

'Do you have any difficulties that I may not be aware of?' A study of autism awareness and understanding in the UK police service

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Nick Chown took early retirement from his former post of Director of Risk Management at the Metropolitan Police Service (London, England) in 2008 to undertake full time study in autism. He became interested in autism through line managing a Metropolitan Police colleague with Asperger's syndrome (AS) traits and undertook a course of study in AS to improve his understanding of the condition. This article is based on work undertaken as a partial requirement for a Masters degree in autism from Sheffield Hallam University (Sheffield, England).

ABSTRACT

The autism 'triad of impairments' will often disadvantage those with autism when they come into contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) when compared with people without autism. Existing research suggests that people with developmental disabilities such as autism are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become victims of crime than those without such disabilities and may be 10 or more times as likely to be victims of sexual assault and robbery. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people with autism are the subject of discrimination in the CJS due to a general lack of awareness and understanding

of autism and its implications in that environment.

This study seeks to assess the current understanding of autism awareness and understanding in the UK police service through the means of a questionnaire, and by comparing the results with an earlier study undertaken by researchers in the USA. The long-term aim is to improve responses by CJS personnel to those affected by autism.

Overall, as a broad generalisation, individual self-assessments of competency indicated that, currently, police officers are probably unable to deal appropriately with persons with autism. However, in many cases, self-assessments may exaggerate competence. The US study also found that police officers tended to perceive themselves as competent when they may not have been. Not one respondent in this study had received training from the police service fitting him/her to interact effectively with persons on the autism spectrum.

INTRODUCTION

The National Autistic Society in the UK has proposed that police officers should ask the question 'Do you have any difficulties that I may not be aware of?' during initial contact with a person in the course of their duties if the officer has any suspicion, or is

told, that the person may have autism. Whilst the Police and Criminal Evidence Act Codes of Practice refer to 'mentally disordered or mentally handicapped' persons¹, and autism is often associated with an intellectual learning disability and/or mental health issues, autism is actually a social learning disability. Children with autism 'have come into the world with innate inability to form the usual biologically provided affective contact with people, just as other children come into the world with innate physical or intellectual handicaps' (Frith, 1989). Although we have learnt a great deal about autism in the past 20 years, this core feature remains in any diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders (Graham, 2008). Unless police respond appropriately to them a person with autism may suffer extreme stress, officers will be unable to do their job effectively, disability discrimination legislation² may be breached, and there will be a risk to the safety of the person with autism and to the officer(s).

Standard psychiatric diagnostic manuals classify autism as a pervasive developmental disorder involving delays in the development of various basic human functions — typically first evident in childhood (World Health Organization, 1992; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). There is agreement that autism involves delays in three particular areas of function (often referred to as the triad of impairment) i.e. socialisation, communication, and imagination (the third often giving rise to restricted and repetitive behaviours) with onset in the first three years of childhood and impacts, mainly adverse, throughout life (Wing and Gould, 1979). There is as much difference between persons with autism as with those without — from individuals who are mute right up those with extremely high IQs — hence the adoption of the term 'autism spectrum'. There are many more persons with autism at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum, often referred to as

Asperger's syndrome (AS), than at the other end. It has been said that about four or five children per 10,000 have autism, but if AS is included the prevalence rate may increase to as many as one per 500 children (Ghaziuddin, 2005). I shall refer again to the finding that awareness and understanding of AS is considerably lower than that for awareness and understanding of autism (it may be due to the relatively recent inclusion of AS in the standard diagnostic manuals). The American Psychiatric Association diagnostic criteria for AS are at Table 1.

There are reports (referred to later) that autism is a risk factor in relation to certain types of crime in that some features of autism may predispose individuals to certain criminal acts, although other features of autism may have the reverse effect (Frith, 1991). But whereas the possible existence of a link between autism and crime remains uncertain, various aspects of the criminal law are factors of particular relevance in connection with autism and issues in relation to socialisation, communication and imagination will put some persons with autism at a disadvantage when in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS)³ in comparison with persons without autism. Existing research suggests that persons with developmental disabilities are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become victims of crime than those without such disabilities (Sobsey et al., 1995). Victimisation rates are said to be more than 10 times as high for sexual assault and more than 12 times as high for robbery (Modell and Mak, 2008). Anecdotal evidence suggests that persons with autism are the subject of discrimination by the CJS due to a general lack of awareness and understanding of autism and its implications in this context.

Research undertaken since the Ghaziuddin study referred to have indicated higher rates for autism spectrum prevalence, for instance the National Autistic Society

Table 1: Diagnostic criteria for Asperger's disorder (more commonly known as Asperger's syndrome or AS) according to the Fourth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association [DSM-IV (TR)]

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- A. Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
 1. marked impairment in the use of multiple non-verbal behaviours such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
 2. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 3. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g. by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)
 4. lack of social or emotional reciprocity.
 - B. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviours, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following
 1. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
 2. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals
 3. stereotyped and repetitive motor mechanisms (e.g. hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 4. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.
 - C. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
 - D. There is no clinically significant general delay in language (e.g. single words used by age two years, communicative phrases used by age three years).
 - E. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behaviour (other than in social interaction), and curiosity about the environment in childhood.
 - F. Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia.
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Note:

Extracted from 'The Complete Guide to Asperger's syndrome' by Tony Attwood.

(NAS) consider around 1 in 100 to be a best estimate autism spectrum prevalence rate in children (National Autistic Society, 2007). No prevalence studies have ever been carried out on adults. There is no denying that prevalence rates have risen in recent years. It is a matter of debate as to whether there is a real increase in autism, but a prevalence rate in the region of 1 per cent of the population represents a significant number of people with a 7 times greater risk, on average, of becoming a victim of crime than persons without autism.

Literature review

Autism spectrum disorders have a special relevance to the CJS in a number of ways.

There is increasing evidence that autism is a risk factor in relation to certain crime types in that some features of autism may predispose individuals to certain criminal acts, although other features of autism may have the reverse effect. Issues in relation to socialisation, communication and imagination may put those with autism at a disadvantage when in contact with the CJS — as victims, witnesses and alleged offenders — in comparison with persons without autism. Certain aspects of the criminal law are factors that may apply to persons with autism more than they apply to those without. Anecdotal evidence suggests that persons with autism are the subject of discrimination by the CJS due to a general

lack of awareness and understanding of autism and its implications in this context.

Autism as a risk factor in crime and criminal behaviour

Autism has been highlighted as a risk factor in connection with arson, criminal damage, violence (including sexual violence) and terrorism (Baron-Cohen, 1988; Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004; Flight & Forth, 2007; Hall & Bernal, 1995; Haskins & Silva, 2006; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Langstrom et al., 2008; Mawson et al., 1985; Mouridsen et al., 2008; Siponmaa et al., 2001; Wahlund & Kristiansson, 2006; and Woodbury-Smith et al., 2006). But there is no clear and unambiguous evidence for it being a significant factor in any of these areas. The NAS unambiguously state on their website that 'There is no evidence of an association between ASD and criminal offending' (National Autistic Society, 2004). Various researchers have published case studies involving a person or persons with autism involved in various crimes but there is no good reason to expect any less variety amongst persons on the autism spectrum as there is amongst those without autism, and such cases could arise simply through the operation of the law of large numbers. Certain studies purport to demonstrate that the percentage of persons with autism committing crime is higher than the current prevalence of autism in the national population but these studies have shortcomings of one type or another (such as failure to isolate the effect of autism per se where there is co-morbidity; difficulties with the diagnosis of autism; and adverse selection). The Newman and Ghaziuddin study into violent crime in AS found that 'most of the cases of (AS) who commit violent crime suffer from additional psychiatric disorders' which raises the risk of persons with AS committing crime (Newman & Ghaziuddin, 2008). Whilst psychiatric disorders increase the risk of any person committing

crime, the relative lack of cases of persons with AS but without a psychiatric disorder committing crime is especially interesting, particularly when it is borne in mind that certain traits associated with autism may mitigate against involvement in crime, for instance a tendency of persons with autism to be 'scrupulously law abiding' (Frith, 1991).

The status of autism from the perspective of crime and criminal behaviour is complex. It is possible that some characteristics of autism mitigate against involvement in crime whereas others may predispose the individual to involvement in certain types of crime. It is not inconceivable that both such aspects of autism might be found in the same individual.

Traits that appear to be factors placing those with autism at risk of involvement in crime may be caused by co-morbid conditions (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, psychopathy, substance abuse etc), could be personality traits unconnected with autism, or be caused by socio-demographic conditions. Nevertheless, various authors consider they have identified risk factors for certain types of crime in autism, including poor social skills, repetitive behaviour getting out of control, lack of empathy, and social naivete. Given the differences in the triad areas (socialisation, communication, and rigid behaviour) seen in persons with autism, they may present differently in a forensic context to those persons who do not have autism. Murrie et al. state that 'individuals with Asperger syndrome likely differ from other forensic patients in terms of symptoms, criminal history, and offense behavior' (Murrie et al., 2002). They point out that 'Failure to correctly identify such persons, or overlooking the features specifically related to their diagnosis, may lead to inappropriate forensic assessment, legal decisions, or clinical interventions.'

Whether or not autism is a significant risk factor in crime, those with autism will be involved with the CJS as victims, witnesses and offenders from time to time and, as they present various challenges due to their differences from the general population, the CJS needs to have a sufficient awareness and understanding of autism and its implications if crimes are to be solved, offenders brought to justice, and people with autism treated fairly throughout the process. In their review of autism and violence, Murrie et al. conclude that '(the debate over whether those with AS are more prone to violence) need not be resolved in order to consider the unique issues posed by the Asperger's patients who do enter forensic contexts, whatever their exact prevalence in such contexts may be' (Murrie et al., 2002). They could have said this in relation to any other area of crime associated with autism as the principle can be applied universally to all crime types.

Contact between police officers and persons with autism

Contact with the CJS is unlikely to be a truly positive experience for anyone, whether or not they are on the autism spectrum. Nevertheless, some of the features of autism may act to make the experience even more stressful, in some cases traumatic, for a person with autism. Offenders or alleged offenders with severe communication difficulties or a learning disability may not understand what is going on around them in the period prior to arrest, during arrest, in the course of being interviewed, during charging, court appearance, and in custody (Debbaudt, 2002). Autism is associated with a resistance to change, dislike of new situations, and a liking for routine. Anything that upsets a routine and involves an experience they have not had before can cause stress for a person with autism, and for that new experience to be contact with authority in

the form of police officers or court officials involves a double source of stress that can lead to heightened repetitive behaviours or a mental 'shutdown' for instance. Persons with autism may also have heightened sensory sensitivities (light, sound, touch) which could add to the stress of an interaction with CJS representatives.

Vulnerability as suspects

Persons with autism may be especially vulnerable when being treated as a suspect by a police officer. In their report on offending behaviour in adults with AS, Allen et al. (2008) graphically and succinctly describe the issues involved.

'For people with Asperger syndrome, the process of arrest, investigation and trial may be extremely difficult. They may be particularly vulnerable as suspects because they are likely to experience difficulty with time relationships, problems in differentiating their own action from those of others, to misinterpret what they see or hear, to function poorly in unfamiliar environments, and to misjudge relationships in formal interviews (resulting in incautious frankness, disclosure of private fantasies, etc.), show undue compliance and rigidly stick to an account once it has, in their view, become established, and use words without fully understanding their meaning.' (Allen et al., 2008)

CJS personnel need to be aware of the range of symptoms a person with autism can present with so that they (the police officer etc) have a good chance of identifying autism in a person with whom they are in contact. If they are unable to do this there is a significant risk of the behaviour of the person being misinterpreted (as a refusal to comply with a reasonable request for instance). They must also understand the range of techniques available to assist in

putting a person with autism at ease if they are to keep the contact under control and prevent it from deteriorating into a 'fight or flight' response. But in the case of autism it would seem that a third type of response is possible. In addition to the individuals becoming aggressive or trying to escape, they may attempt to find somewhere they feel safe or do something that makes them feel safe. To the uninitiated police officer the individuals may appear to be running away when in actual fact they are trying to avoid the painful aspects of the contact with the officer and have insufficient social awareness to appreciate that their 'solution' (for that is what it is) may be misinterpreted as an attempt to escape. I therefore do not regard this as a pure 'flight' response. As it is an attempt to seek the shelter of a familiar place or ritual to avoid a painful experience I regard it as a 'flight' associated response. Hence, in the case of a person with autism I consider that three types of response are possible in a stressful situation: fight, flight or fright.

Cederborg & Lamb reviewed the implications of interviewing persons with intellectual disabilities (Cederborg & Lamb, 2008). North and his colleagues investigated the psychological vulnerabilities of those with high-functioning autism during interviews (North et al., 2008). In an interview situation a person with intellectual disabilities or with features associated with high-functioning autism (or AS) unconnected to intellectual disability, can be a challenge for the CJS professional. A police officer attempts to elicit the facts of the situation they are investigating and is trained to use certain questioning techniques that are effective in normal usage. However, using these same techniques with a person on the autism spectrum may be counter-productive. Interviewers need a special set of skills when interviewing those with learning disabilities or profound autism. Asking ambiguous questions may produce

an incorrect answer, for example 'If (an officer) asks, "Were you with your family or John?" the autistic person may respond, "John" because that was the last choice of the sequence', so the officer should ask 'a more specific question such as, "Who were you with?" thus reducing the influence of suggestion to the subject' (Debbaudt and Rothman, 2001). In a confrontation situation on the street instructions should be given in a clear, simple and direct manner to avoid ambiguity and confusion. Long, complex questions may also confuse an interviewee with intellectual disability when shorter, simpler questions are much more likely to be understood and responded to. As well as the interviewing technique itself, other steps should be taken to reduce or remove the adverse effects of the autism to enable the questioner to focus on the interview and the interviewee to respond to the questions. This may include being aware that the personal space requirements of a person with autism may be markedly different from most persons interviewed. The safety of the interviewing officers must be given appropriate consideration. When those with autism are in police custody their safety needs consideration given the potential risk of them self-harming. There is also a need to consider the potential susceptibility of a person with autism to persuasion by officers. This may be particularly relevant when officers are questioning suspects on the street, or in custody, when they may be prone to feelings of isolation.

In interview, it is possible that officers may be successful in eliciting confessions to 'technical' offences purely because suspects with autism take a literal view of the description of the alleged offence, since asking focused questions of those with low-functioning autism encourages a response even when they do not know the answers (Cederborg & Lamb, 2008), or due to the 'desire to please of a person with autism and

willingness to accept an authority figure's version of events, even if untrue' (Debbaudt & Rothman, 2001). Individuals with autism may unwittingly admit to an offence without it being clear that they did not possess the necessary intent. This could be exacerbated by a lack of understanding in relation to those offences that rely upon recklessness i.e. where the suspect did not recognise the obvious risk of harm, or recognised the risk but carried on regardless albeit without any intention to commit an offence.

Awareness and understanding of autism in the criminal justice system

A police officer respondent to the survey that formed a part of this study, the main results of which are referred to later on, said this in relation to autism and policing:

'What an AS sufferer or autistic person may feel is right and proper behaviour/action may be quite outside the law. This is not an excuse for behaviour which breaks the law but is a relevant factor when investigating/deciding what to do about offending behaviour.'

Awareness and understanding of autism in society generally, whilst considerably improved in recent years, has not yet reached the stage where autism is sufficiently well understood for persons with autism not to face incomprehension, apprehension, and discrimination. It is therefore not unexpected that the CJS may not yet be fully prepared to deal with victims of crime, witnesses and offenders with autism without risking maltreatment, discrimination, and injustice. Any absence of awareness and understanding of autism across the CJS is of concern. Let us consider a couple of examples of CJS literature — some standard operating procedure and a piece of research — that demonstrate an absence of such awareness and understanding.

The two Nacro standards providing guidance for dealing with 'mentally disordered offenders'⁴ who come into contact with the CJS because they have committed, or are suspected of committing, a criminal offence (one standard applies to initial contact with the police and the other is applicable 'at the police station') make no mention of autism at all (Nacro, 2008a and Nacro, 2008b). Likewise, the recent research undertaken by the Crown Prosecution Service Policy Directorate Research Team into 'CPS decision-making in cases involving victims and key witnesses with mental health problems and/or learning disabilities' makes just the one reference to autism, in a table summarising the range of conditions identified in case files reviewed by the researchers (Lee & Charles, 2008). It is particularly interesting to note that this table divides cases into those with a 'mental health problem' and those with a 'learning disability'. The single reference to autism is under the latter heading. There is not one mention of autism in the main body text. The Nacro standards and CPS research are examples of a common tendency for those creating or researching policy and standards to focus on mental illness on the one hand and learning difficulties on the other. This tendency is acknowledged in documentation linked with the Department of Health (DoH) Adult Autism Strategy document 'A Better Future' (DoH, 2009a). The DoH Adult Autism Strategy Equality Impact Assessment admits that: 'Some people with ASC who need services fall through gaps created by traditional service boundaries, usually between Mental Health and Learning Disability services' (DoH, 2009b). As a lifelong condition with an underlying neurological causation, autism is not a mental illness, and, although autism is often associated with an intellectual learning disability, and the socialisation and communication issues associated with autism may make learning more difficult, persons with

high functioning autism, such as AS, are not intellectually disabled and many have well above average intelligence.

In a recent United States study of police officers' knowledge and perceptions of persons with disabilities, Modell and Mak found that '80% (of the officer respondents) were not able to identify accurate characteristics of autism'. Quite frighteningly, a further finding was that 'More than 35% (of the officers) simply listed "Rain Man"⁵ as their response to the question asking "What does the term autism mean to you?"' (Modell and Mak, 2008). Although the Modell and Mak research related to disabilities generally, they were particularly concerned at the 'lack of police officers' knowledge of autism' and recommended that 'The criminal justice system as a whole would benefit from training on autism' (Modell and Mak, 2008). My earlier study of AS awareness in a police force was a more limited study undertaken by a novice researcher, involved a small sample, and may have suffered from a degree of response bias, nevertheless, I regard my conclusion that 'the indication is that there is a two in three chance that someone diagnosed with AS will be dealt with in an environment where that AS will not be taken account of' as fair and reasonable given that 67 per cent of the respondents to my survey said they had not knowingly dealt with someone with AS (Chown, 2006). One response to my survey was: 'Unfortunately not everyone is aware of AS. But someone with AS may need to be treated different (sic) to others, so that they can be understood and it does not seem that they are being aggressive/abusive.' The CJS must understand the differences associated with autism if they are to be able to respond appropriately in the interests of justice for individuals with autism. However, the Adult Autism Strategy Equality Impact Assessment states that: 'little is known (about autism) in relation to . . . the criminal justice system' (DoH, 2009b).

In his unpublished Doctoral thesis, Beardon (2008), who has worked with many persons with AS accused of crimes, says that in some cases: '. . . it appeared to me that their behaviour could be clearly explained in light of the way in which their AS affected them at the time' and raises the question of whether a failure to take account of a person's AS by definition implies that the person concerned is being discriminated against asking: '. . . how are individuals protected by the law if they are simply behaving as an individual with AS, rather than with any criminal or malicious intent?' (Beardon, 2008). He concludes that the behaviour of many individuals whose cases he studied could be explained by their AS, believes that failure of the CJS to take account of AS is discriminatory, and, to reduce discrimination, proposed the development of a professional guidance database of AS affected criminal behaviour to assist in CJS decision-making where persons with AS are involved (Beardon, 2008).

The DoH envision all people working in the CJS to: '*have relevant training or awareness to enable an understanding of the nature of the range of autism spectrum conditions and the ability to respond appropriately to the needs of adults with an ASC and their families*'. As will be seen below, if the findings of my survey are representative of autism awareness and understanding in the police service more generally, the DoH vision is a very long way from being fulfilled on the 'front line' of the CJS.

A contemporary study on autism and the criminal justice system

The author wished to contribute to existing research through achieving improved knowledge of awareness and understanding of autism in the UK CJS. The study design sought answers to the following research questions:

- a) What does the literature on autism have to say about the impact of autism on crime?
- b) What does the literature have to say about the treatment of victims of crime with autism and offenders with autism?
- c) What is the current extent of awareness and understanding of autism in the UK CJS?
- d) How does awareness and understanding of autism in the UK CJS compare with such awareness and understanding in the USA?

A report on the results of my study has been submitted as part of the consultation exercise being managed by the Department of Health in relation to the proposed UK Government Adult Autism Strategy (Department of Health, 2009a).

Given the lengthy bureaucratic process to be navigated, a major risk with the study was the inability to secure the participation of national CJS bodies in the time available (six months). It was therefore necessary to identify a contingency plan in the event that sufficient participation was not forthcoming. Considerable effort was put into securing the involvement of some individual UK police forces to enable the study to be refocused on the police service if it did not prove possible to secure the involvement of other entities in time. In the absence of wider support it proved necessary to activate the contingency plan.

Autism awareness survey

For the reason given, the survey was limited to the police service. Autism awareness and understanding was evaluated via the medium of a questionnaire survey to which 120 responses were received, the majority submitted by police officers and staff members from two police forces (a large metropolitan force and a medium-sized home-counties force). Other responses to the survey were received from members of

a police authority and from members of a networking group of police authority equality and diversity officers.

To maximise the effectiveness of the survey, it was piloted in one of the participating forces (the home-counties force). Questionnaires completed at the final 'roll-out' stage of the survey were largely received from the metropolitan force. It was decided to analyse the results of both stages together but, as the returns from the two forces were not fully comparable, and there were differences between the questions asked at each stage, any significant differences between the results at each stage were highlighted.

Survey sample

In the UK, contact was made with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), Association of Police Authorities (APA), Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS), National Offender Management Service (NOMS), and the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) with a view to securing their participation in the research. Research applications were subsequently submitted to the CPS, HMCS and NOMS, this being a requirement for these bodies to consider participating.

In addition to the involvement of the two forces already mentioned, valuable assistance was received from the APA and YJB. No other support was forthcoming, in some cases due to there being insufficient time to complete a lengthy research application process.

Adoption and design of the questionnaire

A decision on whether it is appropriate to use questionnaires depends on an evaluation of the relative advantages and disadvantages of this method in relation to other methods and in the context of the specific research topic. For a tightly focused piece of

research involving a wide range of potential sources, a wide geographical spread, and that had to be undertaken in quick time at minimum cost, the advantages of a questionnaire (with email and postal return options) outweighed the disadvantages. Considerable thought was given to the question set, with input received from various police service colleagues. The question set was based on a specific output objective (answers to the research questions) and was informed by the Modell and Mak questions (Modell and Mak, 2008). Three particularly important issues were identified; the absence of any guarantee of a good quality of response; sample bias; and response bias. As respondents would tend to be persons with an interest in the subject of autism it was felt that quality of response was unlikely to be an issue. The number of responses analysed (120) was similar to the Modell and Mak study (124). Given the tendency for respondents to be interested in autism, autism awareness levels in the sample were considered likely to be significantly greater than those of the population. Hence sample autism awareness levels inadequate to ensure that police officers 'respond appropriately to the needs of adults with an ASC and their families' (Department of Health, 2009a) would imply even less adequate awareness levels in the population as a whole. Suitable adjustment would be required if autism awareness levels in the sample appeared to meet the DoH standard.

Question set design

Review of the literature identified a recent study into understanding of disabilities — including autism — within the police service (Modell and Mak, 2008). This study sought to assess understanding of persons with disabilities by police officers in the USA on the basis of a ten question survey including one question relating specifically to autism. The Modell and Mak questionnaire was completed by 124 random police

officer respondents with ranks ranging from patrol officer to senior detective. It was realised that asking similar questions to those put by Modell and Mak (where possible) would facilitate comparison of the two studies.

Questions were carefully ordered so as to: (1) seek understanding of the types of disability; (2) ask about the implications of autism in a policing context; (3) ask about the necessary skills for the police service to deal effectively with people with autism; (4) request a self-assessment of competency to deal with autism; and finally, (5) ask for details of training received and training needs. As many of the Modell and Mak questions were retained as possible to enable comparison with their study. The draft UK study question set was peer reviewed and the reviewers' comments incorporated in a 'pilot' version of the questionnaire trialled within one police force. After undertaking the pilot exercise, and seeking advice from an autism expert working with the US police service, various minor changes were made to the question set for use in the main study. Technical terms were defined to ensure accurate and consistent analysis of responses (see Table 2). Modell and Mak terminology was used wherever possible. Consent was obtained from all participants through the inclusion of a suitable form of words in the introduction to the questionnaire (reinforced either in a covering note or verbally as appropriate). This article, and the dissertation on which it is based, have been drafted to ensure that it is not possible to identify the specific sources of the data or individual respondents, and thereby to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS: UK STUDY FINDINGS

Table 3 lists the survey questions.

Given that there is a much longer history of advocacy on behalf of physical disability

Table 2: Definitions of key terms in questionnaire

<i>Term</i>	<i>US study definitions</i>	<i>UK study definitions</i>
Disability	An individual who deviates from the average or normal individual in mental characteristics, in sensory abilities, in neuromuscular or physical characteristics, in social or emotional behavior, in communication abilities, or in multiple handicaps to such an extent that he or she requires adaptations or modifications to be successful in major life activities	Physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (from the Disability Discrimination Act 1995)
Cognitive disability	Intellectual deficits or delayed cognitive processing	US definition adopted for pilot (term not used in main study)
Developmental disability	Not defined	Disability impacting on a person's development such as learning disability, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Mental illness	Any of various psychiatric conditions, usually characterized by impairment of an individual's normal cognitive, emotional, or behavioural functioning, and caused by physiological biochemical or psychosocial factors	Any of the various forms of psychosis or severe neurosis
Physical disability	Impairment of body in one or more of the following areas: muscles, bone, spinal cord, and/or visual or hearing function	US definition adopted for pilot and final study versions of the questionnaire
Emotional disability	Impairment in one's ability to interact with other persons or the environment that significantly affects a person's ability to perform daily functions in school, work, play, and/or social interactions and relationships	US definition adopted for pilot (term not used in main study)
Autism	Not defined	Spectrum of pervasive developmental disorders characterised by impaired socialisation, communication, and imagination
Asperger Syndrome	Not defined	Pervasive developmental disorder on the autism spectrum associated with average to above average intelligence

than mental disability⁶ it is perhaps unsurprising that the first thought of many respondents on hearing the word 'disability' was of physical disabilities. The fact that almost one-third of the respondents

thought first only of physical disability perhaps indicates the extent of progress made in raising the profile of non-physical disabilities within the police service but also the challenge facing those seeking to raise

Table 3: Autism awareness research questionnaire

1. When you first hear the word 'disability' what thoughts come to mind?
2. What difference do you see, if any, between developmental disability and mental illness?
3. Distinguish between physical disabilities and developmental disabilities
4. What does the term autism mean to you?
5. What does the term Asperger syndrome (AS) mean to you?
6. Why do you think it could be important to understand autism and AS to allow you to do your job effectively?
7. What skills and/or knowledge do you think would equip you to deal with people with autism or AS (as victim, witness, offender or otherwise)?
8. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being the most competent) how do you perceive your ability to deal with people with autism/AS?
9. What training have you received on dealing with people with autism/AS?
10. What training on dealing with people with autism/AS would you like to receive?
11. What is your present rank/grade?

awareness of non-physical disabilities still further. Of course, the tendency to think more of physical than mental disability may also be linked to the simple fact that the former is often obvious to the observer.

There was a considerable level of understanding of the differences between cognitive disability and mental illness although still a significant number of people (25 per cent) who saw little or no difference between the two. An even higher percentage of respondents (40 per cent) did not appear to understand the term developmental disability. There seemed to be a general lack of understanding of the term 'emotional disability' which led to difficulty in distinguishing between this type of disability and cognitive disability'. Taken together, there is clearly room to improve understanding within the police service of the various underlying categories of 'hidden' disability. A better understanding of these categories should make it easier to improve awareness and understanding of specific disabilities such as autism, and the ability to distinguish between disabilities. In particular, autism awareness training should seek to develop an understanding of developmental disability as a precursor to explaining autism.

Well over half of respondents were able to refer to key features of autism, and many of the remainder had some insight as to its nature. Despite the fact that this was clearly a study of autism, only half the respondents correctly identified AS as being a type of autism. A comparison of the number of key features identified in relation to autism on the one hand and AS on the other demonstrated that there was considerably less understanding of AS than of autism. Some of those who knew that AS was a form of autism thought, wrongly, that AS was either a less severe or more severe form. Autism awareness training should illuminate the autism spectrum by reference to the triad and associated features. Whether the difference in AS awareness between the results at the pilot and final stages of the study is linked to differences between the audiences (a group of detectives and a force-wide roll-out respectively), or to some other factor/s, there is a need to adjust the delivery of autism/AS training to reflect the extent of recipients' existing understanding of the subject.

Although it is clearly possible to develop an understanding of a specific disability (e.g. autism) without being able to place it within the universe of disabilities, it is felt

that a holistic approach to training police officers about disability, covering the general principles and a range of specific disabilities they may be confronted with, would better equip officers to handle the variety of situations in which they may find themselves.

Various suggestions were made by survey respondents in relation to the development and delivery of future autism awareness training for the police service and are incorporated into the recommendations for future practice set out in this report.

There was a high degree of correlation between the responses to the questions about why it was important to understand autism to do the job of a police officer effectively and the skills and knowledge needed to equip an officer to deal with persons with autism. Key issues highlighted were the need to develop a basic understanding of autism, the ability to recognise autism, enhance interviewing techniques and communication skills generally, and the particular importance of all these issues in relation to the evidential process. The matters identified could form the basis of autism awareness training for the service.

The average competency self-assessment rating over both stages of 2.63 (1 being the least competent and 5 being the most competent) reflected the considerable room for improvement in awareness and understanding implied by the narrative responses but also appeared to significantly overestimate the actual level of awareness and understanding.

One of the respondents demonstrating most awareness and understanding of autism was a Detective Chief Superintendent. His responses included the following:

What does the term autism mean to you?

Severe mental incapacity which is likely to manifest itself — depending upon the degree of severity — in introverted

behaviour, poor communication, inability to interact with others, frustration which may provoke violent outbursts.

What does the term Asperger Syndrome (AS) mean to you?

AS is a mild form of autism characterised by need for regularity, repetitive behaviour, lack of social skills, inability to empathise.

Why do you think it could be important to understand autism and AS to allow you to do your job effectively?

Sufferers are vulnerable, hence likely to be people police will have contact with — as victims, witnesses or otherwise — whose condition will have a profound effect upon how they should be approached and how they will react. Potential for misunderstanding, misreading is significant.

What skills and/or knowledge do you think would equip you to deal with people with autism or AS (as victim, witness, offender or otherwise)?

Specific training to recognise key signs and to plan strategies for dealing with the same in each of these contexts.

What training on dealing with people with autism / AS would you like to receive?

Should be trained as indicated above. This is an important aspect of Diversity training; which focuses almost exclusively upon race and gender issues.

I think it is overlooked because mental health sufferers generally do not have a loud or powerful voice in society.

Surprisingly, this senior officer, with a high level of awareness of autism and of the autism training imperative, gave himself the lowest possible competence score ('1') whereas many other respondents, apparently far less knowledgeable, scored themselves more highly.

In the Modell and Mak study the competence self-assessment ratings of US police officers were significantly higher than in my study. Given the clustering of US scores at the higher end of the scale, it seems reasonable to deduce that the mean US score was significantly higher than the mean UK score. This may reflect the lead that the US police service appears to have over its UK counterpart in terms of autism awareness training delivery.

A striking feature of the responses to the question asking about autism training received was that 62 per cent of respondents had undertaken no formal training in autism awareness. A further 30 per cent of respondents had received limited exposure to autism in police service training on other subjects or had received training on autism from non-police sources. The remaining 8 per cent of respondents did not answer this question hence no one who responded to the survey had received specific training in autism from their police employer.

CONCLUSION

The CJS is a target audience for the DoH Adult Autism Strategy consultation. The DoH 'vision for the future' is that people working in criminal justice will *'have relevant training or awareness to enable an understanding of the nature of the range of autism spectrum conditions and the ability to respond appropriately to the needs of adults with an ASC and their families'* (DoH, 2009a). Despite its best intentions, this appears to be very far from current reality.

As Petersilia said almost a decade ago (and could repeat today):

'... persons who have developmental disabilities have virtually no ability to organize and advocate on their own behalf without our help. They do not possess the financial, verbal, or organizational skills that would be necessary to

launch such a campaign. Therefore, the onus of responsibility on those of us having these capabilities to work to "end the silence" of victims and defendants with developmental disabilities seems ever more pressing' (Petersilia, 2001).

Unless the courts, the police, and those responsible for prisons, probation, prosecution, and youth justice work to ensure that the 'vision for the future' in the Adult Autism Strategy becomes a reality (probably assisted by one or more of the organisations that speak for persons with autism), it is very difficult to see how they will not be in virtually permanent non-compliance with disability discrimination and human rights legislation as regards persons with autism spectrum disorders.

Recommendations for practice in the CJS (strategic)

The UK Adult Autism Strategy Equality Impact Assessment (DoH, 2009b) identifies both employment and the criminal justice system as 'key areas where action is needed'. Employment is included in one of five key themes⁷ within the Adult Autism Strategy but the criminal justice system is not a key theme. Whilst the consultation documentation (DoH, 2009a), refers to the need for autism awareness training for criminal justice system professionals, it would be good to see a further (sixth) 'Criminal Justice System' key theme added to the Strategy. A specific focus on the CJS in the Strategy should improve its deployment in this critical area.

Recommendations for practice in the CJS (operational)

Given the already heavy training burden on police officers, the issue of mainstreaming autism awareness within the police service through training delivery should be approached sensitively. Some guidance on mainstreaming autism awareness through

training emerged from the survey. A sensitive approach to the issue should take the following points made by survey respondents into account.

- An efficient and effective means of mainstreaming training in a specific area such as disability would be to embed such training within existing training programmes (including probationer training) rather than by developing and delivering stand-alone courses;
- A number of respondents emphasised the value of having a variety of delivery mechanisms as people learn best in different ways (this point was often made in conjunction with criticism of reliance on computer based training alone);
- Police officers do not need to be experts in autism. Some respondents felt that there may be a tendency to ‘over deliver’ training and made the point that training should deliver no more than a sufficient (i.e. basic) understanding of autism.
- Training should encompass the range of disabilities (developmental, learning etc) and mental illness that police officers may come across in the course of their duties;
- Training should incorporate advice on tactics to be used when interacting with persons on the autism spectrum;
- A number of respondents said that officers should have the opportunity to interact with persons on the autism spectrum in a training environment.
- The NAS question for police officers to ask of someone who they feel may have a hidden disability should form part of the mainstreaming of autism awareness.

Development and deployment of a professional guidance database as proposed by Dr Luke Beardon of the Sheffield Hallam University Autism Centre should enhance the ability of the CJS to respond appropriately to the needs of those with autism,

and complement the autism awareness training regime envisioned by the DoH. Such a database should encompass the full range of ‘hidden disabilities’.

Recommendations for future research

The lack of research in the area of autism and the CJS makes the area ripe for further study. Examples of topics for further research in this area include:

- (1) Surveys of autism awareness in the police service in other countries to identify any significant differences between countries, their causes, and learning opportunities.
- (2) Surveys of autism awareness in the other branches of the CJS to identify any significant differences between branches, their causes, and learning opportunities.
- (3) Research into the drivers for potential behavioural change in the CJS in response to autism to inform the design of focused autism awareness resources for the CJS. Such research might cover identification of drivers for behavioural change in the CJS in response to autism; identification and evaluation of any behavioural change initiatives in the area of autism already deployed by the CJS; whether current national CJS autism policy and practice need to be refreshed; whether there is a need for behavioural change; and, if so, what change is required and how it might be achieved?
- (4) Evidence is contradictory as to whether or not there is more autism amongst persons coming into contact with the CJS (as offenders and victims) than in society generally. Further research is needed to reconcile the existing evidence and identify if autism is a risk factor for offending or victimisation in relation to any specific crime types.

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ENDNOTES

- (1) 'Do you have any difficulties that I may not be aware of?' is the question the National Autistic Society has proposed should be asked by police officers during initial contact with a person in the course of their duties if an officer 'has any suspicion, or is told in good faith, that a person of any age may be mentally disordered or mentally handicapped' [Code C (1) (1.4) from the Codes of Practice of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984)]
- (2) Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 individuals are disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.
- (3) The UK criminal justice system consists of the Crown Prosecution Service, HM Court Service, National Offender Management Service (prisons/probation), Police Service, and Youth Justice Board.
- (4) Nacro was formerly the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders. It is a major criminal-justice-related charity in England and Wales working with young offenders, prisoners, and ex-offenders. The Nacro standards define 'mentally disordered' as those who 'may be acutely or chronically mentally ill; those with neurosis, behavioural and/or personality disorders; those with learning difficulties; some who, as a function of alcohol

and/or substance misuse, have a mental health problem; and, any who are suspected of falling into one or other of these groups.'

- (5) Rain Man was the name given to an autistic savant character in a US comedy-drama film written by Barry Morrow and based on real-life autistic savant Bill Sackter. Autistic savants are rare and very untypical of those with autism spectrum disorders.
- (6) Forerunners of the RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) and the RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People) were founded in 1868 and 1911 respectively whereas the National Autistic Society was founded in 1962 and DANDA (Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association) only became a registered charity in 2003.
- (7) The five Adult Autism Strategy key themes are: Social inclusion; Health; Choice and control; Awareness raising and training; and Access to training and employment.

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