that, if you need to call to him go ahead.

S: Yes.

B: But it upsets him, Stanley, if I call back and forth, some of the time.

P: What is it that bothers you about that?

S: That if something that we want to do together, or something that I might want to enjoy has to take second place to the capricious whim of one of the birds.

B: It's not a capricious whim, that's the characteristic of them, they're flock animals, and um, they always call back and forth to each other, and they accept their owners as members of the flock, and it's natural behavior for them. And I had to ignore Joey when he was calling to me, and I really wanted to answer him.

P: So you make some accommodations for Stanley. You do seem to make quite a few adjustments, in an effort not to upset him. Does it work the other way too?

S: Yes, I do try to. I might make some mistakes, but I do, uh, know that it's very dangerous if that bedroom door is open and Raphael is approaching the bedroom. The cats are not to go into the bedroom.

Barbara and Stanley go on to talk further about the "mechanics" of cohabitation lapsing in and out of sync depending on the level of emotional discomfort aroused, but showing often a quite touching mutual respect and gentle encouragement. They talk at length about his troubled sorties into the employment world, with Barbara unflaggingly supporting his capabilities and his right to a protected work environment. I ask them to imagine a hypothetical reduction in overall stress factors (birds, etc.), and they jointly envision a more pleasurable life together:

B: I'd have a better life, get more rest. Well I could read books, study.

S: Yes, she's always wanted to study a little more mathematics, which I could, uh, teach her.

B: Some statistics, logic, things I never got before.

S: Maybe try reading ..

B: Read some novels ..

S: ... some Balzac short stories. Those are great fun ..

B: Yeah.

S: .. at least she could try them. If she, uh, doesn't like Balzac, that's alright, even though I like him, uh ...

The tentative sweetness that hovers here seems largely due to the underlying sense of their reaching out to each other, she in expressing an interest in statistics, and he in suggesting Balzac. One can imagine a happily married pair of college professors sharing the same vision – never mind that Barbara doesn't strike us as the professorial type – it's the intention that counts here. When I ask them to imagine what their future might actually be like in ten years, however, a more frightening specter emerges:

S: Ah .. I don't know that far into the future. I hate to think of .. of being in our sixties.

P: What makes that a hard thing to think of.

S: Well one of the things I have trouble with is thinking: what about the future when we're so old that we're disabled. I don't want to even consider that, because there's no point in it, you can't do anything about that, eventually you disable and die. Uh, another thing I think of as an obscenity, that uh, that I really don't like if she even talks about it is, uh, such things as what kind of burial arrangements, what kind of grave site. And what good is it to – will those things do, because if you're already dead such things are of no value to you anyway.

B: One thing scares me is if I don't tell you, you might have me donated to medical science and I'll be a medical school cadaver. Leave it to him, believe me. He wouldn't – he thinks there's nothing wrong with it. I don't want to be a medical school cadaver.

S: Well, .. that, that you just – that you do by on your driver’s license not having an organ donor, uh, card.

B: So, you’ll have no money to pay for my funeral, probably, possibly, so my sister might pay something, I don’t know. But there is a grave site. *[specifics]* And she has two extra ones next to her. So I figure I’ll be in a Jewish cemetery next to my mother. And I don’t know if Stanley’s gonna be there or not, ‘cause, um, I don’t know what he’s going to do with his body.

S: Well they could put the left-overs there after they’ve, uh, used what spare parts they could.

B: You don’t mind being buried in a Jewish cemetery?

S: No, uh. What I think I might like is to have – I’d like to have a tombstone that has a picture of a foot booting a bucket.

B: Oh.

P: Kicked the bucket, yeah.

S: Or even a neon sign that would go off at night, with a foot sequencing (demonstrates) – and the bucket sequencing

The tenuousness of their security is apparent here. Barbara receives no reassuring comfort from Stanley, and doesn’t expect any, and Stanley remains his oblivious and inimitable self. Rather than leave them contemplating a grisly end, I presented the final question which invited them to imagine a hypothetical financial windfall. Barbara evokes a longed for feeling of respite from taxing labor, and Stanley fantasizes a life of recreational leisure, including a favorite activity: canoeing down the Delaware River with his nudist community companions. Barbara has closed her eyes when I prompt for a response, but she rouses enough to sum up her basic approach to life with Stanley:

P: Barbara, you resist those events? (*She’s lying still, eyes closed*) Are you sleeping?

B: No, I wasn’t sleeping. Uh, if he wants to go down the Delaware nude with some other people it’s alright with me. Um, I won’t be nude. And I, you know, I’d try to go when I could – I’d rather not get burnt by the sun.

S: That’s alright. I think she’d like the people if she met them ..

B: .. Wear a hat and sunglasses, and not be out too early in the day.

S: Oh, yes.

B: But when you're going with a group of people you can't do much about the time.

P: So your resistance to those things is not about meeting the people and sharing those friendships.

B: No. I feel a little uncomfortable around it, though.

P: Because they're all naked?

B: Yeah. Yeah, I think it's kind of like .. – a little .., but I guess I'd get used to it, but um ... not for the kids so much, but I think it's a little creepy. And I think I don't want to sit around looking at nude women. I mean, I could take a man doing it easier than I could a woman. But I really don't want to see any naked men either (laughs). (Stanley smiles and nods) But I'd do it, you know, I mean, I could live through it. ... It would actually be quite an experience.

Dave and Christine

Background Information

Dave and Christine live in a small Midwestern town, in a modest home that they share with a menagerie of pets and their adolescent son Kevin. It was Kevin who was first diagnosed with an autistic disorder during his early childhood, which led to a subsequent diagnostic assessment of Dave (a fairly common pathway to diagnosis for adults who had previously been unclassified). The family are active participants in a community of families affected by autism, and regularly attend conferences on the topic. They were recruited for this study when they responded to a posting at an annual conference that specializes in providing a live forum for people with autism to share their views. Neither partner was employed at the time of the interview, but both have a history of varied job experience, including efforts at home-based small business enterprises. Christine has been unable to work in recent years because of deteriorating health due to Multiple Sclerosis. Dave has found it hard to obtain and keep jobs, despite having many skills that he feels are marketable. He spends a great deal of time on creative projects, while Christine oversees Kevin's home schooling. Despite their significant difficulties, the family seems able to sustain a warm and engaging interpersonal environment, sharing both pleasures and hardships with a sense of resolve, and a steady dose of irreverent humor.

Dave's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

Describe myself ... hmm ... I don't know where to begin. ... I am one of me. I don't want to sound clichéd, or make it all just nothing but an autistic conglomeration. It's really hard to be self-defined, without saying that other influences haven't played a major part in defining me. Some people say we're the product of environment and constitutional make-up. Other people say we can define ourselves through the use of individual will. I don't know whether I can do that. It's not like I don't have a self-identity; it's just that I don't worry about it. I know a lot of other people think about it. I think they think too much of it. They're more involved in self, where I think of myself as connected. Because, when you think about it logically, if you're part of an eco-system you serve an important function, so I can't think about myself while denying everybody else, because that would mean that I would have no eco-system. To be separate from everything else would not be logically possible, because I am affecting the whole world, like when I talk to a neighbor or a friend, or react to an enemy, I'm influencing things. My problem is that I can't get everybody else to participate with me. A lot of times I feel isolated because getting everybody else to participate is next to impossible. They're all too busy worrying about their business success, or how they look in the mirror – stupid, superficial things. It isn't that I have no interaction with the world; it's that it's an antagonistic interaction.

When you look at things logically there is a connection with everything. I use a lot of logic to function. If it doesn't make logical sense then I've gotta study it, find out

why. Crime is not logical, which is one reason why I have to be honest. I'm just not good at lying. I'm really incompetent when it comes to deception design, so I don't do it. I'm honest because my survival depends upon it. I need logic to function. Deception is not compatible with logic. When you deal with deceptions you have all these little holes all over the place that really trip you up. You can't function with all those holes to fall in, it just gets too confusing, so why bother? I respond to a situation according to what I feel a reaction should be.

I try to be the best that I can be. There are qualities that I think I like in myself. I'm a very hard worker. I also pay attention to details, and that helps if you have a problem to solve. Like, if I have to do something and don't know if I'm really able to do it, I'll look at a few pamphlets and figure it out. You know, I can adapt to things. It's those little accomplishments that give me a sense of whether I'm a success or failure. I determine my smarts by my ability to see a particular task through. But having ability doesn't mean you have value, because if nobody values your ability, what good is it? And if people value things that you are not able to do, what good are you then? If people don't appreciate what you can do, you're not going to see much value in yourself. You know, you get called "Dummy" long enough you're going to be thinking you're a dummy.

As a kid, I was accused of cheating all the time, because I was coming up with answers to the math problems, but not the way they were teaching us to do it. I could explain how I did it, but they wouldn't listen, they only cared about whether I did it their way. So I failed. I don't understand math but I'm able to do numbers. When you think of yourself as an elementary school kid figuring out math problems on your own, instead

of having help from your teachers – something's wrong with the system. Of course, at the time I just thought I was stupid. When you have a matter of opinion of a majority being regularly told to you, you become convinced. My nervous ticks and my anxiety attacks didn't help either. You're just targeted, you know, and what makes it even worse is that the teacher targets you too. One day I found my desk outside the classroom; another day it was inside a closet, and she closed the door. One day she says: "Looks like Dave wants to have his own school, so let's put these charts around him so he doesn't have to be part of our group." And the kids all laughed and helped her do it.

I remember my mom was concerned when I wasn't reacting the way I should have as a child. She went to the doctor and said: "He's not developing right, what's going on here?" And the doctor said: "Well, is he eating his vegetables? ... Then don't worry about it, they all develop differently," ... which makes sense, I guess. So she dropped it, but I think she knew something was wrong. I remember hearing about attention deficit disorders, back in the sixties, and telling my Mom that it sounded like what I was like in school. She said: "No, no, Hon, they're not talking about you, they're talking about retarded people." But they weren't, actually. I wasn't retarded and neither were those kids on the program.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

If I were to define myself without other relations I would be my own universe. I'd be God – be the king of my own world, like we are in our dreams. But, hey, that's not how it is. Like I said, we're all interconnected, logically speaking. The problem is, things don't properly mesh, with me and other people. There's this antagonism. I think it's just two different ways of looking at the world. I've figured out a way of dealing

with people, though. What I do is I'll observe a person and more or less get their personality down, their behavior pattern, their methods of how they reason, how they understand, and then I'll approach. If it's someone I can empathize with I'll grasp it quicker. But it can be hard with the ones who hide themselves, those who wear their own masks trying to keep up appearances. No matter how you try to approach them, there is no way to communicate because they won't even communicate with themselves. So it just depends upon the person, but once I understand how they function then I can deal on their level.

It doesn't seem to work the other way around though. Sometimes I'll try to explain things to people and I can see that it doesn't register. That's my failure. You know, I look at it as saying "I did not succeed in this particular task." See, I'm looking for certain reactions, certain behavior patterns, or kinds of facial expressions, you know, and if I don't see them I know that I'm not getting through. So I'm thinking maybe it's on my side, 'cause I'm giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, you know. But the older I get, the less benefit of doubt I'm giving other people. I'm beginning to think they just don't want to get it, or maybe they're just not capable. I've had people who were curious, you know, they try, but they don't get me. They don't need to. It's not something that's important in their lives. For some people it's an occupation or a hobby, or even an obsession with all the little details. But as far as wanting to actually communicate with me – they don't have a need for that. I'll try to communicate with them and they'll exchange, you know, but it's rarely in depth. I don't think I'm that complicated. Pretty dull, in fact. I guess I'm just not that interesting. At least not according to the feedback I get.

What I've got to do is figure out how to communicate to the socially typical. I think that's what autistics do, on a regular basis. But the socially typical don't want to do that. They want you to pull out of your world: "Come out from among you and be free." Well why don't they all come in? It's nice, the water's fine, you know. It's relaxing, it's paradise in here. Why should I come out and put up with your crap?

People say that it doesn't matter what others think of you, but it does, because that's how you gauge whether you've been successful or not. Whether or not you're likable, whether or not you're on the level of being good or bad, whether or not you're productive, whether or not you're despised... You define your *character* by the reactions of the world, so you can't say that people's opinions don't matter because they do, you know. That's why I'll always be "stupid," because of that antagonistic conflict. And it's always going to be there, just like it was when I was a kid in school. At that time I wasn't aware of how all that stuff was affecting me. My parents didn't see it either. It was just what I expected every day. Just as long as I got through the day, you know. If I didn't come home with a bloody nose I had a good day.

I learned to get over it. You face the dark, make it your friend. After a while it becomes quite comfortable. The dark is what you don't understand, and there's always something you can't understand. Once you stop being afraid of that you don't have to worry about it. For the most part you're in it alone. Everybody's got their support systems, and I don't want to devalue them, you know, but I eventually had to make my own choices. I had to figure out where to fit myself into the whole biosystem, so it could all work together, like it's supposed to.

I ran into problems, though, because I didn't fit in with the role models of the socially typical world. My first marriage started with all those pre-conceived expectations, but the categories were not realistically applicable. My wife wanted to be the homemaker, take care of the house, invite her friends, and tell them how wonderful life is, while I worked in a factory and earned the money. Well, I would work in the factory and bring home the money, but then I would get laid off from the factory and have to draw on my VA benefits. Of course that wasn't enough money so she felt like she had to go to work, because I was not adequate enough to bring home good money. I was not being the man of the house – wasn't man enough to hold down a job. That's the stereotypical reaction. You lose your job, you get castrated. At the time I thought: "There's nothing wrong with me, what's *your* problem?" I tried to reason things out logically, you know. Jobs were scarce during the "Reagonimics" era and I figured I was lucky to have one that kept calling me back. But she didn't see it that way. I'd cook a nice dinner, and she'd say she wanted to go out to eat, even when we couldn't afford to. I never understood that. It was not logical. A lot of the time her reactions just confused me, didn't make sense. With hindsight, you know, I can see that she had very socially typical reactions, and it was very antagonistic. There were certain things that needed to be done in her world, and I was not doing them. I was not satisfying her expectations as far as social requirements for her to feel good about herself, her family, and what she could tell her family, you know. I just didn't meet the requirements.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

My wife, Christine – she's a sweetheart. You'd love her, she's as warped as I am – might even be another ASD, like me. She'd do anything for you, just like she does

everything for me. One of the things I admire most is her courage. She's not afraid, you know. Well, she is afraid – if you weren't afraid you wouldn't have courage, or need it – but it doesn't stop her. She sees something she needs done, she'll do it. Especially if it's for Kevin's sake (our son). She'll go over to the school, might get tossed around a bit, get upset about it, and then she'll go back, armed with all the “parents' rights” and everything, and say: “This is the way it's going to be.” They finally stopped fighting her. I guess it was the chutzpah, the tenacity ... I don't know. She knows when to stand firm. I suppose you could call her behavior “bossy” but that's not what it is. She's just right. And she's a sweetheart, you know, really. I wouldn't want to take her for granted. She's a very valuable person.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

There's no social role playing in our relationship. No stereotypical model to maintain. We are who we are, and we like it that way. I mean there's no woman's role, no man's role, no wife's role, no husband's role, it's just: “You do this better than I do, it's your turn.” You gotta go back and forth. She thinks I'm a sweetheart, dollbaby. We got the dollbaby-babydoll routine. She says “dollbaby,” and I say “babydoll,” or the other way around. We're a whole household of babies here, dogs and cats included. All babies in the same house, you know, facing the same world. I like everybody being in the same boat, because that way you don't have a particular person to blame. I can be a man, an adult, and I can be a child. That's me, you know. With Christine I don't have to prove myself, I don't have to go through tests. We're honest about our capabilities, so we don't have to try to embarrass each other because of our incapacities, you know. We trust each other.

Our relationship has changed things for me. I've got the freedom to make choices, now that I don't have to constantly fight trying to prove what I can do. I have the freedom to express, and that gives me more confidence. Whereas in my previous marriage, if I failed I wasn't a man. Being with Christine has opened things up. I think it's made life more educational, information more available. Once the availability opened up things were fine. I now have the ability to explore, to discover. I can pursue my special interests, and I don't have to explain myself. Christine doesn't have those prejudices or expectations that go along with socially typical role models.

She knows I can be very naïve at times, too honest for my own good. And she knows I can't lie to her. I've tried, but she'll just stand there and say: "Come on," and so I just break down and tell her the truth. I think she knows I'd do anything for her. And I think she knows I'm not going anywhere. Whether she appreciates that or not (laughs), I don't know. I'm hoping she does. I'd hate to be the person she just can't get rid of. We tease each other about that, you know. We're both stuck with each other, like it or not. Sometimes I don't know exactly what she sees in me. I think I must have done something right, 'cause she's still around. It's probably better that I don't get too confident, because that kind of reminds me to do something, you know, from time to time. I think I've got the confidence; I just don't take it for granted. Because once you start taking something for granted, it starts devaluating, you know.

If I were to try to describe our relationship, I'd have to say that it depends upon the mood. Sometimes it's romantic; sometimes it's a playmate situation; or like a brother-sister relationship. Sometimes we're like a comedy team, playing off each other. My only complaint is that I don't get all the chocolate I want any more. She'll say: "No

chocolate and that's final. Keep your hands off that dish!" I'm a chocoholic. It's one of my addictions, or a kind of eating disorder. Once I get started I can't stop. I'm like the dog who will eat until its stomach explodes. I've learned to use a small plate, and then wait a couple of hours before taking another. If we determine there's a problem Christine will get right in there and put her foot down. She'll get out the 2x4 and say: "Time to take your medicine," and I go in there and take it.

I really feel that she understands me. She listens, she discusses. She'll talk with me about things and give me feedback, even when I demand it. I think she's pretty sensitive to my mood swings. The worst part is when she's walking on eggshells, 'cause it's not really her problem, it's mine, you know. Sometimes I just can't be around, you know, so I'll head into town. And I know when I need to do that. When I get the anger and frustration feeling, it's time to go. So I'll go somewhere and spend some time. She doesn't know why or what she should do. Like, I'll be sitting outside, my mind going 90 miles-per-hour, and I can't get it to stop, you know, and she – it's like she's walking on eggshells. "I don't want to disturb you," she'll say, "I know you're dealing with stuff," or, you know, "Are you hungry or anything?" She 's there, you know.

I think I'd like her to know that it's okay to communicate too, you know. I'm getting the time to fix things, you know, and she shouldn't be walking on eggshells. I don't want her to be afraid of me. I don't think anyone should be afraid of me. Except bullies. I hate bullies. I tear into bullies, I don't give them any slack. I've had it in my life, and I'm not taking it anymore, and I'm not going to give them a chance to do that anymore. Whether it's my problem or not, whether it's my business or not, if I find a bully bullying somebody, I jump in.

I think ... I attempt to make sure that I understand Christine. I want to be flexible, and I know people go through changes due to circumstances and conditions, and I try to be understanding. But I don't rely on intuition. Like, when she feels like she has to be "walking on eggshells" around me – it's not something I pick up on. I know about it because she's told others in front of me. She told you, and I was sitting right over there and heard it. So it's not intuitive. I think it's logical, and I think you can tune into people better that way. Because when you take a leap beyond logic, the only thing you get into is chaos. That's why logic is so important.

Now, when Christine gets upset – that can send me into a panic. I don't want her upset, because then *I* start walking on eggshells: "Anything I can do?" you know, "What can I do for you?" ... and I just don't think I know enough to do. I do what I can, but there again, does she want to talk about it? Is she dealing with it like I am? I think that's what she does. She deals with it like I do. I still look at her as a socially typical type, you know, and usually with a socially typical type, you're not suppose to give up. "You're suppose to get into my problems and empathize with me, and then show me that you care because you get it." Whereas the autistic response is: "Get away from me, I don't want you to be involved with it. I can deal with it myself and you're getting in the way." So, I go off by myself, and she doesn't get in the way, and I think I do the same thing with her. I'm expecting the socially typical behavior pattern, but I'll sit there and I'll wait it out. I'll want to talk to her but I don't want to disturb her. So I'll wait it out. It's like being on alert status, you know, I'll just wait it out. It's a feeling of anticipation, a waiting for something to happen, and dealing with what happens, instead of second

guessing. I don't want to go in direct, you know, because otherwise I'll wind up with all those mind games, and I don't do well with those. I avoid them.

That might be the hardest part of being in the relationship with Christine. Because, like I said, she'll do anything for me. She does everything she can for me, and I don't know whether I reciprocate well enough. Probably not. I'm not sure that I do ... and I don't really know how to gauge it. I think I'm willing to, and I think I could recognize the opportunity to reciprocate. But then, I don't go out of my way or obsess about it. Sometimes I'm aware that she wants me to do something, but I'll be, like, glued to the TV. And I'm thinking: "I should go upstairs and help her ... I should go in the kitchen and help her ... I should go in Kevin's room and help her ... Nahhhh." So I'll have the thought, but it's just there, you know. Sometimes I'll just get wrapped up into things and I just can't pull out of it, you know. I think a lot of times it's because of my sensory issues. I'll walk away from things that I just can't deal with. Avoid it. Conflict, you know.

I do feel close to Christine. I think it's because of the ASD connection. My brother is another person I've gotten along with, and we think he has ASD too. Of course my mother wouldn't hear of it when we raised the possibility. She couldn't accept it when our son was diagnosed. She said: "Oh he can't be, he's just like his dad." ... Hello-oh.

In general, that feeling of alienation, being unable to connect with people has remained constant. You know, you have a socially typical person – that's a constant thing – you can only learn so much about the person. With autistically typical people – it's like an open book, you know everything about them. It's only rarely that I can't get a

good idea of who the person is, what they're up to, why they want to do things. They're real easy to satisfy. Socially typical people – they just put on that façade – think they're fooling everybody, you know.

Christine and I have been married for sixteen years now. We've hardly been apart in all that time. She went on vacation without me once. I thought that was kind of odd, but I don't think it seriously bothered me. Logically, you know, she and her family went somewhere. And I said: "Okay, I'll wait here," and she said: "Good, 'cause that's what you have to do" So I said: "Oh, well, now I have the whole house to myself. Okay." So I thought it was great. I said I'd take care of Kevin while they were away, but they sent him over to Grandma's. For some reason daddies are not that trusted. I didn't particularly miss Christine. Well I knew she was coming back. I mean that's like missing someone when they go to work. It doesn't matter whether it's a day, or a week. Time is irrelevant. It's only a concept.

Analysis of Dave's Narrative

Dave is initially thrown by the task of describing himself, and doesn't quite know where to begin. He tries to approach the issue of "identity" from a theoretical point of view, but this notion seems to prove too abstract and indefinite for him to organize his thoughts around. He handles this conundrum by backing off and claiming that he doesn't worry about it, yet other evidence tells us that it's an on-going preoccupation for him. In fact, Dave has written an entire book about what it's like to be Dave, detailing his struggle to define himself within the context of a world that doesn't "get" him. His written material cannot be incorporated into the present analysis, however the mismatch he experiences between himself and the outside world is richly explored in his interview responses. We come upon Dave having exercised, through written narrative, the desire to make sense of his own inner world and the disconnect between himself and others around him, only to find him still grappling with these issues.

What Dave seems to be seeking calls to mind ideas touched on earlier: the notion that, in order to fully experience ourselves, we need to see our own inner experiences reflected and responded to within the minds of others. "See, I'm looking for certain reactions," he says, "Certain behavior patterns or kinds of facial expressions..."

In addition to distributing his book, Dave regularly participates in specialized forums designed to bring individuals with autism together to share their insights with interested audiences. Like Stanley, Dave clearly yearns for acceptance and understanding, and struggles with feelings of anger and resentment. He reaches out to the

external world, extending an invitation to view things from his perspective, but often ends up feeling rejected.

What I've got to do is figure out how to communicate to the socially typical. I think that's what autistics do, on a regular basis. But the socially typical don't want to do that. They want you to pull out of your world: "Come out from among you and be free." Well why don't they all come in? It's nice, the water's fine, you know. It's relaxing, it's paradise in here. Why should I come out and put up with your crap?

During our time together I found Dave warm and inviting despite his social awkwardness. As the interview progressed, his way of presenting information about himself shifted away from his initial attempt to characterize himself in abstract philosophical terms to more spontaneous self-disclosure, incorporating concrete descriptions of real life experiences and interactions. With this shift his narrative became more organized and coherent. Dave used descriptive adjectives and phrases that referred to different domains of self experience, including the social/relational realms as well as his individual style of problem solving and adaptation. While he didn't choose to specifically characterize his temperament, Dave used a large variety of emotion laden terms, conveying a broad range of intensity and complexity. Another linguistic aspect which stands out in Dave's narrative is his use of personal pronouns as he describes his experience. Dave maintains his subjective position as he recounts his past actions, but when talking about his feelings and reactions to others' treatment of him he switches to "you," as if appealing to the listener to join with him and take on his emotional burden:

As a kid, I was accused of cheating all the time, because I was coming up with answers to the math problems, but not the way they were teaching us to do it. I could explain how I did it, but they wouldn't listen, they only cared about whether I did it their way. So I failed. I don't understand math but I'm able to do numbers. When you think of yourself as an elementary school kid figuring out math problems on your own, instead of having help from your teachers – something's wrong with the system. Of course, at the time I just thought I was stupid. When you have a matter of opinion of a majority being regularly told to you, you become convinced. My nervous ticks and my anxiety attacks

didn't help either. You're just targeted, you know, and what makes it even worse is that the teacher targets you too.

This fluid linguistic perspective evokes the over-arching theme of Dave's narrative: his quest for "oceanic" connection with the world around him, a drive which psycho-dynamic theorists sometimes link to the symbiotic fantasies of infancy (Kohut, 1977). In this respect Dave seems to share some common ground with Susan, who has embraced her overly-permeable boundaries as the only alternative to feeling sealed off, "... in a tube with portholes for eyes."

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Theme # 1 "I am one of me."

It's not like I don't have a self-identity; it's just that I don't worry about it. I know a lot of other people think about it. I think they think too much of it. They're more involved in self, where I think of myself as connected.

Dave's desire to be connected to and valued by others is so powerful that it suffuses virtually his entire narrative with longing and frustration. He sees himself as open and available, but struggles to reconcile this image with his feeling of isolation. Dave seems to continually scan the environment for feedback about himself. When he gets it he senses its often negative cast, and resists taking it to heart, hence his perception of himself as being in constant "antagonistic interaction" with the social world. Since he can't be "one of them" Dave defiantly remains "one of me."

Theme #2 We're all interconnected – and yet I feel so alone.

If I were to define myself without other relations I would be my own universe. I'd be God – be the king of my own world, like we are in our dreams. But, hey, that's not how it is.

Dave resists acknowledging the underlying conflict that we can sense in his narrative, that he feels a need to have omnipotent control that competes with his relational goals. The “universe” has been unkind to him, making it easy to experience people’s “other-ness” as malevolent. This evokes a grandiose and combative response in Dave, hence his construction of an internalized representation of himself in “antagonistic interaction” with external objects. At this stage it isn’t possible to distinguish between Dave’s subjective perception of the difference between himself and others, and the concept he has developed since embracing his diagnosis of autism. One gets the sense that he has always experienced himself as “different” with or without a label.

Dave seems to be trying to accept and tolerate his feelings of difference and alienation, working on maintaining the upper hand against a creeping existential anxiety, one that is arguably no different from the “dark place” that most of us seek to avoid in one way or another. He rightly senses that this aspect of experience is universal, and seems to find some comfort in that. He does indeed share something with the rest of the human race:

The dark is what you don’t understand, and there’s always something you can’t understand. Once you stop being afraid of that you don’t have to worry about it. For the most part you’re in it alone.

Theme #3 “autistic conglomeration”

I remember my mom was concerned when I wasn't reacting the way I should have as a child. She went to the doctor and said: "He's not developing right, what's going on here?"

Throughout his narrative Dave cites aspects of his self-regulatory, social, and cognitive functioning that are characteristic of individuals with autistic spectrum disorders, without explicitly identifying them as autistic traits. As is the case with all of the participants represented here, we don't know to what degree Dave's self-perceptions are colored by assumptions deriving from his membership in the larger category of people with the disorder. Dave's professed strong reliance on logic is a hallmark of autistic cognition, and one that emerges strongly in the material generated by the participants in the present study. Like Stanley, Dave tends to retreat inward at times of emotional distress, where he peels away affect in search of a core of manageable facts. With the threat of disorganization ever present Dave clings to the safety of logical processing, "... Because when you take a leap beyond logic, the only thing you get into is chaos."

Dave's relative strength in this area of cognitive functioning contributes to a positive sense of self, which is reinforced as he applies himself to solving the problems of everyday life, however he struggles to sustain his self-esteem in the absence of reinforcing feedback:

You know, I can adapt to things. It's those little accomplishments that give me a sense of whether I'm a success or failure. I determine my smarts by my ability to see a particular task through. But having ability doesn't mean you have value, because if nobody values your ability, what good is it?

Theme #4 I define my character by the reactions of the world.

You know, you get called “Dummy” long enough you’re going to be thinking you’re a dummy.

Dave describes specific interactions with others that caused him to see himself as inadequate, within his school environment as well as in his first marriage relationship.

His stories show his progression from clueless submission to a social order in which he was the acknowledged underdog, through increasing awareness of the impact of others on his sense of himself.

You define your *character* by the reactions of the world, so you can’t say that people’s opinions don’t matter because they do, you know. That’s why I’ll always be “stupid,” because of that antagonistic conflict. And it’s always going to be there, just like it was when I was a kid in school. At that time I wasn’t aware of how all that stuff was affecting me. My parents didn’t see it either. It was just what I expected every day. Just as long as I got through the day, you know. If I didn’t come home with a bloody nose I had a good day.

In hindsight, Dave tends to see these experiences as representative of his status as an “atypical” individual who simply doesn’t function in a “socially typical” manner – to the consternation of those around him. Like Stanley, Dave harbors a fair amount of resentment and pain, and carries on an internal battle in his attempt to reject the image of himself as unworthy. While Stanley’s struggle with negative external feedback engenders a constant threat of annihilation, Dave’s sense of personal integrity and hope of acceptance seem more likely to survive. Most importantly, Dave sees his need to feel good about himself as a function of relational experience, and recognizes this need as one that’s shared by others, including those who reject and disappoint him. With this capacity, and his (albeit limited) ability to tolerate critical feedback, Dave can begin to explore his sense of himself in relation to others. He acknowledges the anger and feelings of failure engendered during his first marriage, and uses these affective signals in

order to reflect, with some understanding, on his ex-wife's experience of him as a relationship partner:

There were certain things that needed to be done in her world, and I was not doing them. I was not satisfying her expectations as far as social requirements for her to feel good about herself, her family, and what she could tell her family, you know. I just didn't meet the requirements.

Dave's defensive maneuvers are fairly transparent here: he projects his own experience of social inadequacy onto his ex-wife, along with the implication that she should fight against external forces that seek to define and devalue her, as he himself does. At times, Dave's "antagonistic conflict" appears to be as much a battle to maintain a sense of the unique humanity and "personhood" of himself and others, as it is a fight between a misunderstood underdog and the conventional types surrounding him. He sees himself as failing to fit a "role model" and seems to understand that such models are merely frameworks for conceptualizing social behavior, not categories of actual people. At more vulnerable moments however, Dave falls back on a more formulaic representation of others:

In general, that feeling of alienation, being unable to connect with people has remained constant. You know, you have a socially typical person – that's a constant thing – you can only learn so much about the person. With autistically typical people – it's like an open book, you know everything about them.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Theme #1 "Stereotypical role models."

My wife wanted to be the homemaker, take care of the house, invite her friends, and tell them how wonderful life is, while I worked in a factory and earned the money.

Having mastered a certain amount of concrete information about social norms, Dave uses this framework to interpret the attitudes and behavior of others. He applies his

theory of “socially typical” functioning in his efforts to understand others’ reactions to his own “atypical” behavior. This approach seems to serve Dave in a limited fashion, helping him to make sense of the social world, and enabling him to cope with the discomforts of feeling alienated and rejected by others, including his first wife.

I’d cook a nice dinner, and she’d say she wanted to go out to eat, even when we couldn’t afford to. I never understood that. It was not logical. A lot of the time her reactions just confused me, didn’t make sense. With hindsight, you know, I can see that she had very socially typical reactions, and it was very antagonistic.

Theme #2 The Socially Typical are preoccupied with superficial concerns.

They’re all too busy worrying about their business success, or how they look in the mirror – stupid, superficial things.

When discussing his negative experiences in the social world, Dave tends to lump everyone together under the label “socially typical,” expressing a view of others as self-involved and materially oriented. It appears to escape Dave that, in doing this, he’s engaging in the same manner of rigid stereotyping that he objects to so strongly. Dave’s need for these rigid defenses clearly reflects the degree of negative feedback he’s received.

... I was not adequate enough to bring home good money. I was not being the man of the house – wasn’t man enough to hold down a job. That’s the stereotypical reaction. You lose your job, you get castrated.

When feeling more comfortable, Dave’s capacity to appreciate individuality and the rewards of social intercourse motivates him to apply himself to the task of interaction – in much the same manner as he would approach solving a practical problem, using logic rather than intuition:

I've figured out a way of dealing with people, though. What I do is I'll observe a person and more or less get their personality down, their behavior pattern, their methods of how they reason, how they understand, and then I'll approach. If it's someone I can empathize with I'll grasp it quicker.

Dave's use of the term "empathize" should be interpreted cautiously here, as it most likely refers to a sense that he can identify with another individual by virtue of perceived similarities or shared experience. This comes through clearly in his statement about bullies:

I hate bullies. I tear into bullies, I don't give them any slack. I've had it in my life, and I'm not taking it anymore, and I'm not going to give them a chance to do that anymore. Whether it's my problem or not, whether it's my business or not, if I find a bully bullying somebody, I jump in.

A more mature empathic capacity would involve an ability to feel emotionally engaged through reflecting on another person's perceived affect and experience, even if it substantially differs from one's own. According to the main theoretical frameworks presented here the capacity for empathy most often emerges in the context of positive early relational experience (Sroufe, 1988), in which the caregiver's empathic stance creates an emotional "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1965). Through reciprocal contact with a caring other who registers and accepts our full range of affective experience, we evolve our own ability to allow another's emotion to resonate within ourselves (Fonagy and Target, 1998). Dave's development in this area seems to be in progress, even when he appears to be focused primarily on the nuts and bolts of negotiating the external world. In contrast to practical matters, Dave's relational goals seem more significant to him, judging from the amount of material devoted to his attempts to "connect" with other people. In his text we can see how Dave struggles to

make himself understood and accepted so that, ultimately, he can see others in a more positive and empathic light. We can also sense how discouraged and frustrated he often is, a condition that impedes his developmental progress:

Sometimes I'll try to explain things to people and I can see that it doesn't register. That's my failure. You know, I look at it as saying "I did not succeed in this particular task." See, I'm looking for certain reactions, certain behavior patterns, or kinds of facial expressions, you know, and if I don't see them I know that I'm not getting through. So I'm thinking maybe it's on my side, 'cause I'm giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, you know. But the older I get, the less benefit of doubt I'm giving other people.

Theme # 3 My wife, Christine – she's a sweetheart.

I suppose you could call her behavior "bossy" but that's not what it is. She's just right. And she's a sweetheart, you know, really. I wouldn't want to take her for granted. She's a very valuable person.

Dave's narrative takes on a warm and playful tone when he begins to describe his wife, Christine. He characterizes her in overwhelmingly positive terms, suggesting that he tends to minimize or deny negative aspects of his experience with her in order to preserve an idealized image, however he does allude tentatively to times when her presence or needs cause a negative response in him. We can surmise that she must sometimes be the trigger for the episodes of intense dysregulation Dave refers to. The strong appreciation, admiration, and affection Dave expresses convey a genuine quality, and are palpable when he and Christine are together (as observed during their interview). He backs up his positive characterization with behavioral descriptions, giving the listener a sense of what it would be like to be with Christine.

Dave cites aspects of Christine that appear to be projections of his own character traits, and clearly wishes to identify her as, like himself, a person with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder), as if it's some sort of pre-condition for the attunement they enjoy.

These aspects are left unelaborated, however, whereas her warmth and humor, and personal strengths are richly described.

Overall, Dave seems reluctant to address Christine's feelings, perhaps reflecting his own wish to minimize her affective needs. While Dave expresses a desire to be emotionally supportive, there is little evidence that he pursues this in any active way. His ability to spontaneously consider the question of whether he neglects her needs in the context of the relationship indicates a latent capacity for more empathic reflective functioning. Dave's descriptions of Christine's nurturing and organizing effect on him are most suggestive of her function as a "secure base" in both his inner and external worlds. This term is used by *Attachment* theorists to denote the infant's healthy use of the mothering figure as a supportive presence in his bid for autonomy, allowing him to freely explore the surrounding environment while feeling secure in the knowledge that she will be there to fulfill his needs whenever required (Bowlby, 1977; Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985).

RERESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Theme #1 We're not Socially Typical.

There's no social role playing in our relationship. No stereotypical model to maintain. We are who we are, and we like it that way.

Because of his negatively colored representations of the surrounding world of non-autistic people, Dave wishes to free his relationship and hence his partner from the "taint" of socially typical identity. This allows him to experience a gratifying fantasized symbiotic bond with Christine. It also relieves Dave of the responsibility of more mature reciprocal support of Christine, since he can comfortably operate on the assumption that

she prefers to deal independently with her emotional needs as he does. When he allows himself to more honestly reflect on Christine's experience Dave's equilibrium is shaken. In a mere recounting of his response to her negative affect he is disrupted and helpless. Dave is not at all aided by the concept of "atypical" status, nor is he sure which category Christine fits into.

Now, when Christine gets upset – that can send me into a panic. I don't want her upset, because then *I* start walking on eggshells: "Anything I can do?" you know, "What can I do for you?" ... and I just don't think I know enough to do. I do what I can, but there again, does she want to talk about it? Is she dealing with it like I am? I think that's what she does. She deals with it like I do. I still look at her as a socially typical type, you know, and usually with a socially typical type, you're not supposed to give up.

On a more positive note, Dave's slender regard for conventional roles allows him a measure of freedom and flexibility in defining his marital relationship. This clearly bolsters the positive valence in his representation of the bond, in a way that likely reflects a genuine experience of relief from the pressure of both societal and interpersonal conventions.

If I were to try to describe our relationship, I'd have to say that it depends upon the mood. Sometimes it's romantic; sometimes it's a playmate situation; or like a brother-sister relationship. Sometimes we're like a comedy team, playing off each other.

As seems to be the case with most of the other subjects in the study, finding a partner who is willing to be flexible in defining the terms of the relationship has contributed greatly to Dave's sense of comfort and security in his marriage. The downside to this is that Dave's attention to his own comfort appears to leave Christine with an unequal share of the burden, as we will see in her own narrative, in which she assigns herself the role of a *typical* wife and mother.

Theme #2 The transformative power of mutual acceptance and shared affect.

Our relationship has changed things for me. I've got the freedom to make choices, now that I don't have to constantly fight trying to prove what I can do. I have the freedom to express, and that gives me more confidence.

Dave's sense of safety in his bond with Christine has clearly impacted his sense of himself as an individual as well as a relationship partner. Their shared affect is an essential ingredient, yet it's the unconditional acceptance Dave feels that allows him to experience that reciprocal emotion.

We're a whole household of babies here, dogs and cats included. All babies in the same house, you know, facing the same world. I like everybody being in the same boat, because that way you don't have a particular person to blame. I can be a man, an adult, and I can be a child. That's me, you know. With Christine I don't have to prove myself, I don't have to go through tests. We're honest about our capabilities, so we don't have to try to embarrass each other because of our incapacities, you know. We trust each other.

The regressive quality of Dave's representation of his family likely reflects (and gratifies) a narcissistic need that was un-met through most of his life. Unlike Stanley, Dave seems able to actually take in this psychic nourishment, and use it in building a more stable and secure sense of self. His description captures the rapturous sense of connectedness he yearns for and absolves him of any and all "blame" – the stuff of everyone's deepest fantasies. Elements of reality mingle with Dave's infantile wishes; he is a "baby" in a very real sense, and he has found refuge from an atmosphere of intolerable criticism. On one level Dave is blissfully oblivious of the fact that "all in the same boat" doesn't mean each is manning an oar – or two oars. In seeking comfort, Dave can easily forget that a household of babies could not survive without someone in the role of adult. It is telling that he neglects to specifically include his son in the roster of passengers. Fatherhood may be an unsettling role for Dave. On another level, Dave

shows us that he is aware of Christine's role in providing stability: "If we determine there's a problem Christine will get right in there and put her foot down."

Dave doesn't seem to resent Christine's authority or control in his life, perhaps because they have negotiated an ample zone of autonomy in which Dave is free to exercise his choices, and free of external demands and responsibilities. Dave is dimly aware that he has the sweetest of deals, and convincingly expresses his appreciation and certainty: "She's there, you know." When an element of uncertainty creeps in, we can sense Dave's heightened anxiety, and recognize it as signaling the potential for developmental growth. Whether Dave will move forward towards a more mature relational capacity, or remain "arrested" in an early stage is an open question. In the meantime Dave appears to be testing the waters of relational reality:

Sometimes I don't know exactly what she sees in me. I think I must have done something right, 'cause she's still around. It's probably better that I don't get too confident, because that kind of reminds me to do something, you know, from time to time.

Theme #3 Walking on eggshells.

I think she knows I'd do anything for her. And I think she knows I'm not going anywhere. Whether she appreciates that or not (laughs), I don't know. I'm hoping she does. I'd hate to be the person she just can't get rid of.

Dave's struggle with the idea that he should become more attuned and responsive to his partner's needs causes him significant discomfort. He wants to see himself as caring and worthy of her investment, yet he seems aware that she does more than her share of accommodation. Dave distances himself and shuts out Christine's affect when he needs to self-regulate. He cannot tolerate her emotional presence at these times, and finds it easy to explain away his more general tendency to disregard her feelings as a

consequence of his (autistic) impaired intuition. He amply demonstrates, however, that he has other tools for obtaining information about her inner states. When Dave describes needing to be alone when he is upset, he conceptualizes Christine's complex response: anxiety around the threat of further disruption; understanding that he is "dealing with stuff;" and unambiguous emotional availability. It is likely that the emotion he detects in Christine at these times truly taxes him in ways that are hard to manage, yet it also seems that his awareness of her emotional investment serves a significant positive function. Although Dave needs to screen out her affect in order to regain his own equilibrium, he seems to have internalized her comforting presence in a more enduring sense. He runs into difficulty, however, as he begins to acknowledge that she has needs of her own that call for a nurturing response from him:

That might be the hardest part of being in the relationship with Christine. Because, like I said, she'll do anything for me. She does everything she can for me, and I don't know whether I reciprocate well enough. Probably not. I'm not sure that I do ... and I don't really know how to gauge it. I think I'm willing to, and I think I could recognize the opportunity to reciprocate. But then, I don't go out of my way or obsess about it. ... So I'll have the thought, but it's just there, you know. Sometimes I'll just get wrapped up into things and I just can't pull out of it, you know. I think a lot of times it's because of my sensory issues. I'll walk away from things that I just can't deal with. Avoid it. Conflict, you know.

The conflict and anxiety Dave overtly struggles with here provide insight into his ongoing process of restructuring his inner object world. As he begins to see Christine in a more complex and realistic sense, he must re-define his own role as a relationship partner, and evaluate his success in living up to the demands of that role. This represents a shift from his earlier struggles against feelings of inadequacy inflicted by and an uncompromising and persecutory external social world, internalized in such a way that Dave could comfortably excuse himself from any obligation to accommodate. Dave's

current mode of managing the demands of being in a relationship still tend toward less mature strategies – idealized narcissistic fantasies and selective denial, not to mention the standard fall back on his autistic impairment. But, having experienced a stable and supportive bond with a nurturing and accepting other, Dave appears to be more capable of acknowledging his own shortcomings with regard to his partner’s needs. We see him rationalizing and sublimating in response to this discomfort – higher order defenses, though employed in fairly basic fashion. More importantly, we are prompted to look – again, as Alvarez and Reid (1999) have urged – at Dave’s affective response to his own internalized representations. He is anxious and uncomfortable, not because he fears abandonment or loss of his nurturing object, but because he must critically evaluate himself in a complex role. In order to do this Dave must relinquish his superficial distinctions between “socially typical” and “atypical” and look carefully at Dave and Christine. He poses the essential question to himself, and it isn’t about *how* he will gauge her emotional needs and responses, it’s about whether he will “walk away” from them or permit them to register.

Dave has clearly internalized the positive aspects of Christine’s affective presence, to a degree that perhaps distorts her actual role as his relationship partner. We’d be forgiven if we assumed that his assertions of mutual engagement and affective reciprocity were simply the products of blissful denial. Yet the warm and reciprocal quality of their observed and recorded interactions supports his description of their mutual attunement, and suggests that she does indeed derive pleasure and comfort from the relationship. The missing pieces here might include Christine’s collusion in maintaining the status quo, evident to a degree in Dave’s narrative but more obvious in

Christine's own. As long as she continues to minimize her needs and provide intensive emotional and ego support to Dave, she'll likely retain her unambiguously positive image in his inner world.

In psychodynamic developmental terms, Dave might be said to be “on the road to object constancy” (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975), meaning that he can cope with many challenges and function independently in significant ways, aided by an internalized representation of an available and supportive other. Dave's current relational capacity seems not unlike that of a pre-oedipal child – he can detect and share his partner's emotions and experience reciprocal responsiveness. But in order to achieve further growth towards relational maturity, Dave will likely need to experience the challenge of maintaining stable object representations in the face of more realistic relational demands, involving incorporation of more negative and less gratifying aspects of Christine, along with Dave's learning to cope with negative affect related specifically to those changes. A “rapprochement” phase, in other words, perhaps something like our first couple Susan and Tom muscled through during the early years of their marriage. In the meantime, barring drastic changes, Dave will likely continue to benefit from the sense of security derived from his stable and positive object representation, but missing out on the nuances of mature relatedness – if not missing Christine.

I didn't particularly miss Christine. Well I knew she was coming back. I mean that's like missing someone when they go to work. It doesn't matter whether it's a day, or a week. Time is irrelevant. It's just a concept.

Christine's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

Oh gosh, let me think here ... Um, basically I'm exceedingly shy. Most people don't believe that about me, I'm very shy, um, ... I'm having a hard time deciding what to say about myself. I bet it would be easier if you asked some direct questions. Let's see ... well, as I said, shy, but also very outgoing, and very articulate. Um, I'm someone with many varied interests (a science fiction fanatic), and who likes to travel – no, *loves* to travel, when given the opportunity. My first husband was in the air force so we spent a lot of time overseas. That gave me the traveling bug. That's the one thing I miss about my previous marriage. We spent three years in Turkey, in a pretty remote area. That was a mind altering experience, I can tell you, if you've never been pushed into another culture like that. There I was, thrust in the middle of another country clear across the world, having to learn how to communicate and how to get around on my own, with no one to guide me through it, you know, just me and my little dictionary. So, yeah, it makes you or breaks you I guess. But prior to that I was exceedingly shy. I think at my core, I probably still am, but my experience there forced me to overcome it.

Nowadays I'm pretty laid back, I think I'm a very relaxed person to be around. I think my shyness made it difficult for me to accomplish things when I was younger. As a child I was so incredibly shy it was physically painful. I remember hiding behind my mother because I was afraid to meet someone new. It was just such an intense experience, I felt like my whole body was on fire. So, yeah, that's the extremely shy side of me.

Lately, over the past year or so, I've been remembering a lot of that kind of stuff about my childhood, now that I've started to think of myself as maybe being on the autistic spectrum. It's been a few years since my husband Dave was diagnosed, and even longer since we discovered that our son had it. But the more I'm around it, the more I think it applies to me. I mean, I did the toe walking as a kid, and people said: "Oh, she must want to be a ballerina," that kind of thing, you know, typical little girl thing. But I did it a lot. And I had some facial ticks that I finally got under control. I just look and see a lot of things about my behavior, you know, the spacing out, the behaving in certain ways and not understanding why I did it. There's a lot of things that I understand a lot more now.

I guess I'm a pretty typical wife and mom, in a lot of ways. You know, I have that attitude of: it's easier for me to do something myself rather than try to get somebody else to do it. I was diagnosed with MS a few years ago, and I guess I still haven't learned to balance all that. I'm the kind of person – when I'm feeling good, it's like I want to accomplish everything. So I'm guilty of pushing myself too much, because when I'm having a good day I don't know when I'll have another one, and so I want to accomplish everything that I can. You just take it one day at a time I guess. I try to prioritize, you know, deal with the life-threatening stuff, and let the rest wait till tomorrow. I mean, no one's going to keel over if I don't vacuum the floor today.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

My extreme shyness made it difficult for me to do things like participating in class at school, or going for job interviews, things like that. As far as the whole social thing went, I did not get it at all, it just made absolutely no sense to me. I don't think I

learned how to get along with people until I went overseas where I was really forced to learn how to communicate, at a real base level. You know, when you're dealing with people that don't have the same communication skills, don't speak the same language... I mean, my little pocket Turkish dictionary was never far away from me, and I had many conversations where that was the only tool, the only commonality between us, you know. You have to learn to communicate on such a base level. So I think that experience is what helped me along the way.

That experience of living in a different culture really had a huge effect on me. It made me think about people, you know, like people I've met here in the US who are coming from other countries. It just really made me think about what they must be experiencing. Between that and my experience with Dave and other autistic people, I've really learned how important it is to accept people for who they are. I mean, I feel like I'm an intelligent, articulate person, but maybe I don't always represent myself that way, because in other relationships I've always been made to feel that I was less than that. Matter of fact, here's a kind of a humorous story from my first marriage: My ex-husband – like I said, he was in the air force, in accounting – he thought he was really highly intelligent and everything. Well, after we got back to the states he was ready to get out, but I still liked to travel around, so I was ready to go ahead and join up myself. And he just thought: “Oh, you'll never make it, you'll never make it,” and all this stuff. Well I went and I took the initial testing, and I ranked the highest score in the class, I only missed one question. I scored so much higher than he did on those tests, and that made me feel so incredibly good, because, you know, my ex just kind of ridiculed my intelligence. And so that was kind of the beginning of finding my own self-esteem.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

What attracted me to Dave, initially, was his sense of humor. He gets out and out silly sometimes, but that's one thing I've always really enjoyed about him, his great sense of humor. He could always make me laugh. I had come out of a very difficult marriage and I think I really needed that laughter. He can be very outgoing if he's around people that he's comfortable with, but he gets over stimulated. In the beginning I wasn't all that aware of his odd behaviors. Along the way I've kind of discovered that he can wear a mask for a certain amount of time, before he has to go off by himself for awhile just to let loose, I guess. I know he has a lot of vocal and facial ticks, which have always really been a problem for him. But he's able – with just a lot of energy involved – he's able to control these things for a certain amount of time, and that's what I think he did, in the beginning.

Dave has a good heart, a very good heart. He would give you the shirt off his back – that kind of person. He's very intelligent, very articulate, although sometimes I don't think he thinks that he is. I think earlier on he had very low self-esteem, but that's pumped up quite a bit over the years. In a lot of ways he's a different person now than prior to the diagnosis. I just don't think he was really a happy camper before, and I think that, since his diagnosis, he's much more accepting of himself, because instead of dwelling on his weaknesses, he is now concentrating on his strengths, and I think that's just real important that he does that. I think his diagnosis has helped him to accept himself. That's the main thing, although I suppose it's possible that our relationship might have helped, the fact that we accept each other.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

Gosh, now, let's see ... how to describe our relationship. ... It's very stimulating, and intellectually we've got a lot in common, and, um ... I think it's a very stable relationship. I guess we've gotten to that comfort zone in a marriage. Basically we're just really laid back, and I think that helps. I mean, we're on the same wavelength about a lot of things, like the way we think, and sense of humor and all. It's real easy for us to complete each other's sentences, you know, we're just really in tune in that respect.

In the beginning, like I said, I responded to his sense of humor. He would draw me little caricatures, and funny pictures and pass them to me in class, you know. He pursued me, made me laugh, ... seemed pretty confident. He won me with perseverance. And it was kind of odd, 'cause when we were starting to get really serious, he said to me: "You know, before things get serious I just want you to know that I do have a lot of peculiar things about me, and I just want you to be aware of them ahead of time." And I was just kind of, like: "okay," but I hadn't really seen anything. I think he'd made a pretty big effort to hide those odd tendencies. And then, the longer we were together, the more he was able to really relax around me, to where I could actually see some of these things about him. I mean, we were in love by that time, you know, so I didn't have a problem with it. In fact I think it brought us closer, because it made me feel good to know that he was comfortable enough around me to be able to reveal those parts of himself.

There have always been times when I could see that certain things were hard for him to handle. And it seemed like I was able to help sometimes. Like, for example, in IEP meetings, he would just overload and have to leap to it and immediately leave the situation. You know, maybe he couldn't get what the other person was trying to

communicate to him, and so I was able to take what the other person was saying and put it in such a way that Dave could understand, and vice-versa. I could sort of bridge the communication gap between the two. We used to joke that I was his interpreter. I think he sees me as being more able to deal with people than he is. Now that I think of it, I kind of wonder if maybe that time I spent overseas, learning how to communicate, helped me to get better at that type of thing.

We sort of compliment each other in that way, you know, each of us has our different strengths. I can usually tell when he's having a rough time. He gets very, very quiet when he's upset, and his walk gets very heavy – not like a kid stomping or anything – but his step gets very hard and very heavy. And I'll hear, you know, not like doors slamming or anything, but his voice gets louder, whereas typically he's pretty soft-spoken. But if he's upset he may vocalize in a different way, maybe talking more sternly to one of the animals or something like that. When that happens I might try to find out what it is that's bothering him. I'll ask him what's wrong, and, you know, either he wants to talk about or he doesn't. He can get pretty worked up, even over something real trivial. Well, I guess I can't really say it's trivial, because it's all, you know, from your own perspective. But, you know, it could be something that I would view as, maybe, an annoyance, like when the printer's not working right, or something like that. And he would get very frustrated with that, and very upset about it. And in a case like that, I mean, I can go and try to assist him, you know, maybe offer alternative solutions, and sometimes he's open to that and sometimes he's not. Sometimes he's so caught up in what he's doing that he's just not open to that. Then it's pretty well out of my hands until he can get a grip on it. That can be pretty difficult for me, because I'm a fixer kind of

person, you know, I'm used to being able to be in control of things, and if there's a problem I fix it. So, that's something that's totally taken out of my control. And it's frustrating for me to see how frustrated he gets, and the longer it goes on the more frustrating it becomes, and then it just kind of perpetuates until it ends. Lately it seems like he's getting better at dealing with those kinds of things. He'll go out on the back deck and sit and remove himself from the situation, 'cause he sees that he's just getting more and more engrossed in it. He does that now. He's gotten really good about removing himself from those types of situations.

The main thing is that we're very accepting of each other, and we don't have to hide things. I mean, he can get pretty wrapped up in his own stuff, but he probably knows me pretty well. At least I think he does, ... let's see ... I don't know, um, I honestly don't know how he would describe me. I think he would describe me as being intelligent, um, ... outgoing and funny, a good mom, and ... "likes to shop." It used to drive him nuts, my shopping, well, at least before the MS tired me out so much. Used to be if I didn't get out on a daily basis I would just go nuts. I always had to be out doing something, I was real active. But, I think, that's probably how he would describe me. I mean, you know, with any relationship there's things you discover along the way. I think, probably, the one aspect that he doesn't fully understand, is what it's like for me to deal with the MS. I mean he tries to understand, I think, and he tries to be intuitive about things. Like, he can tell when I'm having a hard time if we're out doing something, and I get worn out or whatever. I guess I get a real dazed expression on my face, because he'll just look at me and say: "You're spacing out now, aren't you? You're having a problem." So, yeah, he tunes into that and gets me out of that situation pretty quickly.

He doesn't always pick up on things, though, I mean not intuitively speaking. Unless I have actually told him something, I don't think he knows what I'm thinking or feeling. He might notice if I'm upset, but I think it kind of depends on what it is he's up to. If he's involved with one of his projects I don't think he would necessarily notice that I'm upset. But if he's not involved with something else, then I think he'll probably ask me what's wrong. ... I don't know really, ... maybe I expect him to be able to cue in on it, I don't know ... Is that a woman thing, you know, do we expect them to be able to tell when we're upset? ... I don't know.

I don't always let it show, though. I tend to clam up pretty well. But there are some times when I feel really overwhelmed. I guess those are the times when it might feel like it's hard being married to Dave. Because I feel like I do absolutely everything – make all the appointments, pay all the bills, you know. It's not that he's not willing to do things, I think they just don't occur to him. When I'm doing okay physically, it's not so bad. I don't really mind it 'cause I'm pretty well accustomed to it. But, I think, when I'm having physically hard times, it becomes real burden at that point, 'cause, I mean, those are times when I can't even dial a phone number or control the mouse on the computer. So it's kind of a Catch-22 situation in that respect. I think maybe I'm slowly getting towards the point where I might be expecting more out of both of them, you know, now that Kevin's getting older, ... um, yeah, I think I do. Eventually it'll just be such a matter of necessity, that I think I'll have to.

There's one thing I did want to add, about our relationship. It happened after we got back from this conference, and I was, you know, I was just so gung-ho about everything. That Autism conference was just the most amazing thing to me, just meeting

all the people. It was just so incredibly comfortable, 'cause everyone was just kind of on that same wavelength, you know, and very trusting, very accommodating. A lot of people had their different stims and vocalizations and things, and nobody really thought anything about it, you know. Where if I was in that situation before my experiences with Dave, I may not have dealt with that in the same way, but I was in there and I thought "oh, this is wonderful," you know. Anyway, I had run across this site online called FAAAS, for families of people with autism. And I thought, well, I'll go ahead and become a member, you know, 'cause I could really identify with a lot of things they were saying. So I joined up, and it was just really disheartening to me, it just ... Well, I feel like everyone blames their failed marriages on autism. And I would read things on there that were just like "autism-bashing" kind of stuff, and it was really disheartening to me to read this stuff. I mean, autism is a big part of people, but they still have personalities, you know, that go along with that. And when I went on there and introduced myself, people immediately started accosting me, telling me my MS must be caused by all the stress of living with somebody with AS. And I was like: "excuse me." And also they said I was in denial because I said I was in a happy marriage.

Yep,... I must be in denial, because I thought I was happy. Well, I think that I'm very aware of the workings of our marriage. And, you know, I have lots of NT friends [neuro-typical], and I think I'm probably in one of the happier marriages that I know of. We're a family unit, you know, we work together, and you don't give up on something or someone just because of things like that, you know. Maybe the other people have a commitment thing or something, I don't know. For us, I just think it comes back to being able to accept people for who they are. I guess if there's one way the relationship with

Dave has changed me, that would be it. I just kind of take everybody as they are, and don't really have any immediate expectations.

Analysis of Christine's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Christine's description of herself emphasizes temperament, social role, and motivating interests. Her narrative also includes a historical perspective, in which she recalls significant life experiences that triggered growth and change. As she recounts her experience she links the capacities that emerged during a particular transformative period to her current ability to cope with the challenges of living with Dave. In general, Christine focuses on her process of mastery, from which she seems to derive her most positive feelings about herself. Her more vulnerable "core" is alluded to in a more oblique fashion, vaguely linked to her need to be "accepted," without actually exposing what had made her unacceptable in the first place. She notes episodes of hardship and low self-esteem, including a failed marriage in which she (like Dave) was made to feel inadequate, but gamely finds the silver lining on nearly every cloud.

During her interviews Christine smiled and laughed often, creating an atmosphere of warmth and relaxation (Her personal style likely contributes significantly to the level of comfort Dave enjoys in their relationship.). Christine's narrative style is somewhat loose and rambling, with a persistent positive tone, giving a surface impression of superficiality. But on closer inspection her text conveys a range and depth of feeling that seems authentic, especially given the significant challenges Christine has faced. As much as we can picture Christine feeling *stimulated*, *so incredibly good*, or *gung-ho*; we can also credit her reports of feeling *dazed*, *driven nuts*, *accosted*, and *disheartened*.

Under the burden of a major debilitating illness, and a husband and son who suffer significant impairments, Christine holds her household together. It's no wonder that her effort to hold herself together leaves a few noticeable cracks. Into those cracks seeps a slippery notion, that she herself might have autistic traits. In recent years Christine and Dave have pursued close connections within the community of high-functioning autistic adults. Like Dave (and most of us), Christine seeks shared experience and avails herself of opportunities presented. She felt entirely misaligned when she joined an autistics' family members' support group, and now turns to autism itself for a feeling of alliance: "... the more I'm around it, the more I think it applies to me." The question begging to be answered here is not what about autism *applies* to Christine, but rather what about it *appeals* to her. As she tries to support this notion Christine cites minor quirks, social discomfort and a "spacing out" as suspicious symptoms, as well as: "behaving in certain ways and not understanding why..."

For those who suffer from (or along with) the real symptoms of autism, a diagnostic explanation is an immeasurable relief. For many of those affected, including participants in the present study, autism presents an organizing framework around which an otherwise fragmented sense of self can be cobbled together. Might Christine experience herself as somewhat fragmented? She certainly can be cognitively disorganized at times, and unquestionably runs into trouble trying to pull together various aspects of her self perception, including her childhood limitations and adult strengths and vulnerabilities, into a coherent whole. Christine tells us, for example, that she is *exceedingly – even painfully – shy, ... but also outgoing*. She tries to sort out this discrepancy by designating her shyness as an early characteristic that she has since

overcome, yet she continues to refer to it in present tense terms, (“So, yeah, that’s the extremely shy side of me.”) juxtaposed incongruously with her assertion that she is *a laid back, ... very relaxed person to be around*.

Christine’s confusion may have to do with somebody’s autism, but it isn’t likely hers. With a husband and son on the spectrum, however, it makes sense to look at the role autism might play in her sense of herself, especially in the context of relationships. Therefore the question will be revisited with a closer look at how she represents her partnership with Dave. It is in the description of that relationship that Christine reveals most about how she sees herself as a person.

Theme #1 When life threw curve balls I became a better hitter.

We spent three years in Turkey, in a pretty remote area. That was a mind altering experience, I can tell you, if you’ve never been pushed into another culture like that.

Christine describes the emergence of new social skills during her experience of adjusting to a foreign culture. She credits her three year sojourn in Turkey with forcing her out of the imprisonment of a paralyzing shyness. There she relied on basic, explicit communication, with her dictionary and structured custom as a protective buffer. Her interactions in that environment gave her the confidence to overcome her intense social anxiety. With her success, feelings of mastery were internalized, and she gained a sense of resourcefulness and competency. At another turning point, Christine describes feeling vindicated by evidence of her intellectual capability, in the midst of a denigrating marriage relationship:

I scored so much higher than he did on those tests, and that made me feel so incredibly good, because, you know, my ex just kind of ridiculed my intelligence. And so that was kind of the beginning of finding my own self-esteem.

Theme #2 I'm a wife and mom – which means I do *everything*.

I'm a fixer kind of person, you know, I'm used to being able to be in control of things, and if there's a problem I fix it.

In her description of her role within her family Christine reveals how hard it is for her to accept any limitations in her ability to cope with what life dishes out:

I guess I'm a pretty typical wife and mom, in a lot of ways. You know, I have that attitude of: it's easier for me to do something myself rather than try to get somebody else to do it. I was diagnosed with MS a few years ago, and I guess I still haven't learned to balance all that.

Her hard won independence starts to look like a liability here, all too easily permitted to mask her legitimate need to be relieved of an overwhelming burden of responsibility. Christine chillingly describes how severely her MS symptoms can debilitate her – to the point where dialing a phone or using the computer are beyond her – and notes that she is still reluctant to call Dave's attention to her condition. She has chosen a husband who relies on her far more than an equal partner typically would, and sustained a dynamic that may have been gratifying when she had unlimited health and energy (plus a need to prove her worth), but which now threatens to dangerously deplete her. The big question that arises is whether Christine will achieve another appropriate developmental transition, and re-adjust her expectations of herself and her partner in order to promote a more lasting stability. She is able to verbalize the basic elements of her conflict, including her ambivalence about placing increased demands on a partner whose likely response will be negative, yet seems far from resolving to take action. Learning to balance her increased need for support, will mean disrupting the skewed but stable balance of her relationship. Christine retreats from this prospect and stays in the pseudo-safety zone of her maternal prerogative:

You just take it one day at a time I guess. I try to prioritize, you know, deal with the life-threatening stuff, and let the rest wait till tomorrow. I mean, no one's going to keel over if I don't vacuum the floor today.

Theme #3 I keep my needs quiet, but I don't fool myself.

I tend to clam up pretty well. But there are some times when I feel really overwhelmed. I guess those are the times when it might feel like it's hard being married to Dave.

Christine describes her reluctance to ask for Dave's help as a "Catch 22 situation." She knows it will truly tax Dave if he's asked to divert from his own chosen activities in order to take on more family responsibilities, and rightly anticipates a backlash. Because of that fear she colludes in his self-involvement:

It's not that he's not willing to do things, I think they just don't occur to him. When I'm doing okay physically, it's not so bad. I don't really mind it 'cause I'm pretty well accustomed to it.

Lurking in the back of Christine's mind, however, is the conscious awareness that her illness will progress over time, and that disruption of the status quo is inevitable. Her trepidation is palpable as she resists dealing with an increasingly grim reality: that even with the grace and skill of a "typical wife and mom" she can't indefinitely compensate for the absence of a "typical dad" in her family:

I think maybe I'm slowly getting towards the point where I might be expecting more out of both of them, you know, now that Kevin's getting older, ... um, yeah, I think I do. Eventually it'll just be such a matter of necessity, that I think I'll have to.

While Christine has come to see herself as one who can reliably draw on her inner resources to meet life's challenges, her physical illness has drawn a line in the sand. We might even speculate (as others have done, according to Christine's report) that her MS

is, at least in part, a manifestation of the reality that she is not impervious to the stresses of sustaining a relationship in which autism is a factor. Christine's sense of personal mastery and self-sufficiency must inevitably yield to the progression of her disease, forcing her to look to others for support.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Christine doesn't spontaneously offer information about significant figures in her life other than Dave, except for a few brief references to her first husband, as noted above. We know little about what this man was like but get a strong sense of his negative impact on Christine. This sense is further supported by the reference she made to that relationship, while detailing the history of her current marriage during her joint interview with Dave:

Well, we applied for a marriage license and it sat there, and it sat there, and it sat there, and expired, because I was petrified. I, my first marriage was very, very bad, um, and I was just really petrified...

Theme #1 There's something scary about other people.

As a child I was so incredibly shy it was physically painful. I remember hiding behind my mother because I was afraid to meet someone new.

Although she says little about it, Christine makes clear that her past relational experience colored her own self representation in a negative way, and taught her that others can instill a profound sense of danger, including a significant threat to her self-esteem. What she also conveys is that this damage is not irreparable, nor has it compromised her ability to form generally positive representations of other people. Christine does, however, appear unable to attribute the potential for nurturing to others

around her. When she did, in one described instance, seek the support of external others (a group for families of autistics) she ended up feeling “accosted” by them. She clearly retains a sense that other people are likely to inflict pain, which probably contributes to her reluctance to make demands in the context of her relationships.

Since her fear of others’ responses stretches far back into her early childhood, during which her shyness caused such excruciating discomfort, it probably originates in a combination of temperamental and experiential factors. This makes Christine’s mastery of her social anxiety all the more impressive, yet leaves the details of her relationship history unexplored. She says nothing about the people she interacted with to give us clues as to how she experienced them as individuals. Although minimal, however, Christine’s references to other people do give a consistent impression of what she’s learned about others, one that she sums up succinctly for herself – don’t have expectations.

Theme #2 I can relate.

That experience of living in a different culture really had a huge effect on me. It made me think about people, you know, like people I’ve met here in the US who are coming from other countries. It just really made me think about what they must be experiencing. Between that and my experience with Dave and other autistic people, I’ve really learned how important it is to accept people for who they are.

Christine doesn’t seem to dwell on her disappointments and hardships, but she carries the memory of those experiences in an accessible mental realm where she can put it to use in the service of empathic understanding. This mature way of coping with her own painful experience seems to help her feel connected to people in a positive way, despite the seeming scarcity of comfort and empathy coming back to Christine from the

external world. Her capacity for reflecting on another's experience extends beyond situations in which it matches her own, as she shows in her efforts to accommodate Dave.

He can get pretty worked up, even over something real trivial. Well, I guess I can't really say it's trivial, because it's all, you know, from your own perspective.

Theme # 3 Dave is good.

Dave has a good heart, a very good heart. He would give you the shirt off his back – that kind of person.

In describing Dave, Christine cites many positive attributes. She also notes behaviors and shortcomings that are hard for her to deal with, but rationalizes around these negative aspects, so that she can absolve him of responsibility and not have to be angry at him. Dave's underlying vulnerability and child-like enthusiasm seem to have significant appeal for Christine, and his ability to lift her spirits appears to be a genuine (if not strictly intentional) need-fulfilling quality.

What attracted me to Dave, initially, was his sense of humor. He gets out and out silly sometimes, but that's one thing I've always really enjoyed about him, his great sense of humor. He could always make me laugh. I had come out of a very difficult marriage and I think I really needed that laughter.

Even before receiving a diagnostic explanation for Dave's odd behaviors Christine had come to see them as benign and even endearing. Although there were critical aspects of his behavior toward her that troubled Christine during their early years together [specifically, his repeated withdrawal from any attempt to resolve conflict during episodes of heightened emotions, explored in detail in Dave and Christine's joint interview], the awkward tics and quirks that emerged as he let down his guard made her feel closer to him, according to her report: "... it made me feel good to know that he was comfortable enough around me to be able to reveal those parts of himself."

In her compassionate view of Dave and wish to feel attuned to him Christine focuses on aspects of his experience that are resonant of her own, especially his history of self doubt.

He's very intelligent, very articulate, although sometimes I don't think he thinks that he is. I think earlier on he had very low self-esteem, but that's pumped up quite a bit over the years. In a lot of ways he's different now than prior to the diagnosis.

Her awareness of the relief Dave gained when diagnosed with autism likely contributes to her own wish to be included in that category.

Theme #4 Dave is a member of the club.

That Autism conference was just the most amazing thing to me ... A lot of people had their different "stims" and vocalizations and things, and nobody really thought anything about it, ... but I was in there and I thought "Oh, this is wonderful," you know.

Kevin and Dave's diagnoses of autistic disorder opened up a new social world for Christine's family, in which everyone's flaws were forgiven and understood. As they will describe, in the next section, it also helped them to make sense of unexplained problems in the marriage, specifically Christine's mistaken assumption that she had repeatedly done something "wrong" and driven Dave away from her. As her anxiety was soothed, she reorganized her understanding of Dave, who now qualified for all the forbearance and accommodation accorded to society's vulnerable. The fact that Christine could absolve herself of guilt probably made it easier for her to forgive Dave his shortcomings as a partner, but it left her outside of the protected circle. Her excursion inside (as a conference participant) provoked a response in which we can detect a sense of longing: "... it was just so incredibly comfortable, 'cause everyone was just kind of on

that same wavelength. Everyone was very trusting, very accommodating...” Dave’s autism has become a positive attribute in Christine’s representational world.

Since she herself has felt like a misfit, Christine identifies with and likely envies Dave his feelings of redemption. We’d almost expect to find more aggression and negativity attached to her representation of Dave, given the envy and disappointment Christine surely feels. Instead we see her discharge her furious indignation at the “autism bashers” (the FAAAS support group who suggest that she is victimized by Dave), taking advantage of a convenient opportunity for “displacement.” Christine chooses to preserve Dave in a highly positive light, which enables her to sustain their attachment. This attachment, however imbalanced in terms of reciprocal nurturing, allows Christine to feel valued. Her sense that this is genuine is not misplaced – Dave has convincingly designated her “a very valuable person.” This apparently genuine emotion helps to mitigate Dave’s deficient responsiveness to Christine’s needs, perhaps because the need for self acceptance (which derives from feeling valued in the context of a relationship) trumps the rest. Lucky Dave gets the bonus – a relationship and a diagnosis.

I think his diagnosis has helped him to accept himself. That’s the main thing, although I suppose it’s possible that our relationship might have helped, the fact that we accept each other.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

As her narrative unfolds Christine eventually acknowledges her disappointment in Dave’s failure to assume a more equal measure of family and relational responsibility, but she doesn’t permit her negative affect to emerge fully. The frustration is acknowledged but minimized and rationalized in a way that robs her of the impetus to demand more of him. She seems to question whether Dave has it in him to be more

considerate, but doesn't characterize this as an autism issue. This is consistent with her defensive stance around autism being a problem. When she eventually admits to being overwhelmed by the burden of maintaining the entire household Christine tentatively admits that it "might" be hard to be married to Dave.

Theme #1 Dave needs me, which feels good – except when he doesn't.

There have always been times when I could see that certain things were hard for him to handle. And it seemed like I was able to help sometimes.

Christine exhibits a maternal attitude toward Dave, and feels gratified by being able to nurture and support him, but also experiences frustration when he withdraws from her attempts to assist him with affect regulation.

... I can go and try to assist him, you know, maybe offer alternative solutions, ... Sometimes he's so caught up in what he's doing that he's just not open to that. So, that's something that's totally taken out of my control. And it's frustrating for me to see how frustrated he gets, and the longer it goes on the more frustrating it becomes, and then it just kind of perpetuates until it ends.

She feels helpless at these times, and struggles with the uncomfortable realization that he often cannot take in and make use of her compassion and support. This probably undermines Christine's sense of being "valued." She assures us that she has now accepted his explanation that he needs to be alone in order to self-regulate, and understands that this may be a manifestation of his impairment, yet she still seems to feel empty and anxious when he withdraws himself. She notes feeling a loss of "control" when this occurs, but more likely she is responding to a vague sense of separateness at these moments, as if she has ceased to be an essential part of his world, the way we intuitively expect when we become significant to another.

Theme #2 He's oblivious to my needs, but I hate to blame him.

I mean, he can get pretty wrapped up in his own stuff, but he probably knows me pretty well. At least I think he does, ... let's see ... I don't know, um, I honestly don't know how he would describe me.

Although Christine manages to convincingly elaborate on ways that Dave responds to her behaviorally, that indicate his awareness of her as a unique individual, her hesitation in attributing more insight to him suggests that she feels unsure of her status within his internal object world. As she reflects on this matter, she searches for evidence that Dave cares for her, finding some, but perhaps not enough to give real comfort.

I mean he tries to understand, I think, and he tries to be intuitive about things. Like, he can tell when I'm having a hard time if we're out doing something, and I get worn out or whatever. I guess I get a real dazed expression on my face, because he'll just look at me and say: "You're spacing out now, aren't you? You're having a problem." So, yeah, he tunes into that and gets me out of that situation pretty quickly.

Both Christine and Dave refer to Dave's need for explicit verbal communication around others' internal states, but retreat from the idea that his ability to attune in a more "intuitive" way might be, at least to some degree, within his control. When Dave chooses to allocate his attention to the nonverbal signals others emit he gets information that has some meaning to him. It may be difficult for him to cognitively organize and accurately interpret this information, but he can make use of it – especially if he's willing to tolerate the accompanying affect. Christine tries not to take Dave's lack of responsiveness personally, and taps her ideas about autism and gender difference in her attempt to take the sting out of her disappointment.

He doesn't always pick up on things, though, I mean not intuitively speaking. Unless I have actually told him something, I don't think he knows what I'm thinking or feeling. He might notice if I'm upset, but I think it kind of depends on what it is he's up to. If he's involved with one of his projects I don't think he would necessarily notice that I'm upset. But if he's not involved with something else, then I think he'll probably ask me what's wrong. ... I don't know really, ... maybe I expect him to be able to cue in on it, I

don't know ... Is that a woman thing, you know, do we expect them to be able to tell when we're upset? ... I don't know.

Christine's query foreshadows one of the newest theories offered as an explanation of autism, Simon Baron Cohen's recent thesis, which postulates that autism results from an extreme case of the "male brain" (2004). (Citing a body of literature on gender differences in social functioning, showing that the capacity for empathy and emotional attunement are inherently weaker in males than in females, Baron Cohen postulates that autism is an extreme form of this weakness.) Regardless of the causal role of neuro-pathology in her situation, Christine's most pressing concern is her effort to re-balance her representation of her relationship with Dave so she can retain its positive valence.

Theme #3 The "comfort zone."

The main thing is that we're very accepting of each other, and we don't have to hide things.

As seems to be the case with our first two couples, the glue that secures Dave and Christine's marriage is composed primarily of mutual acceptance. Their experience of that seems to be genuine enough to ensure a measure of stability, not only of the relationship but of their representations of themselves and each other in that context. Whereas Dave retains an idealized (somewhat infantile) image of Christine, she has formed a more complex and integrated representation of him, even as she resists acknowledging the negative qualities she clearly detects. She probably knows that Dave has her on a pedestal, and also senses that this helps him to stay regulated, which may be one of the reasons she preserves the current balance by refraining from placing demands

on him. Her sacrifice seems to have paid off in a number of respects. The warmth and satisfaction each describes is apparent when they are together, as is their affective attunement around the positive experiences they share. Christine does not, however, convey the bubbling joy that Dave evokes in his “Sweetheart-Baby Doll-babies in a boat” passage. Her discomfort is too close to the surface to be concealed. In their joint interview we will see her speak more openly about the ways in which Dave failed to meet her expectations during the marriage. The fact that Christine can admit to Dave’s shortcomings helps her to stay grounded in the reality of their situation, which likely contributes to the sense of the relationship’s constancy that she expresses: “I think it’s a very stable relationship. I guess we’ve gotten to that comfort zone in a marriage.”

If, ultimately, Christine’s satisfaction with the current state of her relationship exacerbates her significant health problem, and leaves her with an increased need for emotional support, she will pay the cost of prioritizing Dave’s comfort over her own. Perhaps – like any good mother of a pre-schooler would – she’ll gradually allow his protective bubble to deflate and increase her demands for a more mature recognition of her own human needs. In the meantime, having adjusted her expectations, she’ll likely maintain the present balance, and direct her ire at the “neuro-typicals” who’ve accused her of being “in denial” for believing she’s happy in her marriage. Happy or not she sees something worth holding onto.

We’re a family unit, you know, we work together, and you don’t give up on something or someone just because of things like that, you know. Maybe the other people have a commitment thing or something, I don’t know. For us, I just think it comes back to being able to accept people for who they are. I guess if there’s one way the relationship with Dave has changed me, that would be it. I just kind of take everybody as they are, and don’t really have any immediate expectations.

Summary of Dave and Christine's Dyadic Interview

During their joint interview, Dave provided twice the amount of verbal material as Christine did. While there were many extended sequences of alternating dialogue along an agreed upon thematic line, Christine generally deferred to Dave, often simply adding her assent to his opinions and recollections. The transcript is peppered with her brief responses of: "Oh yes...most definitely...uh-huh...right, yeah..." This often seemed like enthusiastic and genuine validation of his account, and in many instances indicated her sharing of his viewpoint. But at other times she seemed to be allowing him to attribute shared perspectives where she might have experienced events differently from him. Dave had a tendency to make unambiguous pronouncements or to expound on a particular theme (sometimes even doing so at Christine's invitation). He particularly wished to present a picture of the two of them as in uninterrupted harmony, "mentally connected," and never at odds.

As the conversation progressed, however, Christine began to insert her different perspective on experiences, causing Dave to pause and take note, as if surprised by these diversions. To his credit, Dave was able to take in this new information and begin to digest it, though often seemed not quite sure how to respond. One particular exchange was referred to later in the day during his individual interview, which took place last in the sequence for this pair. He then showed that he could reflect on what she'd revealed (about her need to "walk on eggs" around his darker moods) and explore its relational implications. As the interview continued Dave began to attend more closely to Christine's contributions and more often referred to her unique experience as he

understood it. On the whole, though, he stressed their presumed synchronicity to a degree that belied his anxious dependence on this notion. Christine's automatic response to this was to reinforce it, unless he touched on a significant matter where her experience differed from his.

Once Christine had broken the chain of acquiescent validation, Dave began to occasionally actively invite her to add her own perspective. Christine sometimes seemed surprised by this. In one telling instance Dave turned to her after giving an opinionated response to a question, and said to her: "And you?" She hesitated, then replied: "Can you repeat the question? (both Laugh) I get so lost in what he's saying, I ..." Clearly, Christine is used to giving Dave the floor.

Much of the verbal material and their process of telling their story supported their mutual assertion that they were securely bonded, and unconditionally accepting of each other. Their emotional closeness was evident in the nods and smiles they exchanged, occasional ribbing, and abundant laughter they shared. In some instances it seemed that their humor (which clearly sustains Dave and Christine through difficult times) was employed to permit avoidance of uncomfortable realities, but more often the laughter rang true. The interview commenced on a humorous note with Dave's declaration: "Well, we met in a mental institution," prompting immediate and infectious laughter, hardly diminished by their admission that they'd shared this little joke many times before and "get a kick out of" evoking a picture of the two of them meeting as inmates, when in fact they were both employees at a state hospital. The warm atmosphere persisted as they described the quality of their earliest interactions:

C: But, um, I think it was romantic. He was always bringing me flowers and ...

D: You yelled at me for that.

C: Well, because you felt that every time that you saw me you had to bring me flowers. Where you're bringing me flowers everyday and I, I mean, I made the same amount you did, I knew it got to be expensive. That's why I yelled at you about it.

D: It doesn't matter.

C: I know, it was sweet. I still have all the cards.

Dave's anxious need to preserve his fantasy of an ideal marriage between them was apparent from the start of the interview. In the section below we see him immediately react to my query about "changes" as if their marital stability had been challenged. The very notion of imperfection clearly disrupts him. Christine's response to this is to provide soothing validation, initially, but soon she introduces a note of mild dissent:

P: And would you say that there have been changes over the course of the relationship?

C: Oh yeah.

D: Ups and downs? I don't think there are any ups and downs. we have good times and bad times and, yeah, we ... I think we face whatever we face together cause we're all in the same house, you know, um, but I also think if we have a conflict, um, it's not really uncomfortable.

C: Yeah.

D: I don't think we have many problems because we talk and things.

C: No we don't.

D: We don't yell at each other.

C: We don't argue.

D: We got the same sense of humor, you know,

C: Yeah.

D: And it scares her, because we keep repeating the same cliché lines and the same humor type of response.

C: At the same time. (Laughs)

D: Well ...

C: But, I mean, initially I think things were kind of bumpy, I think, just the typical things that all couples go through, you know. You left the cap off the toothpaste and, you know, just the typical things like that, things where, you know, I would get ...

D: I never worried about that whole thing. Did I?

C: Oh yeah.

D: I did?

C: Oh yeah. I think we both had our little pet peeves ...

D: I think what helped us was that we were both married before.

C: Right.

D: And we saw how ugly a marriage can be.

C: Yeah. (Laughs)

D: So we said "Not again." You know, and we both kind of identified with, with, uh, really bad marriages and ...

C: Um-hm.

D: "I don't want that anymore." 'Cause, you know, we both, I guess we both played the stereotypical roles of husband and wife in the first attempts, you know, and this time we said: Let's just get rid of the role playing.

C: Exactly.

D: And just be who we are and not worry about it.

We get a sense from this of how she's adopted a strategy of treading carefully when contradicting him, titrating her disagreement to match her (perhaps only semi-conscious) perception of his ability to tolerate it. As Dave and Christine went on to describe more of their relationship history, they revealed its more difficult periods with increasing openness. Christine recalled her early trepidation about embarking on a second marriage after such a painful first experience: "Well, we applied for a marriage license and it sat there, and it sat there, and it sat there, and expired, because I was

petrified. I, my first marriage was very, very bad, um, and I was just really petrified.” It was more than two years before she agreed to get married, during which time Dave reportedly waited with impressive endurance: “He was patient. He was very patient.” Christine doesn’t say that she had reservations about Dave during that period, but as they described things in increasing depth a more complex picture emerges – one of two people coping, independently, with disquieting episodes that neither could explain, during an era that they now describe as “BD” – before diagnosis.

D: ... because lot of times, well, especially with me not having a diagnosis, my pretexts of pretending to be like everybody else was, was paramount, you know. It was something that I had to do, but then I couldn’t keep it up forever either, it exhausts me. So I had to go to my room. You know.

C: Yeah.

D: And she hated that, she says: “You’re not facing issues, you’re not doing nothing.” And I said “No, I’m facing issues, I just want to be by myself for a little bit, you know.”

C: Yeah and I think that was probably the biggest thing, was that he had his own separate room set up, and I just wasn’t used to being around someone that, if an issue did arise, you know, would go to their separate place and, basically, lock the door and ignore me. I wasn’t accustomed to being around someone that did that. And I think that was probably my biggest thing, was because I felt like we weren’t communicating,

D: Yeah.

C: And I didn’t know what was going on inside you so ..

D: Yeah, with me it was just dealing with overload.

C: Right.

D: Getting it out of the system to put things back together the way it was, and you come out and everything’s fine again, you know.

P: So, you were able to cope, with those periods on your own?

D: Well, I knew what I had to do but I couldn’t break it down into terminologies, you know. I knew it was something I needed to do, it’s something ... it’s one of my coping mechanisms and

C: And I had no clue.

D: She didn't understand that.

C: Yeah. Yeah, where now, you know, if he gets overloaded, I know he needs, you know, he may go sit out ...

D: I'll sit outside

C: Out back on the deck or, you know,

D: Or I'll get involved with the computer a lot, I do a lot of mindless stuff, or, um, I'll write, or I'll do music, or I'll, um, just busy myself, you know. I'll put something in order. That's the thing, I got to put it in order so that I can get back in order. Once the chaos hits everything goes kaplooeey, you know, it's like nothing's going right. It's a terrible situation. Terrible time.

Christine went on to describe one of the worst aspects of this pattern for her, the recurring fear that she had done "something wrong" to cause Dave's withdrawal. She did note, however, that once the periods of intense distress had passed, she would wait for an opportunity to cautiously broach the subject of what had happened to disturb him.

P: And when you were finally able to talk about things, were you able to come to an understanding of what went on, and did it reduce the stress?

C: Yeah, oh yeah, it definitely reduced the stress. I still didn't really have a good grasp on what was going on though, until he got his diagnosis. That, that just, that changed a lot.

D: You see, I would go into the room, I would control my behavior. Then I'd come out and everything's fine, and she's going "what happened?" You know, so, on this side I knew things were fine. On her side ...

C: On my side I'm walking on eggshells.

D: Yeah, she's walking on eggshells, not quite sure what's going on. Not all of her questions have been answered, cause, you know, 'cause it goes on from time to time. So, um, I don't think I could provide her with good enough answers. I mean, just to say, well, I had to go up to my room and pout a while, you know, it's not what adults do.

The frequent shifts between past and present tense in these passages highlight the fact that these disruptions, though better understood, still cause significant stress for both of them individually, as well as in the marriage. This is confirmed in their individual

interviews where both reflect more deeply on the impact of this stress on their relationship, and its implications regarding the issue of reciprocity. The present material also provides an *in vivo* demonstration of their reciprocal regulatory pattern, which involves Christine's validation of Dave's unique needs and her acceptance of his mitigating explanation, relieving both of burdensome guilt. More importantly, perhaps, this dialogue shows that Dave can indeed conceptualize Christine's experience of his labile mood and behavior, and even reflect on it within the larger social context of what's expected of emotionally mature individuals. Where it falls short, however – at least in the moment – is in dealing with the underlying negative affect. Dave falls back on his standard mechanism of putting ideas and explanations in order, and Christine colludes in keeping discomfort at a “cognitive distance.” Their habit of looking at their relationship through a diagnostic lens, seems to have created a positive aura that allows them to avoid more troubling issues. One of the most comforting factors they cite is the discovery that they are not alone in their experience of living with autism, having connected with the larger “cultural” community of people on the spectrum (and their families).

In the following sequence I have asked them to think of a time when they felt “close” to each other. Here we can see the gratification Dave derives from the regressive symbiotic flavor of his internalized representation of their bond, and the specific image he evokes in response to the prompt. Christine, in contrast, cannot produce a specific memory or any evocative imagery.

C: Oh, let's see here.

D: Uh, ... sometimes I'll just snuggle up on her lap, and just enjoy the time. I'll watch television and she'll say “get off my lap!” (they laugh) And I'll say “no!” And she'll say “okay.” (all laugh)

C: Hmm, I can't really think of any particular time, um, I don't know, it just seems like we're so much closer just ... it's like there's BD and AD ...

P: So it's like an era that's the "good era."

C: Yeah.

D: No, there's, there's a mental connection I think, where the closest is that we connect mentally all the time,

C: Um hmm.

D: You know, and ...

P: But there's nothing that comes to mind, a particular event, or ...

C: No.

D: I think it's all just inter-linked ..

C: Yeah.

P: .. a particular time?

D: ... to the point to where we say: "Wow!" You know. (laughs).

C: Yeah, well, it just seems like really, after the diagnosis and everything got out into the open I think we've been a lot closer.

Neither Dave nor Christine raised the issue of parenthood in response to my inquiry about changes in their relationship. When I introduced the topic, it proved to be a catalyst for the disclosure of more anxiety and negative affect, on everyone's part. Even I, in my ostensibly neutral interviewer's role, succumbed to a defensive impulse to ease the discomfort aroused by exposure of painful feelings associated with a time of significant stress and disappointment. In another revealing shift, both Dave and Christine revert to primarily using singular pronouns (*I, you*) instead of "we" as they talk about the period immediately following their son's birth, suggesting that this was a time in which they experienced a separateness that could not be easily bridged at the time, and that continues to resonate. Christine's feeling of being "alone" with the burden of

motherhood, during that particular time, emerges more explicitly here than in the above sample of dialogue, with it's more vague sense of her reluctance to join Dave in his reverie.

P: When I think of changes in relationships I often think of what happens when a child comes along.

D: Um hmm.

p: How did that impact?

C: Oh gosh...

D: Well, I didn't really think about the stress of it, I just thought about making sure everything was alright. Um, I went into the delivery room with her, uh, I stayed with him through the whole process. Wherever Kevin went I went with him. No one was going to exchange this kid for nothing (Christine laughs), and, uh, he was not about to get lost in any shuffle through due process and he didn't. So, um, I'd get up in the middle of the night and make sure he's still breathing, and, I think we switched off on feeding and – or did I just sleep all the time?

C: Well, you would get up and bring him to the bed so I could feed, uh, he was, um, his birth was C-section and, um, basically, Dave and your mom and my mom just basically had to take care of me and the baby for quite awhile, you know, that was a pretty difficult birth, um ... I'm trying to think here, um, actually, it seems like after Kevin was born was a time I started noticing, you know, different behaviors then, you know, just ..

D: Better or worse? (laughs)

C: Well, I mean, well, I would be ... I can think of things like Kevin would be in his little swing thing in the same room about two to three feet away from you and I would be in the other part of the house in the kitchen doing things, and I would hear him crying and I would think "Oh well, you know, oh Dave will get him," and then it would go on and on and on, and I would walk back in and you would be sitting there but you were oblivious to Kevin crying in the swing because the swing had stopped.

D: Oh.

C: I think of things like that a lot.

D: Okay, yeah ... (uncomfortable pause).

P: It's very typical for the birth of a child to really stress a couple, and stress a relationship, it's a very typical thing.

C: Oh yeah. We were just so tired all the time. (laughs)

D: I'm not too sure

P: So you experienced that period differently it sounds like.

C: I think, you know, ...

D: I don't think I stressed out, I just tranced out. (laughs)

Dave and Christine speak both directly and indirectly to each other in this instance, showing a willingness to face difficult truths, despite obvious trepidation. It even seems as if this might have been Dave's first encounter with Christine's direct expression of those painful feelings. He responds with a discernible effort to remain present. It's impossible to know what the two might have revealed, had I stifled my own regrettable impulse, and instead, prompted Christine to elaborate on the "things like that" she still thinks of. In any case, the material touched on in that exchange surfaced again, prompting further exploration by each in their later individual interviews. Like most issues that have arisen in the course of their marriage, parenting problems seem to be more openly addressed now than in earlier times ("BD"). In their more recent period of family life, the couple seem to have settled into a mutually recognizable pattern of assigning responsibilities, one that seems dependable, if not entirely satisfactory.

P: And how is childcare now? How does that work out between you at this point? Are you equally involved or differently?

D: No, I don't think we're equally involved, um, I think she takes care of a lot of the childcare situation because of ... and then she drafts me to (Christine laughs), um /

C: Like: "You're going to do this," and ... yeah.

D: Ah, "Time for you to be daddy." "Okay."

C: Uh huh, uh huh.

D: "I'll be daddy." But I do have my daddy moments.

C: Oh, sure you do. Oh, you two have a blast together, gosh.

P: And do you find that you're able to make it clear when you need him to participate?

C: Eventually.

p: How is that worked out? Is it ...

C: I'm a very persistent person.

D: Well, there's ... now there are mommy priority parenting things and there are daddy priority parenting things.

C: Oh yes, that's true, you have a point with that. (laughs)

D: Now, when we have the daddy priority parenting things, it drives you up a wall. (laughs)

C: You mean like the wrestling and things like that ... well, yeah.

D: The wrestling, the fun times, the bonding, the ...

C: Well, that's because we go to visit someone's house and ..

D: Persistent lectures, you know.

C: You roll around in the middle of the floor and wrestle. (laughs)

D: Yeah.

Although he can't say "why" their parenting roles are unequal, Dave can honestly admit that they are. It is likely that the pleasure evoked around his "daddy" interactions (more fraternal than paternal in flavor) helps him to more easily face the negative personal implications raised by his acknowledgement of their imbalanced roles.

As the interview drew to an end I asked Dave and Christine to imagine their future ten years ahead. In response they produced a shared vision of a wished for refuge from the pressures of financial insecurity and societal expectation, bracketed by disclaimers that marked the unlikelihood of fulfillment. Their dream begins with the successful marketing of Dave's books and music CD's, original materials that he produces in his home studio.

D: I guess, if sales go ... if sales go, things are going to change drastically, otherwise, ... I think it's this.

C: Yeah, I, yeah, providing things happen the way we've planned for them to happen, then I think we'll really be enjoying life a lot together.

I then fueled their fantasies with the suggestion of a large financial windfall, and discovered the breadth of their dreams for the future:

C: Stay in a hotel, find a place out in the country where you can have your privacy for your recording and do your things, and I can have my area to pursue my interests.

D: Yeah, I think we would invest in the Meister Media press kind of concept we've got going.

C: Oh, most definitely.

D: And, uh, work more towards that. Um, maybe work more towards advertisement and sales.

C: Work towards making our little, um, Davesville world a reality.

D: Yeah, Davesville. (Christine laughs) We want Davesville.

P: Davesville? Tell me about Davesville.

C: You're on. (to Dave)

D: Well, I've always had this dream, that somewhere along the line there'd be a community that could

And Dave was, with Christine's bold invitation, indeed "on." He held forth on his fantasy of an idyllic community, where they and others like them could live in comfort and harmony. His vision was minutely thought through, down to the small details of how "social skills" would be taught, so as to dispel the notion that he and his comrades would want to "...just close the doors and not talk to anybody." Dave emphasized mutual support, based on harnessing personal strengths while accommodating individual weaknesses, explicitly tailoring his formulation to the needs of people with disabilities, especially autistic spectrum disorders. As he continued, Dave also began to express the

hostility he harbors toward the external world of those who won't tolerate "differences." Dave was up front with his disdain, and complained of being "surrounded by idiots." He freely admitted to his own bias: "I think after knowing more about ASD and how to respect the differences, I've found out that I've developed more of a prejudice towards socially-typical thinking." Dave spoke at length about the mistreatment he and people like him have suffered at the hands of Society, bemoaning their inability to achieve their true potential, and periodically aiming his barbs at those he sees as perpetrators. As he continued in this vein, Christine became more of a spectator, and ceased to provide any verbal reinforcement. Then when Dave eased off on his "separatist" rhetoric, expressing a less strident tone, she was able to re-join him. Dave's more inclusive stance still represented his desire to level the playing field between himself and the surrounding social world. In this, Christine can comfortably identify with and support him.

D: My theory: Nobody's perfect therefore everybody has a disability.

P: Um-hm.

D: So if you're willing to admit the disability you can be a part of it. But you got to face

P: And it will be accommodated.

C: You know that.

D: You've got to face what you lack, you got to face issues that you know, um, that you're having difficulties with, and you can't play the money games.

C: Um...

D: And I think that's the difference.

C: I was going to say, there are so many people out there that need this assistance, people that would just really shine if they were put into this kind of environment ...

D: Oh yeah.

C: ...where they would be able to discover their talents and really make the most of them to where there's, you know, .. and that's something we really want to accomplish.

D: To be able to take those talents and apply them in an economic sense where they can be independent, and self-sufficient, and don't have to kiss anybody's behind in order to get anywhere, and they don't have to worry about somebody taking advantage of their naiveté ...

C: Um hmm.

D: ... and their immaturity qualities, things like this, their honesty, you know.

C: Yeah.

While Dave dominated the conversation during this last portion of the interview, he and Christine both shared their experience of losing the ability to earn a steady wage, she because of the ravages of Multiple Sclerosis, and he because of – well, he didn't exactly say. They spoke of a number of his independent business endeavors, including a few that were obviously pipe dreams – all unfruitful, but not for lack of labor. Dave has tried to get Social Security income on the basis of his disability but has so far been unsuccessful. "But then again," he said, "I'd rather my efforts pay off." He'd like to be part of a self-sufficient community of disabled people who can thumb their noses (and a few other parts) at government agencies who fail to provide for their needs. Christine is right behind him on this.

C: Oh definitely.

D: You know. 'Cause if my efforts pay off I will definitely kick butt. (laughs)

C: Yeah.

D: Cause I think – I think it's another thing too about Davesville is to, um, to get even, to make them, to make them non-essential and disposable. ... So, we don't need your program anymore, you'll have to lay people off.

P: 'Cause the community should be self-sufficient.

D: I think so, yeah. If the program isn't helping people maintain a certain standard of living, then you have problems.

P: Yeah.

D: You'll have resentment. You'll have animosity. You'll have people who just won't care, and become burdens. And if Society turns away, they're just asking for their own troubles, you know.

For all their enthusiasm Dave and Christine recognize the likely futility of their hopes. Dave can't help getting carried away or sweeping Christine along, but he keeps one toe on the ground: "I think the only way it's going to happen is if I reach that nine to ten digit figure, and that is unrealistic as, I guess, anybody can make it." In another important respect, Dave showed that he could step back from his over-ripe fantasies. Before concluding the interview I returned briefly to an earlier comment that Christine had made about pursuing her own interests if she and Dave reached financial security. Christine described her wish to develop her artistic skills, and to write a book of her own ("for spouses of those with autism").

P: So these are things you haven't had an opportunity to develop but you would like to.

C: Oh, most definitely. Yeah, they're things I've dabbled in, in the past, but – just time restraint is one big thing. There's, you know, the obvious things that go with having a family, that kind of take away from that.

Christine's comments prompted a response from Dave, perhaps one motivated by anxiety that he himself might have taken away her opportunities with his engulfing needs. He asked to add his own final thoughts, borrowed from Kahlil Gibran, to sum up their relationship. In doing so, he seemed to be trying to relinquish some of his need for oneness with Christine, and restore a sense of individual integrity to his representation of their bond.

D: It's kind of like what Kahlil Gibran wrote, you know, like pillars of an archway, you know, they stand together and they support the arch.

C: Um-hmm.

D: But they stand apart in order to provide that support, They're together but apart, kind of.

P: Um-hmm.

D: We have our interests, we have our own individuality, we don't infringe on that individuality. ... You know, I think it's important.

(end)

Though not likely evidence of deeper psychic change, his effort did seem intended to communicate a sincere wish to accord her a more appropriate status in his inner world.

Steven and Clarissa

Background Information

Clarissa and Steven have been married for thirty years and have twelve children. They met in their late teens and were each other's first romantic partners. Currently living in an industrial town in the British Midlands, they are committed members of a close knit religious community. He works as a computer software designer, and she as a nurse specializing in midwifery. Steven received his diagnosis of Aspergers Disorder from one of the leading researchers in the field of autism, at a point when he and Clarissa were feeling desperate to understand what might explain and help with the intractable problems that had plagued their relationship for years. At the time of the interview he and Clarissa were still in the process of assimilating the meaning of Steven's new label, and exploring its implications for their future as well as in making sense of the past. Steven volunteered them for the study in response to an internet posting asking for recruits. At that time he conveyed his wish to assist in further illuminating issues that he and others like him daily cope with.

Steven's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

I haven't ever given much thought to the question of what I'm like as a person. Hm ... Introverted, I'd say. Yes. ... I'm very good at communicating on factual matters, but very poor at communication on emotional matters. At least, that's my understanding of it now, since I've begun to learn more about Aspergers. In my own view, I think I never actually tried to communicate about emotions. I don't think I was ever really aware of that sort of thing. I'm really good at understanding things intellectually. But not about how a person works, what makes them tick – not even myself.

This is very challenging, making me think about myself. I suppose these are things I ought to be thinking about. Let's see, ... I think it's safe to say I'm ... not a team player. I tend to do solitary pursuits, rather than group. I was always very much a loner. My sister said that about me. When they were trying to assess me for the diagnosis they spoke to her. They really wanted to talk to my parents, but they couldn't. Anyway, she said I was very much a loner.

I can remember things about my childhood. I knew that I didn't take part in things. I never was very interested in football or cricket, ... and I'm not particularly good at either. And I thought at the time, well, if I'm not interested in football as other boys are, then that's going to put me outside a bit, to an extent, anyway. I never really had any friends. That must be very common in people with ... um ... with my sort of ... with the disorder.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

I've got some very early memories. I remember that my mother seemed to be very cold. Now my understanding is that she did love me, but she didn't seem to be able to show it. I don't think she was up to it really. Perhaps she had some difficulty with physical contact. I don't remember her hugging me at all, ... Which certainly doesn't mean that she never did, but ... she can't have done very much. My father was very similar, really, I think. I don't remember wanting particularly to be hugged. But then, if you've never experienced something, you're not going to want it. I remember that if there was a party, it was quite likely that they would put me in the bedroom with a comic or an encyclopedia.

When I was at school I had only one real friend. He was a bit of an odd bot as well. I don't think he was like me, but he was a bit odd. And at university I had one friend. He was like me in being a bit of a nutter about computers, so we had something very much in common there. I think we enjoyed each other's company, but that was not an emotional relationship at all. It was just two men who were friendly buddies – not like with a man and a woman, where you would expect to have an emotion ... and contact. Before I met Clarissa I'd been out with a couple of girls. I didn't start on that until I was about seventeen. But, um, they were fairly shallow really, ... no real involvement.

As I said, I've never been a team player, ... but there was one exception to that, something slightly different for me. It was a time when volleyball seemed to be very popular at our church, and I really enjoyed taking part in that, and enjoyed playing as part of a team. Perhaps because it was rather informal, with any number of people of all ages, players of both sexes, up to nine or ten people on each side. It's a bit of an anomaly, I have to say. In that game I was definitely a team player, and I enjoyed it. It wasn't the

sort of thing you had to do well. Even up to the finish it didn't really matter too much who won, as long as you did your best. I think that's what made it enjoyable, and perhaps also the part about working together as a team. I suppose those are people I might regard as friends, at least from my perspective, by my judgment. But I don't think I would say they were close friends ... I don't really feel the need for frequent contact with them. And I haven't thought of seeing them outside of church activities.

... Now that I think of it, there are one or two people in the church – most of our contacts are in the church – that I've had more of a relationship with, I think. And, um, they seem to be people that are disadvantaged in some way. One of them – well, she's got two small children and her husband's left her. It's not a situation that I've been in, but, ... well, I can understand and feel with the problem, ... and the strain that she's under, and I – actually, I've done quite a bit to help her. And there's a couple of other people who are at a disadvantage in one way or another, and I've found that I've wanted to make contact with them and do something to help. I suppose there might be some sort of emotion involved with that. I'm not sure but I think so.

Some people say that Aspies don't have emotions, and ... well, some people've said that. I think we do, but quite often can't explain them, even to ourselves. And empathy tends to be rather lacking. But I think I can empathize with another person if it's the sort of situation I've had some experience with myself. There's some restriction perhaps, but it's there, I think. I suppose the main problem has to do with not being aware of emotions, ... and then there's the matter of communication, because, as I said, I'm not very good at doing that, or not in the way that most people are, naturally, I think. I can recognize broad-brush emotions from face and voice, but if I want to understand it,

it sort of has to be with words. The ones I tend to react to most strongly are the negative ones, ... but I think it's similar with positive emotion: I don't express it or receive it well. I believe it's something I need to learn more about. I've started to learn, actually. But it's been difficult to get used to thinking that way, and dealing with strong emotions. What I used to do, if there was any emotional situation, was just shut off completely and not communicate at all. It's true that I've had a great deal of difficulty understanding what the other person is trying to communicate, emotionally, but I don't think it's only that that's hard to handle, ... it's the emotion itself.

I think I've started to become more aware of that sort of thing, and I can try to understand better what it is that's happening, ... intellectually, that is. I don't generally have much success getting the signals, even where my own feelings are concerned. The stronger emotions tend to be the more negative ones. For example, ... let me see if I can recall one ... yes. On one occasion, I was watching a video, and there was one scene in which the main character was being embarrassed because he was in a social situation that he didn't know how to handle ... and I couldn't stand it. I had to go out. I haven't thought about it until now, but I suppose it may have been that I identified with it rather closely ... him not being able to cope with a social situation. Yes, ... that could've been it. What seems to be better, lately, is that I might notice if I'm pulling back and shutting myself off. So if I start to do that, I can say: wait what's actually happening here? And if I do get upset, I'm not so afraid of the emotion. If I can better understand what's happening, I can work with that, stay a bit more calm, and perhaps try and understand what the other person is actually trying to say. I realize I'm being intellectual about emotions again, but that's the way I am. In the end, I suppose it all helps, in an emotional

interaction, ... but it isn't the same as actually understanding people. I don't think I would say that I really understand anybody ... as a person.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

Hm I don't really know if I can describe Clarissa ... as I said, I find this sort of thing rather difficult ... Let's see ... Dependable, ... I would say. During our relationship we've had problems, and ... well, most people have problems, I think ... and we certainly wanted to stick it out and overcome the problems, keep up the relationship ... so, ... I think Clarissa just has great endurance, to ... to stick it out, .. in situations that some people might have given up on. So, she has a determination to succeed. I think it's hard for her. Particularly the fact that I don't really understand or react to her emotions.

... These are things I can say about her now, but I wouldn't have known any of it at the beginning. I don't think I really understood her as a person, but then I probably never really tried very hard.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

When we got started, I'd had very little experience with girls really, .. I'd dated a couple of girls, and had gone to parties, and ... uh ... I think Clarissa ... she did seem to want to be with *me*. Rather than be with me and go somewhere, or do something in particular, like go to a party or to the cinema, .. she seemed more willing just to be with *me*. And, ... I think, I wanted to be with her.

I don't quite know how we managed to end up getting married. Clarissa must have been wearing her rose-colored glasses at the time. She said that afterward she found

out more about what I was really like. I don't think I really know what initially attracted her. It's probably something I should have thought about. ... One possibility is that ... probably I looked as if I needed a mother. Not that it was really that sort of relationship, but it was different. I think she admired me for my intelligence and ability. ... These are rather small things, really. ... On the other hand, ... I suppose, perhaps, they could be important. I think it's quite a large part of my personality, my intelligence.

I don't think I'm very good at romantic feelings. I can't say that I'm even sure what people mean by that, really. When Clarissa talks about romantic feelings, I think she's speaking about my giving her flowers or little gifts, or ... wanting me to tell her I love her ..., which I'm pretty poor at, .. all that sort of thing. I think there may have been a bit of that in the earlier part of our relationship. As I said, I wasn't much good at paying attention to her feelings. But I could recognize broad scale emotions. In fact I could tell a bit more than Clarissa says I could, actually, but I couldn't put any fine detail on it. I could say: well, she's upset, but I wouldn't know why, except that it was probably something I'd just done. One incident that comes to mind took place while we were engaged, when we were both studying. I'd done something to upset her – I can't remember what it was. I probably didn't intend it. I'm sure I didn't intend it, ... but I'd upset her. And I went round the next day with a bunch of flowers. I wanted to give her something and say: "sorry." And she was .. she was actually quite cheered up. So, if I can do something along those lines, I think she appreciates it. But again, it doesn't come naturally, that sort of thing. I have to work it out first, which means I'd have to be aware of what she's feeling. And ... generally, I'd say I don't pay much attention to that ... unless it's something obvious. Even then I might have trouble responding, because I've

always had the tendency to withdraw from it. If there were any, uh, strongly expressed emotions, I would just close in and go black.

I've begun to understand more about all this recently, particularly since getting the diagnosis. I think Clarissa realized some time back, that if she wanted to communicate with me, she'd have to keep the emotional temperature down, you know, so that I would stay in contact. More recently, I've been trying to handle it so that I can tolerate it more, now that I have some understanding of what is happening and some idea of why. I still can't rely on getting the signals, it's more a matter of her volunteering the information. But if she's clear about what she wants, it helps, I think. And again, since we've had the diagnosis it may have been easier for her, in a way. There hasn't been, or apparently been, as much frustration or anger ... yes. ... I hope it isn't just her resigning herself to the fact of a hopeless case. I don't think it's entirely hopeless, but my basic condition can't change. Some of the manifestations can be worked on, and we've begun to change things, a little.

There is, I think, an emotional component to our relationship. From my side, a large part of it is need for her and dependence on her. I'm coming more to consider her needs and her feelings, ... but that really is something that was previously quite badly lacking. ... I don't find it very easy to consider what would please her. I try to do it, but it doesn't come naturally. I make an effort, ... because I do want to make it good for her. When I know I've pleased her I feel very good. For example, when I come home in the evenings now, and she's in the kitchen, I go and hug her and kiss her, and I know she appreciates that, .. because, .. well, she says so. And she responds. And also, I enjoy doing it ... which ... is a bit surprising, really. Because when I started doing it I was

doing it as an exercise, not because I wanted to do it. That's one of the really encouraging things: I modified my behavior, perhaps learned behavior, like a trained dog ... and then found that it was the right thing, and a good thing. So now I do that, mainly just before I go to work or when I come home. Previously, hugging her would've been pretty rare. It's still more or less a routine, I suppose, .. but sometimes – in the evenings or at the weekend – sometimes I'll go and give her a big squeeze. I think I'm finding that I like the contact with her. In fact, I can think of one or two times when I've perhaps felt a need for it. For example, a few months ago my doctor reduced my anti-depressant, and it went very badly, and now I'm on a higher dose than I was before. And during that time, I'd come home from work quite upset. And I'd really want to have quite a long hug then, ... just to stand there for a bit.

One of the things Clarissa is not finding satisfactory lately is our sexual relationship, since I've been on anti-depressants. Clarissa thinks they have a rather depressing effect on our sexual relationship. I used to put in a great deal of effort, in that area, so I'm hoping that side effect can be reduced somehow. We had a bit more of that romantic feeling during the very early times ... and there's been quite a lot more recently, I'd say. Again, .. it's part of the thing about kissing her when I come in, and so on. If I think to do the appropriate romantic thing, it's rather wooden, I suppose. But then it becomes more alive, and I find I do it because I want to. Still, it's probably not as much as Clarissa would hope. There are things that I'm learning that ought to improve things, I think, but I'm a very slow learner. We've read some books, like *Men Are From Mars*, *Women Are From Venus*, which is quite applicable. Having read that I can understand a bit more of what might be happening. I tend to take an extreme male viewpoint. For

example, when Clarissa's upset about something, my tendency would be to try to fix the problem or correct the situation, rather than to comfort her. And I think I could try something, perhaps, involving contact, like holding her or talking to her. That might be relating more on the emotional level. As I say, I've started doing some of this, as a rule, and only then tend to appreciate it. It's worth doing though.

I think for the situation to really improve, it would need for me to be more communicative, ... in both ways: understanding what Clarissa is saying, other than with words, and being able to express myself. I'd really like to be able to communicate more fully. Probably, our emotional interaction – more negative emotions, obviously – has exercised my emotions and my perception of them. I've been a slow learner. But I am learning. Having the label has been helpful. I think Clarissa understands me better now ... but again, in a way that's more intellectual. ... As to whether she understands my emotions, I would say probably not. But then, how would I know, if I don't? If I don't understand my emotions, how would I know if somebody else understood them?

Analysis of Steven's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Steven was gracious and attentive as his interview commenced, but found the task of describing himself very challenging. He hesitated at first, visibly disconcerted as he cast about rather helplessly for something to say that would address the matter in question: what sort of person is he? After landing on an apt descriptive adjective (introverted) he settled a bit, but continued to apply himself with discernible effort. Much of the framework and terminology he used to characterize himself seemed to have come from others' comments, or traits that he'd learned were typical of persons with autistic spectrum disorders, specifically those related to social and empathic deficits. He readily admits that his assessment that he is "very poor at communication on emotional matters" derives from what he's recently begun to understand about his disorder, and refers to his sister as a source of the descriptive: "loner." In fact we can easily, and somewhat objectively, support these aspects of Steven's self evaluation with features of the data he spontaneously presents us within his narrative. The difference between the number of terms Steven employs to describe his emotional responses and the numbers used by other participants is significant in the extreme: the other participants produced a variety of terms connoting affect in numbers ranging from 27 to 48; while Steven produced only fourteen. Despite what these figures might suggest, however, the concept of emotion appears to be foremost in Steven's mind as he struggles to sort himself out.

Steven describes himself primarily in terms of his relative abilities and deficits, citing what he's "good at" and "poor at" but doesn't give us the kind of detailed examples

of coping strategies and problem solving that most of the other participants offer as a way of illuminating their inner workings. One exception to this general paucity, however, is Steven's explicit attempt to intellectually analyze his wife's behavior in order to discover her underlying thoughts and feelings. His preoccupation with remediating his abilities in this area is one of several major thematic elements in his narrative. Another is his effort to master his own unfathomable (to himself) and potentially disruptive affect. Steven's inability to regulate his emotion, other than by withdrawal from interpersonal contact – his “autistic” defense mechanism, if you will – seems to pervade his experience of living among people, including the thirteen other individuals residing under his own roof. From this we can begin to imagine what it must be like to be Steven, and can also see why it's so hard for him to articulate his thoughts about being himself. If one takes such pains not to notice other people, one has no reference point for conceptualizing what kind of person one is oneself. Of the four affected individuals represented in the study, Steven most poignantly illustrates the experience of autism as a “disorder of the self.” Nevertheless, Steven shows a nascent capacity to reflect on his own self-hood, and to apply his mind to the task of making inferences about the internal lives of others.

Theme #1 Having feelings is the tricky part of being a person.

I'm really good at understanding things intellectually. But not about how a person works, what makes them tick – not even myself.

Steven's use of a mechanistic metaphor may be consistent with common usage, but it seems particularly evocative in his case, as well as consistent with popular notions of autistic thinking. While we can't be sure how much the literature on his diagnosis has influenced his way of representing how he or any other person “works” we can sense that

Steven's approach is concrete and formulaic – somewhat “mechanical” in other words. He knows that he's failing to integrate some essential information in his (heretofore infrequent) attempts to consider what makes people “tick,” and he seems to realize that the missing pieces have to do with feelings. With this in mind, Steven sets to work.

As he details his observations about his own emotional functioning, Steven makes distinctions between the various tasks of identifying and labeling affect, “expressing and receiving it,” and “dealing with” the experience of the emotion itself. He reports that the process of giving any consideration to these complex matters is new to him, and has been hard to get used to. Steven's fear of experiencing affect seems to be a major factor in his “processing” impairment, one that requires him to push the limits of his tolerance in order to build skills. He explains that his understanding of emotion derives from intellectual rather than intuitive abilities, and emphasizes the importance of verbal mediation in his processing of relevant information: “I can recognize broad-brush emotions from face and voice, but if I want to understand it, it sort of has to be with words.”

One of his greatest challenges is in formulating appropriate responses to others' emotions, a task he has methodically approached in the past. In one described instance he was motivated by a desire to repair a breach with his wife Clarissa, and offered an apology with flowers. In hindsight Steven notes the success he achieved, and suggests he might do well to implement that approach more often, but he senses that this idea fails to address the underlying problem.

But again, it doesn't come naturally, that sort of thing. I have to work it out first, which means I'd have to be aware of what she's feeling. And ... generally, I'd say I don't pay much attention to that ... unless it's something obvious. Even then I might have trouble responding, because I've always had the tendency to withdraw from it. If there were any, uh, strongly expressed emotions, I would just close in and go black.

Here Steven clearly states that he has difficulty attending to people's expressions of emotion, and shows that he's beginning to understand why – he is so entirely disrupted by his awareness of feelings that he must escape. As he tries to make sense of his difficulties Steven can be seen struggling with the same theoretical questions cited in this project's introductory literature review: is his emotion processing impaired due to his innate neuro-cognitive deficits; or are those capacities under-developed because of his pervasive need to ward off all affect?

What I used to do, if there was any emotional situation, was just shut off completely and not communicate at all. It's true that I've had a great deal of difficulty understanding what the other person is trying to communicate, emotionally, but I don't think it's only that that's hard to handle, ... it's the emotion itself.

Unfortunately for us, and for Steven, the present material only adds fuel to the burning question. One thing that's striking, however, and potentially relevant to the debate, is the overall coherence with which Steven presents his conundrum. In comparison to the other autistic respondents, he demonstrates, in a number of passages, a notable organization of thought along the path of his inquiry, with each suggested explanation raising another question to be considered, or an additional observation begging for inclusion. This flow is heralded by phrases such as: "Now that I think of it ... Which certainly doesn't mean that ... but there was one exception ..." Where other participants show more frequent shifts, contradictions, and lapses in coherence, Steven often sustains a more stable train of thought. Admittedly, this organization must be, in part, an artifact of the first phase of data analysis, in which the narrative was reconstructed according to research driven thematic categories. Steven's material, nevertheless, stands out against that of the other autistic participants, whose data were

reconstituted in the same way. What accounts for the difference? Certainly many more factors than can be explored here and now, yet the aforementioned aspects of style and content may have relevance. What distinguishes him most obviously from the others is not how much he talks about emotion during his interview, but how much he seems to actually feel (or not feel) in the process. The others' narratives falter when their feelings are aroused, producing discernible disorganizing effects. They describe a myriad of nuanced emotions that Steven, by his own account, couldn't begin to define or recognize within himself. He can only attempt to distinguish them via external manifestations:

I don't think I'm very good at romantic feelings. I can't say that I'm even sure what people mean by that, really. When Clarissa talks about romantic feelings, I think she's speaking about my giving her flowers or little gifts, or ... wanting me to tell her I love her ..., which I'm pretty poor at, .. all that sort of thing.

We have to concede, along with Steven, that he likely hasn't ever experienced what we would call "romantic" feelings. Still it's baffling, that with all the reasoning and reflective capacity he exhibits, he can't arrive at a concept of romance that conveys some set of internal, emotional properties beyond basic need or desire. If we compare him to Susan, who also flails about in her effort to define what she feels for her partner Tom and agonizes over the question of whether it is enough to satisfy him, we note a similar confusion around representation of so complex and abstract a concept as "romantic love." But the difference between them is quite profound in terms of actual felt emotion, by all accounts, including the numerical evidence displayed in Susan's 48 separate ways of describing what she's felt. Each of them has been explicit about his/her own experience: the one flooded and battered by waves of intense feeling, willingly embraced (though not without trepidation) as a preferable alternative to isolation; and the other willfully

distanced, in order to avoid what he can only dimly conceive of – a terrifying thing that makes him “close in and go black.” They feel differently, yet they both struggle to cognitively represent emotional concepts because of the discrepancy they perceive between their inner experience and what seems to connote emotion in the external world. Both are vulnerable to emotional “contagion,” which disrupts, but also provides a basis for empathy. But where Susan has bridged the gap in a way that has allowed complex emotions to register perceptually as well as within herself, Steven still feels the impulse to escape when affect appears. Here he describes an instance in which he was caught off guard by a chance perception of a feeling he was too frightened to own:

On one occasion, I was watching a video, and there was one scene in which the main character was being embarrassed because he was in a social situation that he didn't know how to handle ... and I couldn't stand it. I had to go out. I haven't thought about it until now, but I suppose it may have been that I identified with it rather closely ... him not being able to cope with a social situation.

We find Steven, at present, learning to tolerate more affect from both internal and external sources and beginning to make use of what analysts have traditionally called “signal anxiety” (Freud, 1965), that initial twinge that alerts the psyche to marshal its defenses in order to handle escalating discomfort. In Steven's case the defense is, predictably, engagement of his intellect in processing verbal information that will lead to an understanding (enabling regulatory management) of the emotional interchange.

What seems to be better, lately, is that I might notice if I'm pulling back and shutting myself off. So if I start to do that, I can say: wait what's actually happening here? And if I do get upset, I'm not so afraid of the emotion. If I can better understand what's happening, I can work with that, stay a bit more calm, and perhaps try and understand what the other person is actually trying to say. I realize I'm being intellectual about emotions again, but that's the way I am. In the end, I suppose it all helps, in an emotional interaction, ... but it isn't the same as actually understanding people. I don't think I would say that I really understand anybody ... as a person.

Theme #2 Intelligence – that’s a personal attribute, I think.

I think she admired me for my intelligence and ability. ... These are rather small things, really. ... On the other hand, ... I suppose, perhaps, they could be important. I think it’s quite a large part of my personality, my intelligence.

Considering that Steven earned a degree in Mathematics and Computer Science at a prestigious university, and has managed to function as the primary financial provider for his family of fourteen, it’s somewhat surprising that he isn’t more assertive about his intelligence. His hesitance signals what is most important, and poignant, in the above passage: that Steven wants to be valued for something real in him, but that this attribute seems small next to the ones he so clearly lacks in Clarissa’s eyes. We get the impression here that Steven infers Clarissa’s admiration but we aren’t quite convinced (at least I’m not) that he’s actually felt *admired* by her – *approved of*, maybe, or *status confirmed*, but far from *basking in the glow*, so to speak – despite a sense of the likelihood that Clarissa has expressed this to him. Steven’s anxious vigilance around Clarissa’s negative affect is all too apparent, however, and seems to prompt such vigorous warding off that it’s no wonder he doesn’t feel soothed by anything positive coming back (unless that reservoir has long since run dry).

Theme #3 I was always very much a loner.

I never really had any friends. That must be very common in people with ... um ... with my sort of ... with the disorder.

In recalling his childhood Steven notes that he didn’t share the typical interests of his peers, and identifies his only “friend” as another “odd bot” who shared his interest in computers. He is careful to point out that this relationship didn’t involve “emotion” or “contact” even though he comments that they “enjoyed” each other’s company. Steven

has found a descriptive term to apply to his social remoteness: he is “not a team player.” In his description of one exception to this experience (which he tellingly refers to as an “anomaly”), his participation in recreational volleyball with fellow church members, he strikes an authentic note: he felt part of a team because of shared positive emotion. What clearly felt good to Steven, in this instance, was the sense that he couldn’t fail. He could enjoy the game without fear of feeling inadequate, as well as register the fact that others with whom he was engaged shared his enjoyment. It’s hard to imagine that in all his life there haven’t been countless other opportunities to tap into this type of experience, within family life for instance. But then again, family relationships are fraught with deeper emotions, and Steven makes clear that his volleyball companions were not “close friends.” Steven’s ideas about people, and the emotions they evoke, unquestionably make it hard to get close.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Steven seems to show a limited understanding of people as products of their experience, endowed with a mixture of basic emotions and attributes, but feels unable to grasp their “personhood.” In describing his wife he is able to extract several “personality” characteristics from his observation of her behaviors, but admits that his ability to do this is only recently acquired. Again Steven stands out from the other participants in his representation of his partner: he offers only three terms describing what she’s like as a person (dependable, determined, and having endurance), in contrast to a range of nine to twenty-five descriptive words or phrases among the other respondents. In referring to his partner’s feelings, however, Steven’s variety of descriptive terms is near the average number among participants. He shows that he can

perceive and identify her frustration and distress, and from external cues, coupled with his own reflective abilities, he can intellectually infer thought and affect processes. In spite of these capacities, Steven doesn't seek emotional attunement or empathic understanding of Clarissa. This calls to mind Alvarez and Reid's definition of autism as a fundamental lack of affectively driven curiosity about others as objects of relational strivings (1999).

Theme #1 My parents couldn't show love or affection.

I remember that my mother seemed to be very cold. Now my understanding is that she did love me, but she didn't seem to be able to show it.

Although spare and tentative, Steven's effort to describe his parents by tapping early memories conveys a sense that he is struggling to integrate fragments of relevant information into concepts that will ultimately lead to a better understanding of his own formative experience in relation to them. The process is a largely intellectual effort, involving what seems to be a measure of projection ("Perhaps she had some difficulty with physical contact.") in his effort to explain her distance and apparent coldness. As Steven tries to infer an internal life from his recollections of his mother, we can detect an underlying affect. He represents her as a person with shortcomings, like himself, and seems to view her with a sense of regret and longing around the lack of warmth and nurturing he depicts. Perhaps because of his identification with this internalized image, he refrains from characterizing her as neglectful or malevolent. As he lingers with his memory of the past, he seems on the verge of wondering whether he was actually deprived of something essential:

I don't remember wanting particularly to be hugged. But then, if you've never experienced something, you're not going to want it. I remember that if there was a party,

it was quite likely that they would put me in the bedroom with a comic or an encyclopedia.

Theme #2 I get a feeling when I identify with a person.

One of them – well, she’s got two small children and her husband’s left her. It’s not a situation that I’ve been in, but, ... well, I can understand and feel with the problem ...

When Steven perceives people as being at some kind of a disadvantage he seems to feel something “with” them and toward them, including a wish to offer support. A similar experience was described by Stanley, as he recalled his wish to offer supportive advice to fellow soldiers who might have been left feeling vulnerable by their brush with mortality. Each man’s explicit denial of being in the same circumstances as those they speak of (in Stanley’s case he shared their experience of danger but insists he had no residual anxiety) seems to correspond to a need to split off any related emotion. Both men seem to want to respond to a need that they can cognitively conceptualize, and recognize some kind of affiliative impulse, but neither believes that he himself shares the same need as those he seeks to comfort. As outsiders we can note that these impulses, which are unique in each man’s experience, arise in the context of potential identification with another person. Steven has not been deserted by his spouse, but he can well imagine the experience because of his own well founded fears of being left by his wife. Sensing, again, an opportunity for shared experience Steven finds himself seeking contact, and notes that there’s “some sort of emotion involved with that.” This seems to be a degree of affect that he can tolerate and tentatively recognize as a form of empathic relatedness, in contrast to the overwhelming distress aroused when he clearly “identified with” the unfortunate character in the video he described.

Theme #3 Clarissa has great endurance – which is lucky for me.

Hm I don't really know if I can describe Clarissa ... as I said, I find this sort of thing rather difficult ... Let's see ... Dependable, ... I would say.

As noted, Steven demonstrates a capacity to make inferences about Clarissa's internal life when he attends to his past or present observations and focuses his intellect on this task. The personality characteristics that he extracts through his synthesis of information and analysis are logical and seemingly accurate conclusions. One thing that is particularly striking is that Steven assesses her almost solely on the basis of her abiding commitment to their marriage, despite her obvious disappointment with him. Steven's inability to say more about his wife of thirty years in a way that characterizes her beyond her enduring presence is quite profound. We too can infer her fortitude and forbearance, as well as her disappointment and frustration from what Steven says, but he utterly fails to make her come alive for us in any tangible way. Though it may be inappropriate to derive conclusions from this single exercise, the material suggests a woefully undeveloped – if not truly impoverished – representational capacity in Steven's case. We can only surmise that she doesn't take shape as a person for us because she doesn't fully exist as one in his mind. She instead occupies the abstract role of "wife" to whom certain considerations are owed, which, when given, keep her in proximity. This in turn staves off the vague and largely incomprehensible threat of being entirely alone. In order to move beyond this limitation, Steven will clearly have to put more than his mind to the task. Even that is something he's only just begun to do.

... These are things I can say about her now, but I wouldn't have known any of it at the beginning. I don't think I really understood her as a person, but then I probably never really tried very hard.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

While a number of points have been mentioned that seem to distinguish Steven from the other participants, another bears noting as a likely factor in the quality of the material he presents us with: Steven is engaged here in a process of reflection that, by his own accounting, is largely unfamiliar to him. The other participants seem to vary broadly along this dimension, and engage with differing levels of ease and familiarity in the task. However Steven appears to be undertaking a truly novel journey of thoughtful examination. This may help to explain the more linear and straightforward quality he sustains, with the result that his narrative is uncluttered with tired recitations and tangential intrusions in comparison to others. On the other hand, it also lacks the rich elaboration seen in the other texts, perhaps reflecting his more restricted realm of experience in the object world he's been asked to explore.

As he approaches the topic of his relationship with Clarissa, Steven indicates that he has rarely given thought to such questions as what might have attracted them to each other in the first place. During his interview he ponders issues not contemplated before, and in doing so shows that he can be flexible in considering possible interpretations of his own and others' behavior and responses.

Theme #1 I depend on Clarissa for security.

There is, I think, an emotional component to our relationship. From my side, a large part of it is need for her and dependence on her.

It is telling that Steven can comment so concisely about the basic nature of his attachment to Clarissa, but can't imagine what she might derive for herself from the relationship. He can note at least one quality that she might admire in him, and diligently

applies nascent theories of behavioral analysis in his efforts to determine what pleases her (with the goal of increasing his security in the bond), but he hasn't much sense of what she might find rewarding. This is probably largely due to the fact that Clarissa's dissatisfaction, as we will see, is so much in the forefront of her own representation of their marriage. Nonetheless, on careful consideration Steven hits (accurately) on what seems to be the main ingredient in his appeal to Clarissa.

I don't think I really know what initially attracted her. It's probably something I should have thought about. ... One possibility is that ... probably I looked as if I needed a mother.

With further consideration, and more insight, Steven might have gone much farther with this idea. He might have noted his own child-like qualities (a sweetness of manner and curious innocence that were immediately apparent, and undeniably appealing, on the occasion of my meeting him), or characterized her as maternal or nurturing, but instead he leaves the matter unelaborated.

Steven's reflections on Clarissa's experience in the relationship focus primarily on how she responds to both his failures and his attempts to mollify her. The evidence of nuance in his descriptions of her affect is somewhat surprising, given his many protestations of insufficiency. He uses the terms: *admires*, *appreciative*, and *resigned* to illustrate his understanding, words with slightly more complex connotations than basic labels. He himself is aware of having more ability than he makes use of in their interactions.

In fact I could tell a bit more than Clarissa says I could, actually, but I couldn't put any fine detail on it. I could say: well, she's upset, but I wouldn't know why, except that it was probably something I'd just done.

Again Steven nails the salient point: his more complex capacities are overwhelmed when the threat of rejection looms. Regardless of the number of sophisticated emotion words in his lexicon, or his ability to attribute them to her, he can't deploy them in the service of fulfilling her relational need for empathic attunement. As he admits, he hasn't even tried to attune to her emotional state, for reasons that are probably more obvious to us, but still discernible to him: he is too cowed by the potential of encountering her negative affect. He therefore allocates his attention to devising and maintaining routines that will demonstrate his resolve to please her.

Steven's understanding that dispassionate cognitive appraisal can't compensate for what he lacks is clear to us, as it is to him. He is realistic about the dynamics of the relationship, and doesn't imagine that he fulfills her needs.

I'm coming more to consider her needs and her feelings, ... but that really is something that was previously quite badly lacking. ... I don't find it very easy to consider what would please her. I try to do it, but it doesn't come naturally. I make an effort, ... because I do want to make it good for her.

Theme #2 Doing can arouse feeling.

I think I'm finding that I like the contact with her. In fact, I can think of one or two times when I've perhaps felt a need for it.

Based on a rather impressive degree of self observation, Steven sees a possibility that he may derive pleasurable sensation around the experience of affectionate contact with Clarissa through a process of learned behavior. He also seems, tentatively, to be discovering a more intrinsic reward in arousing positive feelings in her, as opposed to simply avoiding the discomfort of her displeasure.

When I know I've pleased her I feel very good. For example, when I come home in the evenings now, and she's in the kitchen, I go and hug her and kiss her, and I know she appreciates that, .. because, .. well, she says so. And she responds. And also, I enjoy doing it ... which ... is a bit surprising, really. Because when I started doing it I was

doing it as an exercise, not because I wanted to do it. That's one of the really encouraging things: I modified my behavior, perhaps learned behavior, like a trained dog ... and then found that it was the right thing, and a good thing.

His description of these new sensations contains a disarming naiveté, which highlights his vulnerability, as well as the distance he has yet (if ever) to travel toward more mature functioning. As he recounts his feeling of need during a recent period of depression, his child-like response gives the impression that he's only now registering feelings that we associate with earliest infancy:

For example, a few months ago my doctor reduced my anti-depressant, and it went very badly, and now I'm on a higher dose than I was before. And during that time, I'd come home from work quite upset. And I'd really want to have quite a long hug then, ... just to stand there for a bit.

Theme #3 I have to change, but what if I can't?

I hope it isn't just her resigning herself to the fact of a hopeless case. I don't think it's entirely hopeless, but my basic condition can't change. Some of the manifestations can be worked on, and we've begun to change things, a little.

Steven ultimately shows considerable insight into the challenges he and Clarissa face, and notes that they are learning to cope and understand their problems better since receiving his diagnosis. He also realizes that their efforts are likely to generate mainly superficial change. His formulations around what kinds of adjustments might help to make the relationship more mutually satisfying are, again, keenly observed, and place the responsibility primarily on him. He enumerates the skills he would have to learn and capacities he must develop in order to achieve growth, including an intrinsic level of commitment and trust as well as the adoption of specific behaviors. Steven notes what has long been obvious to Clarissa, that his engagement depends on his tolerance for affective arousal:

I think Clarissa realized some time back, that if she wanted to communicate with me, she'd have to keep the emotional temperature down, you know, so that I would stay in contact. More recently, I've been trying to handle it so that I can tolerate it more ...

Steven shows that he can make use of different resources in conceptualizing both problems and solutions, but it's impossible to know whether he will ever integrate these intellectual processes with his immediate interpersonal experience to achieve more genuine and mutual empathic attunement.

I tend to take an extreme male viewpoint. For example, when Clarissa's upset about something, my tendency would be to try to fix the problem or correct the situation, rather than to comfort her. And I think I could try something, perhaps, involving contact, like holding her or talking to her. That might be relating more on the emotional level.

Still struggling to understand what it actually means to relate emotionally, Steven stumbles on another immutable fact: it requires something reciprocal, and unambiguously detectable.

Having the label has been helpful. I think Clarissa understands me better now ... but again, in a way that's more intellectual. ... As to whether she understands my emotions, I would say probably not. But then, how would I know, if I don't? If I don't understand my emotions, how would I know if somebody else understood them?

Clarissa's Narrative

MY SENSE OF SELF

Myself. Well, I was born and brought up in the north of the country. My mother did darning work, at home. And my father – he'd trained as an aircraft engineer in the Navy – but after he left, had a succession of failed prospects. I was expected to pursue a career, they were very clear about that. I was nineteen, when I got married. But I did complete my education, and then I moved down here where Steven had gotten a job. I did my midwifery training here, and shared a prize with my class for excellence in training, which I was quite pleased with. I enjoy my work. I work part time in a hospital, sometimes in midwifery and sometimes on a high-risk ward. I enjoy the work very much, and I see it very much as a life saver, from my personal perspective, you know, for the sake of my own sanity.

Being the mother of twelve children, I suppose you might say that I'm maternal. Of course you don't have to be maternal to be a mother (laughing) .. But I suppose I am. You know, I care what happens to them. I'd say I'm flexible. I've had to be, of course. ... I like to think of myself as generous and kind, ... you know, I once let the children catch a turtle and bring it home, .. I wouldn't let them keep it very long, though. (laugh) ...

I've never really thought of myself as strong, perhaps because I'm very aware of my weaknesses. I mean, other people looking from outside probably would say that I am. But if I am, it's something that's been developed, over the years, through the situations that I've gone through.

MYSELF IN THE RELATIONAL WORLD

My father was very rigid, in his expectations. I was the eldest child of two girls, and he expected me to do very well. My biggest worry, back then, was what I would say to my father if I failed in my examinations. He was quite a disciplinarian as well. For half of my childhood he was away, in the Navy. And after that he tended to throw himself into his work. So as a child I wanted to be closer to him, which didn't happen until, maybe, the last ten years or so. We'd had a big disagreement about where I was going to secondary school. He wanted me to do a very high level medical course that covered three specialties in different areas. But I decided to change my plans in order to accommodate my relationship with Steven – we'd met by then. And I didn't tell my father, I just made all the arrangements myself to cancel the course. That was our first disagreement, when I was eighteen years old. It took me that long to get the courage up.

I think during that time, while I was getting to know Steven, I was having a rather delayed growing up phase. And I suppose my marrying him was, partly, an attempt to get away from my father. I can see that now, but of course you don't seem to know when you're in the middle of it. My mum was quite an emotional sort of person. She always tried to manipulate people with her emotions. I don't think she was very secure in her marriage – Dad was a bit of a philanderer – and she wasn't very secure in herself. They did actually get divorced, about six or seven years ago.

Most of my important relationships have been with people in our church community, which is where I first met Steven, actually. We were members of a youth group. It wasn't really connected to a particular church, but met in someone's house. So that's played a significant role in my life, obviously. It's probably given me the inner resources that I've needed, to get through all of this with Steven, over the years. I mean,

part of our belief is that we need to be in some ways quite introverted, and that we need to examine ourselves and our interactions and judge them according to the word of God, and bring them to mind along with the word of God. So much of it is about behavior, about assumptions that challenge and influence behavior. Take, for example, the idea that if a rich man comes in you put him at the top of the table; if it's a poor man you put him at the bottom. You've got ask yourself: what are you doing? You've got to think: what assumptions are you using, and challenge all those, and see what goes on, that you actually judge people by their appearance. And it's – all of it is about asking: what is it that we're doing with our lives. And so that is an integral part of our faith.

So that's been an important source of support. Mind you it can't shield you from everything, can it? There've actually been a number of episodes when I've been quite depressed. The first one where I was clinically treated, happened after we had a baby who died. It was during a time when Steven was unemployed for three years as well, which was hard. We'd been prepared for it, but, still, it was quite devastating. And then, of course, there was the lack of emotional support from Steven, and understanding that I couldn't expect it of him, given his lack of responsiveness. But there had been other instances before that, where I was probably clinically depressed but I wasn't treated. Well, you carry on, don't you. There's a whole family to look after, ... and I'm somebody who takes responsibility seriously. So I walked into my own trap there. I'm somebody who .. can be quite empathetic, ... and who tries to understand how people are, ... which perhaps has made it more difficult with Steven, in the sense that I haven't been able to do that with him – understand where he is, and that's been quite frustrating.

The diagnosis has helped in that. Now I can understand why he's working the way he is. But up until then I just felt very frustrated a lot of the time. I suppose this might be one area where having contact with other people might be a help. I mean other people with Aspergers, you know, to talk with them about what they've learned in that way, what they've found helpful.

MY RELATIONSHIP PARTNER

Before I knew Steven I'd seen him, and had gotten an impression of sorts. He had a reputation for being very intelligent, which he is. He wasn't a run of the mill sort of person. I can remember seeing him coming into the school, with nothing on his feet, and a great big dahlia stuck in his button-hole. He certainly isn't the sort of person who's bothered by what people think about how he looks. I suppose I was intrigued that he didn't care whether people thought he was silly or were talking behind his back. When I finally met him I could see that he was less comfortable socially than other people, and I felt sort of a maternal instinct, because he was woebegone.

It didn't occur to us, at that time, that there might be anything seriously wrong. I mean, when Steven was being brought up there was no proper label for it around. Both Steven's parents and mine had died before we got the diagnosis, ...and, well, we never got to talk with them to explain. His mother and sister had a very strong emphasis on education, on intelligence and culture – all of them were very bright, in music and things like that that were very technical, ... so I don't think they ever saw him as ... didn't see the problems.

Steven is very intelligent, very focused. You can trust him. He is very serious about providing for the financial needs of the family. He takes that very seriously, and

that's something I admire in him. But even his being intelligent doesn't mean he has the ability to exercise it in a useful way. He's very motivated by his interest in programming and computer training, but because of that, I think people tend to see him as very limited. He's inflexible, I mean, to the point where he's oblivious to what's going on around him. He doesn't seem to have a broad base of interests that he can share with other people. He does socialize with our friends in the church, on certain occasions. Steven likes to help, and he always makes himself available. Like when one of our friends gets a new computer, he'll help with things like that. Or in the past he's done electrical work for friends in their homes. And he's also helped people financially, when he sees that there's that need. He can be very generous with his time and his talent. Of course we don't see much of that here at home, .. which has been difficult for me. I mean, I'm glad he can do it. I am glad that he's willing to do something, for someone – anything that takes him away from his selfish state. But when he goes off and puts up a new lamp for somebody, or something like that ... I've been hurt by that. Then I might make a quarrelous remark or something, but then I'll leave it. That's what I mean about being flexible. I've had to learn to cope with things like that, so I don't fight them.

Occasionally he will do something, but it somehow has to have a point to him. Like, for example, we had a doorbell that didn't work, and I'd been asking him to fix it for months. And he was expecting some computer parts, and when they didn't come, he said: "The kids must not be answering the bell." And I said: "They can't answer the bell – it doesn't work, it hasn't for months." So then he went and fixed it, so he could get his computer parts. You see what I mean – he did something about it because it impinged on his experience and reality. Well, two days later it stopped working, and when I said:

“The bell doesn’t work,” he said: “Well I fixed it, so it couldn’t have gone wrong now.” He couldn’t understand that it needed attention again, because that was something he’d already done, whereas other men, normal men, you know, would think: “Oh well, all right, I’ll have another look at it. Let’s make it work.”

I’ve tried to work some of these things through with him, but nothing seems to make any real difference, any change in him. Even if I sat down and went through a sort of “post-mortem” of a situation, and he seemed to understand what happened – you know: “You did this and I did that, and I was upset because you said this, and that helped...” Well he would seem to understand it, but then he would go and do what appeared to me to be the same thing two days later. For him it’s a different situation, because, you know, it’s not in the bedroom; this time we’re out shopping. From my point of view it’s the same sort of reaction, that I’ve been complaining about, but he doesn’t seem able to relate what I’ve just explained to the new circumstances. There’ve been times when I’ve just been completely at a loss, you know, unable to understand how he could fail to grasp even the most basic concepts. I mean, how could an intelligent man not understand English? But then things have become a bit clearer since learning more about the disorder.

At one point, after the diagnosis, we tried to talk about definitions of emotion words, and I said: “Well, what about enthusiasm, what do you think that means?” And he hadn’t a clue, so I said: “All right, well, I’ll describe a situation: Supposing you’ve said you’re going to take your children to the zoo, and so they’re out there in the car, you know, before they’ve had breakfast, and on the way there they’re saying, ‘Are we there yet, are we there yet?’ And you get there and you buy the tickets and they go ripping in

through the gate, and they're crawling everywhere and saying: 'Mum, mum, are we going to see the elephants, are we going to see the tigers, I want to see the tigers!'" ...you know, trying to explain how enthusiasm expresses itself. And he just looked at me, blankly, and said: "No, I don't think I know what that is." He hadn't identified that feeling within himself, or been able to put that label on himself, ... because, I think, with his own feelings, he tends to think of them only as good or bad.

I don't know whether he has more complex emotions; it's difficult to tell what he's feeling. I mean, sometimes it's possible to see when he's irritated, or when he's impatient, for example when he's waiting for somebody. But I don't know that he would put that label to it, as what he's feeling at that time. There are times when I can sense that he's feeling more positive. Like when we go to Norway, to our conferences there, he certainly – he relaxes more physically, and his face relaxes more. I mean, his whole body actually stands up taller. So there are physical things there, that indicate that he's happier, when we're there. And he does seem that little bit more alert, perhaps because he's not got his computer, you know, so he's forced to take notice of the 8000 people surrounding him. He does seem a bit more open in that environment. Actually, he's had a lot of help from some of the friends over there, who've just accepted him as he is. And he does appreciate that, I know he does. But, on the whole, I don't think he has much interest in having other people around him. He finds it very difficult to live in a house with a lot of girls, you know, teenage and frenzied girls, because obviously they can be quite emotional. So he just tends to hide in a corner, basically. I think he's quite happy at work, as it's a type of job where he doesn't actually have to interact with anyone. I

think if it was left to him he wouldn't take holidays. He would get up, go to work seven days a week, right 'round the year. He'd be quite happy to do that.

OUR RELATIONSHIP

We were part of a local youth group, Steven and I, so that was where we got to know each other. He was at Oxford at the time, and had had a difficult first term, and it was very, very lonely, and that had been sort of a springboard for his conversion to the Christian group. Neither of us had been seriously involved with anyone else before that. He did give the impression of being very determined about the relationship, .. in some way or other. I suppose there were romantic feelings – for me as a seventeen or eighteen-year-old that would make sense. But looking back I can see lots of other things that were probably lurking around in the situation, that obviously influenced it. My relationship with my father, for example. His being against my having boyfriends, things like that, and I think my being inexperienced as well. And Steven was unusual .. in some way. Perhaps we were both just trying to have a close relationship, never mind about marriage. But that didn't work, in the end. When we were getting settled in the community here, we were required to do some training, which included couples' counseling. But as far as our relationship went, it didn't change that very much. It wasn't something that Steven would have chosen.

Our church put a really big emphasis on family, which included an understanding about raising children. Steven went along with that, I don't know how whole-heartedly, after all he was never one to conform. But eventually he got worn down; he actually agreed to having children. So we ended up with a large family, ... which I wasn't consciously using, as a buffer against him, but I can recognize that it did give me a focus,

a reason for staying in the home. And certainly if we hadn't had children during that time, I would have given up on him.

Of course with hindsight I can see that the warnings were there early on. There were times, before we got engaged, and certainly before we got married, that I couldn't seem to make him understand certain things, perhaps having to do with why I was upset about something. I mean, I can remember once, trying to explain something as we were driving somewhere, and getting more and more frustrated, and in the end I just jumped out of the car and slammed the door and stormed off in the dark. I thought: "That'll teach him," though of course it didn't. But I didn't ever pin those down as being problem areas at that point, and didn't extrapolate ahead into the future, which you don't tend to do at that age. I just thought: well, it'll get better; we'll learn, learn how to communicate. But we never did, basically. I mean we can talk now, we can talk about something in the news, or a book that we've read. I mean, looking back, we did have conversations. That is what I would call them, definitely, but they were always on that intellectual level.

I suppose that must have been satisfying up to a point, and I sort of thought that was simply the way he responded. Then during those early years, as more children came along, I had to learn, more by mistake than anything else, not to push him in complicated situations. I should have expected it, because, quite obviously, it wasn't a wife he needed but a housekeeper. That's what I was: a housekeeper cum-child-minder-cum-secretary, you know. Someone who was keeping his environment for him, without getting anything back from the relationship. And of course I wanted a romantic relationship, and that didn't seem to be something he was capable of having. I can actually remember a day when I was out rather late with the children visiting a friend, and saying: "Steven'll have

been home for ages, he'll be expecting his tea." And, you know, getting home, and coming in and saying: "Oh, I'm sorry I wasn't here when you got home. I'll get you something to eat straight away." And he just looked up with a sort of vague expression on his face and said: "Oh, .. weren't you here? I didn't notice." And that's one of the times it really struck me, that his connection with the world around him wasn't the same as other people's, you know. He didn't notice the absence, not just of his wife but of four rowdy, small children – that he'd come home from work, and not noticed that the house was empty. I found that quite difficult to handle at the time. And I thought: "What's going on here?"

There was that sort of thing happening, I know, regularly. I mean, he didn't want to be involved with anything, such as buying things for the home, or birthday presents or Christmas presents. I couldn't really make sense of it, so basically, I worked on being as flexible as possible. The one thing I drew the line at was the finances, because I felt he had to have some sort of responsibility. So I explained to him that I wasn't prepared to be the only one responsible. And that's all. I was very logical about it. At the time, I think, he was a bit resistant. But I just said: "I'm not doing it," without any emotional fight. Then he accepted it. But the down side of it was that from then on he was very particular. I had to do very detailed accounts of what I'd spent, and was expecting to spend, and I had to give him these accounts religiously, every two months. And every month, usually he would complain that we were spending too much. That was the down-side. But the up-side of it was that that was one responsibility that I didn't have to have. And there was no problem with his capability, at least for that sort of thing.

I think, one of the things with Aspergers is .. you feel very isolated .. with your problem .. because it's so difficult to explain, because you haven't got a label, to explain what your problems really are. And people don't understand that you're not just complaining about your husband, I mean – well you do, don't you? (laugh) ... you know: he's out to the pub every night, or he doesn't come home from work until ten o'clock, or something (laughs)... It's a very stressful thing to try and explain to somebody who hasn't experienced it... I think the biggest problem for me, apart from the lack of emotional connection, was the sense of responsibility – that everything was my responsibility. You know, the home, keeping the family going, getting the children from school, going to parents' meetings, helping them decide what courses to do at school, the garden – actually, he does gardening. But for the most part, I've felt solely responsible, and I couldn't get him to understand that he could take some of that responsibility.

It's hard to be optimistic, even though I can see that he's making more of an effort lately, because after so many years I'd nearly given up on getting him to understand or respond to my needs. The problem is that I've got all those negative years behind me and they're pulling me in the other direction. You know: all right Steven is feeling something, but it's so small compared to the lack over the past years, that part of me wants to draw back and say: it's not enough. During periods when I was frequently having explosions over situations, he became very.. self-pitying, and he'd go around with this guilty puppy dog expression. He seemed to be blaming himself, but never getting the point of what he was blaming himself for. You know, he'd recognize that there was something that I was upset about, so he would admit that there was something wrong, and be aware of the fact that I felt bad, and that he was feeling bad that he

couldn't do it right, .. but somehow never grasp what it was that he could do right, to improve things in the future. And that was incredibly frustrating as well.

If he senses any sort of negative emotion he'll just say that I'm sulking; he can't detect the feeling in me – that I'm sad, depressed, anxious, frustrated, or any of the gamut of emotions. He can't think of any of those. He'll just put it all in one lump and say it's sulking. ... He doesn't do that so much now, I have to say. I suppose by now he has some sort of understanding, he must have. But I don't think he's got the sense of understanding that I would like. I mean, because he's intelligent he can use language, and he could perhaps acquire things in certain ways, like how to describe an emotion, but I'm never sure that what he means by it is what I would mean by it. I mean, he has come to me and said "I love you," but it's quite obvious that what he means by that isn't what I mean by it. Because whatever it is to him it's something with very little expression.

There was one occasion when he surprised me – once, in thirty years. He came home from work, on a fine day, .. and I was in the garden, and he said: "Go and get changed and pack your bags. You're going away." He'd gotten the children involved in this project: he'd arranged for two of them to look after the house, and a couple of weeks previously he'd asked one of them to pretend to do a survey as part of their school work: "If you had a week to go away, where would you like to go in the British Isles?" .. as if it was a questionnaire they had to do for school, and he'd booked a weekend away, and sent me away. ... So, something happened there. I mean, I can't say I'm ...incredibly happy with how things are, but I'm working with it, so that it doesn't become a burden for me, personally. It's part of my development, given the situation, that in the end, something

good in me comes out of it, so that I grow as a person, rather than let it become something that makes me bitter.

But it has been hard work, .. and there have been times when I've felt very much that my whole personality has been influenced by the way Steven is. I mean, some people with Aspergers dominate in the relationship, in an obsessional way. I know that from what I've read. But Steven dominates in a very ... negative way. It's his very absence that forces other people, mainly myself, to adopt certain roles. I mean, when I went back to work as a midwife that was as much to help my own sanity, and create a space that was mine, rather than me feeling I was Steven's wife, or housekeeper or all the other things that he wants me to be, or .. somebody's mother. And it's a way of creating something that's an area of expertise where I can flourish, and be acknowledged, outside of the family situation.

I do have quite a sense of areas where I feel I've failed, particularly in the family context, because of the pressures on me, in the emotional sense, I don't feel I've had the emotional resources for their needs. I mean, I can't take responsibility for all of it, and of course I didn't know that he had Aspergers, but I sometimes wonder how that knowledge might have helped us, as a family. Perhaps I'd have had an explanation for the children, as to why their father is the way he is, so I could in some way have helped them come to terms with it as very small children, and see it in more positive terms rather than negative terms. I mean, how could they make sense of it – having a dad who doesn't play with them, who, if he was asked to take them to the park, would literally do that – take them to the park and just stand there, and expect them to get on with whatever, without any idea of what they would want to do, or feel a need to get involved with them, playing football,

or pushing them on swings, or, you know... those are the sorts of situations that children are being shaped by, in one way or another. I'd say he doesn't know the children. He doesn't know what subjects they're taking in school, what they're reading at university, what sort of work they'd like to go into, or what their hobbies are. You know, I picture him going out to choose birthday presents, and he'd have absolutely no idea what to get them.

I imagine that by now he has some understanding of me as a person; he'd have to, after this long. But I don't know how he'd describe me, or what it is about me that drew him, or keeps him with me. ... I look after him. That's something that he would probably say. ... And I put up with him ... he'd probably say that. I suppose, in the simplest sense, you could say that I provide security for him. I've provided stability, without which he would have struggled, because he needs a secure base. He's not the sort of person who could live alone and look after himself adequately. Well, he probably could live alone but he certainly wouldn't be able to look after himself. But as far as what sort of person I am, I think perhaps that's what he finds the most difficult sort of thing to express. I haven't actually seen much of that, so it's hard to imagine what he'd say about me. He would probably describe me as kind, and patient, and generous.

I do know that, whatever sort of person I am, a large part of it must be the result of all the years with Steven. I think that the relationship has affected how I understand myself quite significantly. It's challenged me a lot. It's given me borders to break through, that in a more comfortable situation I wouldn't confront. It's stretched me as far as my faith goes, and in my personal development. One part of my faith is the belief that my situation has been given to me by God, and my responsibility, with relationship to

God, is to develop within that. I'm an "all in" person. Without that understanding, I don't think I would remain in the relationship, and that faith stays with me. I made a promise. But without that understanding, that within this situation there is the potential for development, then I wouldn't have had the vision to keep going.

I don't think these sorts of ideas are much help to Steven. That's one of the difficulties he's had in the church. He sees that people are so concentrated on these internal developments, without recognizing that that's what's actually meant for him, to examine his internal experience. I think it's something that he finds difficult. It's almost as if he's had to learn what's expected of him, more as a set of rules, than an internal development. He keeps on trying, though. I know he wouldn't choose to be anywhere else.

There are things that I appreciate about Steven. If we've somewhere to go I can trust him completely to get us there, and he's quite happy to do all the driving, and make all the arrangements. So, yes, there are things like that. And, I have to say that he doesn't care two hoots about what I offer him to eat. He's very easy to please at the meal table, .. though that's quite a light-hearted sort of reason to stay with someone (laughs). It's not one of those deep personal motivations, is it? Well, it's always better the devil you know, than the one you don't. (laughs) ... And he's got lovely eyes ... And long eyelashes. Lovely eyes and long eyelashes. I've always been sorry that we didn't have more dark-haired children, especially after our first dark haired girl. She had very dark hair, very like he had. And I always wanted at least one boy like that, but we haven't got one.

What it all comes down to, I think, is the reality of the commitment. I suppose you'd call it love, I mean, not in a romantic sense, but it's love that's worth fighting for. I mean, it's commitment. Some people use the word, but it actually has a tangible content for me and Steven.

Analysis of Clarissa's Narrative

REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Clarissa begins her narrative in a restrained manner, as if she's composing a grammar school essay or introducing herself at the Ladies' Horticultural Society. Nevertheless, she quickly reveals her sense that life has been unkind to her, beginning with a childhood during which parental expectations were burdensome and warmth in short supply. Clarissa describes herself in a variety of contexts and life phases with a sense of how her experience impacted on her self-development. At her present stage, she can reflect on her earlier life from a more distanced vantage point, observing herself with a measure of objectivity and what seems like a somewhat reluctant compassion. At times Clarissa appears to be struggling against a tide of self-pity that threatens to overwhelm her. This she holds off with determined stoicism and a faith-based resolve to enrich herself through struggle.

When she touches on her role as a mother, Clarissa's dry, spare manner gives way to a more affectively resonant style. She says little about her children, but what she notes conveys a sense of them as emotional beings – teenagers feeling “frenzied” and youngsters eager to play – and herself as someone capable of generosity and kindness. In describing her own emotions she provides detailed accounts of precipitating events and subsequent coping, using terms that vary in range and intensity, but the vast majority of which convey negative feelings. This negative cast appears to be an open and honest reflection of her experience as Steven's life partner.

Clarissa describes how Steven dominates her world, paradoxically, by his “absence” – in an interpersonal as opposed to a physical sense – in their day to day life together. He is present, however, in a way that often threatens to overwhelm her. As she also reveals in her reflections on her father’s role in her inner world, Clarissa intuitively understands the power of internalized object representations in defining one’s experience of the self in relation to others. In her case this insight has proved essential to her psychic survival, for if she hadn’t been able to fully appreciate the power of those inner imagoes she might not have recognized or acted upon the imperative to resist becoming engulfed by them.

Theme #1 Maternal instincts.

Being the mother of twelve children, I suppose you might say that I’m maternal. Of course you don’t have to be maternal to be a mother (laughing) .. But I suppose I am.

Clarissa doesn’t say much explicitly about her experience of motherhood, but gives implicit indications of the importance of that aspect of her life. Her choice of a nursing career with specialization in midwifery is also consistent with the primacy of this self attribute. Since she notes that her first impression of Steven aroused maternal instincts when they were still teenagers, we could postulate that her sense of herself in a nurturing role developed early in life. Clarissa’s allusion to childhood experience of frustrated emotional needs raises the possibility that she might have evolved a coping style in which she felt compelled to offer nurturing to others, as a way of compensating for her own submerged feeling of deprivation (Bowlby, 1973). She herself has acknowledged that her twelve children probably serve as a “buffer” against the emotional coldness of Steven’s response toward her. That motherhood affords Clarissa a deep and

resonant connection to significant others emerges most clearly in the passage where she describes trying to fortify Steven's emotional repertoire by exploring the concept of "enthusiasm" with him. In her attempt to convey the nature of this feeling, she invites him to imagine his child's expression of anticipation and excitement on the occasion of a visit to the zoo, vividly revealing how easily this vicarious affect resonates with her. Her depiction gives weight to the significance of this experience to her, as well as to the depth of the loss she feels around its lack in her relationship with Steven. This loss was at its most painful when Steven's remoteness left her bereft and emotionally alone following the death of their newborn child.

Theme #2 I like to think I'm a good person, but my weaknesses get in the way.

I like to think of myself as generous and kind, ... you know, I once let the children catch a turtle and bring it home, .. I wouldn't let them keep it very long, though. (laugh) ...

The self descriptive words and phrases Clarissa uses almost all depict what would be considered positive attributes: *patient; flexible; empathetic; somebody who takes responsibility seriously*. Yet they are couched in skepticism and self deprecation, as if she can't quite give herself credit for what she knows to be true. She won't accord herself true strength, because her "weaknesses" are too obvious to her. In noting this now, I myself regret that I didn't ask her to explicitly describe those presumed faults for us. She gives a clue in explaining the role of her faith in sustaining her commitment to Steven:

It's probably given me the inner resources that I've needed, to get through all of this with Steven, over the years. I mean, part of our belief is that we need to be in some ways quite introverted, and that we need to examine ourselves and our interactions and judge them according to the word of God ...

The central tenets of Clarissa's faith, which include unconditional acceptance of others and self-evaluation with regard to one's behavior toward them, seem to direct her to endure Steven with grace and forbearance – a challenge that would seem to call for near divine self sacrifice. From this point of view Clarissa's self examination must encounter all manner of "weakness" in the form of resentment, frustration, and impatience towards one who disappointed virtually her every hope. In order to achieve the level of grace she aspires to, Clarissa would have to negate her own humanity, with which she is painfully (and healthily) in touch.

Clarissa's "observing ego" functions to monitor her states and to take note of what helps her to regulate emotion and maintain a coherent and positive sense of self, often finding her coping mechanisms in active participation in the world around her.

I mean, when I went back to work as a midwife that was as much to help my own sanity, and create a space that was mine, rather than me feeling I was Steven's wife, or housekeeper or all the other things that he wants me to be, or .. somebody's mother. And it's a way of creating something that's an area of expertise where I can flourish, and be acknowledged, outside of the family situation.

Clarissa's acknowledgement of her own needs permits her to find healthy ways of fulfilling them. It has long been clear to her that any sustenance she obtains from her relationship with Steven will not come from their inter-subjective experience of each other, nor will it derive from his emotional response to her. Instead, her commitment to Steven nurtures another essential aspect of herself – her religious belief.

Theme #3 Person of faith.

One part of my faith is the belief that my situation has been given to me by God, and my responsibility, with relationship to God, is to develop within that. I'm an "all in" person.

In this account we can see the main source of Clarissa's endurance, and her ability to cope with her negative experience by transforming it into something that contributes to her sense of personal integrity. She gets comfort from doing what is morally right. In addition, by fulfilling a mandate to emphasize self-examination she can face her struggle without deluding herself, acknowledging that her faith can't protect her from pain. In this light, Clarissa's vulnerability to depression and hopelessness demonstrate a solid capacity to tolerate honest scrutiny of both internal and external reality.

Theme #4 My personal development has been shaped by being with Steven.

... there have been times when I've felt very much that my whole personality has been influenced by the way Steven is.

In their more than thirty years together Clarissa has had ample time to reflect on what Steven has taught her about herself. Only seventeen at the time they began their relationship, she was still in the throes of adolescence trying to break free of parental control. Given Steven's presence during those formative years, and her strong investment in their bond as a counter-weight to her unsatisfactory relationship with her parents, his influence couldn't help but be profound. Because of her long standing struggle to come to terms with her unhappy situation, Clarissa's description of this aspect of her development seems to have been thoroughly thought through:

I do know that, whatever sort of person I am, a large part of it must be the result of all the years with Steven. I think that the relationship has affected how I understand myself quite significantly. It's challenged me a lot. It's given me borders to break through, that in a more comfortable situation I wouldn't confront. It's stretched me as far as my faith goes, and in my personal development.

REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Clarissa presents us with fairly complex representations of others, including Steven. She talks of her parents with some sense of their struggles, strengths, and weaknesses, although she focuses mainly on how she herself experienced them. Clarissa seems able to take a realistic view of her parents' failings, and doesn't defend against the painful feelings they caused her. Her brief comments about her parents' relationship convey her sense of its dynamics. In observing her mother's affect and behavior she was able to make inferences about her inner experience. Clarissa also seems to see her children as complex people with dynamic internal lives, evident as she imagines the impact of their father's disability on them. While she feels regret for having failed to protect them from this, she has difficulty feeling much compassion or tolerance for her husband, perhaps because of the rawness of the pain and disappointment he's caused her.

Clarissa's text is most richly elaborated, as she elucidates her understanding of Steven and the history of their relationship. More than any other participant in the study Clarissa details her partner's behavior patterns and tries to make some sort of sense out of what he does, perhaps reflecting the fact that throughout their life together she's had to rely on external clues to guess at what he might be thinking or feeling. We also find her at a point where she and Steven are in the process of integrating the relatively new information about the phenomena associated with autism as they apply to their experience. Clarissa's description of Steven reads like a catalogue of autistic deficits. She compiles this information episodically, accompanied by past and present observations, occasionally noting that it all makes more sense now in light of Steven's diagnosis. Despite that new layer of understanding, however, we don't get the impression that Clarissa has imposed this diagnostic categorization on Steven, but rather

uses it to help her in her attempt to put together the pieces of the puzzle. The story emerges vividly from her detailed recollections, and had it been sent in its present form (perhaps along with Steven's own) to Dr. Simon Baron Cohen, who provided Steven with the official stamp of Aspergers Syndrome, he could have (theoretically) diagnosed him before even meeting him. Clarissa's ability to paint a verbal portrait is striking indeed.

Theme #1 People are shaped by experience in relationships.

My mum was quite an emotional sort of person. She always tried to manipulate people with her emotions. I don't think she was very secure in her marriage – Dad was a bit of a philanderer – and she wasn't very secure in herself.

As she demonstrates, in her description of her parents and her own personal trajectory, Clarissa views people as products of their complex histories. This understanding prompts feelings of regret and disquiet where her children are concerned, as she considers what they might have missed out on growing up with Steven as their father:

I mean, how could they make sense of it – having a dad who doesn't play with them, who, if he was asked to take them to the park, would literally do that – take them to the park and just stand there, and expect them to get on with whatever, without any idea of what they would want to do, or feel a need to get involved with them, playing football, or pushing them on swings, or, you know... those are the sorts of situations that children are being shaped by, in one way or another.

While she has little to say about the impact of positive relationships or her own experience in that regard, Clarissa gives indications that her world isn't entirely devoid of such bonds. She cites her connections within the church community as her most important relationships, and although she feels "isolated" with her particular problem of having a husband with Aspergers, the context in which she describes that feeling seems

to indicate that she is attuned to the everyday ups and downs of people in the surrounding world.

I think, one of the things with Aspergers is .. you feel very isolated .. with your problem .. because it's so difficult to explain, because you haven't got a label, to explain what your problems really are. And people don't understand that you're not just complaining about your husband, I mean – well you do, don't you? (laugh) ... you know: he's out to the pub every night, or he doesn't come home from work until ten o'clock, or something (laughs)... It's a very stressful thing to try and explain to somebody who hasn't experienced it...

Theme #2 Steven wasn't a run of the mill sort of person.

I can remember seeing him coming into the school, with nothing on his feet, and a great big dahlia stuck in his button-hole. He certainly isn't the sort of person who's bothered by what people think about how he looks. I suppose I was intrigued that he didn't care whether people thought he was silly or were talking behind his back.

With hindsight Clarissa can cite a number of factors that prompted her to embark on her relationship with Steven, things having nothing to do with how he behaved toward her. Still, she can readily recall her first impression and the positive feelings he evoked in her. At present she can still credit him with valuable attributes (including impulses that would indicate an admirable regard for the needs of other people), which unfortunately highlight what he lacks in the context of their marriage.

Steven is very intelligent, very focused. You can trust him. He is very serious about providing for the financial needs of the family. He takes that very seriously, and that's something I admire in him. But even his being intelligent doesn't mean he has the ability to exercise it in a useful way.

From her present vantage Clarissa attempts to objectively look at Steven's positive and negative traits, but the impact of her negative experience in the relationship affects her ability to reflect empathically on his vulnerabilities. Although she can imagine his internal, life to a degree, she demonstrates little sympathy towards him.

Through years of effort Clarissa seems to have acquired a complex understanding of Steven's way of approaching the world, including the impact of his deficits, but – as he himself surmises – she doesn't seem to have rich picture of his emotional life. Perhaps this is because Steven's affect truly is restricted, or locked away so tight that not even the most intuitive person could accurately discern his feelings. But another possibility suggests itself, dimly signaled by glimpses of a time when Clarissa may have been more open to Steven, when his “woebegone” air aroused a maternal tug at the very beginning of their life together. It may be that years of frustration and inevitable hostility have closed her off to his emotional signals, making it hard for her to feel either empathy or affection at the present point. Nevertheless, there are moments when she seems to soften towards him:

There are things that I appreciate about Steven. He's very easy to please at the meal table, .. though that's quite a light-hearted sort of reason to stay with someone (laughs). It's not one of those deep personal motivations, is it? Well, it's always better the devil you know, than the one you don't. (laughs) ... And he's got lovely eyes ... And long eyelashes. Lovely eyes and long eyelashes. I've always been sorry that we didn't have more dark-haired children, especially after our first dark haired girl. She had very dark hair, very like he had. And I always wanted at least one boy like that, but we haven't got one.

Clarissa's yearning for a long lashed child like Steven strikes a poignant note. If he were entirely without appeal in her eyes, she might actually be ready to chuck him out. Instead she expresses a lingering wish for another version of him, one who retains his appealing qualities but might, this time, have the capacity to attach.

Theme #3 There's something wrong with Steven's feelings.

I mean, he has come to me and said "I love you," but it's quite obvious that what he means by that isn't what I mean by it. Because whatever it is to him it's something with very little expression.

Steven's emotional disconnect from the world around him and his impairment in discriminating and labeling his own feelings seem impervious to Clarissa's concentrated efforts to assist him. With her current understanding that he genuinely needs help in this area, she has attempted to make appropriate accommodations, however her own feelings of frustration and deprivation take their toll. They make it hard for her to forgive what she can't blame him for, or forget what she does.

You know: all right Steven is feeling something, but it's so small compared to the lack over the past years, that part of me wants to draw back and say: it's not enough. During periods when I was frequently having explosions over situations, he became very.. self-pitying, and he'd go around with this guilty puppy dog expression. He seemed to be blaming himself, but never getting the point of what he was blaming himself for.

Theme #4 Steven doesn't know people.

I'd say he doesn't know the children. You know, I picture him going out to choose birthday presents, and he'd have absolutely no idea what to get them.

Clarissa describes Steven as being "oblivious" to people around him, and imagines he would be content with almost no human interaction. She also notes that he has poor tolerance for others' heightened affect, and depicts him hiding in a corner in an effort to escape his daughters' vibrant emotions. She also grasps the fundamental nature of his social deficit – that he doesn't have a sense of people (including himself) as unique personalities with complex internal lives. That he lacks, in Alvarez and Reid's words, a sense of personhood (1999). She reflects on how she herself might be represented in Steven's internal world:

I imagine that by now he has some understanding of me as a person; he'd have to, after this long. But I don't know how he'd describe me, or what it is about me that drew him, or keeps him with me. ... I look after him. That's something that he would probably say. ... And I put up with him ... he'd probably say that. I suppose, in the simplest sense, you could say that I provide security for him. But as far as what sort of person I am, I think perhaps that's what he finds the most difficult sort of thing to express.

Clarissa's assessment of how Steven sees her is strikingly accurate, as we've seen from the material he presented. What she also sees is that his inability to grasp what is essentially human and personal is incomprehensibly – unless you factor his autism in – at odds with his intellect.

There've been times when I've just been completely at a loss, you know, unable to understand how he could fail to grasp even the most basic concepts. I mean, how could an intelligent man not understand English? The diagnosis has helped in that. Now I can understand why he's working the way he is.

Clarissa drops another telling clue in her use of the phrase, "...why he's working the way he is," as if even she has come to see him, at times, as something more like a machine than one entirely endowed with personhood. It isn't a sense that's conveyed consistently throughout her description, but it emerges frequently as she struggles with the frustration of failing to solve the enigma.

I'm somebody who .. can be quite empathetic, ... and who tries to understand how people are, ... which perhaps has made it more difficult with Steven, in the sense that I haven't been able to do that with him.

In one sense, Clarissa's (above quoted) speculation about Steven's experience of her gives the clearest impression of her awareness of his human qualities, those that portray him as vulnerable and in need of mothering. This reinforces the notion that we represent others most fully when we can do so as they exist in relation to ourselves. Unfortunately, the reality of Steven is much more complex than this childlike image, a

fact that Clarissa is well aware of. It may be that her representation of Steven will always remain somewhat fragmented, as this is how she experiences him. In one respect, Clarissa seems to have internalized Steven, not as a person with whom one has a reciprocal relationship, but rather one who serves as a vehicle that keeps her in positive relationship with God.

REPRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Throughout her narrative Clarissa is explicit about the evolution of her affective experience during the course of her relationship with Steven, guiding us through her early efforts to defend against her growing fear and disappointment, through her recognition of the undeniably negative reality. She openly discloses her feelings of helplessness and frustration, her attempts to rationalize, and her adaptation by way of reducing her demands and expectations of Steven. Despite her resolve to assert some of her own needs (*i.e.*: not to have sole responsibility of every aspect of household functioning) using a determined rational approach, Clarissa continues to feel an enormous burden. Her depression is in many ways an appropriate response, as is her pessimistic outlook. Overall she seems to cope with the emotional fallout from all of this in a reasonably adaptive way, by finding something positive in her sense of doing right, and living up to her personal standards and religious ideals. In one respect, however, Clarissa's notion that she should be expected to endure her lot, as a pre-ordained opportunity for personal growth, perhaps robs her of the additional comfort she might gain if she could see herself as highly altruistic and even noble in her self-sacrifice, rather than simply in compliance. On the other hand, other participants who lean more in that direction (Barbara comes to mind) seem to show a related need to repress or relinquish their anger and hostility

towards their autistic partners, perhaps so they can better preserve their images of themselves in a positive light. Because she's more insightful and self-aware, Clarissa is more vulnerable to negative affect and thus more true to herself in the end. Remaining true to the relationship, however, is a much greater challenge, as it is characterized most easily by what it is not, as opposed to being something worth holding onto.

Theme # 1 The illusion of a relationship

That's what I was Someone who was keeping his environment for him, without getting anything back from the relationship. And of course I wanted a romantic relationship, and that didn't seem to be something he was capable of having.

As she recalls their coming together Clarissa becomes vague about what she and Steven might have been feeling towards each other at the time, noting with hindsight that both of them were probably looking for something indistinct that would alleviate a feeling of loneliness, in his case, and oppression in hers.

He did give the impression of being very determined about the relationship, .. in some way or other. . I suppose there were romantic feelings – for me, as a seventeen or eighteen-year-old, that would make sense. But looking back I can see lots of other things that were probably lurking around in the situation, that obviously influenced it.

Clarissa suggests that she and Steven were both looking for closeness when they became involved, but didn't recognize its absence as they went through the motions of putting their lives together. She now characterizes the main missing ingredient as his inability to understand her feelings and communicate in an emotional way. When Steven describes this phenomenon he's clearly reciting what he has learned about his condition from outside sources, as well as labeling experience of which he was only vaguely aware. But in Clarissa's telling we can see that she's used her new understanding to organize and reflect on previously felt experience, including her own denial of the severity of Steven's

deficits. Her view of their twelve children as a compensatory “buffer” as well as a focus for her relational strivings rings true, and provides a stark contrast to her description of Steven’s remoteness from the whole milieu, a state that struck her forcibly on one occasion when he’d come home to find the house empty and hadn’t noticed.

... And that’s one of the times it really struck me, that his connection with the world around him wasn’t the same as other people’s, you know. He didn’t notice the absence, not just of his wife but of four rowdy, small children – that he’d come home from work, and not noticed that the house was empty. I found that quite difficult to handle at the time. And I thought: “What’s going on here?”

Theme # 2 Missing person

I mean, some people with Aspergers dominate in the relationship, in an obsessional way. I know that from what I’ve read. But Steven dominates in a very ... negative way. It’s his very absence that forces other people, mainly myself, to adopt certain roles.

In discussing Steven’s “absence” in its multiple dimensions, Clarissa explores how the relationship has shaped her and reveals what is most painful to her about her situation – his general lack of consideration and generosity toward herself and the children, which seems to negate their significance in his world.

He can be very generous with his time and his talent. Of course we don’t see much of that here at home, .. which has been difficult for me. I mean, I’m glad he can do it. I am glad that he’s willing to do something, for someone – anything that takes him away from his selfish state. But when he goes off and puts up a new lamp for somebody, or something like that ... I’ve been hurt by that.

Despite labeling it “selfish,” Clarissa seems to understand that Steven’s neglect is not simply willful disregard, but a substantial limitation. She clearly indicates, however, that she feels he should make more of an effort to overcome his deficiency. Her exasperation comes through vividly in her tale of his response to a broken doorbell that needed fixing.

... he did something about it because it impinged on his experience and reality.
 whereas other men, normal men, you know, would think: "Oh well, all right, I'll have
 another look at it. Let's make it work."

Clarissa recognizes that Steven is making more of an effort now, and that when he
 puts his mind to it his goal is to truly please her. She also allows that he might be
 beginning to actually feel some of the appreciation he's trying to demonstrate.
 Unfortunately, none of this goes far enough towards healing the years of hurt and
 disappointment, nor does it conceal his inability to do it "from the heart" so to speak.

You know: all right Steven is feeling something, but it's so small compared to the lack
 over the past years, that part of me wants to draw back and say: it's not enough.

Theme # 3 Commitment.

*It's part of my development, given the situation, that in the end, something good in me
 comes out of it, so that I grow as a person, rather than let it become something that
 makes me bitter.*

Clarissa stakes a reasonable position when she claims personal growth as a
 potential reward for staying in the relationship with Steven. The price of gaining nothing
 would be too high to bear, no doubt, since the bitterness she seeks to avoid would push
 her further toward the brink of hopelessness. It's notable that Clarissa doesn't cite their
 offspring as a mitigating positive result of their union, though this is in keeping with the
 overall impression she gives – that, in her view, Steven's role as a father is basically
 devoid of personal involvement. Ultimately, the relationship that Clarissa values and
 sustains by maintaining her marriage is more of an abstraction, a conceptual ideal, than a
 reciprocal and mutual bond. It is, nonetheless, something of value to her.

What it all comes down to, I think, is the reality of the commitment. I suppose you'd call
 it love, I mean, not in a romantic sense, but it's love that's worth fighting for. I mean, it's

commitment. Some people use the word, but it has a actually has tangible content for me and Steven.

Summary of Steven and Clarissa's Dyadic Interview

Steven and Clarissa sat side by side on a sofa, bodies touching, and holding hands throughout most of their interview. Their physical demeanor, gentle tone and attentiveness toward each other gave an impression of mutual affection and regard. Despite the air of “sweetness” that seemed to hover, however, painful feelings ultimately emerged as the more heartfelt affect. The disconnect between what appeared in the observable emotional atmosphere and the verbal content of their interview became strikingly obvious once Clarissa and Steven’s data were fully transcribed, at which point their words stood alone. The unvarnished reality of their lifetime of bewilderment and frustration, and their inability to bridge the emotional divide between them, arises starkly from the page, contradicting the lingering mental picture of physical warmth. Yet as much as the present inquiry relies on linguistic material as the fundamental source of information, I find that I can’t entirely dismiss that earliest impression from my mind.

The falseness of human perception is now considered a given from virtually every theoretical perspective. We tend to see what we want to see. But even though my subjects themselves gave it the lie, when during the course of our conversation I challenged my perception and put it out on the table (text will be presented below), I still hesitate to give it up. My sense is that, although I can credit their unambiguous (largely negative) verbal depiction of their experience, something additional might occur between them on a less accessible plane, outside of the verbal realm and perhaps beyond full consciousness. That intangible something seemed fairly positive to me – a fragile tenderness – though perhaps even more frail, as I view it in retrospect. They did not

convey a sense of romantic attachment, despite having produced twelve children together, but they did convey a fondness. It's possible that the nonverbal signals I observed merely arose from Steven's childlike dependence and Clarissa's answering maternal instinct, and only highlight her disappointment with her lot. But it was Steven who stroked her cheek, as her eyes began to tear in a moment of pathos, attempting to give comfort in a manner all too rare, according to every report. His gesture seemed spontaneous, but as we are told in their individual narratives, as well as in what follows here, real spontaneity may be beyond his ability. But while Clarissa struggles to come to terms with dashed hopes, Steven anxiously strives to keep them alive. The unanswered question of whether he has any potential as an emotionally responsive relationship partner ultimately dominates Steven and Clarissa's interview. That and the contradictions in my different perceptions of their bond will have to remain unresolved here – not that we need, at this point, a reminder of the complexities of the phenomena under consideration.

Steven's helplessness in the face of human complexity was evident throughout his and Clarissa's interview, most obviously in the fact that he made very few contributions to a conversation that was largely about how one person might – or might not – come to understand another. There were only a few brief instances where Steven and Clarissa sustained a shared narration of their relationship history, and even fewer that constituted a dialogue. While all the participating couples produced sequences of alternating verbal input, the number and length of those were far smaller in Steven and Clarissa's case. Instead, their transcript consists largely of sections where I alternately question each individually, often attempting to elicit Steven's response to ideas that Clarissa had

introduced and elaborated on. When they did contribute more equally along a particular thematic line, they often tended to contradict or invalidate each other's perspectives.

Clarissa and Steven's transcript was also significantly shorter than the other couples', despite Clarissa's detailed elaboration on relevant themes and historical descriptions. Thus its brevity was largely due to the overall sparseness of Steven's verbal output. There seemed to be a number of factors inhibiting him during the conversation, some of which were less at issue when he was later interviewed individually. In some instances Steven confessed that he'd never given consideration to the particular matter in question, or that the inquiry tapped a way of thinking that he wasn't skilled at or familiar with. However, he later showed that he could explore more novel considerations when put to the task during his individual interview. This suggests that Clarissa's presence might have had a subduing effect on Steven during their joint conversation, a result, perhaps, of her relative gregariousness and facility with words. Clarissa dominated the conversation in a more significant way, however, with the persistent negative content of her reflections on their thirty years of marriage. She managed to do this without appearing heavy handed, and maintained a thoughtful and contemplative tone, as well as a ready sense of humor, which Steven seemed to appreciate and often share in (though this took on a rueful cast when the humor accompanied an acknowledgement of his deficits).

Clarissa's complaints about the relationship were presented explicitly during their conversation with me. They are likely a more insidious presence in their day to day life together. This fairly pervasive negativity with regards to their relationship may be the most important factor in the paucity of Steven's conversational input. During the

interview Clarissa seemed to convey a subtle sense that Steven's verbal responses were inadequate, just as she finds his marital partnership to be inadequate. Whereas, in her individual narrative, she expresses a sense of the intrinsic value of her enduring commitment to the relationship, here she withholds this comfort from Steven, and makes little discernible effort to ease his anxiety when it arises. These aspects of their interactions were more apparent upon closer reading of the transcript rather than during the actual interview, at which time their gentle manner toward one another may have obscured some of the underlying negativity.

There were a number of lighter moments during the course of their interview, where Steven and Clarissa shared a warm laugh or exchanged smiles and affirming glances. Throughout most of the conversation they listened very attentively to one another, usually commenting directly on each other's points without avoiding uncomfortable content or straying onto irrelevant topics. One topic that featured consistently during the conversation was the role of Steven's diagnosis in their understanding of their difficulties. In Steven's case he seemed largely reliant on "Aspergers" as a conceptual framework for piecing together thoughts about his marital history and his own role in it, though the sum of all those pieces is far from adding up to a whole picture. For Clarissa, on the other hand, the diagnosis enabled her to finally assemble a puzzle that had confounded her for most of her life. Now that she has it put together and in front of her, she seems, in the present conversation, comfortable with sharing her perspective with others, and to a certain extent with Steven. But Steven tells us that he feels unfinished, as both person and partner, and seems to want her to hold out

for a more promising version of himself – one that didn't exist when they met, long before the dawning of enlightenment.

As prompted, Clarissa and Steven began the interview with a brief description of the beginning of their relationship. They did this together, each providing small bits of chronology and concrete detail, making no mention of their initial impressions of each other or of feelings evoked at that time. When they came to describe an early period of separation (due to conflicting job and school constraints), however, they both characterized this phase as “difficult.” Clarissa described her disappointment over Steven's failure to behave in the “normal” manner of a young man forcibly separated from the girl he loves, while Steven admitted that his reactions weren't “standard.” When they reunited to establish their first home together, Clarissa could not engage Steven in the process of creating a home with her. In her description of this phase she conjured the vision of the togetherness she'd been trying to build with repeated use of the word “we,” which dissipated as she recounted his disinclination to join with her. In the following portion of the interview, she specifically cites Steven's failure to make emotional connections around the issues they faced. Steven shows, here, that he can reflect on his own experience of this period in a limited way, while Clarissa applies her new understanding in hindsight. As they relate their new insights to their current functioning, however, it is clear how little positive impact they've derived from that understanding.

C: I was just trying to understand his reaction, his reluctance to engage or to show any enthusiasm for the sort of normal progression in a relationship, you know, you get your own home. He was never very interested in the surroundings that he was in. [*detail*] But once you were trying to establish your own home – well he just wasn't interested in whether we had furniture or not, or what kind of kettle I'd pick, you know, that sort of thing.

P: Steven, were you indeed not interested, or was it something you just weren't expressing? What was going on with you?

S: Um, .. I think quite a large part of it is, um .. just being sort of content with things the way they are, and being quite happy for them to go on being like that.

P: So it was okay for you.

S: Yes, um, I think that is a fairly general thing with me, and probably like me, generally, to like things to continue as they are.

P: So how did you resolve it. You did eventually get a home.

C: Yes. ... I mean, looking back, I can see from an Asperger point of view, why Steven had those difficulties. *[goes on to detail his lack of emotional investment in focus on concrete issues]*

P: (to Steven) So you had a practical attitude about things, rather than emotional, does that sound right?

C: Um, I don't want to put too much emphasis on the practical, because, no, Steven isn't practical. He can be when he's pushed, but generally speaking ...

S: In the sense of focusing on practical issues rather than emotional issues, yes.

C: Yeah, but I mean, even now, he is completely unaware of how what he's doing is impacting on other people in the home. You know like using the coffee table as his work station and taking computers apart and leaving all the little bits on the floor, and then wondering why they disappear or get kicked about, or ..

P: And how do you all deal with that?

C: Well, generally – we don't have any very small children now – but generally the children have learned not to touch things. But there are bits of computer at one end of the room and right down the other as well, and he doesn't seem to understand that that actually impinges on other people.

S: Apart from certain rebellious teenagers.

P: Does anybody tell you? Do they tell you that it bothers them? ... How is that handled, how is that communicated?

S: Well, they kick things.

P: And do you understand what that means?

S: Yes.

C: Well, no, you call it rebellion, so you don't see it as an expression of their frustration, that every day they've got to live in the middle of your mess rather than theirs. Basically. Or that they can't have friends around because the kitchen is being used as a work room all the time, and, you know, that sort of thing.

In the moment above, Steven's remarks actually do seem to have emotional implications – his own, aroused by a notion of “rebellious” children. But whatever Steven might be capable of contributing to this conversation, emotionally or otherwise, it seems to stand little chance of penetrating the overriding imperative of Clarissa's frustration, and her wish to make him understand the nuances of internal life among the family members he “impinges” on. As they went on to talk about the few significant events that broke the otherwise seemingly static nature of their marital dynamic, Clarissa emphasized the lack of emotional intimacy that has always been the most painful aspect of their relationship for her. She also recounted how her frustration with this prompted episodes of explosive distress, which led to Steven's further withdrawal. Periods of depression and discord followed some particularly stressful events. Clarissa reported that several times they had sought support from counselors, but on each occasion they reached an impasse where they recognized that no intervention could explain or modify Steven's unresponsiveness to those around him. Steven's brief comments about these events did nothing to illuminate his inner state during those times, he could only report a vague awareness that “something was missing” in his interactions and communications with others, and that he now understood that as symptomatic of Aspergers Syndrome.

They'd come upon the idea that there might be diagnostic explanation for Steven's constellation of problems when Clarissa was given a newspaper article by a friend, which mentioned the syndrome. The description fit so well that she was motivated to pursue the matter further. This clearly set them on the road to discovery, with an impetus that continues to resonate in their telling of the story:

C: And then it took some time before he was convinced to see – we'd actually been in counseling together, and had got to the point where the counselor was almost climbing up the wall, because she could see that Steven wasn't responding to that sort of

self-help counseling, which was quite understandable retrospectively[*details about his impaired insight*]

S: We, um, ... there was one point with the GP where – one point where I mentioned Aspergers. I had to spell it for him so he could go and look it up.

C: [*details about meeting with their general practitioner*]... he was willing to make a referral to a psychologist, sent us to see this chap – I can't remember his name – but, anyway – the health service is so slow, it took months to get in to see this chap, and then, basically we had fourteen minutes where we went over the history of the depression. We didn't touch on any of the things we wanted to talk about. And then he said: I can give you another appointment in six months time, and we thought: No, this is not going to work. Steven already had found some web sites, and he'd got Dr. Simon Baron Cohen's name off that, and made an appointment. [*more details*]

P: You were very determined. I mean, you really pursued this with an objective.

S: Yes.

P: It felt very important to you, Steven?

S: Yes, well by then I was convinced that I actually was Aspergers, and .. I felt that I wanted a diagnosis to confirm that, and to, sort of give me some grounding, to be able to say: Yes, I have that, the doctor said so.

C: But from my point of view – I mean my GP actually said: “Well alright, we think he's got Aspergers, but what difference does a diagnosis make.” And I said: “Well, it makes a difference to me, personally. It means the difference between spending another thirty years with someone who's disabled or spending another thirty years with someone who doesn't care. And that is a big difference. ... Because one is much more manageable than the other. Because, obviously, the impression that Steven's reactions give, him not connecting, is: I don't want to know; I'm not really interested; I don't really care. Whereas, now that I know that's not the case, I can handle it better.

P: So your sense, then, is that he actually does care, now?

C: .. Well I ... I still, I'm still haunted a bit by the conflict between thinking that, and his behavior, because of my expectations about how people express that they care. Which is something you can't really get away with, you know, we all expect things, we can't help but – that if somebody cares, if they are interested and they do want to get involved, they do notice things, and these are things that Steven can't do.

S: Can we pause a moment?

P: Of course.

(*short break*)

S: I have read a number of books, about how to be in relationships. And one of them – I think one of them actually said ... something like: “Aspies” don't get married.

P: So how do you explain the fact that you did get married? Do you have a sense of how that happened, such an unusual thing?

S: *(to Clarissa)* Do you want ...?

C: *(laughs)* [?] ... young, romantic – blind sexual instinct, I didn't know you very well. *(laugh)*

This more light hearted moment gave Clarissa a little bit of positive momentum, as she went on to describe her encounters with internet based spouses' support groups that presented a self-pitying, pessimistic view of their circumstances, an attitude that she rejected as unhelpful. Clarissa's amusement at her own misfortune didn't do much to disguise her disappointment, in the end. Steven's reaction to this, in the moment, was consistent with what they have elsewhere described – a need to escape her negative feelings. He followed this with an attempt to present mitigating information, but could not elaborate on its implications with regard to his own situation. Neither managed to explain how they ultimately came together. Clarissa continued to speak about how she was learning to adjust her expectations, while Steven admitted that he still had difficulty inhibiting the impulse to “back off” from her feelings and needs. He described recently undertaken efforts to compensate for his intuitive deficits:

S: Well since the diagnosis I'm learning more about the condition myself. I can recognize my behavior, and um, I'm trying in certain ways to adapt. Like contact: um, Clarissa always wanted touch, and, um, .. I never thought it necessary. But , understanding, reading that and understanding it, I can see that touch is a comfort. And learn to do it. And it's good for me as well. And it's given me some confidence that perhaps this type of thing can be trained.

P: So you think that having a better understanding of yourself has had some positive impact on your experience of the relationship?

S: I think so.

P: What would you say, Clarissa?

C: It's made some .. some small differences, yeah. Um .. I .. it almost makes me sound like somebody who can't ever be pleased, but .. there's still an underlying frustration that I know that – alright now he greets me when I come home, he comes and gives me a hug. But I know that's something he's doing consciously, rather than spontaneously. And as a woman, what I want is the spontaneity, but I'm having to settle for the conscious act, and the sort of thought that: I've got to go and find Clarissa and say hello now that she's come home – and be grateful for that.

S: Then I find that I like to come and give you a hug.

C: (*smiles, laughs*) Well that's nice to know as well. (*laugh*) Do you know what I mean? It's the spontaneous, you know, as they say: from the heart, .. that I'm never going to get.

We see Clarissa momentarily brighten at the thought that Steven might actually feel like hugging her, but then she explicitly rejects the possibility of his ever feeling something deeply for her. Following this she went on to provide a very detailed picture of how, despite his intelligence, Steven's cognitive limitations prevent him from effectively carrying out tasks involved in the day to day management of family responsibilities. She cited his overall inability to adjust any plan of action to accommodate unexpected factors, and the failure of his logical approach in situations that require spontaneous decision making.

Neither Steven nor Clarissa raised the topic of their twelve children as a factor that impacted on their relationship with each other. When I brought it up Clarissa stated openly that she would not have been able to remain in their marriage without the children to fill the gap in her relational world, and to give meaning and focus to family life. Steven's perspective, when elicited, is of himself as limited in his innate ability to interact with them as expected.

P: How have the children impacted on you, Steven?

S: I've found it difficult to relate to them. .. The one response .. quite a lot of it I understand more .. I understand rather more about it now, and Clarissa's explained

things, and .. one of the large things is this lack of spontaneity, that .. Clarissa keeps pointing out. That I .. I can't .. I can't do spontaneous, unstructured play. Not now, I think I ... I'm quite happy to play a game with rules,.. but obviously with even small children, they'd rather [?].

P: So you weren't able to play with them when they were little. Did you participate in the child care? Look after them?

S: Yes,

C: More or less. Occasional walking up and down with a crying baby on his shoulder. But he couldn't cope with things like a child sitting on his lap and then finding that he'd got wet trousers. That would really throw him. You know, it would be as if it was the end of the world (both laugh a little), the way he reacted. Instead of like: that's normal when you've got tiny children. That's the sort of thing that happens. Or .. like, um, .. he seems to expect them to do what he says straight away and if they don't, then he'd get furious. Not understand them being just children, you know, you can't expect a two-year-old to get down from the table the minute you say: "You shouldn't be up there, get down." You know, they've got up there for a reason; there's something interesting up there that they want to get hold of, and they don't have the intellectual understanding to know that when Dad says something they have to do it. So he's always found that very frustrating when the children don't respond in a logical way.

P: Now you have quite a few. [*They hand over family portrait.*] Wow, they're gorgeous. What a beautiful family. So, over time, Steven, did you learn anything more about them, did you come to understand children better? Having so many?

S: No .. not really.

C: No.

Throughout this passage they each speak to me, referring to each other in the third person rather than speaking directly to each other. Indeed, they both indicate that what's being communicated is a constant process taking place between them: Clarissa's repeated identification (and Steven's awareness) of what Steven lacks; and her efforts to provide him with insight that might result in a better understanding of his children. One thing she does not do, either overtly or implicitly, is validate or show understanding of Steven's own emotional experience. His frustration with the children's non-compliance gets no sympathy here, probably because Clarissa's own (arguably) greater frustration has created a shortage in available "funds." We get the feeling that Steven has too much to

make up for before earning something back. Clarissa's behavior toward Steven here demonstrates what we gleaned in looking at her individual narrative: that after so many years of noting Steven's seeming inability to communicate or reciprocate emotions, she has not only come to resent Steven's feelings – she can no longer attribute real emotions to him, let alone respond to them. While she can talk about his thoughts and feelings at a cognitive remove, her own pain seems to have caused her to armor herself against him. In the following section, however, each penetrates the surface and hits raw nerve, exposing a mutual, but dividing, rather than shared pain.

P: Has there been a time when you've felt happy together, a particularly joyful time? Can you remember feeling ... ?

C: ... Interesting question Shall we say, I've always hoped to be happier. That's a bit of a .. a bit of a cop-out, isn't it. I think Steven has always been happier with me than I have with him.

S: Yes.

C: As far as Steven is concerned, if he has a meal when he expects it, and he can do what he's interested in doing, at a given time, he's happy.

S: Um, I think that's being a bit ..

C: Simplistic?

S: A little bit.

C: I don't know ... (*her eyes begin to tear up*).

P: Steven, do you think there are deeper feelings that you haven't shared with Clarissa?

S: ... Yeah, I .. uh, .. well you know I have difficulty expressing .. you know that. And, like, I care for you, and I really appreciate the way you care for me, and ...

C: It's all inside.

P: It doesn't come across to you.

C: Yeah.

P: You know, just as somebody from the outside who's only just met you, I see you, kind of cuddled together there holding hands, and smiling fondly at each other, at times.

I mean, am I getting an accurate impression there? I mean, both of you are looking at each other with what seems like affection to me.

C: It's something we've had to work at, because it's something that's – that's sort of in spite of the difficulties ... [?] And we haven't allowed the difficulties to crush that, a hundred percent, no. It would be so easy just to throw in the towel, and say: Well, I'll be better on my own.

S: But, any .. I think I can say that any expression of emotion .. I would say is real, .. but I've had to .. had to learn the expression.

It's hard to be sure precisely what triggered Clarissa's sadness in that moment.

Did it register that he actually can, or might be hurt? And perhaps by her? Or was it the hopelessness that nothing can dispel, least of all, Steven's efforts? In any case, it seems that they are able to touch each other, in rare moments.

When I asked them to imagine how things will be for them going forward, the forecast was mixed. The "learning" to express and recognize emotions that Steven hopes to achieve represents a life-line to him, as he presented it for the remainder of the interview. He repeatedly offered this possibility as if to encourage both himself and Clarissa, while she recounted prior attempts and considered their prospects.

P: Now, at times .. once the "heat" has passed, do you ever, then take a moment and go back for a .. a post-mortem, so to speak?

C: I have tried, at times, but I don't know how effective it's been. What do you think? (to Steven)

S: Um ..

C: I've tried to sort of go back and say: "Look, can we talk about it? Do you know why I was upset?" .. I mean, certainly up until the point when we got the diagnosis, Steven could recognize when I'd crossed some sort of boundary, from being normal and calmer .. to: Well, things are a bit dodgy now. But, he will put it all under this label: sulking, .. which I resented terribly, because, again, it put the whole responsibility for the situation on me; I was reacting unreasonably, and sulking. Because that's what "sulk" means. It's an unreasonable reaction; it's over-reacting. Um .. and he would actually say that to me sometimes: "Oh, are you sulking again." (both laugh a little). And, (laughs) I found that incredibly difficult to cope with. It usually made me start to sulk, actually.

P: I'm noticing that you two seem to listen to each other very carefully. Like, I can see that Steven is listening very carefully, now, to what you're expressing and saying. I

wonder, you know, if that kind of listening could be helpful, and maybe lead to some insights. What do you think, Steven?

S: Um, now that I know that I .. don't understand certain things .. you know, that I'm missing emotional connections and expressions .. now I know that if I give more attention to it, I can .. do a bit better.

C: That's something.

P: Sounds like you have very modest expectations, for change. But any hope? Any optimism?

C: Um ... There's always a kernel there, of wanting something better, .. and hope of something better. [details how much better things are since diagnosis] ... But once you get the diagnosis of something so fundamental, like that, then you can't hope in that same way any more. You've got to only hope from where the diagnosis is, basically, which is a certain unchangeable way of thinking about the world, and of reacting to the world. That affects .. at the moment I can only feel that things are changing in small ways, certainly not to what I would have hoped for thirty years ago when I married him, to what I was looking for in a marriage. So it's been the death of that sort of .. hope for romance, and things to improve in that sort of way, that I've had to come to terms with. And that's been quite difficult I've found.

(She's tearing up slightly, he looks, and strokes her cheek with one finger, gently).

S: ... If we .. If we can concentrate on some small things .. um, then I think we will make .. we will make progress. Um ...

Steven's sense that his progress must be in small steps was later underscored by his description of just what feels so "big" and unconquerable to him, and where it comes home to haunt him most frequently. He explained that it is in Church, listening to instructions on how to live a "Christian" life, where he's forced to face the chasm he can't cross: "And there've been many times when I felt: well, this is how I am, .. and that .. what I hear at church is what I should be .. and there's this huge gulf in between, ... what can I do?" Clarissa's response to this reveals what most depletes her hope: with all the faith she possesses; she does not have faith in Steven.

C: Of course, a lot of Christ's teachings are about how you behave towards other people, .. that involve compassion, sympathy and empathy, and understanding how you impact on other people's lives, and how you can change, so that it's a better impact. .. And, again, we're falling into this blank area.

Given the enormous role of their religious observance in their lives, they appears to be caught in a poignant paradox: the religious faith that keeps Clarissa so committed to Steven seems to be a significant factor in his inability to face the task of personal (and relational) growth. Steven's sense that his *whole self* is unacceptable, and feeling that he is *wholly* incapable of being the sort of person who fits Clarissa's representation of what a person should be, highlights the fundamental element missing from their relational environment that might provide him with a fighting chance. He can't see himself reflected back as a *good enough object* (Winnicott, 1965) – one that actually bears looking at – because whatever he might be in Clarissa's mind it only takes shape, for him, as something he's not. In noting how they express their views (and, to a more limited extent, their feelings) in each other's presence, we can see how Steven and Clarissa arrived at the internalized images that emerged in their individual narratives. This leaves us still, however, without explicit content that supports my perception (ever more fleeting, I must admit) of a more positive affective "aura." Perhaps, if anything like it really exists, it would be found in the "small things" Steven pins his hopes on.

A look at the final pages of their transcript gives a flavor of a more relaxed and congenial mode of interaction. With my concluding suggestion that they imagine themselves with a large financial bonus, Clarissa is able to join with Steven in his comfort zone – the practical realm. In doing so she finally creates a space for shared positive feeling.

P: ... Here's a question: If you had, quite suddenly, won the lottery or something, and had, say, half-a-million pounds, what would you do with it?

C: Pay off the mortgage.

S: That's the first thing.

- P: So, you're out of debt, then what?
- S: And those of our children who are .. well, the first of our children has just left home .. well, two have, actually, but .. the eldest is 24 ..
- C: Twenty-five.
- S: Twenty-five. And he actually left home a couple of months ago (*smiles broadly*).
- P: You look very proud, Steven, ..
- S: Well ..
- P: Are you?
- S: I feel very proud, yes, that he's gone out on his own.
- C: We'd pay off their debts, the children's.
- S: Yes. I mean, he has now stopped being a student, but he's still on a student's pay. And, you, know, there's need there.
- C: And we'd hopefully provide so that the ones who have still got to go to university didn't have to come out with debts. .. And that would probably take a big whack out of it, won't it.
- S: Yes a fairly big one (*both chuckle*). .. And I think this house could be redecorated a bit.
- C: And we would save some money for the garden, wouldn't we?
- S: Yes (*nods, smiles at her, she at him*).
- C: And we'd have a new dryer.
- S: Yes. And .. there's a number of things we'd re-decorate, .. things that maybe Clarissa would appreciate, but that we could probably manage without.
- C: Like [?]. Half-a-million wouldn't go a long, long way.
- P: No it wouldn't.
- S: Though, I'm sure we could find ways ... (*all laugh*)

Here we can see them producing the alternating and synchronous dialogue that has been missing throughout the rest of the transcript, and indications that they can evoke a shared vision, even if it is merely concrete and made up of small parts. Clarissa had

earlier wished Steven could make an emotional investment in choosing a tea kettle. She now ups the ante with a dryer, generating seeds of pleasure and enthusiasm. They may be small matters, but their scale seems to allow Steven to conceive of ways he can please Clarissa, including setting his own need for frugality aside. Positive affect has undeniably entered into the atmosphere, perhaps even a hint of actual reciprocity. They're almost finishing each other's sentences. Noting this I succumbed to an impulse to push the limits further. It's amazing, after all, what money can sometimes do.

P: Now suppose you had a chunk of money that was just for your pleasure, just play money, and that it had to be spent on the two of you, not on anyone else.

C: Ooh, that could be difficult – because I'd want to go somewhere hot, and Steven would like to go somewhere cold – wouldn't it? I've always fancied laying on a tropical beach, under the palm trees, and all.

S: And I'd be going (demonstrates panting and sweating) (both laugh).

C: And he prefers skiing. (Laughs)

S: If we go to the beach we could have skiing to ..

C: ... cool off in.

S: ... cool off from it. (laughs)

C: I think we'd find that one quite difficult.

S: A holiday was a very good idea, but our ideas of ideal temperature don't agree.

C: We'd have to find somewhere in between ... or have two holidays. We'd have one holiday and then go on another. Compromise somehow.

Compromise is unquestionably called for.

SUMMARY OF INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVE CODING RESULTS

The following sections present the results of the coding of the individual narratives (reconstructed versions) through use of Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). A summary of similarities and differences among the eight participants, as well as between the autistic and non-autistic groups, will be given for each of the three main categories of interest: representations of *self*, *other* (*partner*), and *the relationship*. Qualitative aspects of the data set, such as linguistic conventions and thematic currents, will be briefly noted here, to the degree that they suggest significant trends or theoretical links. Major themes and relevant theory will be further addressed in the Discussion section.

SELF REPRESENTATIONS

A number of organizing themes emerged from the dozens of content codes that were extracted from the entire set of individual narrative data. Self representative statements were assigned to six emergent categories or dimensions of self: *self development* (a historical perspective, which included information describing how significant events and relationships impacted on the evolution of personality and self-concept); *self management* (including ways of processing information, problem solving, coping skills, evaluating and maintaining self esteem); *physical self* (bodily/sensory experience, as opposed to physical characteristics); *social self* (social role, group membership, awareness of and adherence to social norms, social acceptance or isolation); and *relational self*, with this last encompassing several sub-categories (ways of

understanding and relating to others, negative relatedness/distance from others, positive relatedness/closeness to others). A sixth category contained statements indicative of a *disturbance in the integrity of the self*, including diffusion of self-other boundaries, inner fragmentation or dissociative experience. The responses in this category were mostly generated by Susan, with the addition of a few of Dave's more extreme strivings for oceanic "interconnectedness" and symbiosis falling into this grouping of codes.

Seventeen response categories included statements by all or nearly all (seven of eight) participants. Those who were not represented in these content areas generally stood out from the rest of the group in recognizable ways. In seven instances it was either Steven or Barbara who was missing from the group as a whole. This pattern is consistent with other ways in which these two differed from their respective cohorts. Each stood out as having provided significantly fewer self-descriptive words or phrases than their group members, with Steven offering 10 different descriptives in contrast to a group mean of 16.25, and Barbara offering 6 in contrast to an average of 10.25 among the non autistic participants (perhaps reflecting an overall impoverishment of self conceptualization relative to that of the other participants). This numerical data supports Steven and Barbara's subjective accounts of their self experience: her reference to having an "inadequate personality;" and his contention that he's never given much consideration to the concept of individual personality traits. Stanley was the only participant who did not include self-critical evaluations in his narrative, an omission that seems quite consistent with his rigid defensive style and intense narcissistic vulnerability. Clarissa stood out from the rest of the respondents as the only one who did not see her role in society as significantly limited by her personality traits – again, an estimate that seems to

accurately reflect the degree of developmental maturity and adaptive strength she exhibits in comparison to the others. As a group, the autistic participants used a greater number of self-descriptive phrases in representing themselves.

While the specific content of the narrative texts showed a broad range of experience among the eight participants, including notable differences in their individual pathways to self understanding, all were able to describe themselves in a fairly complex fashion along a number of dimensions, including active/behavioral characteristics as well as in psychological terms. All participants were able to be introspective, albeit to varying degrees, in approaching the task. Each evoked a self-representation that incorporated feedback derived from affect-laden interpersonal experience, awareness of his or her role within the larger social world, and a sense of how his individual history contributed to his personal development. Their use of self descriptive terms varied in number and specific emphasis, but all used words or phrases to characterize themselves in both relational terms (*i.e.*: shy; compassionate; obedient; etc...) and “functional” terms (*i.e.*: concrete; inventive; impractical; etc...). Emotional or temperamental qualities were also cited by most participants (Steven was the exception in this respect.). The participants produced an average of 31.25 different words or phrases describing their own emotions, with Stanley and Susan topping out at 48 and 46 respectively, and Steven generating the fewest at 14.

On the whole the participants’ responses were far more weighted toward social/psychological factors than physical/active characteristics, with the autistic respondents seeming to show the greater tendency to focus on the inner workings of their own minds in their self-representations. Only participants with autism felt compelled to

describe their own unique way of making sense of the world, giving detailed accounts of battling misapprehension with cognitive strategies, and organizing thoughts and behaviors into manageable logical schemata. They also differed from their non-autistic counterparts in their practice of orienting themselves within a larger cultural and historical context, and in their reported reliance on external rules and structure to govern their behavior (Clarissa joined the autistic respondents on the latter item, by virtue of her stated adherence to behavioral guidelines associated with her religious beliefs).

The explicit content of the individual narratives revealed numerous common concerns and experiences among participants, many of which emphasized the challenges of establishing and maintaining a stable and positive sense of self in relation to other people. While a number of emergent themes were unique to participants with autism, there were far more similarities than differences between them and their non-autistic counterparts in the kinds of information they chose to provide in describing themselves. All provided historical information, though some only touched briefly on childhood experience. Notably, all participants spoke about their experience in relationships as having impacted on their self-development at different points in their lives, and all described themselves as having empathy or compassion for other people. Both autistic and non-autistic participants spoke of their awareness of others' views of them, in the context of larger social environments as well as specific relationships, and used that feedback in constructing their self concepts. As noted in the analyses of each individual narrative, however, the insights derived from those relational experiences varied greatly among the participants, and did not always prove to be reliable resources for building a stable sense of self or positive connections to others.

There were many individual code categories that were unique to the participants with autism. All four included references to feeling socially isolated/alienated and misunderstood by those around them, and feeling bewildered by the responses and behaviors of other people (Christine also made the latter statement.). All were aware of being “different” and of causing negative reactions in others (Tom joined the autistic group on these two items.). Three out of four autistic respondents described themselves as having difficulty in discriminating and communicating emotions, discomfort with physical intimacy, and disturbances in modulating and processing sensory in-put. Despite – or perhaps because of – their social difficulties, the autistic participants tended to give detailed descriptions of how they monitor and interpret social-emotional cues during interpersonal interactions, and of how they use this feedback to adjust their own behavior for the purpose of maintaining interactive contact with others. Stanley and Dave produced a number of shared response categories reflecting their particular difficulty in predicting and interpreting others’ behavior, and extreme sensitivity to perceptions of hostility and rejection from the surrounding world. Both described frustrated efforts to fit in socially, and experience of conflict and antagonism within their peer environments. Both men expressed judgmental or superior attitudes toward the world of the “socially typical,” and emphatically rejected social norms in favor of asserting their individuality.

There were no specific codes unique to the entire group of non-autistic participants, however several items were mentioned only by members of this group. Barbara and Clarissa describe themselves as altruistic, a quality that fits with our sense that they must sustain their commitment to their partners while receiving very little

reciprocal caring and empathic support. Christine and Clarissa both report feeling isolated and alone at times, in having to deal with the stresses associated with their autistic partners' deficits. All but Tom describe having been hurt by others in prior significant relationships (including familial). As a group, the non-autistic participants generated more codes involving complex conceptualizations of their personal development than the autistic group, with notable attempts at more objective self evaluation, and recognition of contradictions and ambiguity in their reflective process. Notably, this last category of codes, suggesting a more sophisticated capacity for insight, included quite a few instances where Susan joined with the majority of non-autistic participants in producing this type of response.

A number of intriguing patterns were detected in looking at the (many) content codes in which members of both groups were represented. The distribution of codes included eleven instances in which Susan and/or Dave clustered with all or most of the non-autistic participants, while the other two autistic subjects only clustered with them on three items. Their partners Tom and Christine, in turn, produced a number content codes that linked them with the autistic group (most describing efforts to overcome social awkwardness and feelings of low self esteem). Given the tiny sample size, this numerical data cannot be viewed as indicating a significant trend, however it does suggest that these two couples might, overall, have more shared experience in their personal histories and self concepts. Other ways in which Susan and Dave appeared similar included their wish to see themselves as psychically connected to the world of others, and the sense of fluidity that characterized their internal concepts of self and self-other boundaries.

Codes falling into the category of negative relatedness (interpersonal distance, hostility, and rejection) were somewhat more numerous in the autistic group, but were also prominent in their partners' narratives. Barbara joined the participants with autism on several items, describing herself as rejected and victimized by others in her social environment. There were fewer descriptions of positive relational experience by the autistic group as a whole. Most of those cited referred to their current partnerships, however a few participants mentioned supportive family relationships or community experience.

The overarching themes extracted from each participant's narrative representation of *self* (presented in each "analysis" portion) also revealed differing trends in the two groups. Those with autistic disorders tended to elaborate on themes that captured their search for self definition of a fairly basic sort: the struggle to maintain self-cohesion and integrity of boundaries (or to dissolve them in an effort to connect with others); a need to defend against the threat of external assault or annihilation; or an effort to discover what bits and pieces of experience – emotions, behavioral rituals, or patterns of internal logic – might be cobbled together to construct a concept of self. Susan's themes of "identity diffusion" and "inner fragmentation" were echoed in Dave's sense of being an "autistic conglomeration," and both conveyed a sense of *self in relation to others* organized around a need to feel mirrored by or fused with external objects in order to avoid feeling isolated or non-existent. Steven and Stanley's inward scrutiny focused heavily on intellect, and the need to ward off disruptive affect rather than integrating their emotional experience into ideas about their own personalities or temperaments. With the exception of Susan, the autistic participants' incorporation of external feedback into their self

representations seemed to reflect interactions with “society” at large more than with significant individuals in their interpersonal environments (outside of their relationship partners). In this respect they are somewhat similar to Lee and Hobson’s (1998) autistic subjects, who although they described themselves in “relational” terms, cited few examples of personal relationships as compared to the control group. (It may be that our present group’s responses would have looked more like Lee and Hobson’s had they been surveyed, like them, during their teenage years.)

In contrast, the non-autistic participants gave considerable thematic emphasis to their personality development, noting experiences that shaped them as unique individuals. Their self descriptions, as suggested by a sampling of their major themes, embraced the complex and often contradictory aspects of personhood: “I guess I’m basically a reasonably intelligent guy who’s never really lived up to his potential...” (Tom); “I’m decent and capable, but know my limits...” (Barbara); “I like to think I’m a good person, but my weaknesses get in the way...” (Clarissa); “I keep my needs quiet, but I don’t fool myself...” (Christine). Members of this group were also more able to cite personality characteristics that identified them as particular types of people, *i.e.*: “I’m a fixer kind of person...” (Christine); “I’m maternal...” (Clarissa); “I’m not a hardy person...” (Barbara). These statements capture something tangible that is clearly lacking in themes generated by participants with autism: “I’m a multiple...” (Susan); “I’m one of me...” (Dave).

REPRESENTATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS

Four general thematic categories emerged in coding the explicit content of participants’ descriptions of their relationship partners: ways of describing partner

(personality traits, behavioral patterns, positive and negative attributes); *reflecting on partner's internal life* (understanding/imagining thoughts and feelings); *partner's responsiveness to participant's needs*; and *participant's responsiveness to partner's needs*. As in their descriptions of themselves, participants from both groups (autistic and non-autistic) were well represented in all thematic categories, and shared many individual codes. However they differed in ways that suggest notable variation in how they conceptualize their partners as significant internalized objects. Again, individual participants stood out from their respective groups as well as the sample as a whole, with Steven and Stanley notably absent from many content codes, and Susan and Tom often crossing groups to join with their counterparts. This created a number of codes where participants were divided into same gender groups.

The number of descriptive terms used in representing partners ranged broadly among all participants, with Susan producing far more than the mean number of 13 (she used 25 different words or phrases), and Steven generating only three descriptive characteristics. The suggestion of gender differences that emerged in the data, included a general trend of more descriptive information given by female participants than males (17.5 was the mean number of terms among the women, vs. 8.75 among men.). Three of the women produced more descriptives about their partners than themselves. The participants also differed according to gender in describing their relationship partners' affective states, however all participants generated far fewer "feeling" words in reference to their partners' emotions than their own.²⁵ Barbara stood out as attributing the least number of feeling states to her partner (six descriptives), while Clarissa produced the

²⁵ This discrepancy is consistent with Damon and Hart's observation that, on balance, most individuals are simply more invested in reflecting their own experience than that of others (1982).

greatest number of emotion terms (19 in her description of Seven). Again, the women as a group seemed more able to conceptualize their partners' affective experience than the men.

All the participants expressed admiration for their partners and listed positive/pleasing attributes in the course of their narratives, and all described behaviors or signals they used for the purpose of discerning their partners' emotional states. Each participant was also able to verbalize their notions of how they themselves might be viewed by their partners. None of the subjects evidenced "theory of mind" deficits (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985), and nearly all (with the exception of Stanley) showed reflective capacities that enabled them to represent their partners' experience in complex ways that involved formulating ideas based on their own conceptualizations rather than reliance on concrete or external information. These seven were also able to imagine their partner's experience of the relationship, and all saw themselves as required to make adjustments in their own behavior for their partner's comfort. All but Steven were able to support their characterizations with behavioral descriptions.

Susan and Dave joined the non-autistic respondents in providing more nuanced and balanced representations of their partners, including descriptions of negative attributes that they find hard to deal with, and observations of their partners as having undergone processes of developmental growth and change. These six also saw their partners as being sensitive to their own shifts in mood or affect, and as providing emotional comfort and ego support. Steven and Dave were missing from several codes, in which participants demonstrated an understanding of why their partner felt or behaved in a particular way and used their understanding to predict how their partner might

respond in a given situation. The majority of the participants (excluding Steven and Clarissa) said their partner provides acceptance and validation, and felt they could trust their relationship partner. Most saw their partners as unconventional, and as imperfect but still worthy of regard. Nearly all described their partners as evoking both positive and negative feelings, and as experiencing a variety of affects in response to the participant.

As with the self representations, there were a number of codes that were unique to participants with autism in their descriptions of their partners. Only the four autistic respondents saw their partners as making behavioral adjustments in order to minimize the participant's discomfort, and all four expressed regret for causing their partners emotional pain. All but Susan said that they were disrupted by their partners' emotional needs. Dave and Susan described their partners as assisting them with affect regulation and providing positive feedback. Susan was joined by Stanley in noting and appreciating their partner's patience and forbearance in the face of relationship conflicts. Tom joined with the majority of participants with autism (minus Steven or Stanley) in viewing their partners as being tolerant of their emotional needs, as providing comfort, and providing a quality of responsiveness that enhances their own self-understanding. Barbara joined those with autism in noting how their own behavior can cause negative affect in their partners; and Christine joined the group in expressing a wish to make their partners happy but having trouble knowing what to do.

Again, there were no content codes unique to the group of non-autistic participants as a whole, but several statements represented three of the four. All but Tom found their partners to be intolerant or unresponsive to their own needs, and felt it necessary to

minimize their own emotional needs in order to avoid disrupting their partners. All but Barbara reported feeling emotionally attuned to their partners. All four in the group noted aspects of their partners that were confusing or hard to understand. They all described their partners as having significant problems, and all mentioned the diagnosis of autism in their descriptions. Susan joined with all or most of the non-autistic group in making inferences about their partners' underlying defensive and regulatory processes, and in describing efforts to be supportive and sensitive to their partners' needs. (Tom's independent corroboration of the benefits of Susan's insight lends credence to her sense that she – unique among the participants with autism – is understanding and satisfying his needs.) Clarissa stood out from her cohort and the group as a whole in generating eight codes that were unique to her. A few of these items conveyed her particular disappointment and frustration with Steven, however a number suggested a considerable depth and investment in understanding his inner experience.

The participants showed considerable diversity in thematic emphasis in their representations of others, however there were a few trends that suggested common experience both within and between the two groups. Most seemed to find their partners unconventional in a way that they found appealing and reassuring. Six of the eight participants seemed to represent other people, in general, as threatening or rejecting, and conveyed a sense that these internalized notions derived from painful experience in the interpersonal world. Steven and Clarissa differed from the rest in this respect, with neither evoking themes that suggested they saw themselves in the context of a hostile social environment. It must be noted that, whereas the other respondents were well into adulthood when they embarked on their current relationships, Steven and Clarissa were

each other's first and only significant partners, and came together while still in their teens. (It might be further noted that their social milieu – a stable religious community – seems to provide a shelter from the normal vicissitudes of socialization.) Thus the others' representations of their partners are contextualized within a history of generally negative relational experience, except for Susan's case, which includes reference to positive and protective male figures. For these individuals, their current partners emerge as offering a refuge from the critical and rejecting responses they'd grown used to. Thus their themes reflect feelings of safety and relief.

Barbara joined with Stanley and Dave in a tendency to lump others into negatively-valenced rigid categories of people, broadly defined as intolerant of those who are "different." Stanley was largely unable to transcend these internalized object schema in forming a representation of Barbara as a unique individual, and tended to see her simply as "not" one of the "conventional" types he feels persecuted by. He seemed to feel that his adherence to a fair and ethical code of relational guidelines would be sufficient to meet her relationship needs. Barbara and Dave, however, seemed able to endow their representations of their relationship partners with more individuality and complex internal lives, and appear to understand that this requires them to exercise their own reflective/empathic capacities in maintaining a reciprocal relationship. Steven's efforts to represent his partner and others (and himself) as unique individuals reflect a strikingly limited framework for conceptualizing personality traits and internal experience, however his recognition that there is a body of knowledge and experience that he lacks seems to have awakened a sense of potential in himself. At present his representation of his partner, like Stanley's (and Barbara's to a significant extent), is

narrowly focused around his need to keep her in proximity for fear of being abandoned and alone. Susan and Dave, on the other hand, join the non-autistic participants in conveying a sense of what they value and respect in their relationship partners, as well as the personal qualities that tax and challenge them, and produce themes that portray their partners as catalysts for their own personal growth.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS

The five general content categories that emerged in the coding of participants' individual narrative representations of their relationships were: *Descriptive characteristics of the relationship, or of "we;" Learning and problem solving strategies; Communication; Relationship stability; Emotional attunement/shared experience.*

In contrast to the narrative representations of *self* and *other*, there were no single content codes shared by all participants in describing their relationships. All but Steven described their relationships as characterized by love for one another, and the majority (six of eight) described experiences of other shared emotion (minus Stanley and Steven) and expressed appreciation of their relationships (minus Stanley and Clarissa). The majority of participants were also able to describe reciprocal interactive patterns in a manner that incorporated understanding of underlying emotional or temperamental factors, and most saw their relationships as requiring mutual adjustments to maintain both partners' comfort.

The patterns that emerged in the distribution of codes in the participants' representations of their relationships revealed only a few differences that distinguished autistic from non-autistic respondents. Only non-autistic subjects, with the exception of Tom, saw themselves as making an effort that was not mutual in sustaining their

relationships. These three (joined by Steven) also saw their relationships as challenged by autism. Paradoxically, only Stanley joined the four non-autistic participants in explicitly describing their relationships as secure and stable, perhaps reflecting a conviction that he and Barbara share uniquely in contrast to the others: that neither of them could ever be accepted by another partner. Clarissa and Christine cited an unequal distribution of parenting responsibilities in their marriages, with both feeling overburdened. Barbara and Clarissa each spoke of doubts and reservations they'd had when they embarked on their relationships. Barbara and Steven both expressed a fear of loss of their relationship partners.

Response patterns seemed to distinguish specific couples in significant ways, with Dave and Christine and Susan and Tom reporting considerably more positive and shared relational experience than the other two couples. This was evident in the number of codes the partners shared with each other as well as in their content. These couples saw themselves as complementary to one another, supportive of each other in the face of external challenges, and as collaborators making joint efforts to solve problems. They also viewed themselves as similar to one another in important ways, and felt free to define their relationships on their own terms. Both partners were represented in 70% of the codes they jointly produced, in the case of these two couples, while Stanley and Barbara paired up on 40% of their codes, and Steven and Clarissa shared half their responses. Three affect related codes that were focused around mutual responsiveness in meeting each other's needs were unique to Susan and Tom, who also produced the greatest number of individual content codes in describing their relationship. The other

three couples all convey a sense that, to varying degrees, emotions can be a destabilizing force in their relationships.

The overarching themes of their narrative representations of the relationship, emphasizing mutual trust and affective reciprocity, also distinguished Susan and Tom, who describe the most satisfying relationship of the four couples. Dave and Christine also emphasize their mutual acceptance and affection, which gives each a welcome sense of security, but acknowledge an imbalance in the area of responsiveness to one another's emotional needs. Susan, Dave and Steven all express anxiety around the possibility of failing to meet the emotional needs of their non-autistic relationship partners, an obligation that Stanley seems unable to conceptualize (or tolerate). Stanley and Barbara's themes focus on their cooperative effort to keep the emotional temperature down, in order to preserve the partnership that each is desperate to maintain. The needs they satisfy for each other seem to be those of the most concrete and basic variety, but do include a sense of mutual appreciation and regard. Clarissa and Steven both reflect a perception that their bond is one in which she resentfully serves a quasi-maternal function, and that lacks the fundamental qualities of a mutually need satisfying relationship.

SUMMARY OF DYADIC INTERVIEW CODING RESULTS

Although the explicit content of the dyadic interviews adds compelling information about the history and functioning of each of the four relationships observed here, it is their “qualitative” aspects that are of primary interest in our attempt to illuminate the partners’ interactive co-construction of their relational representations. The coding results presented in the previous section pointed to differences in each couple’s sense of shared experience, and in the degree to which the partnerships are seen as mutually need satisfying by each participant. Differences also emerged in some participants’ ability to reflect on their partners’ unique inner emotional lives. The participants seemed to vary in the degree to which they derived feelings of comfort and security from their relationships, though this often had to be inferred from signs of underlying anxiety that contradicted their explicit characterizations of their experience. Certain distinguishing features of the narrative representations suggest that two of the four relationships provide an environment more conducive to affective reciprocity, and a sense of reflective awareness of the other’s complex personal and relational needs between partners, even when those needs are difficult to tolerate or meet. While each participant with autism recognized his or her own difficulty in regulating emotional arousal, only Susan and Dave described ways in which their partners help them maintain (or regain) equilibrium, and also provide positive feedback. Their partners, in turn, see them as understanding and receptive to their needs, whereas Steven and Stanley’s partners more often represent them as inflicting hurt and disappointment. Our overall sense is that Susan and Dave have achieved a level of positive mutuality with their

spouses, and see themselves as having something important to contribute to their partners' sense of comfort and joy in the relationship, which Stanley and Steven can only represent in intellectual or concrete behavioral terms. The failure in emotional attunement and feelings of comfort noted most often in the latter two marriages seems attributable to factors presented by the non-autistic partners (Barbara's impoverished, depleted sense of self; and Clarissa's negativity, induced by decades of mounting frustration), as well as the autistic individuals' deficits. If the former two relationships are indeed more reciprocal and satisfying, then something distinguishing should emerge in the quality of their interactions as demonstrated during their dyadic interviews.

The qualitative characteristics of the dyadic interviews that were coded for comparison among participants were derived from the *Oral History Interview and Coding System* (Buehleman and Gottman, 1996), a research tool developed to assess the quality of the "perceived marital bond" as cognitively represented by both partners in a relationship. This scale has been found to correlate with other measures of relationship satisfaction and predict marital stability (Gottman, *et al.*, 1998). For the present purposes, three dimensions, each with its own set of six-to-nine item subscales, were chosen from the eight factors that comprise the whole coding system. These specific factors were chosen for their ability to capture positive aspects of a couple's interactive patterns that either transcend or underlie their explicitly stated evaluations of relationship satisfaction (territory that was thoroughly covered in the individual interviews). The dimension of "We-ness vs. Separateness" measures the degree to which a person represents self and partner as a unified concept, sharing thoughts, goals, beliefs and values, as manifest through use of plural pronouns as well as in the couple's coordinated

sharing of the task of telling their story. The dimension of “Fondness and Affection” measures the affective tone displayed by each partner toward the other during their interview, and “Expansiveness vs. Withdrawal” assesses each partner’s responsiveness to the other in the process of their joint narration, by rating items such as expressiveness, and tendency to elaborate on, ignore or validate each other’s comments and perspectives. The individual items were scored according to a five-point scale, then summed for scoring on each of the three dimensions. Partners were scored separately, according to recommended use of the instrument.

On the dimension of “We-ness” Dave scored the highest (30), with Susan next (28), and Tom and Christine just below (27). Dave’s score represents a somewhat extreme degree of “merging” with his partner, as measured by one specific sub-scale item, whereas a more balanced representation would entail a degree of separateness. High we-ness scores, such as those found among this group, generally correspond to other measures of relationship strength when used in tandem with other scales (Beuhman and Gottman, 1996; Gottman, *et al.*, 1998). The other two couples scored significantly lower, with Stanley and Barbara achieving scores of 23 and 19 respectively, and Steven and Clarissa yielding the lowest scores of 14 and 18. The pattern repeated itself on the dimension of “Fondness/Affection,” with high scores of 26-28 contrasting with low scores of 12 to 16 between the two sets of pairs. Scoring on the third dimension of “Expansiveness” followed a pattern seen earlier, in which Barbara and Steven fell significantly below the rest of the respondents (25, 24), with Stanley coming in marginally above, and the other five participants earning scores of 38 to 43 (Susan at the top).

These trends were further illustrated by additional aspects of the data set that highlighted differences between these two sets of couples. As noted in the individual summaries of the dyadic interviews, the transcripts were scanned for instances in which the couples sustained stretches of alternating dialogue/narration, without requiring prompts or lapsing into silence. While Susan and Tom, and Dave and Christine produced the most and longest of these sequences (four or more exchanges over 22% of the text, relative to the overall length of each transcript), Stanley and Barbara also jointly sustained stretches of narrative, for 14% of the total number of lines of text. However in the latter pair, most of these sequenced exchanges were classified as “in-validating” rather than “validating” or “elaborative” responses. Steven and Clarissa produced only four brief sequences, which constituted just five percent of the text.

All participants employed plural pronouns in reference to themselves and their partners with notable frequency, as judged by computation of a “we-ratio” for each (lines of text divided by number of plural pronouns), however Barbara’s usage was significantly less frequent than the overall average (She used one “we” term per 12.1 lines, as compared to an overall average of 8.1.). Another feature that varied greatly was the number of times each participant directly addressed his or her partner during the interview. Christine, Susan and Tom did this most frequently, every 9 to 13 lines of text. Stanley was the least likely to speak directly to his partner, with only four instances in the entire transcript (once each 160 lines). Barbara and Clarissa also tended not to speak directly to their partners during the dyadic interview (four and seven times, respectively), while Dave and Steven did so with moderate frequency.

All of the couples were able to provide information about the early history of their relationships, albeit with varying levels of detail and clarity, and all touched on affect-laden experience that carried tangible emotional resonance in the telling. While each story depicted a significant measure of struggle and hardship, themes of endurance and commitment were also prominent. All imagined a future together, with some degree of both hope and trepidation (and, in one or two cases, a sense of resignation to a life of continuing frustration and disappointment).

DISCUSSION

This inquiry began with a number of questions aimed at generating a better understanding of how individuals with autistic spectrum disorders represent themselves and others in a relational context, and how those representations are influenced by, and, in turn, impact on their experience in stable adult relationships. The selected informants represent a small sub-segment of the larger community of persons with autistic disorders who seem, at least on the surface, to have overcome the expected limitations of their disorder and formed lasting partnerships. Their relationship partners were included in the study to provide a counterpoint (and, in some respects, a “control” data set) to the identified population’s acquired data, and to permit exploration of both partners’ perceptions of their experience of their relationship. It was proposed that relevant information could be derived from participants’ verbal narratives, and observations of the relationship partners’ interactions during a couple’s interview session. While a number of theoretical perspectives were presented (cognitive, neuro-psychological, and psychodynamic) in an effort to give the reader an integrated understanding of the constellation of challenges facing this diagnostic group, the primary conceptual focus has been on autism as a “disorder of the self” (Cohen, 1980; Hobson, 1990; Mayes and Cohen, 1994; Wittenberg, 1997), which produces impairment in the sufferer’s ability to represent self and others as fully-endowed uniquely minded individuals, and to form mutually need-satisfying relationships.

By presenting each informant's narrative depiction of his or her experience of *self* and *other* in the context of a significant relationship, the study has attempted to shed light on both internal and interpersonal psychological processes that underlie the participants' efforts to form coherent object representations. Because of the exploratory (rather than hypothesis-driven) nature of the endeavor, the data were presented in the manner of a series of case presentations, with clinically informed commentary, in order to allow the reader to share the investigator's sense of each participant's unique experience. Each data set was subsequently discussed from a theoretical standpoint informed by research in developmental psychopathology, within a general framework of *object relations theory*. The objective of this process was to identify both individual/intrapsychic and dyadic/interpersonal patterns of thinking and behavior that might correspond to internalized constructs of *self*, *other*, and *self in relation to other*. This search for links between internalized concepts of "persons" (and how they relate to one another) and their behavioral manifestations, as observed *in vivo* as well as through the lens of subjective recollection and narrative construction, is consistent with a large body of theory and research exploring the psychological underpinnings of humans' capacity to form and maintain meaningful relationships.

The results of this study are consistent with clinical and theoretical observations showing that, despite their adaptive successes, high functioning individuals with autism (here defined as "normally" intelligent persons who demonstrate the skills necessary for self sufficiency, including the ability to negotiate basic social interactions) continue to struggle with issues of identity, and have difficulty in acquiring a rich and coherent sense of self and maintaining its essential integrity (Brendel, *et al.*, 2002; Capps and Sigman,

1997; Mayes and Cohen, 1994; Mundy and Hogan, 1994; Polmear, 2004). Whereas other studies and case presentations have explored these phenomena by measuring autistics' functioning against non-impaired control groups (Lee and Hobson, 1998; Mavropoulou, 1995), or by describing their deficits and developmental progress in the context of treatment (Alvarez and Reid, 1999; Polmear, 2004), this project has raised the question of what we might learn from affected individuals who appear to have achieved a level of functioning considered rare within their diagnostic peer group: the capacity to sustain stable intimate relationships. Most efforts to quantify the percentage of successful long-term partnerships among adults diagnosed with autistic disorders have relied on anecdotal reports and informal surveys. With newer diagnostic trends allowing increased identification of adults "on the spectrum" researchers are now attempting to gather relevant statistics. One recent publication (Hénault, 2005) estimates the divorce rate among marriages in which one partner carries a diagnosis of autism (or related disorders, such as Aspergers or PDD-NOS) at approximately 80 percent. Thus the present sample, comprised of couples who have been married for an average of 18.5 years, appears to lie well outside of the norm. As this study seeks not to define or predict what might be "normative" for this group, but rather endeavors to illuminate factors that could be associated with the unique experience of selected individuals, a qualitative phenomenological approach has been taken. The methodology was designed to elicit information that would depict how the participants have internalized aspects of their experience in significant relationships, and how that process has informed or enhanced their representations of self and other in a relational context. An additional focus of inquiry has been to examine the participants' subjective experiences of their

relationships, in order to better understand the unique challenges they face and the ways each couple has coped with those challenges.

What can be inferred about the representational and relational capacities of participants from the data gathered?

Thematic analysis of the data has shown many common difficulties and concerns among participants, as well as similarities in the kinds of information they note and use to assemble concepts of self and other. It has also highlighted the unique experience of each individual, revealing differences that distinguish them from one another, as well as between autistic and non-autistic informants. The information obtained seems to provide a rich (in most cases) picture of each participant's sense of self, and illuminates significant aspects of his or her inner object world. Like their partners, each autistic participant showed, to varying degrees, a capacity for reflective self awareness in his or her narrative, and showed the ability to conceptualize the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others. Examples of their reflective capabilities range from one informant, Steven's, somewhat tentative formulations about how his own emotional vulnerability might enable him to empathize with another person's misfortune, to Susan's more sophisticated analysis of how her own angry outbursts, which initially silenced and intimidated her husband, became a vehicle for increasing his assertiveness and promoting mutual communicative exchange. Both these individuals were able to articulate how their own limitations impaired their ability to respond intuitively to others' social-affective cues, and could imagine the emotional reactions and cognitive perspectives of their relationship partners.

The emergence of such capacities, once thought to be virtually absent in this population, has begun to be recognized within the last few years. A review of relevant literature on the topic was presented in the introductory chapters of this report. Since that initial sampling was compiled investigators have continued efforts to assess the potential for higher-level functioning among individuals with autistic spectrum disorders. In one recent article, Uta Frith (2004) cites the high level of “retrospective self analysis” demonstrated in autobiographical writings by a “small sub-group” of persons with autism. She cautions, however, against interpreting these achievements as indicators of normal social-emotional functioning: “They talk about themselves and their experiences, but do not seem to have the same curiosity to know what others think or feel.” (p.682) Frith suggests that this lack is due to their inability to imagine the contents of other people’s minds (“Theory of Mind” deficits). She also notes how frequently individuals with autism exhibit suspicious or paranoid attitudes toward external others, and believes that this might occur because, without the ability to understand that others simply have a different perspective, they attribute an attitude of hostility toward people who don’t seem to share their point of view. Frith goes on to say that even those autistics who have made good adaptations continue to have deficits in reflective function, sharing of emotions, and “intuitive mentalizing,” as well as in identifying complex emotions. Other recent research has confirmed the persistence of impairments in accurately identifying and predicting others’ mental states, relative to the normal population, among high-functioning individuals with autistic spectrum disorders (Hill, Berthoz, and Frith, 2004; Lawson, Baron-Cohen and Wheelright, 2004; Ponnet, *et al.*, 2004). The information

obtained in the present study appears to be largely consistent with these findings, yet suggests a broader range of potential achievement in affected individuals.

Among our four participants with autism we see differing degrees of impairment in their ability to conceptualize the mental states underlying others' behaviors. We might recall, for example, Stanley's erroneous interpretation of his quarry's frightened response when, as a teenager, he tried to approach girls by broadcasting his cryptic overtures through their car radio: he thought they were playing "hard to get" or concerned with social status. Even with hindsight and the interviewer's exploratory probing, Stanley could not imagine the fear and confusion he must have caused the girls. (They ran a traffic light in their effort to flee after he visually identified them, first on one radio frequency and then another, as he cruised behind them through the busy center of his town.) Stanley's attempts to take his current partner's perspective are hit or miss, and largely influenced by his tendency to assume her point of view must mirror his, even when his reading of her vocal tone and other cues gives him accurate (if unwanted) information to the contrary. On the other hand, his defensive denial could be construed as evidence of his underlying ability to accurately detect Barbara's feelings, even as he fails to respond empathically. He fares best when he applies a more objective or structured template, as when he uses his understanding of her religious beliefs to predict her reaction to a particular controversy, or chooses a gift based on her explicitly stated preferences. We might also note the case of Steven, who, according to both his and his wife's reports, shows no ability to understand his own children's inner lives. However, even he, arguably the least interpersonally aware of the four informants, shows sufficient insight to express the hope that his wife hasn't simply resigned herself to a future devoid

of relational satisfaction, indicating a rather keen perceptiveness on his part as confirmed by Clarissa's own account. Although he has only recently begun to grapple with the intricacies of affective exchange, Steven has long been aware of his wife's disappointment in him. Having postulated Clarissa's state of irritable discontent, Steven can now formulate a behavioral strategy aimed at demonstrating his consideration for her, in the hope that he can improve her disposition toward him through carefully orchestrated affectionate gestures. Susan and Dave describe similarly formulaic processes used to conceptualize their partners' inner states, along with the emergence of a more spontaneous and intuitive capacity for implicit understanding.

These observations suggest that, at least on a purely cognitive level, these four individuals with autism have the symbolic capacity to represent hypothetical mental states, and to a large extent they can perceive and interpret the behavioral signals of *familiar others when they are invested in* gaining insight. Our participants with autism tell us what kinds of information they attend to when seeking to understand their partners' thoughts and feelings. They appear to benefit from explicit verbal communication, but also report noting subtle non-verbal cues and filtering these interrelated bits of information through a concept of what their partners' typical response patterns have led them to expect (*i.e.*: Dave can reportedly detect when his wife's MS symptoms require him to provide immediate assistance by noting subtle changes in her facial expression; Susan attends to her husband's body posture and affective shifts to determine whether he is suppressing negative feelings; Steven attributes relational stability to his wife's "endurance" because he is aware of her suffering.). Their narrative depiction of instances of emotional attunement, and the implicit understanding they

convey as they describe their partners' experience within the context of their relationships, however, contrasts sharply with how they describe interactions with non-significant others or with figures from their distant past. Our informants describe numerous instances of being bewildered by others' behavior and of failing to successfully negotiate the social demands of educational or work environments, and even of family life. The "theory of mind" capacities they demonstrate within the context of their current long term partnerships seem much less reliable in the larger social arena, particularly as seen in their depictions of earlier life experiences. These depictions are also notable for the rigid and simplistic quality that often characterizes their representations of people in the external world. With these observations in mind, we might postulate that the "mentalizing" abilities evident in their current relationships result from a process of "situated learning" made possible by the fact that their partners have, over time, been internalized as stable objects in their inner worlds. The resulting representations might then be endowed with a significance and complexity that can be tested against a body of consistent and sustained experience. This might explain the degree of inter-subjective awareness conveyed as the autistic respondents describe their perceptions of these significant relationships, as well as their ability to fill out their characterizations of their partners with supporting experiential information. In doing so they arrive at a sense of what these individuals are like as people that rings true when we hold it against their partners' self descriptions, as well as the interviewer's (albeit subjective) impressions.

While each participant's internalized representation of his or her partner differs in level of complexity, integration, and overall "maturity," each can make use of these available concepts to imagine how his or her partner experiences their shared reality, and

to negotiate the demands of basic interaction. Where they seem to differ most significantly, however, is in the degree to which they attend to their partners' emotional signals, and in how they respond to that information. As might be the case in any number of "normal" relationship, awareness of their partners' feelings doesn't necessarily lead them to formulate affectively resonant responses that answer an expressed need. I mean to suggest here, that the individuals represented in this sample are, in certain circumstances, *sufficiently able* to interpret their partners' external behavioral cues, their obvious and general impairment in social information processing notwithstanding. Like others in their diagnostic categories, they appear to share the deficits in cognitive-perceptual processing of social cues cited earlier in this manuscript and further explicated in more recent studies (Hill, Berthoz and Frith, 2004; Rutherford, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2002). Two of them, Stanley and Dave, also show the tendencies noted above by Frith (2004): they are likely to attribute hostile intentions to people in the surrounding environment; though whether this tendency arises from cognitive deficit or other experiential factors is arguable. It has been suggested that the social perceptions of individuals with autism are fundamentally compromised in the specific following way: that whatever skill they acquire in reading and interpreting others' social cues, they are unable to accurately detect and incorporate the expressed emotional component in incoming social information (Shamay-Tsoori, *et al.*, 2002). Ongoing research continues to affirm the general impairment in processing of "complex" or "subtle" emotions found among persons with autism (Hillier and Allinson, 2002). Two of my informants, Susan and Steven, talk at length of their difficulties in identifying and integrating complex emotions into their understanding of themselves and others. In an attempt to compensate

for this weakness they use their intellectual skills to discriminate and categorize different emotions. They tell us that they lack an intuitive understanding and response system, yet all four autistic participants use a broad variety of terms connoting both simple and complex emotions, and give indications that they can accurately attribute a range of affect to themselves and their partners. The autistic participants do not, as a group, significantly differ from their partners in linguistic labeling of emotions. Although all participants offered fewer affect terms in describing their partners than themselves, there were notable differences among them in the degree of this discrepancy. As noted in the previous section, however, the differing trends that emerge in the data appear related to gender rather than diagnostic category, a result which corresponds to overall findings on gender differences (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004). Taken altogether, the present material seems to suggest that, in the context of a stable long-term relationship, certain high functioning autistics can achieve a form of information processing that enables detection of another's affect that is comparable to that of their non-impaired partners. Where they do appear to struggle, however – and quite profoundly, according to our informants – is in their ability to modulate their own state of arousal in the presence of others' emotive signals.

What three of the four autistic participants explicitly state (and the fourth, Dave, seems to imply) is that the detection of others' emotions triggers a flood of disorganizing affect in themselves, and that they have few reliable strategies for maintaining psychic equilibrium in the face of such onslaughts. They also tell us, implicitly as well as explicitly, that when they do feel empathy or compassion for another person it usually occurs when they recognize a fellow sufferer, and can directly identify with what that

person feels. At these times, however, the intensity of the affect they feel and attendant blurring of psychic boundaries threatens them to the core. It is therefore obvious why they might seek to ward off awareness of others' emotions, and might consequently lack, as Frith (2004) says, "curiosity" about such matters, but it is not so certain that this difficulty can be attributed to cognitively based "theory of mind" deficits.

One of the most recent formulations regarding the "core" deficit in autism posits a continuum of cognitive style whose polar opposites are defined by gender-specific tendencies (Lawson, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004): the male brain being prone toward "systemizing" (categorizing or understanding systematic or non-agentive events, *i.e.*: mathematical, mechanical, etc...); and the female toward "empathizing" (focusing on thoughts and feelings of others and responding appropriately). According to this theory autism represents a form of the "extreme male brain." It is not my intention to evaluate or apply this new theory here, but rather to cite one of its authors' most salient points: their definition of "empathy," which emphasizes not just the ability to understand another's experience but to *respond* with "...an appropriate spontaneous emotional reaction" (p. 302). Others have gone further, suggesting that real empathy entails an impulse or wish to offer comfort in response to another's emotional need (Davis, 1994). Empathy, by these formulations, constitutes more than a purely cognitive process of understanding another's experience; it infuses this exercise with spontaneous affect. Given our autistic participants' depiction of the disorganizing effects of allowing others' emotions to resonate within themselves (evident in the present data as well as material cited in earlier chapters), we can see that the experience of empathy exacts a high price. It also places a high demand for an emotive-behavioral response. In order to feel

compassion for another's pain a person must allow a subjective experience to be induced as a result of his or her perception of external phenomena, which then triggers a corresponding cognitive-affective schema that will likely arouse a degree of emotional discomfort. This emotional arousal must be regulated to the degree that the individual retains the ability to differentiate between what is happening to him and what he perceives as experienced by the other person. He should then be able to conceptualize an active response aimed at restoring the other to a state of comfort, regardless of whether he chooses to act.

Theorists and researchers who study the capacity for empathy among individuals with autism have most often characterized their impairment in this domain as a result of functional neuro-cognitive deficits (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004; Frith, 2004; Hobson and Patrick, 1995; Jaedecke, Storoschuk and Lord, 1994; Lawson, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004), rather than in the complex psycho-dynamic terms favored by analytically oriented practitioners. Those who discuss the phenomena from a more integrated standpoint note that, whatever the underlying neurological deficit hampering the autistic's ability to perceive what others are experiencing internally (often most glaring in his interpretation of their reactions to his own behavior), his subjective ideas about people are vulnerable to psychic distortions induced through cycles of "projective identification" (Alvarez and Reid, 1999). In this process his interpersonal experience is colored by overwhelmingly negative affect and distorted feedback. The resulting perceptions of others as not only bewildering – but malevolent and rejecting – would likely preclude the development of an empathic or caring attitude toward other people. Such a process is depicted by Sean Barron, a writer with autism, who eloquently

describes his early internalization of the notion that “Sean is bad,” based on virtually every shred of evidence that penetrated his awareness, and tells how this fostered an angry and vengeful attitude toward the external social world (Grandin and Barron, 2005).

Our tendency, as analytically oriented thinkers, is to focus on the negative implications of “projective identification” in psychological development. It’s worth reminding ourselves, however, that the same processes can account for our positive connection to others. It might be said, in fact, that empathy is itself a form of projective identification, and one that involves both non-verbal (or pre-conscious) processing of social cues as well as more mature cognitive abilities. As discussed in the introductory chapters, developmental theorists tend to think of these capacities as rooted in an infant’s early perception and spontaneous imitation of his caregiver’s affective expressions, carried out in an environment in which his own need for responsive soothing is securely met by the external other, until he develops the tools for maintaining his own equilibrium. At the same time, the infant is learning to determine what is reliably “me” and “not me,” and learns to locate emotions within the inter-subjective relational matrix (Hobson, 1993b; Schore, 1994; Siegle, 1999; Stern, 1989). Thus we can see that this facility relies on the management of inherently porous psychic boundaries, as well as a capacity for self regulation, areas that pose major challenges to the autistic individuals represented here.

With these ideas in mind, it seems that “empathy” can be identified as a variable factor in the relational functioning of this study’s participants. While there is nothing remotely revelatory in this, it nevertheless bears looking at to the degree that it appears achievable among categorically impaired individuals, who, like anyone else, can hardly be expected to form and sustain mutual relationships without it. In Susan’s case she

makes clear that her achievement took an enormous effort of will and a conviction that she would be rewarded – by a longed-for feeling of emotional connectedness and by a positive sense of “doing it right” – if she could tolerate exposure to her partner’s feelings. So determined is she, to fulfill her perceived role as a “loving” and empathic partner, that she literally bullies her husband into disclosing feelings (some of which seem, admittedly, to be her projections) so that she can wrestle with them. Whatever unique and laborious process has led them to this point, Susan and Tom show every sign of mutual emotional support. Dave and Christine also claim a mutually need satisfying bond, but the data make clear that she (like all of the non-autistic partners) tends to minimize her needs in order to reduce the potential for disruption that both acknowledge is lurking nearby. In spite of this dynamic, however, Dave asserts his wish and readiness to step up. He actively noted and sought clarification of his wife’s verbal expressions of emotional discomfort during the interview process. Christine describes him as a guy who “would give you the shirt off his back.” Her estimation of his generous spirit must come from somewhere in the realm of their experience together. Whatever Dave’s limitations, he and Christine show a reciprocal warmth and appreciation that, like Susan and Tom’s, is easily apparent in their interactions. These two couples appear to have achieved a level of relationship satisfaction, as evidenced by both the content of their narratives and their scores derived from the *Oral History Coding System* (Beuhlman and Gottman, 1996), that the other two clearly have not.

Steven and Clarissa have co-existed for decades with little discernible sense of shared emotion or mutual support. Since beginning to understand the nature of Steven’s disorder Clarissa has sought ways to verbally explicate complex social-emotional

processes, in an effort to help him understand the emotional reactions that others have to his behaviors, and to analyze interpersonal response patterns. For his part Steven is attempting to take on the surface features of caring, while hoping to eventually generate genuine feeling. In considering the overall viability of such exercises, Hill, Berthoz, and Frith (2004) note the potential pitfalls, which they associate with the high incidence of depression and feelings of inadequacy that beset this population: “Whereas the slow compensatory acquisition of theory-of-mind has made the awareness of inner states possible, at least to some extent, it has also led to increased awareness of the failure to ‘fit in’.” (p. 234) Experience of failure and rejection figures prominently in the presented narratives, as does the extent to which each relationship functions (or fails to) as a haven, where acceptance provides badly needed relief and healing. As noted in the first phase of data analysis, Steven rightly detects the degree of negative affect attached to Clarissa’s experience of their relationship, which constitutes a significant barrier to his goal of increased emotional awareness and availability. Steven’s palpable fear of loss is based primarily on his understanding that he is not acceptable to Clarissa as he is. If he were able to open himself to her emotions, he’d likely face an onslaught of messages that would threaten his sense of security and well-being. He can feel the stirrings of empathy for an individual whom he perceives to be disadvantaged or threatened like himself, but what he feels in response to Clarissa’s emotions – to the extent that he attends to them at all – evokes a need to escape.

Stanley and Barbara seem to face a similar challenge. They assert their marital stability, but their mutual anxiety is palpable, and her disappointment and resignation are easily detected. Stanley’s acute sensitivity to any hint of negative affect in Barbara’s

voice or posture keeps him constantly on guard. His defensive barrier against awareness of her needs was profoundly evident throughout their dyadic interview, during which he simply failed to take in her rare expressions of affect, while she reciprocated by emotional withdrawal. Stanley's inability to cope with emotional "noise" corresponds to his intolerance for other forms of sensory stimuli. We might postulate that these varied forms of stimulation are poorly differentiated in Stanley and others like him, whose regulatory systems appear to function in a primitive and volatile manner. His representations of self and others are infused with perceptions of color, sound, and smell, intertwined with images of rejection and persecution. Barbara, on the other hand, is mercifully bland. Although he recognizes his own powerful emotions Stanley never seems to feel anything in concert with another. He characterizes his and Barbara's regard for each other as a system of negotiated accommodations of individual preferences, or calculated gestures aimed to please, rather than an emotionally based desire to share and reciprocate one another's feelings and needs. Stanley's representation of Barbara fails to integrate a perception of her emotional needs to the extent that he might be in a position to respond to them. The continuous tension he seems to feel around a shadowy feeling of potential loss suggests that Stanley is, on some level, aware that something essential is missing in their relationship, and that this missing link represents a threat. His sense that she has turned to her pets for affection that he cannot reciprocate arouses feelings of envy and resentment. He consoles himself with assurances that she will never leave him because, like him, she is undesirable and inadequate in the eyes of society, a notion that forms the critical basis of their shared experience and mutual acceptance. Barbara's appreciation of the fact that Stanley wanted her, at a time when she had lost all hope,

enables her to view him with a positive sense that contrasts with Clarissa's experience of Steven. Her own experience of feeling like a social outcast also allows Barbara to "empathize" with Stanley in a way that echoes the definition cited above: she has compassion for his pain and seeks to nurture, protect and comfort him, not because he reciprocates, but because he deserves it.

Barbara's ability to tolerate Stanley's seemingly selfish neglect of her feelings, and to sustain her empathic stance seems to result from her sense of his overall fragility and the degree of suffering he has endured. This awareness of their partners' essential frailty was also shown, to varying degrees, by other wives in the study. Interactive patterns that arise from such perceptions have been the focus of research on marital relationships. A woman's habitual response to her husband's high level of emotional reactivity was found to be a significant factor in marital stability and satisfaction by Gottman, *et al.* (1998). In their study of 130 married couples they found that "male reactivity" was a frequent stress factor in relationships, and that the partners' regulatory function (*i.e.*: de-escalation of negative affect through self-soothing, wife soothing or validation of husband's point of view, introduction of humor, etc...) predicted the stability of marriages over time. A couple's success in coping with disruptions, rather than their frequency or severity, appears to be a sound predictor of outcomes. Gottman and his colleagues found no effects attributable to negative affective reciprocity, and emphasized that such episodes are inevitable in relationships. Their analysis along a number of dimensions suggested that marital stress is overcome, not by adopting concrete strategies such as "active listening" or other cognitive-behavioral approaches, but by achievements attributable to both intra-psychic and interpersonal dynamics, which they

characterized largely in terms of *object relations theory*. Specifically, the researchers cited a theory originally postulated by Hendrix (1988), which suggests that wives who see their husbands' hostility and negative affect as a result of unresolved childhood wounds are more likely to formulate a mitigating positive response. This stance entails a view that one task of marriage is to heal childhood wounds. Gottman and his co-authors note: "This view is consistent with object relations theory, which also sees marital hostility as primarily the result of projective identification." (p.20) They point to *attachment theory* as offering another important perspective; one that advocates acceptance as the most stabilizing response to negative arousal, rather than demanding behavioral change, and note the paradoxical result that change is most likely to occur based on the re-framing of underlying emotions. Anger and hostility might thus be seen as manifestations fear and sadness, feelings connected to issues of attachment security. Their conclusions further emphasize the overall importance of emotional engagement and mutual responsiveness, as opposed to conflict resolution, and characterize these positive factors as capacities that cannot be trained in marital therapy: "... it seems unlikely that couples will be able to follow an admonition to increase the amount of positive affect in the service of de-escalation. Interest, humor, and affection need to occur naturally, particularly in the context of a conflict resolution." (p. 20). This warning not to place confidence in the studied acquisition of "spontaneous" affect is precisely what haunts Steven and Clarissa in their efforts to sustain any hope of an improved relationship.

Of what use are existing theories in assessing the marital functioning of this unique sample?

The above citations highlight the degree to which the participants in this study resemble the broader population of married couples struggling to manage the intensity of emotions aroused in the context of their relationships. They also reinforce the significance of underlying cognitive-affective representational schemas in determining how individuals in relationships are likely to respond to one another. The above mentioned factors can be seen operating in all four relationships examined here, and corroborate observations of gender-specific trends, which seem to be identifiable in “typical” as well as “atypical” patterns of marital interaction. The couples in this study may be understood as representing an “extreme” form of the proto-couple depicted by Gottman, *et al.* (1998), (with Susan assuming the reverse-gendered role): reciprocal affect is most successfully regulated when the “wife” maintains a view of her spouse as suffering from early childhood wounds, and seeks to provide an atmosphere of acceptance and healing.

Gottman, *et al.*’s (1998) notions of “male reactivity” and female “empathy” resonate in a way that corresponds to Baron-Cohen’s theories (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004; Lawson, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004), as well as the gender trends noted in the present results. While it would be unwise to try to draw any conclusions about the impact of gender in differentiating Susan’s functioning from that of the three male autistic participants, it’s impossible not to speculate as to whether her greater capacity for empathic reciprocity might be related to her gender role. If Hendrix’s (1988) template were applied to Susan and Tom’s marriage, she would fit into

the role of the volatile and over-reactive spouse in greater need of acceptance and soothing. Yet her stance toward her husband also incorporates the protective and nurturing dynamics typically associated with the female's role. Only a broader survey of relevant literature would permit exploration of gender differences among individuals with autism, and even then may not prove fruitful until new findings allow for more precise diagnostic specification within the broad spectrum of severity and symptomatology currently subsumed under the category of autism and related disorders. The small proportion of females with autism is only one of many obstacles to investigating the role of gender in their relational capacities. The present study, like most involving this population, will remain cautiously reticent about interpreting observations of specific gender-related phenomena as causal links. The commonality among our autistic participants, in terms of the deficits and vulnerabilities associated with their disorder, are sufficient to suggest that, as a group, they came to their marriages with limitations and "emotional baggage" that would challenge the most forgiving of "wives," and set a new bar for the measurement of compensatory healing of psychic wounds.

If, as Hendrix (1988) suggested, a stable marriage can provide an environment for "healing of childhood wounds," it is a small leap to reformulate this statement to suggest that such a stable relationship might create an environment for addressing unresolved developmental tasks, a premise that forms the basis of psychoanalytic therapy. That a mature and mutual relationship, such as a marriage between two adults, ought not to be burdened with this task – to the degree that the impairments of autism constitute a significant maturational lag – is eloquently expressed by Clarissa, who has

already undertaken the raising of twelve children and needs Steven to function as a father.

It may be rather late in the game for me to admit that one of my early hypotheses was that I would find evidence of a maternal “holding environment” (Winnicott, 1965) in the dynamics of successful partnerships involving persons with autistic disorders, but from the present vantage point this prediction appears to have been contradicted. The two women who characterize themselves as “altruistic” (Clarissa and Barbara), and find that they must accommodate their partners’ infantile needs and relinquish any hope of being nurtured themselves, are in the least satisfying relationships. Their autistic husbands, in turn, have organized their relational strivings around the need to sustain attachments that keep the desired object in proximity, but not with the mature aim of reciprocating her empathic and nurturing feelings and behaviors. To be sure, the other two couples struggle with the apportioning of relationship responsibilities, and Susan and Dave retain many child-like vulnerabilities, but their relational drives encompass a view of themselves and their partners as linked by shared affective experience and mutual responsibility to respond to one another’s emotional needs. The degree to which they can represent and aspire to this relational concept, and tolerate awareness of their partner’s affective states, seems almost more important than their actual behavior toward one another, in creating a positive sense of themselves and their partners in a reciprocal bond.

What is striking in the themes that have emerged from the data presented here, as well as the theoretical references and commentary they now inspire, is the degree to which they transcend the specifics of “autism” and touch on what we think of as universal in human efforts to give meaning to life lived among other people, and in

forging connections that grow into stable significant bonds. To be sure, our couples are challenged by autism and the need to understand and manage its symptoms and deficits. They struggle to accommodate difficulties with sensory processing and modulation, preoccupation with idiosyncratic or restricted interests, impairments in social cognition and regulation of arousal – all of which impact on multiple functional domains. For most of the couples, diagnosis constituted a watershed moment that explained what had previously been simply bewildering and beyond repair (Recall that Stanley's childhood diagnosis of autism was deliberately kept from him). It also provided invaluable information that has enhanced their self-representations and permitted, in some instances, integration of splintered off aspects of experience that had undermined self-cohesion and the ability to make sense of others' responses to them. In some respects it might be said that, with diagnosis, each had returned to a new starting point on the road to consolidation of self, but that would give autism too much singular emphasis in the overall context of their life histories. Instead we need to look at autism as an integral factor that affected virtually all processes in which information from the external world of objects and people was taken in and organized alongside of mental schemas or fragments of experience connoting *self* – without the normal degree and manner of intermingling of relevant information. While we cannot trace the path that brought each of them to mid-life in a way that would enable us to look for factors that might explain the different levels of functioning each has achieved, we *can* look at their internalized representations (as explicated in narrative depictions) for evidence of underlying schematic structure. We can further gauge how the ways in which our participants construe internal concepts of *self* and *other*, and make sense of interactive experience,

impact on the kinds of relationships they form. The issues they struggle most with – unresolved narcissistic needs, primitive fears of separation or abandonment, difficulty in managing negative introjects and projections, and diffusion of psychic boundaries – seem to be best understood within the context of psychoanalytically informed developmental theories, *i.e.*: *self psychology* (Kohut, 1977); *attachment theory* (Bowlby, 1977); and *separation-individuation theory* (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975).

Re-appraising the adequacy of existing developmental theories in considering autism.

Their diagnoses and their descriptions of early experience imply that each participant with autism followed a unique and atypical developmental path, and lacked an adequate early experience of achieving a positive and stable sense of self within the world of external objects. In this respect their experience is similar to that of many individuals whose essential psycho-pathology constitutes an impairment in the capacity to form mature and reciprocal need-satisfying relationships. Because we understand these difficulties as indications of failure to negotiate the emotional vicissitudes that accompany the tasks of early childhood development – namely: the establishment of a stable and loving parent-child bond, within which the child comes to know himself as a unique and valued individual with nascent capacities that will enable him to move toward independence, secure in the knowledge that his caregiver will support and nurture him until such time as the mere “concept” that significant others are available as a source of comfort and gratification will suffice, enabling him to be a provider as well as a receiver of others’ nurturing – we call them disorders of *personality*.

The recognition that the impact of autism is “interwoven” with the development of personality led authors Anne Alvarez and Susan Reid to title their 1999 book (one of immeasurable value and insight, which details the philosophy and treatment approach of the Tavistock Autism Team) “Autism and Personality.” They state, however, that each of their patients harbors a “non-autistic” personality component, a notion that I have trouble disentangling from the global and pervasive sense of other-ness that so many sufferers describe, and lately embrace as a cultural phenomenon (Grandin and Barron, 2004). It seems, on the other hand, that their framing carries the essential conviction that most individuals with autistic disorders can be awakened to the possibility of conceptualizing “personhood” and the potential rewards of true interpersonal experience, a point with which I concur. It is hard not to defer to such gifted and experienced clinicians, particularly when the therapy they provide by attempting to engage the “non-autistic part” of each individual they treat is so richly rewarding and effective in addressing the core deficit of impoverished relational strivings. While Alvarez and Reid’s insights are among the most compelling to be found in the autism literature, I worry that their scope is too narrow. I believe that we must maintain awareness of and continue to investigate the neuro-biological underpinnings of autism – which interact with experiential factors in impacting multiple functional domains – to achieve an integrated understanding of the disorder as it is manifest in each individual, otherwise we risk operating on the same representational distortions that our patients bring to treatment, and miss opportunities to more fully understand what it’s like to be them. Having said this, however, I must admit that my own take on the specific relational phenomena presented in this study draws me repeatedly to theoretical formulations that pre-date consideration of constitutional factors.

Although, in my review of the literature, I tried hard to present a more complex and integrated theory of early development impacted by autism, my encounters with the present set of participants leave me feeling that I gave short shrift to Margaret Mahler and her colleagues. As I survey the relational dynamics of my autistic informants and their partners, I see echoes of the vicissitudes depicted in Mahler's (1968), Bergman's (1999), and Tustin's (1981) case studies of "psychotic" children. My participants, like those authors' subjects, continually struggle to either confirm or relinquish infantile fantasies that keep them from achieving psychic autonomy and interpersonal reciprocity.

We may never acquire (or even need) a developmental theory that is specific to autism, but we can mine the theories we have to better understand our autistic patients, and tailor our interventions, embracing new terms such as "personhood" alongside of old ones like "maternal holding environment" and "separation-individuation." In my analysis I found ample evidence of my subjects' struggles to forge through or retreat from the vicissitudes of becoming separate and distinct individuals. Being vulnerable or compromised in significant ways, they depend on external forces, or their internal fantasied counterparts, to confirm their existence and protect them from imagined annihilation. They therefore face utter terror at the thought of relinquishing their sustaining "attachments." It doesn't matter if we call it a symbiotic fantasy, maternal holding environment, or internalized relational "matrix." The requirement that a fragile individual emerge from the shielded space where his essential needs are met and impinging external threats are reduced – in order to achieve autonomy – sets up excruciating conflict. In "normal" development ambivalence around psychic

separateness is thought to be inevitable and lifelong. In pathological cases ambivalence is intolerable, hence the search for unattainable and, therefore, distorted certainties.

Traditional psychoanalytic theorists (Bergman, 1999; Mahler, 1968; Tustin, 1981) explained childhood psychosis (including forms of autism) as a result of an infant's failure to derive what was needed from the primary symbiotic bond. While initial theories attributed these failures to pathological mothering, we now have ample evidence that parental limitations and constitutional deficits can both play a large role in an infant's inability to achieve homeostasis. Such an infant is either unable to be regulated through the caregiver's ministrations, or the caregiver's own emotional state distorts and disturbs the dual-unit, so that the dyadic space that should be an idyllic cocoon-like shelter becomes a terror-filled engulfing "black hole." The child's ensuing disorganized response leads to revolving cycles of anxiety and aggression, which can't be accurately located in self or other and seem to spill back and forth. The mothering object that the child looks to for rescue from this terror is at the same time a source of profound fear. A child's retreat to "autistic" encapsulation is therefore seen as escape from an intolerable condition. Once able to experience the mothering object as a source of comfort (even if not fully recognized as an individual in her own right) the child can begin to accept and seek his caregiver's nurturing. The same child, unfortunately, might then become arrested in a "symbiotic" stage, unable to move beyond the security of seeming fusion with a sustaining other, however fragile or imprisoning the bond feels, and even at the expense of his own self-hood.

Mahler saw these two basic patterns of defensive organization, "autistic" and "symbiotic" as relatively distinct and recognizable in her child patients, but noted that the

children seemed to shift from one to another at different stages of development and treatment (1968). She observed that, in some ways, those who remained in autistic isolation struggled less and tended to make easier adaptations than those who sought to encompass another person within their inner realm, but that even the most primitive forms of self-hood and relatedness eluded them. In order for the child to begin to emerge as an individual (or “hatch” as Mahler says) he must register the separateness (or “personhood”) of the care-giving other, and also come to recognize this person as someone who will assist him in maintaining homeostasis while he builds competency and moves toward autonomy.

Among our four participants with autism we can see suggestions of these two types of defensive organizations, which seem to come in and out of play as they grapple with the demands and desires of their adult relationships. Susan and Dave appear to seek “symbiotic” experiences of merger and mirroring that enable them to feel emotionally connected to others, while Stanley and Steven hold to firmer boundaries to avoid disruption. In doing so the latter two may have reduced some of the emotional “noise” of interpersonal experience, which might have allowed them to develop the capacities and skills that constitute their successes in important domains. Among the four autistic participants, Steven’s Oxford degree and stable career stand out as significant achievements, and Stanley’s cognitive gifts (test data submitted show him to be in the firmly “superior” IQ range) and doctoral degree in Physics place him among the intellectual elite. With their rational capacities intact throughout their maturation, however, they have perceived and understood their marginal status, and now fear isolation and abandonment. While Steven has simplified and managed things by

insulating himself against awareness of the world of people, Stanley has ventured to the wall, from where he scrutinizes and categorizes people in an effort to identify both allies and enemies. Both have come to recognize their relationship partners, or certain aspects of them, as sources of external support. This places them in a position to take the next developmental step, which as Bergman points out (1999) entails recognition of the object's meaning through awareness of the potential for loss. These successive steps, however, assume a certain foundation of basic trust that can only evolve through interpersonal experience: a child must recognize his own emotional needs, and expect understanding and responsiveness from a dependably available other. Neither Steven nor Stanley have the reflective capacity to adequately recognize their own emotional needs, and though they dimly perceive their partners as a significant presence, they don't attend to them in a way that would allow them to fully experience the sense of being understood and empathized with. To experience this they must achieve a "mentalizing" capacity (Fonagy and Target, 1998) which, as described in the introductory literature review, requires reciprocal communication of affect – a notion that can be fraught with imagined danger.

In describing her treatment of Rosie, a severely autistic child, Bergman (1999) depicts the crisis that precipitated her patient's progress toward accepting her caregiver as another person with feelings and needs of her own, a process that required her to grapple with terrifying feelings of rage and guilt. The transformation came about when the child's mother sustained an injury, which, in her mind, the child linked to her own unmanageable aggression and excessive need. With intensive therapeutic support and the mother's sustained availability, the child moved toward being able to represent her

mother as a distinct and vulnerable individual who could be impacted by the child herself, while ultimately remaining intact. Bergman cites Winnicott's (1971) idea that, in the case of the severely disturbed child, the mother must survive being destroyed before she can be recognized and used as an external object (a process that analytic therapists routinely enact with their borderline patients). Treatment enabled Rosie to tolerate and work through painful feelings of guilt and fear around the threat to her now-perceived primary relationship. Though largely imagined, Rosie's "attack" on her mother prompted her to value her and begin to understand that she could affect her, an understanding that is a necessary pre-cursor to assuming the role and responsibilities of a relationship partner.

Our theoretical assumptions lead us to anticipate the reverberating patterns of these early relational dynamics in our work with adult patients, though we generally expect them to be more submerged than they appear to be in our four autistic respondents, and also to be weighed against the maturational adaptations they have made to the demands of reality. The present exploration, however, highlights the degree to which our participants remain preoccupied with these basic issues, which leap to the fore with a mere scratch to the surface of their relationships. We can trace the trajectory of Susan's emerging capacities through the history of her relationship with Tom: she embarked with complete certainty that she could trust him; then proceeded to goad and embroil him in furious emotional storms, until satisfied that he would remain intact. It has to be noted that Susan reported receiving more than twenty years of individual therapy throughout her adult life, which must have played some kind of role in her development, yet it appears she has used her actual adult relationship with Tom as a framework for growth that enabled her to consolidate psychic boundaries and reciprocate

rather than absorb her partner's affect. As therapists we expect and even welcome "regression in service of the ego" in the context of treatment, but we tend to do this in the hope that our patients' external relationships can be spared these vicissitudes. The therapeutic relationship is meant to be somewhat removed from the real world, and operates on the assumption that change can occur as a result of experience in this "transitional" realm. Our theories suggest that such "transferential" experiences can be integrated into stable but dynamic and flexible psychic structures. As analytic thinking has evolved we increasingly, recognize how much formative experience takes place in a symbolic inner realm that bears a fluid relationship to external reality. As cited earlier, Blatt's emphasis on intra-psychic events and "fantasied" relationships (1995) compliments Alvarez and Reid's exhortation to assess our patients' affectively charged relation to inner symbols (1999), with both serving as reminders that there are many pathways to psychic growth, which pass through different levels of reality, always perceived through a subjective lens. Yet this returns us to basic notions of subject and object that cannot always be taken for granted.

Ogden considers these intra-psychic phenomena in both normative and pathological terms, noting the tendency towards "personal isolation" that can characterize the inner psychic environment as representations are formed (1997). He uses the term *subjective object* to describe internal representations derived from fantasies, stressing that the object is "created" on the basis of illusions rather than found. The self remains isolated, in this case, because the individual doesn't have to respond to objective perceptions. He instead engages in "cul-de-sac communication," exchanges that, though experienced as real, serve to reinforce existing representations. We are reminded here of

Stanley's inflexible representation of Barbara, and his oblivious stance toward her hints of dissatisfaction, which he hopes will protect him from out-right terror of being rejected. Ogden asserts that these impervious images, as well as comforting symbiotic fantasies of "at one-ness," can coexist alongside a sense of separateness, experienced at different levels of consciousness in dialectical interaction. At the most primitive level an individual isolates in a "self-generated sensation matrix" where any contact with another remains a purely sensory experience, which can be seen as a substitution for an "interpersonal matrix.." (Recall Gergeley's studies showing infants later diagnosed with autism attending to self-confirming images of their own leg movements, rather than taking interest the non-contingent movements of others, 1999.) In this case "being" is simply a sensory definition, or a locale oriented in space but not in relation to a person. Ogden believes that this form of isolation can act as a needed respite from the demands of real interpersonal interaction. As such, it is not pathological or limited to early experience, but serves as a "sanctuary" that we slip "in and out of" as needed to maintain equilibrium. Autism, in his view, represents a failure to achieve an appropriate balance, prompting a retreat to primitive isolation.

We need only to return to the auto-biographical writings quoted earlier (see pp. 68-69) to confirm the utility of Ogden's depiction of the "autonomous sensory matrix," and to see how easily interpersonal experience falls under its spell in the population in question. The persistence of such modal processing, in organizing experience of *self*, is also discernible as we picture Susan standing arrested in front of a colorful array of yarn, or preserving dust-bunnies to retain evidence of her continuous existence. Again we are reminded that our existing theories of development have much to offer in our efforts to

interpret the phenomenology depicted here and elsewhere. But we have to ask again whether the underlying representational systems of persons with autism conform to the assumptions that form the basis of our theories. The integration of fragments of real and imagined experience in multiple sensory realms into coherent and stable concepts – structures that can anchor an individual in a world as unpredictable and complex as human society – pre-supposes a fully functional mental apparatus. Acquisition of necessary information necessitates a discriminating perceptual processing system, and a sound capacity for regulation of attention and arousal. A mind that can process information at different levels of consciousness must be organized in hierarchical layers of awareness, with an executive capacity to rove and plumb or by-pass in it's striving for efficient adaptation. If we attempt to base our theories of autistic development on these traditional or “normative” assumptions, we will fail to understand the true nature of these individuals' earliest and fundamental experiences, and formulate our interventions and expectations on incomplete and inadequate guiding paradigms. At present we have no choice but to tolerate uncertainties and floods of overwhelming data – that likely pale in comparison to what our patients experience – while we re-configure our notions of both the “baby” and the “bath water.” In the meantime we have plenty of ideas to work with.

What do the present findings suggest about the quality of autistic's representational systems?

Our look at internalized object representations in the selected group has relied heavily on the relational matrix as a contextual framework. The information derived from the informants' narrative depictions (as well as the interactive patterns observed and measured) argues for continued investigation within a dyadic developmental context.

Our participants are actively engaged in relationships, which must necessarily reflect the dynamic underpinnings of their earliest interpersonal experiences, however distorted or inadequate they may have been. The number of ways in which the infant-caregiver relationship can be fraught, and the negotiation of successive stages of development disrupted, fills innumerable volumes of psychoanalytic literature on every form of psychopathology – the main point being that these early disturbances can create catastrophic distortions in psychic structure, which result in a person’s perception of both the inner and outer worlds as dangerous. The “symptoms” of mental illness, then, can be conceptualized, in part, as the individual’s defensive adaptation to an unmanageable threat involving some kind of sense of fragile existence in relation to the external world. While it remains useful to analyze the manifestations of primitive infantile fantasies connected to interpersonal events involving the child and its caregiver, we need to pay closer attention to recent theories that emphasize the role of the infant’s innate sensory-perceptual endowment and ability to regulate arousal states, capacities that we now understand to be highly variable at birth (Schorer, 1994;1996). We must keep in mind that, despite this large measure of biological pre-determination, regulatory capacities are also significantly shaped by experience in interaction within the nurturing environment. As emphasized earlier, all elements of experience are critically interconnected in forming our earliest representations. A crucial ingredient in “normal” psychic development – the awareness of a *separate* “other” with discernible thought, feeling, and perspective – is clearly operating from the earliest weeks of life, as we now know from an ever growing body infant research (Schorer,1994; Siegel, 1999; Stern, 1989). While this new evidence points away from Mahler’s ideas of “normal” autistic and symbiotic phases in

psychological development (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975), their usefulness in interpreting our patients' inner object worlds affirms the continued value of such concepts. Our explorations of internal life confirm the vividness of fantasies and strivings toward these imagined states. Accepting that compromised individuals either lose touch with or cannot acquire a sense of a real and peopled world, and of themselves as integral parts of it, requires hardly any leap at all. In the case of those with autistic disorders such distortions seem virtually inevitable, given their common and primary disturbance in modulating and organizing sensory-perceptual input, and in deriving useful information from social stimuli. Our clinical accounts and subjective descriptions of autistic individuals' attempts to bridge the formidable space between their own inner worlds and those of others are brimming with descriptive images of the fluid and chaotic intermingling of incoherent representations – hence the inevitable grasp at simplified one-dimensional object images, and preservation of rigid boundaries and compartments to contain the chaos. The failure to integrate aspects of experience, thereby preserving infantile response patterns alongside of more mature adaptive behaviors and strivings is not unique to autistic psychopathology. Its transparency, however, makes it uniquely available for exploration and clinical intervention.

The literature cited in the opening chapters included Donna Williams' (1996) account of her "sensory-based relationship" with her husband, which vividly illustrates the modular construction of her representation of him and of their relationship, and shows how much her concept derives from their pleasurable physical interaction, which is reminiscent of an infant's early contact with its caregiver (see page 69). While we can sense how their mode of relating allows for positive shared experience, it isn't sufficient

to allow her to construct an idea of what sort of persons they are in relation to one another. Williams also conveys the difficulty of cobbling together an “identity” from disconnected fragments of experience. From existing material as well as the present data, it is clear that self concepts in this population tend to develop along atypical pathways, incorporating aspects of experience in interaction with the external world, but without the organizing framework of a “normal” dyadic experience. Whereas in normal development, the salient experiences are mainly interpersonal events involving specific and significant individuals, the developing autistic person fails to orient to the external world of other people in a way that allows him to fully take in their mirroring perceptions of and responses to his own self. Thus the emotionally laden and reciprocal reflections on one’s “personhood” (and that of others) that normally coalesce to form a relatively stable sense of self, seem largely unavailable during the early development of those with autism. They therefore cobble together concepts of self and other out of disparate bits and pieces of experience with the outside world, filtered through a “processing system” that virtually all now agree is “wired” differently from the normal apparatus, from the earliest phases of development. While the precise reason for their inability to perceive and respond in kind to the social stimulus of other complex and unique individuals remains a matter of hotly contested debate, we can reasonably suppose that the degree to which a given individual with autism (or without, for that matter) can experience and incorporate genuine and reciprocal interpersonal contact into his or her mental schemata – including concepts of self and other – will predict his or her success at forming real relationships. Having postulated that the symbolic capacities of our autistic participants developed atypically we must expect that their representations of people and of

relationships will show unique characteristics and deviate from what we have come to consider a “normal” maturational progression.

We have noted how one participant with autism, Susan, imposes a “multi-personed” organizing framework in her attempt to contain and manage fragmented aspects of self-experience. Despite this impression of incoherence, and the fluidity of psychic boundaries that Susan reports experiencing, an over-riding sense of self-integrity emerges when the data are taken as a whole. Her husband Tom understands and accepts Susan’s conceptualization of herself as a “multiple” but views and responds to her as a singular and complex person. In allowing her to articulate her self experience, Tom seems to sense that she needs more than validation. Without an anchoring sense of underlying structure that corresponds to the concepts others seem to share, Susan has constructed her own template. Within that system she can identify feelings and values that reflect the influence of significant figures with whom she has had relationships, and can also link affects to needs associated with different levels of emotional maturity. These bits of experience are integrated not by a semi-conscious incorporation of affect-charged information, but by personifying the separate elements and representing them as directly communicating with one another (Note: these are not dissociative events in which fragmented experiences are walled off from one another). That she has embraced herself and her idiosyncratic perceptions as authentic is detectable in the certainty with which Susan describes them. As she explains why she drives slowly (because the mailbox by the side of the road might just ‘up and run into her path), or how her husband must keep a beard so that she can recognize him when he approaches, she laughs at herself and we smile with her – because the amusement can be genuinely shared. Susan

is able to verbally articulate her inner world and her attempts to make sense of both internal experience and interactions with the outside environment. Most importantly, she shares her experience of coming to know and care for her relationship partner in a way that confirms their achievement of a mutually need satisfying emotional bond. Susan and Tom show us that this accomplishment was fraught with uncertainty and disruption, but also characterized by an enduring affection and commitment. They emphasize their reliance on external support, as well as a system of structured guidelines for effective communication and conflict resolution, but their interactions show an exchange of open and spontaneous affect. Significantly, the patterns that have become stable and reliable seem to have grown out of their mutual understanding of themselves and each other, and their ability to reflect on and respond to one another's individual emotional needs.

When I interviewed Susan and Tom together we were ensconced in a little cluster of armchairs in an intimate corner of a Border's book store, with snacks and beverage cups scattered around my recording equipment on the coffee table between us. After an hour or so I began to notice a small group of patrons hovering nearby, a few of whom eventually pulled up chairs and listened openly, and attentively, as if they were an invited audience. As I registered them, peripherally, I detected occasional smiles and nods, while wondering what they could possibly find so fascinating in the banal content of the conversation taking place. When the interview concluded there was a burst of animated chatter and exchanged pleasantries among the listeners and two participants. I sensed that what had seemed to draw others to our little circle was the warm glow that surrounded Tom and Susan, as they held hands and gazed lovingly at each other, while openly inviting me to share in their pleasure. To whatever degree Tom and Susan might

have been in “performance mode” their genuineness was readily apparent. A similar memory of my first sight of Dave and Christine comes to mind. They were among a small group of attendees at an autism conference when I approached to hand out flyers announcing my search for study participants, laughing and chatting in an animated post-mortem on the last presentation in which Dave had been a discussant. I noticed Dave occasionally glance toward Christine for visual feedback as he shook hands and negotiated introductions. “How’m I doing?” his look said, as she responded with smiling affirmation and barely perceptible signals aimed at nudging him to attend appropriately to the next person seeking to engage him. Their rhythms seemed synchronized and their affect suffused with amusement and intimacy, as they appeared during our later interview. Such observations, though unscientific, give welcome confirmation to the picture of positive relatedness that the data analysis supports.

How to account for and foster relational capacities in individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorders?

The underlying intra-psychic and interpersonal dynamics suggested by analysis of the material generated in this study support the view that ongoing psychological maturation, including negotiation of the basic stages of separation-individuation (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975), can take place beyond early childhood, and likely does so with more frequency among persons with autistic disorders than in the normal population. For this to take place, affected individuals seem to need particularly accommodating and supportive interpersonal environments, as well as a symbolic capacity that can be harnessed in the service of reciprocal empathic “mentalizing.” Their achievements seem to be most hampered by an acute and pervasive vulnerability to dysregulation caused by

the registering of affect, which, whether cause or consequence of impaired neuro-cognitive information processing, seems to disrupt their ability to incorporate emotional experience into an organized conceptual framework encompassing “personhood.” While the deficits associated with autism pose enormous challenges that impact the stability, coherence, and flexibility of internalized object representations, the resulting atypical schemata seem able to support relational functioning in a select high-functioning group.

Our theories suggest that formative experience can take place in a transitional realm that spans different levels of reality and consciousness, offering opportunities to re-negotiate important tasks of development that may have been disrupted during early life (Kohut, 1981; Neugarten, 1968). One recent study, conducted by Grady (2002), used qualitative methodology to examine the experience of a select group of adults as they underwent mid-life career transitions, which necessitated re-organization and critical appraisal of their self-representations. The narratives generated by these individuals, a group of gay male dancers faced with the waning prospects of their Broadway careers, exposed vulnerabilities linked to the vicissitudes of their atypical early developmental experience, which some had managed to resolve in later stages of their lives. Like my informants with autistic disorders, Grady’s subjects, because of their homosexuality, grew up feeling alienated, “different,” and often unacceptable within their social and familial contexts. In entering the insular and protected world of the dance community, however, they were able to experience fulfillment of narcissistic needs that had been inadequately gratified and mastered in early development. The community of gay dancers seemed to function as an accepting “holding environment,” offering the mirroring and validating feedback that was unavailable or distorted during the men’s

early histories. Members of the autistic population often report similar experiences upon connecting with a community of others like themselves, as we can see vividly in Dave's reported process of assimilation. In these instances the community can become an abstraction or symbol, which is internalized as a "good object." Nevertheless, such representations can be distorted and reified just like that of any actual person with whom an individual comes in contact. We have only to look at Stanley's notions of "intellectuals" versus "fashionable people" to be reminded of such pitfalls, as well as our mission to consider the dynamic and affect-laden relationships our subjects have with their internalized symbols. If they haven't negotiated real relational challenges, their internalized objects will likely remain primitive and rigid in a way that interferes with experience of actual "personhood."

Treatment Considerations

In some ways it might appear that people with autism could be especially able to make use of transference experiences, with their shifting perceptions of reality and availability of primitive fantasies, yet my instinct is not to assume this. Although the above cited theories and observations assert that different modes of managing and conceptualizing emotive interpersonal events operate simultaneously in our minds at different levels of awareness, we are not all equally able to perceive or incorporate these multiple experiences into coherent and reliable psychic structures. In the case of autism what is striking is how open and conscious these concurrent processing modules seem to be in operation. Susan is fully aware that a tree or a mailbox cannot animate and interact with her, nevertheless she must behave as if they could at any moment. In psychoanalysis we often speak of psychosis as a failure of "repression" – a retreat or

succumbing to primitive and normally unconscious fantasies, accompanied by loss of contact with reality and shutting down of rational thought (Bion, 1957, 1967). But in autism, it often seems as if there has *never been* any capacity for repression, any layers of consciousness that would indicate, or enable, an individual's capacity to selectively attend to either internally or externally generated stimuli. They are left feeling flooded until such systems of management are cobbled together out of whatever shaping forces can impose order on the chaos. Whatever reasoning capacities emerge, the raw and vulnerable response system can perhaps never be entirely tamed or ignored, thus accounting for the child-like qualities that persist in adults with autism no matter what else they achieve. With self awareness, however, these aspects can perhaps be managed in a way that permits the person to learn and exercise more mature capacities, as we see happening in Dave's case: "I had to go up to my room and pout a while, you know," he said, "It's not what adults do." If he can conceptualize how an adult should respond to interpersonal events, accepting that he needs to do more in order to be the relationship partner he aspires to be, Dave has a fighting chance – even if he continues to be fiercely oriented to the idea that his wife is an "Aspie" like him, and they will find bliss in a world where "neuro-typicals" are excluded.

The question that might bear most on how to clinically address the difficulties enumerated here is whether experiences or therapeutic techniques that are processed primarily in a symbolic (or transference) realm can create an interpersonal environment that is sufficient to allow for real maturational growth. We know that essential functions like theory of mind and empathy require imaginative space, and know that psychological development is dependent on the emergence and exercise of imagination. But do we

know whether persons with autism – who are as capable as anyone of vivid fantasy lives – can integrate these experiences in a useful way without some kind of explicit and concrete link to real interpersonal events involving *genuine* and reciprocal feeling? It may be that the “holding environment,” wherein they might find the nurturing and acceptance that would enable them to then take the steps toward more genuine emotional reciprocity, needs to be experienced as a *real* relationship (preferably one that allows for the blossoming of a symbiotic fantasy) in which they are gradually pushed toward facing the responsibilities associated with being an equal partner. This isn’t to say that therapy should necessarily be such a relationship, or that transference-based analytically oriented work wouldn’t be useful – far from it; it seems quite essential to addressing the actual experience of *being* autistic – just not by itself.

In one recently published case study of an adult patient with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, three different “consultants” critically examined a psychodynamic treatment in progress (Brendal, *et al.*, 2002). The therapist found himself responding to his patient in an intellectual and emotionally distant manner, and according to his commentators, failed to achieve an appropriate level of compassionate acceptance of the man’s limitations and distorted inner object world, or to adequately appreciate his experience of being in a bewildering social environment. A major focus of the commentary was the quality of the therapeutic relationship: “... a significant relationship with his psychotherapist is critical to help him explore the parameters of his disability and learn how to compensate better,” wrote one consultant, “...in a psychodynamic psychotherapy, ... I would forge a relationship, necessarily a long-term one, ... Eventually we would discuss how I viewed him and how he viewed me examining the issues that typically arise when two people

attempt to sustain a significant friendship or relationship.” (pp. 173-174) Another clinician emphasized understanding the patient’s symptoms as an effort to find self-cohesion and to externalize aspects of his inner representational world, and offered advice concerning the patient’s compulsion to cut up and reassemble pictures of nude women, generating a collection of re-constructed paper dolls. “... we do not know who the dolls are for him – or, equally important, who he imagines himself to be in relation to them,” she says, “Are they his prostitutes, and he the pimp? Or are they princesses and he their protector?” (p.176). In both instances the recommended interventions draw on ideas that are consistent with *object relations theory*, and also suggest the utility of a *relational* approach (Altman, 1993).

These approaches seem appropriate, according to the needs postulated here, as does another modality developed by Stanley Greenspan and his colleagues (ICDL, 2000) for use with autistic children, which involves eliciting and harnessing the child’s affect in building sequences of purposeful activity, preferably within an interpersonal context. Based on their *Affect Diathesis Hypothesis*, which postulates a functional impairment in “... the infant’s ability to connect affect or intent to motor-planning capacities and emerging symbols” (p. 59), the approach focuses on building the child’s awareness of his own and others’ intentionality, the basis of which is: a feeling connected to a goal. They suggest that the repetitive, seemingly aimless, activities seen in autism occur in the absence of affect driven behaviors, and encourage therapists and caregivers to engage with the child, harnessing any self-generated striving that can be given meaning by linking it to a desire or purpose. Although I might differ with the view that self-reinforcing autistic behaviors are aimless, the overall emphasis on forging links between

affects and actions seems right on the money, especially as the method is designed to engage all sensory modalities and emerging symbolic processes in increasing levels of complexity in the context of a relational matrix. Though not explicitly stated, Greenspan's technique must entail increasing attention to and tolerance of affect, which stands out as the most critical need in the case of my study's participants.

The person with autism must be helped to establish an interpersonal matrix where he can perceive the empathic registration of his own emotional experience in the response of a caring and compassionate other, who truly "gets" what he's going through – which entails coming to grips with the constitutionally-based specifics of his autism. Such an individual might then be able to assimilate a representation of his own emotional self in the context of a shared humanity, and experience the comfort of being "with" someone.

Finding a sense of *self* that is validated by the external world doesn't seem to necessitate molding it to an outsider's structural concept. For two of this study's autistic participants, Susan and Dave, authenticating a fluid and less cohesive sense of self may have actually helped them to achieve mutuality and intimacy with their partners. Their sense of a mirroring bond seemed also to provide needed gratification, but this could be just one of various ways such individuals might seek to see themselves reflected. As we have observed, individuals with autism will seek shared experience in any number of different places, merging or testing their boundaries, identifying with animals and inanimate objects, but often failing to orient to other people to have this need met. Steven and Stanley, by and large, seem unable to use their relationships to enhance their self-experience. At present, Steven can barely conceptualize the idea that he might have a complex self, much less one that requires more than basic security to be fully realized

and function interpersonally. Stanley has intellectually arrived at a concept of how “others” evaluate him, but has little sense that another can actually understand him, and doesn’t seem to take in his partner Barbara’s sincere attempts. His difficulty corresponds to his imaginatively rich, but rigidly schematic, internalized representations.

Though difficult, it appears to be possible for people with autistic disorders to sustain emotionally significant and reciprocal relationships. In order to do this they must learn to conceptualize their partners as complex persons with emotional needs that demand empathic response. Most importantly, they must feel safe enough to open the affective channels that allow for interpersonal transmission of emotion, by whatever pathways such communication can take place. The developmental processes associated with the emergence of these capacities, as well as the pitfalls they are subject to, may still be best understood within the context of psychoanalytic theories, while maintaining a solid awareness of the neuro-cognitive variations that characterize this unique clinical population.

In memorializing Francis Tustin, a profoundly gifted analyst who devoted her career (begun at the Tavistock clinic) to analytic treatment of autistic children, Grotstein (1997) writes: “I believe that Tustin may have innocently erred in her conceptualization of “psychogenic autism” instead of postulating autism due to pervasively abnormal development with psychological sequelae.” (p.175) He continues:

The irony is that Tustin rushed in where more knowledgeable angels feared to tread. Yet by rigorously applying psychoanalytic technique to the treatment of this disorder, because she thought it was psychogenic in origin, she inadvertently pioneered the enlightened rehabilitation of what seems to me to be a predominantly neurobiological disorder. In so doing she helped break the spell about its untreatability in selected cases. Consequently, I think Tustin may deserve credit for instituting what I would call “rehabilitative” or “remedial” psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Along with Tustin, I believe that when treating patients suffering from constitutional disorders, we should not shirk from the challenge of

the analytic task they present, but we should also humbly and realistically respect the enormity of the handicap that brain pathology presents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The small number of participants and heavy emphasis on individual phenomenological exploration constitutes an obvious weakness in the presented study. It's findings cannot be generalized to the overall population of people with autistic spectrum disorders, and do not predict particular outcomes, nor do they confirm the usefulness of a specific treatment approach. This limitation reflects not only the chosen methodology, and the largely unexplored territory of interpersonal functioning among adults with autism in the context of stable relationships, but also reflects our limited understanding of autism itself with its broad and complex manifestations and highly variable course. It seems that while a number of adaptive/defensive coping strategies have been identified as typical and indicative of the underlying disorder, the diversity of experience and adaptive response is so great that it undermines our attempts to arrive at any unifying theories on how to understand and mitigate its effects. Nevertheless, I believe that the developmental struggles and relational themes depicted in the material so generously provided by my participants enhances our understanding of the parameters of their potential achievements, and points us toward theoretical frameworks that will help us to address their unique needs.

Given the time and labor intensive nature of this type of inquiry, as well as the difficulty in comparing and measuring results acquired using non-standard methodology within the larger context of research literature, it is appropriate to question the value of continued endeavors in this model. If, as I have suggested, my participants' conflicts and developmental needs correspond to issues that challenge other clinical as well as "normal" populations, then perhaps other methods already in use should be applied in the

study of their functioning, so that the data can be more broadly considered. Instruments and coding systems designed to assess “attachment” styles and object relational function (Diamond, Blatt and Kaslow, 1987; Main and Goldwyn, 1984; Slade and Cohen, 1996) through analysis of interview transcripts might well be applicable, but may fail to capture some of the nuances of experience that are unique to this population. Interpretation of standardized results could also be skewed by mis-attributions associated with the atypical cognitive and linguistic tendencies associated with autism. Caution seems most essential in the case of judgments based on any narrow or standardized rating of expressive behaviors, such as eye contact, facial expressions, body posture, and speech prosody. Such features tend to deviate markedly from the “norm” in persons with autism.

Interpretation of linguistic data should accommodate idiosyncratic semantic choices as well as narrative properties, anticipating the effects of weak “central coherence” (Frith and Happé, 1994) and executive function (Minshew, *et al.*, 1992). For example, Susan’s linguistic style (grammatically undisciplined and semantically “original”) and tangential thinking paint a surface picture of disorganization and lapses in executive oversight. If we were attempting to assess her object representations or level of attachment security by scoring and analyzing her verbal out-put on the basis of “narrative coherence” we would likely derive misleading or incomplete information. In fact, the most organized and linguistically coherent text produced among our four participants with autism comes from Steven, who seems to be least able to elaborate on matters germane to our inquiry. This suggests the need for caution in applying standard research instruments that rely primarily on narrative properties. While the structural aspects of our narrative data give important clues to the participants’ underlying cognitive

organization (or lack of), and signal important affective shifts, they do not appear to give accurate indications of their relational capacities. Existing instruments, such as the Oral History Interview and Coding System (1996) used here, which capture aspects of dyadic interaction and view linguistic properties as clues to representational schemata (for example, interpreting the use of plural pronouns as connoting an inner concept of “we-ness,” a unified bond encompassing self and partner) appear to be useful. The present results suggest that some standard tools that measure marital stability can be applied in assessing the functioning of relationships involving individuals with autistic disorders, but they might fail to illuminate underlying issues that pose unique challenges that call for informed intervention approaches. While so much of note here has been linked to theory that is non-specific with regards to autism, I would argue that failure to approach inquiries from a phenomenological standpoint that permits examination of experience specific to the disorder raises a risk of presenting a distorted picture of their functional capacities.

Greenspan and Weider, who are currently involved in long term follow-up assessments of children treated using their much heralded intervention approach, argue for a broad coordination of varied research formats (ICDL, 2000), with particular emphasis on clinical case studies as essential markers in the effort to gauge abilities and outcomes in a disorder that remains so poorly understood: “The clinical practice community will need to use case studies and collections of cases to systematically describe problem areas, different functional capacities, intervention methods, and relative courses of progress ... part of a long tradition of employing expert opinion to discuss and systematize clinical principles in the face of incomplete, but developing, knowledge.” (p.

33) Their most recent report (Weider and Greenspan, 2005) looks at a group of fifteen teenagers who represent the highest achievers among the 200 cases followed in their outcome study. Their aim – in many ways similar to that of the present undertaking – was: “... to answer the question of whether or not a subgroup of children diagnosed with ASD could go beyond expectations for high-functioning ASD and learn to be related, empathic, creative, and reflective thinkers.” (p. 3) Their conclusion, a resounding “yes,” offered encouragement, without suggesting that the data can be applied to the population as a whole. “Looking at the upper limits attainable by a subgroup of children with a good prognosis,” they propose, can “... shed light on both the mechanisms involved in helping children with ASD grow psychologically and intellectually and the potential of some children in an optimal intervention program.” The massive body of work generated by Greenspan and his colleagues highlights the complex and labor intensive task of addressing the concerns of the autistic community, and emphasizes the necessary interplay between empirical studies and the kind of exploration undertaken in this project with its, admittedly, limited scope.

The relevant information here has been derived from a synthesizing process involving successive stages of abstraction and analysis of thematic content viewed through a “clinical” lens informed by relevant theory. It has also relied, admittedly, on my subjective sense of what it was like to interact with my participants, as well as my personal observations on their interactions with each other. While this poses a liability in terms of objective assessment, it adds a dimension of “inter-subjectivity” that corresponds to the dyadic experience we seek to understand. As clinicians we use ourselves in a myriad of ways, including our contributions to a century long tradition of

literature comprised of case studies. Where – or rather *who* – would we be, as therapists, without Freud's *Dora* or *Wolf Man* in our own inner object worlds.

CONCLUSION

In the three years since I began this project, diagnoses of autistic spectrum disorders in both children and adults have increased at dramatic rates, following a trend that has been widely noted for the past several decades. The accompanying explosion of attention in the media and popular literature seems to have made autism and Aspergers syndrome the new “flavor of the month,” increasing the likelihood of over-diagnosis, and perhaps capturing many people who simply crave “absolution” for their social-emotional failures. There are, nevertheless, thousands of affected individuals who need informed clinical intervention, not just during their early childhood years but throughout their life-spans. Since many of them will have acquired significant adaptive skills as a result of ever more available early interventions they may avoid some of the pitfalls that have tended to prevent achievement of independent functioning within the population. But in order to cope with their vulnerabilities and avoid isolation they will need to be assisted in forming and maintaining meaningful connections with others around them. The results of this study suggest that psychoanalytically informed treatment approaches, which emphasize exploring and expanding internalized *self* and *object* representations, may have much to offer in helping affected individuals form mutually need gratifying relationships. In order to do this effectively, however, clinicians must expand their own conceptions of psychic structure, and adopt a more broadly informed theoretical stance. Even so, it is likely that we will be meeting our patients far less than half-way, since our own vulnerabilities make us tend toward the hubris of thinking that we have come to understand how humans “tick.” Our autistic patients, at least, have the measure of the

distance. As we learn more from them it becomes increasingly apparent that their struggles are really not so different from everyone else's in essential ways, and that fostering a sense of *personhood* within a context of shared humanity offers some hope of bridging the gap.

Appendix A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore my experience of being in a close relationship.

In agreeing to participate in this study, I agree to meet with the interviewer for approximately 4 hours to discuss what it is like for me to be in a close relationship with another person.

I understand that all of my responses to the interview questions will be tape-recorded and will remain confidential. On the tapes I will only be identified by a participant identification number. I will not be asked my name, address, or phone number during the taping, but will be asked to provide the information on a separate sheet of paper. I understand that this information will be kept separate from the interview tapes in order to ensure confidentiality. By signing this form I agree that I am willing to be contacted in the future for additional interviews, although I am under no obligation to participate.

Although I may learn something about myself from the interview process, I understand that the purpose of this research is not for my immediate benefit. Should I request it, I will be given information about the outcome of the study when it is completed.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions that I have about my participation in this study. I understand that my participation will not subject me to any possible physical risk. In the event that I experience emotional discomfort or anxiety as a consequence of my participation, the investigator will provide me with an appropriate referral to counseling services. Further, I have been informed of the system for insuring my confidentiality and have no further concerns regarding that matter. Since my participation is voluntary, I understand that I can stop at any time.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have any questions or complaints about my rights as a participant, I may call Ethel Breheny, Institutional Review Board Administrator, at 212-650-7903 during office hours. If I have any further questions about the study, I may call Pamela Rosenbaum, at 212-650-6602, or Dr. Jeffrey Rosen, Professor of Psychology at the City College of the City University of New York, at 212-650-5694. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

I agree to participate in this study.

Signature, Date

Printed Name

Witness Signature, Date

Printed Name

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Can you describe what you are like as a person?

Can you tell me of an experience that illustrates how you are [aspect of self-description]
[adjectives]?

Can you tell me about [partner]? What is he/she like as a person? [probe, elaborate]

Can you tell me about your relationship with [name of partner]?

[describe, adjectives, probe]

What aspects of [name] draw you to him/her?

What aspects of you draw [name] to you?

Do you feel that [name] understands you? How well?

How do you think he/she would describe you?
[what you're like; how you think/feel]?

[What clues? What does he/she attend to? Examples]
e.g. what you say, what you do, facial expression, tone of voice

How do you understand him/her?

[Why he/she is the way he/she is / does what does / feels and thinks like does?]

When you're upset, what does he/she do?

When he/she is upset, what do you do?

What are the things that make it easy for you to be in a relationship with [name]? Can you tell me about an experience that illustrates this?

What makes it difficult for the two of you? (example)

How do you handle these difficulties?

How is this relationship different from others you've been involved in?

Has your understanding of yourself changed since you've become involved in this relationship?
How?

Dyadic Interview Questions

I'd like to get a sense of the history of your relationship. Can you tell me the story of how you met?

Have there been changes in the relationship since that time? [describe]

Can you tell me about a time when things were difficult for the two of you?

Can you tell me about a time when you were particularly happy together? [felt close/attuned?]

Can you imagine what things might be like for the two of you ten years from now?

If you had \$100,000 to spend together, how would you spend it?

Is there anything else you would like me to know, or think I should know about your relationship?

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