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HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The communication “Roundabout”: Intimate relationships of adults with Asperger’s syndrome

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Abstract: Reciprocal communication between couples is central to sustaining strong intimate relationships. Given that Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) affects communication and social reciprocity, adults with this disorder are vulnerable to experiencing difficulties in relating to their “neurotypical” (NT) partner. As reported in a previous paper, prompt dependency was found to be a compensatory mechanism for some of the communication difficulties within AS-NT relationships. This paper draws on the same data-set to describe the impact of prompt dependency on AS-NT relationships. The research reported here is also used to derive a theoretical model that illustrates how a cycle of prompt dependency results in a communication “roundabout” for partners. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

Subjects: Health Psychology; Counseling Psychology; Psychiatry & Clinical Psychology - Adult

Keywords: prompt dependency; couple relationship functioning; Asperger’s Syndrome; autistic spectrum disorder; dynamic systems theory

1. Introduction

Relationships play a central role in the overall human experience and fulfil the universal need to belong and to be cared for (Ruppel & Curran, 2012; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). Yet



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bronwyn Wilson is a teacher whose encounter with Asperger’s Syndrome led her on a journey into research. She holds a Master of Special Education that resulted in the development of a theoretical model illustrating the prompt dependency cycle. The prompt dependency cycle arises from the communication patterns and resulting difficulties occurring within intimate relationships of adults with ASD Level 1 (Asperger’s Syndrome). Presently, she is completing a PhD that tests her model by expanding her research globally and incorporating all types of close relationships of adults with ASD Level 1 (Asperger’s Syndrome). She is also in the process of writing a book on the discoveries she made during the course of her research journey.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Everyday interpersonal interactions are critical for sustaining intimate relationships. However, people with ASD Level 1 (Asperger’s Syndrome, AS) are concrete, literal communicators who usually do not have the same connectedness needs as others. Accordingly, they often remain unaware of the reciprocal interaction and affection needs of significant people in their lives. This study used a rich interview protocol to develop a theoretical model representing communications between neurotypical (NT) and AS partners, which the authors have called the “prompt dependency cycle”. This cycle occurs through repeated attempts by the NT partner to prompt reciprocal interaction from their AS partner, followed by avoidance or blocking of interaction by the AS partner. Understanding how cycles of communication arise and are sustained through interaction between AS and NT partners is a critical first step in developing effective clinical interventions for couples experiencing these communication problems.

strong, stable, emotionally connected intimate relationships don't just happen. They need to be maintained through hard work and commitment from both partners. Satisfying relationships are achieved when ongoing and reciprocated interaction conveys a sense of understanding and responsiveness and cultivates positive emotional encounters (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005). Consequently, relationships are constructed, negotiated, and sustained through the everyday relating of partners (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2012). It follows that the capacity to provide and receive ongoing reciprocal interactions in everyday relating is a critical factor to the realisation of meaningful connected intimate relationships (McGraw, 2000; McKay, Fanning, & Paley, 1994).

Until recently, Asperger Syndrome (AS) was recognised as a distinct neurodevelopmental disorder within the Autism Spectrum. However, in the new international diagnostic manual (DSM-5), AS is subsumed into the general category of Autism Spectrum disorders (Bostock-Ling, Cumming, & Bundy, 2012), and has been given the new designation of Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 1 (Asperger's Syndrome). Throughout this paper we use the term AS which is adopted not only because it was current at the time of the study, but because many AS participants in this study used the term to self-identify. Moreover, the term AS is still in transition in clinical setting and within the community (Attwood, personal communication, March 17, 2015).

AS is characterised by difficulties in social interaction, social reciprocity and social imagination (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Attwood, 2007; Gillberg, 2002). These difficulties affect the individual's capacity to respond to the thoughts and feelings of others, hamper efforts to relate to others, and disrupt the give-and-take that typically occurs within ongoing reciprocal interactions (Attwood, 2007; Lovett, 2005; Meyer, Root, & Newland, 2003). Meaningful intimate relating to a partner, therefore, has the potential to be undermined in such circumstances. On the other hand, neurotypical individuals are usually able to effectively respond to the thoughts and feelings of others. Neurotypical or NT is a term used initially by the autistic community as a label for people who are not on the spectrum, and are generally assumed to have effective social and communication skills, together with the capacity to navigate new or socially complex situations.

While many adults with classic autism commonly appear to be more comfortable with a solitary lifestyle, adults with AS are usually interested in relationships with others (Moreno, Wheeler, & Parkinson, 2012). Accordingly, many adults with AS initiate romantic interest, form romantic attachments, progress along the relationship continuum, and enter long-term relationships (Bostock-Ling et al., 2012; Henault, 2006; Moreno et al., 2012). Berney (2004) reported that adults with AS have a tendency to talk "at" rather than "to" others and appear to have little concern for their partners' responses. This tendency creates not only one-sided exchanges between partners but also circumstances that undermine the back-and-forth flow of interactions between AS-NT couples. Over the long term, the resulting difficulties can become a burden on the relationship.

Moreover, people with AS are prone to considerable amounts of stress, anxiety and frustration (Dubin, 2009; Lovett, 2005). For these individuals, the fear of making mistakes and getting entangled in the complexities of interrelating, together with subsequent tensions and conflict, can create high levels of anxiety (Dubin, 2009). Furthermore, individuals with AS tend to have low self-motivation (Berney, 2004) including limited motivation to be more sociable (Attwood, 2007). Taken together, these conditions may contribute to a lack of inherent appeal by AS partners to engage in, contribute to, and persevere with ongoing reciprocal interactions with their NT partners.

In contrast, NT partners typically seek emotionally connected intimate relationships (Aston, 2003). For them, reciprocity is an integral part of communicating, connecting, and expressing love. In general, NT partners expect an intimate relationship to provide emotionally close, reciprocal interactions to experience feelings of being understood, validated, and cared for within the relationship (Grigg, 2012). It follows that a lack of ongoing reciprocal interactions within a relationship undermines expected intimacy and closeness, fractures emotional attachment, and can cause discord within the relationship. The frequent result for NT partners is to become emotionally unfulfilled

(Grigg, 2012; Marshack, 2009; Rodman, 2003). In order to address these unmet needs, NT partners use prompting in their everyday communication as a means to induce ongoing reciprocal interaction (see Wilson, Beamish, Hay, & Attwood, 2014).

In most situations, a prompt is a temporary aid given to encourage a desired response from an individual in the presence of a demand (MacDuff, Krantz, & McClannahan, 2001; Milley & Machalicek, 2012). Therefore, NT partners envisage demands will be met and the requirement to prompt will cease. However, Wilson et al. (2014) reported that for some adults with AS, the long-term experience of prompts as temporary aids to communication and reciprocal interaction resulted in a dependency on the prompts from their NT partner. This study broke new ground as it identified prompt dependency as a significant feature of communication between AS and NT partners in long-term intimate relationships and that this impacts on the potential for reciprocal exchanges between couples. Wilson et al. (2014) further found that the need to impart prompts on the part of the NT partner coupled with the dependency on prompts on the part of the AS partner worked to define distinctive roles for each within the relationship. This paper draws on the same data derived from the above-mentioned study to describe the impact of prompt dependency on AS-NT relationships and to present a theoretical model illustrating how a cycle of prompt dependency results in a communication “roundabout” (i.e. a repetitive communication cycle with no apparent exit) for partners within these relationships. The research question this study investigated was: How does prompt dependency impact on communication and interpersonal interactions within the AS-NT relationship? The paper is presented in three parts. Part 1 describes the method used to conduct the study and procedures for analysing data. Part 2 present the results of the study organised according to the key phases of the prompt dependency model that emerged from the data. Part 3 discusses implications of the findings for understanding the complexities of communication with AS-NT relationships and considerations for the development of intervention strategies. Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant university Ethics Committee.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data collected for this study were based on interviews with 9 AS-NT couples. Couples were recruited through a number of organisations including Asperger Services Australia - a national AS support organisation; the Queensland Asperger Partner Support group; and psychological counselling services in south-east Queensland. Recruitment occurred through approaches to support groups by the first author of this paper, distribution of flyers through various AS support networks, and electronic outreach.

Accordingly, to be eligible to participate in the study, couples needed to meet four predetermined criteria: (a) one partner in the relationship having a formal diagnosis of AS and the other partner regarded as NT, (b) the relationship existing for at least 1 year to ensure that each partner had adequate knowledge of each other to enable a descriptive account of their interactions, (c) both partners consenting to a recorded interview for the study and (d) both partners being available to be interviewed within a 6-month time frame. The application of the criteria to couples who expressed interest in participating in the study resulted in a convenience sample of nine AS-NT partners (Creswell, 2008). A signed consent form was obtained from each participant involved in the study.

Table 1 presents demographic information on partners. All were aged between 29 and 69 years. Of the AS partners, seven were males and two female. Most couples lived in south-east Queensland, were married, and in a heterosexual long-term relationship ranging from 3.5 to 35 years. Seven couples had children from their current relationship, a previous relationship, or both, and two did not have children. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Partner	Marital status	Years together	Children ^a	Locality	Education
AS partners	Bev	F	37	Kevin	Defacto	7.5	1	SEQ ^b	10th grade
	Mia	F	29	Scott	Living apart	8	1	VIC ^c	TAFE ^d
	Rob	M	57	Ella	Married	35	2	SEQ	10th grade
	Greg	M	43	Abby	Married	9	5	SEQ	Uni ^e degree
	Joe	M	69	Beth	Defacto	16	3	SEQ	TAFE
	Jeff	M	64	Meg	Married	40	0	SEQ	Uni degree
	Pete	M	57	Kelly	Married	24.5	0	SEQ	TAFE
	Doug	M	59	Carol	Married	14.5	0	SEQ	
	Nick	M	53	Anne	Married	3.5	2	SEQ	Uni degree
NT partners	Ella	F	56	Rob	Married	35	2	SEQ	Uni degree
	Abby	F	40	Greg	Married	9	5	SEQ	TAFE
	Beth	F	50+	Joe	Defacto	16	3	SEQ	Uni degree
	Meg	F	40	Jeff	Married	40	1	SEQ	TAFE
	Kelly	F	49	Pete	Married	24.5	0	SEQ	TAFE
	Carol	F	54	Doug	Married	14.5	0	SEQ	Uni degree
	Anne	F	58	Nick	Married	3.5	0	SEQ	Uni degree
	Kevin	M	36	Bev	Defacto	7.5	1	SEQ	TAFE
	Scott	M	45	Mia	Living apart	8	1	VIC	12th grade

^aChildren denotes the number of children cared for within the couple’s household.

^bSEQ denotes south-east Queensland.

^cVIC denotes Victoria.

^dTAFE denotes training and further education.

^eUni denotes University.

2.2. Data collection

In-depth, one-on-one interviews lasting between 1 and 2 h were conducted separately with AS and NT partners. Individual interviews enabled each partner to speak freely about his/her experiences within the relationship (Creswell, 2008; Silverman, 2004; Turner, 2010) avoiding the censoring of responses that potentially would have occurred had partners been interviewed in each other’s presence. For couples residing in south-east Queensland, face-to-face interviews were conducted at the venue of the participant’s choice. In most cases, this was in their own homes. One couple, located in Victoria, was interviewed via Skype due to distance.

Interviews were relaxed and informal enabling the interviewer to draw out perspectives on communication patterns and discordance in interactions. This approach proved effective for obtaining granulated data from each partner about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences concerning the relationship (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). All participants (both AS and NT) were asked the same 32 open-ended questions and probes, which addressed their perspectives on interpersonal interactions and communication strategies related to six domains of “need fulfilment” distilled from the literature related to intimate relationships (e.g. Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2012; Wieman, Shoulders, & Farr, 1974). Relationship domains were: (a) effective communication; (b) strategies for resolving communication problems; (c) communication of shared goals; (d) communication supporting sharing, cooperation and support; (e) communicative responsiveness; (f) ongoing commitment and investment in the relationship. Within these domains, questions probed participants’ perceptions of communication across a number of dimensions, including the strategies used by participants in attempting to resolve communication problems between themselves and their partners, the responses of partners to these strategies, and the impact of these exchanges on partners and

the relationship. For example, in domain 1 (effective communication), several questions specifically probed participants' perceptions of routine patterns of communication within the relationship. In domain 2 (strategies for resolving communication problems), questions specifically probed participants' problem-solving strategies when communication difficulties arose. For example, participants were asked: "When the channels of communication aren't working as well as you would like, what do you say to your partner?" Other questions probed specific details of these communication strategies: "Do you need to provide instructions within the interaction and if so what kinds of instruction (e.g. prompting encouraging, provoking, urging, inspiring, motivating, prodding)? Finally, questioning probed participants' perceptions of the potential impact of communication difficulties on them and their partners. This general pattern of questioning was repeated for each of the other domains.

Member checking of completed interview transcripts was used to improve validity of the research. Following transcription, each participant was sent a copy of his/her interview transcript within an individually addressed envelope to protect confidentiality and invited to make comment or revisions if required. No amendments were made to any of the transcripts as a result of member checking.

2.3. Data analysis

Qualitative methods, guided by a grounded theory research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Glaser, 2002), were used to gain a detailed understanding of prompt dependency and its impacts on AS-NT couples. NVivo 9, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package designed for qualitative research of text-based information (Bazeley, 2013), was used to support grounded theory's analytical coding processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2009). To start the coding procedure and to manage ideas, concepts, and theoretical knowledge generated from the data, nodes (storage depositories) were created. Each transcript was examined in depth and coded into the nodes. A hierarchical tree structure of nodes were developed and structured according to themes and subthemes.

Evidence for the six components of the theoretical model of the prompt dependency cycle and the relationships between them emerged during the axial coding stage used in grounded theory. Axial coding is the second stage of a four-step sequence of coding which involves a constant comparative process of connecting categories and concepts together using inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell, 2008; Kendall, 1999). This method of constant comparison of incident to incident, incident to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories and categories to categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Heath & Cowley, 2004) reduced the themes into six key categories. These themes, in turn, were arranged into a cyclical model according to relationships indicated in the data.

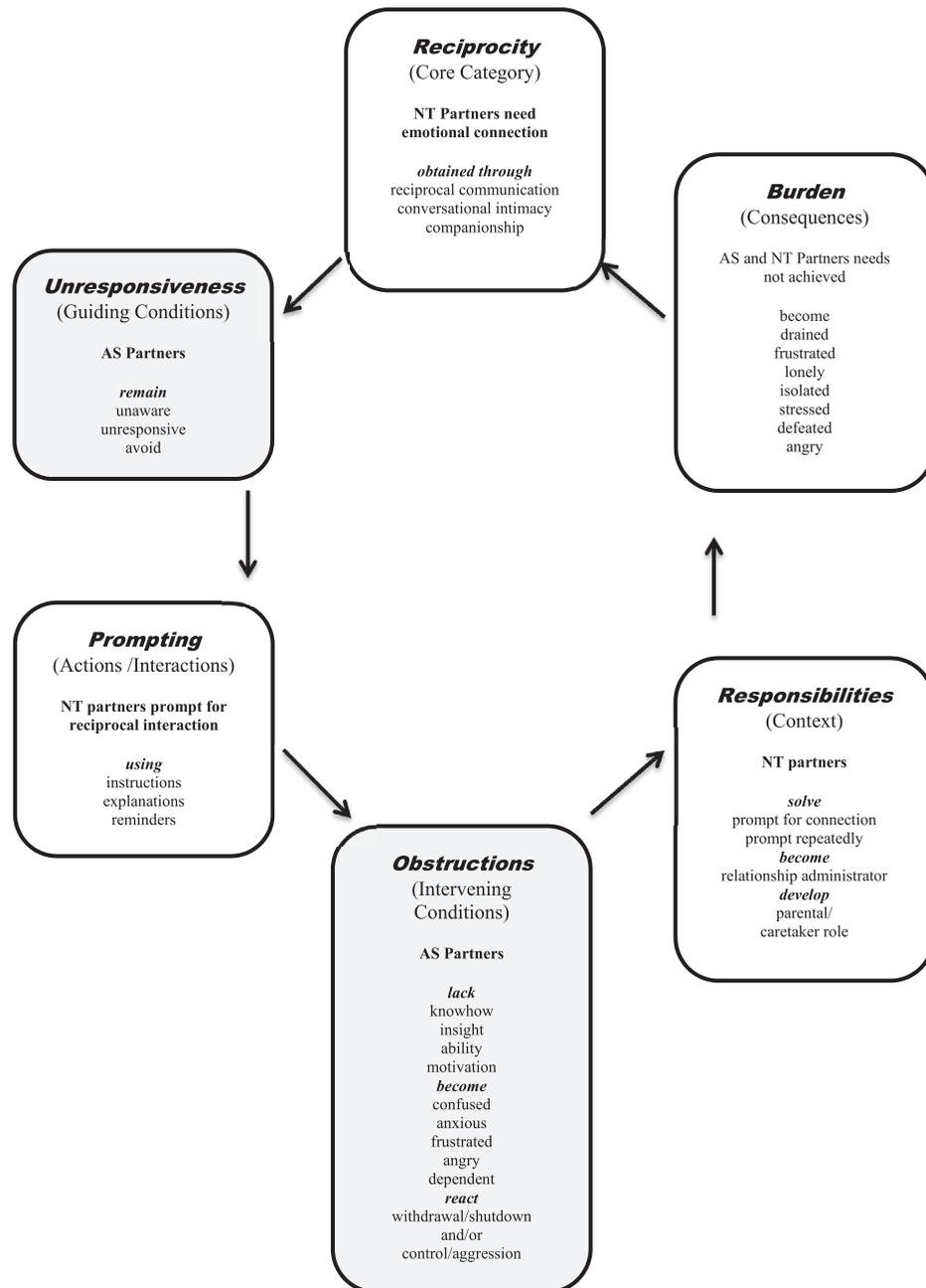
To enhance validity, data analysis occurred through a process of critical discussion amongst members of the research team which served to provide a continual check on specific interpretations (Cho & Trent, 2006). In addition, a research journal was used by the research team to systematically record decisions relating to coding of the data and its interpretation (Bazeley, 2013).

Data analysis resolved six key themes to illustrate the cycle of prompt dependency within the context of intimate relationships. They are: (1) NT partners need for reciprocal connection from their AS partners; (2) AS partners are unaware and/or unresponsive and/or avoids connecting; (3) NT partners prompt, instruct to activate more intimate connection and/or interaction; (4) AS partner lacks social development and abilities and intrinsic motivation to do and/or to learn appropriate responses; (5) NT interactions become more parental towards their partner; (6) NT and AS partners often become drained, lonely, stressed, and angry.

3. Results

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model of the cycle of prompt dependency, which comprises six themes derived from the coding paradigm (Creswell, 2008; Kendall, 1999). The model represents how prompt dependency emerges within the AS-NT relationship and how the need for reciprocal interaction (NT partner) versus the need to avoid reciprocal interaction (AS partner) are the common

Figure 1. Theoretical model of the prompt dependency cycle.



threads that kept prompt dependency cycling between partners. Each theme is described in detail in sections that follow.

3.1. Reciprocity

In this study, reciprocity was the defining theme as it signalled both the beginning and end of communicative exchange. From the NT perspective, it was the point at which emotional connection and intimacy with their partner through conversation was sought. For many NT partners, it was also the point where they recognised they were entering into yet another cycle of communicative dissonance. Ella highlighted how this was the case for her on both accounts since her attempts to facilitate better reciprocal communication and connectedness merely resulted in a perpetual communication roundabout within her relationship:

So he goes into that great spiel again then and I just ... “man here we go again”. It just frustrates me and it just makes me ... angry and I would just get really annoyed about it. It would probably end up in an argument. These days I just don’t do it. I just withdraw ... there are times when he starts I just look at him and I just put my hand and I just go, “Rob just shut up. Not going to go there.” And he will want to keep going and I will go, “nope” and I will actually walk out of the room because I just don’t want to go into the same spiel all over again ... I try and save my energy ... because it is just like going round in circles, like a dog chasing its tail. He won’t ... ever see the point and won’t see that things there that you should just do because you care ... it just makes me think “oh my God here we go again”, so you’re on that roundabout round and round roundabout ... I don’t want to hear the same stuff over and over ... I have had it for the last 20 years.

Ella also explained how over the years she had endeavoured to facilitate her partner’s capacity to reciprocate many times and shared that the relationship had foundered.

I have always told him that he has never had to guess about how I feel. “Look this is what I need from you.” And I can think back ... before he was even diagnosed, in our relationship, having those conversations with him. “I need more of you.” “You don’t give me enough of yourself.” “You don’t talk to me about you.” And being very honest and I say this is not fair, this is not. I explained that I don’t think this is what a relationship should be, if it’s not happening. Those things need to happen, and because they don’t, this is why we don’t have this relationship ... If I don’t initiate conversation then it doesn’t get initiated. I don’t bother initiating anymore because I don’t have enough energy to do so ... We don’t sleep together. We haven’t for some time, so there is nothing normal about it ... Right at the moment, our relationship is very much, I think two people boarding in the same house.

Like Ella, most NT partners believed that the struggle to avoid being caught within the communication roundabout proved arduous. Beth described the exhaustion involved in being entangled in the cycle and elaborated on how the experience made her feel devalued as a partner:

I find it exhausting. I find it absolutely exhausting that we can’t have a normal interactive communication with him. It’s, it’s an impossible thing to do. And I guess in a way I’ve moved further and further towards having that kind of interaction with other people. I don’t even imagine that I am going to be able to have it with him.

I feel devalued. I feel assaulted verbally. I guess in a way I feel diminished and on the whole very frustrated, intensely frustrated that it is the same old, same old, and he will actually feedback the information that I am saying the same things. And when I say to him, well it’s the same issues come up over and over again and then not resolved and for me, I may say the same things, but they’re unresolved. That becomes very frustrating.

What emerged from the interviews was that many NT partners felt disconnected from their AS partner due to the lack of reciprocity and regular avoidance tactics employed by their partners.

3.2. Unresponsiveness

In this study, the majority of NT partners felt that their partners’ unresponsiveness and the resulting lack of connection was one of the most difficult things to deal with. This unresponsiveness not only created considerable emotional loneliness within the relationship but also was also difficult to convey to others. Beth described these difficulties:

I mean, it’s a weird feeling to sit and be absolutely distraught and crying and have him change the subject and say “I saw the most amazing engine the other day.” You are in the middle of this terrible crisis and breaking your heart, and he is telling you about nuts and bolts. I mean, that defies all reasoning. So you don’t talk to people about that.

Ella also elaborated on the lack of emotion and unresponsiveness that she found hard to endure in her relationship. Moreover, she described the resulting gulf that had developed within the relationship:

I know that my ranting and raving only makes that worse, and he withdraws all the more because I guess hasn't got the words. But he doesn't show anything, like there is no emotion. Like not even a touch or a hug, or a "it will be okay", or a recognition even that you are hurting, even though it's got to be obvious that you are ...

But now he withdraws, because I ... nowadays have the total ... wrong tactic. I probably did years ago, would sit and "well tell me and talk to me" and I would get a blank sort of inane sort of stare and I have often had things like, "well I don't really know" and I actually believe that he doesn't. I think that's part of the frustration.

In contrast, some AS partners reported how connection, interaction, and the intimate sharing through communication were simply not a priority for them. For example, Jeff stated:

But as an NT, you seem to appreciate the social interaction where I couldn't care less. I just do it because you're expected to, you have to. It's just an interruption and an annoyance.

However, in Jeff's case, his lack of response may have been related his perceptions about the communication needs of his NT partner.

I do understand that a bit. I can understand. It really seems that NTs are really pre-programmed in a whole lot of ways. And if they don't get the reactions they expect, it brings up an emotional response. It's most unfortunate.

Other AS partners described how difficult it was for them to communicate to their partners. They realised that this difficulty caused complications within their relationships. However, this realisation did not transfer to understanding just what these complications entailed and how much impact these complications had on their partner. Subsequently, many AS partners indicated that they had little knowledge of how to handle communication differently. This lack of awareness frequently contributed to them being unresponsive as described by Rob who admitted that he didn't understand what his partner Ella needed:

... but as I said, because I am the way I am, I didn't, I wasn't aware. I have had situations where I would be sitting on a chair, she would be on the floor bawling her eyes out and say "why can't you understand?" And I would say "understand what?"

Although he acknowledged his lack of awareness, Rob nevertheless implied that he thought that Ella was partly responsible for the communication problems within their relationship believing that Ella was not sufficiently responsive towards him.

Okay, if you haven't got someone who wants to listen to you, how can you be more communicative, and also express your feelings? Huh, feelings okay, yeah, I feel sad, I feel alone now, I feel angry, I feel upset ... Like I'm sorry but I'm no good at interacting with people outside my work environment. Is that a crime? Is that something that I should be ashamed of? I don't think so ... to turn around and say, well you've got to be a bit more considerate, a bit more passionate. Oh yeah, right, okay.

Conversely, Nick, another partner with AS, confirmed that he did understand his partner's need for him to respond. However, he indicated that he would often withdraw during their interactions:

she will quite often try and get me to respond in the way that she wants me to respond, so she will keep at me ... she has said to me sometimes she will ... say things to get me to respond ... through trying to hurt me, name-calling, that sort of thing, she may resort to ... because when that sort of thing happens, I start shutting down. So there's going to be no visible response from me, no emotional response, which apparently frustrates the crap out of her.

This struggle with unresponsiveness was summed up by Greg (AS) who related the challenging aspects of interactions with his NT partner. Interestingly, he referred to NT individuals as “humans”.

Humans talk things out again and again and again ... that’s the human-Aspie perspective that I can’t handle ... I mean sometimes I won’t speak to her for a couple of days ... basically humans want to talk, Aspies don’t want to hear, or what they interpret is completely different to what they are hearing. How do you get past that?

3.3. Prompting

The combination of the need for reciprocity on one hand, and unresponsiveness towards this need on the other, commonly triggered NT partners to prompt for responses, connection, and interactions as a means to resolve their partner’s behaviours. They reported that prompting did, on occasions, elicit some response from their AS partners. The intermittent success of this strategy tended to intensify the level of prompting over time, thus prompting became the prime strategy for resolving the issue of unresponsiveness. A variety of prompting strategies were reported. Anne gave examples of prompting that involved positive reminders:

“Did you understand what I was feeling or what I meant before or how that went?” So it is constantly going back and reminding and reminding this is what happened. This is how I felt. This is what I need.

Beth shared how she set the context of communication with the use of instructional prompts.

I do. But they’re generally not heard and the kind of instructions would be “I really would like to talk to you about this. I want you to not talk over me so that I can say what I want to say and I really would like you not to get angry and start raising your voice.” But it usually falls on deaf ears.

Meg also described how she used explanation as a prompt strategy.

I try to explain to him, then it comes down to “I’m not explaining it in the words that he wants”, and then it usually escalates into an argument. So once again another day, another argument. So it’s not working at the moment ... Jeff demands that I explain things to the nth degree every time there’s a debate and a discussion, on everything and it goes on infinitum. I am exhausted with all of the discussion to get the small thing done that I am determined I am not going to let him get away with it so that I am doing all the work.

Regardless of strategy, all NT partners reported that their prompting was frequently unsuccessful because desired responses were often negated by their partner’s intervening behaviours.

3.4. Obstructions

NT partners pointed to a variety of behaviours that their partners displayed when attempting to avoid further interaction. Behaviours included engaging in psychological withdrawal, inward focusing, defensiveness, stonewalling, and passive or aggressive controlling behaviours. These developments within the communication cycle often generated considerable disharmony, tension, and sometimes conflict between the partners. Meg’s commentary reflected the general lament of many of the NT partners interviewed:

... then every day becomes, another day, another bloody argument. I don’t want to live like that. Yeah, so it’s not a happy situation. It is not happy for him. It’s not happy for me ... I have said to him at times “why do things have to be so hard?”

More specific emotional responses in relation to their AS partner’s intervening behaviours were also shared. For example, Ella expressed her frustration with her partner’s defensive behaviour:

Oh he gets very defensive and tries to justify and its, “well if you were, then I wouldn’t”, “if you did, then I would.” It is all those sorts of kinds of things ... I’m sick of justification, rather than, taking responsibility. No accountability and no responsibility.

She also described the ways she attempted to cope with these behaviours:

These days I guess to help, I just walk off ... cause I know I will get angry and I know that I will start ranting and raving ... literally there have been times when I have wanted to punch him, knock his lights out, or get a cricket bat ... and that’s not good. These days probably more often than not I just walk out of the room.

Beth described her partner’s stonewalling behaviours and how these impacted on her.

If he doesn’t want to do something he just doesn’t do it. You cannot force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do. And, I mean ... this is one of the lonely spots in our relationship is that he will be motivated to do something that he wants to do but for me to ask him to do something, it’s like I have asked him to pin himself to a cross. He is just so resistive and he might do it eventually, after months and months of me asking, but he will do it with such foul temper that it is almost a waste of me getting anything done. And it never gets finished. He never finishes anything that he doesn’t want to do.

She continued:

Well I feel helpless basically and it’s like a brick wall and it is that real meaning of a brick wall. You cannot, it’s like stonewalling in counselling situation. You cannot get past the rigidity. And there is absolutely no point getting yourself all upset and, and wasting so much energy in attempting to shift because you can’t shift them ... he says yes but when he actually acquiesces, it is rare that he will engage.

Moreover, Beth shared how she could not resolve the disconnect within her relationship due to Joe’s lack of understanding about his involvement in disagreements.

No comprehension of the damage that he has done. And I mean I am not abrogating my own responsibility, because there are times when I just want to lash out and so I am not blameless at all, but it is the lack of comprehension ... Well, just oblivious ... And that kind of thing distinguishes it from domestic violence is that you really do eventually recognise that there seems to be no understanding of the emotional side of things, and I know that he is highly emotional. He is a highly emotional being and to not be able to recognise what is happening to himself, emotionally, I just feel sorry for him.

The repeated patterns of prompting (NT partner) and intervening behaviours (AS partner) typically resulted in both partners disengaging and disconnecting. These messy circumstances were captured in Jeff’s graphic narrative.

Yeah, well we get in this huge thing that escalates and then something might get thrown, not by me I might add, and both go away ... to our different areas, and then after a while it’s just business as usual ... But there’s no making up and there’s no saying sorry ... because I’m not wrong, and she obviously believes she’s not wrong either and therefore what’s to be sorry about. Well there’s sorry about the situation but not sorry because you can’t be if you haven’t done anything wrong. Well, you won’t admit, you don’t believe you’ve done anything wrong. She believes I’ve done a lot of things wrong, and I don’t believe it at all, because I believe motivation is the important thing for judging whether a thing is right or wrong than exactly what was done or what resulted.

3.5. Responsibilities

The situation described above resulted in the NT partner assuming a dominant role over the course of the relationship with many comparing their relationships to that of parent/child or teacher/

student. Carol had earlier written her thoughts about the issue during a course she had previously attended. She read it aloud during the interview:

And I wrote “he feels like a child and I am the parent. He can’t cope without me. I have to praise him. I have to prompt him. I had to guide him. I have to teach him. I feel heavy and overburdened. No wonder so many AS-NT couples stop having sex. I just want him to be self-motivated.”

Ella described a similar experience:

Well again, you are the fixer, you are the direction giver, you’re the ... one who has to take charge again, and feel like a mother, or a carer, or a do this, do that, like with your kids.

Carol compared her role in her relationship as that of a parent furthermore pointing out how her relationship suffered during times when she withheld the extra effort to prompt, guide, or give positive feedback:

Oh we don’t want to be near each other or with each other. If we are both in that state because an AS person needs a lot of positive feedback, which is a parenting role and doesn’t seem to have any inner resources to build themselves up. They need to have someone outside telling them how wonderful they are, which is probably why they make good employees. If they do their job well and they get good feedback they probably prefer to be at work than at home ... but when I am too busy to give positive feedback our relationship tends to fall over and disintegrate into shouting matches.

All NT partners reported that they felt similar pressures resulting from the added responsibility caused by assuming a parental/caretaker role in the relationship. Accordingly, all NT partners expressed a profound sense of frustration about how their relationships had developed, particularly the considerable the effort required to initiate and sustain routine communication. Ella shared some of her feelings of frustration about being in a conversation roundabout and having to guide and direct conversations:

So it is just frustrating. You are taking charge again. You are having to make decisions again. You having to ... take on the burden again and ... it’s that sharing thing that doesn’t happen. It is not, “let’s do this together”, “what do you think”, cause they don’t have an opinion. It is like, “well I don’t know so you tell me”. Yeah it’s just annoying. You are just at it again.

Beth conveyed how “a communication thing” that turns into a conversation roundabout poses a huge challenge for both partners in an intimate relationship:

Someone that’s Asperger’s, because it is seen as a communication thing, they are almost put in the too hard basket and because of the terrible difficulty in interpersonal relationships. I mean how many people do you hear saying “they’re impossible.”

NT partners reported a number of ways that they responded to the frustration they experienced. Some said they became sarcastic while others withdrew. For example, Scott admitted that he had given up trying to deal with the parental/caretaker role with Mia, his AS partner, for that reason. He expressed the general NT point of view:

In many ways I suppose I’ve um I’ve given up on trying to have any more of an instructive role because to me it feels that ah, I’m just being like a teacher and a carer and not being a partner and just yeah just wearing after a while. And so I find that, at times can get frustrating, asking for a level of detail that is really onerous.

Many NT partners confided that on some occasions they reacted angrily in response to the responsibility continually placed on them to manage the relationship in addition to experiencing resistance from their AS partners. Some admitted that this had sometimes led to extreme reactions on their

part which they regarded as uncharacteristic. Several NT partners remarked how the level of anger they experienced was “not like me” or “I am not like this!”

The majority of NT partners acknowledged that they experienced many negative consequences from the effort involved in continually prompting their partners during interaction. These negative outcomes were exacerbated for NT partners when the intervening behaviours of their AS partners undermined their efforts to attempt to improve the situation. In these instances, the parental/care-taker role was the result both of the requirement to continually prompt their partners, then—in the face of resistance—the need to remedy communication exchanges. These negative consequences for NT partners included a loss of a sense of self, isolation, and loneliness which we have labelled “Burden” within the prompt dependency model.

3.6. Burden

The consequences of the prompt cycle reported by NT partners were mainly negative. Predominantly, NT partners became emotionally and physically depleted, which also frequently led to exhaustion and health issues. Some NT partners commented that they struggled with the decision either to stay in the relationship and live with the consequences or leave the relationship. However, some NTs indicated a sense of guilt associated with their desire to leave. Some believed their partner would not be able to cope alone. Meg explained this conflict.

But I really don't see the solution. At this stage in my life, splitting up, we've been together too long. I just feel if I walked away from it that he would be this lost person. He would be by himself with no connection with the outside world, and it's not, it's not pity that I feel for staying with him, it's just compassion. One human being to another.

AS partners, also struggled, but for different reasons. They too become depleted in their own way, confused by what was happening around them. Significantly, some AS individuals reported that their NT partners had become domineering and controlling towards them. For example, Jeff reported:

... but in reality, she is very dominating, and very non-accepting, with lots of things. But especially people who don't try, you know, because um, there's lots of things I don't do, I don't even try, and she gets really upset about it, because I know there's reasons why, and things like that, so that's, yeah, but, but she has got a kind heart, but she, she is just over the top sometimes.

Because of the difficulties experienced with communicating with their partners and the frequent conflicts that resulted, many AS partners used various strategies to avoid communication as much as possible. Nick remarked:

I have learned to give up, it is not worth the hassle.

Alternatively, writing provided an effective coping strategy for Mia.

It was difficult to talk to him; this is why in the end I decided it was better to put it in writing.

Joe decided it was better to communicate in non-verbal ways.

I would communicate by taking some sort of action rather than talk about it.

Some AS partners noted that repeated communication breakdowns had impacted on their self-esteem. Doug referred to this aspect:

Ah, it doesn't do anything for the confidence or anything or the ability to do things. Just lack of confidence. It just puts your confidence down, in your abilities.

All AS and NT participants interviewed, repeatedly stressed how difficult it was to live with the consequences of the communication “roundabout”. However, they indicated that they wanted to find answers to the problems they were encountering. Most interviewed indeed recognised that a considerable portion of their relationship issues resulted from communication difficulties in which constant prompting was a central theme. When asked to describe her situation, Meg related the deep emotional turmoil reported by many NT partners resulting from the unrelenting cycle of prompting on the part of NT partner and intervening behaviours of the AS partner in response.

Every time ... there’s no memory of the last time that was done. Everything is new every day. Every day! ... Draining and frustrating. And sometimes I just say “you drive me crazy. Absolutely crazy.” I used to yell it at him. Now I just say it. Because it is not helping my health to get so het up about it. I’m trying to change the way I interact with him, but what I’m finding is it’s not changing because he’s bringing in new behaviours that keeps us in that conflict situation. And that’s why I hope someone can get through to him because I can’t. Can’t, and I don’t want to stay in that conflict. I want to move on. Life’s too short ... I get frustrated because I’m explaining the same thing and being corrected on the way I described it. Although Jeff tells me that he is only reconfirming, but it is not the way he is wording it. I feel frustrated. I feel angry. I feel defeated ... Oh, a lot of anger which I can’t internalise any more. I punched the wall the other night, instead of punching him. That’s got to stop ... Shame. I can’t believe that I would treat someone I love in that manner ... I never ever thought, I did hit him once. He hit me back. I don’t blame him. It is unacceptable behaviour from one human being to another. I don’t believe I’ve been reduced to reacting in that manner.

Ella also shared her struggles with the unrelenting communication roundabout revealing that at times she felt as if she was “losing it”.

It is quite stressful. It can get quite stressful, and again initially in our relationship it was something that I just did, but it did add to the stress and you probably didn’t realise it. I think these days it just makes me really resentful, which is a type of anger I guess. I just get angry that I still doing it and I get angry with myself that I still do it. It is almost like if I don’t, I feel guilty because then he is left on his own to deal himself and “gee what happens if”, you know, so you feel guilty if you don’t, and so it creates a resentment and then I get angry with myself, because I think “well why are you still doing this?” “You don’t need to do this”. This is just bullshit, you know, you are still doing it, but you feel guilty if you don’t ... Over the years there has probably been lots of tears shed. I would go away and cry a lot. I don’t know. I actually have over the years probably thought there are times when I probably had mini breakdowns about like, “oh my god, I’m just falling apart, like physically falling apart.” Just go “I can’t do this anymore.” And then there are times when you think you are going nuts. You think you’re the one totally losing it.

Like Ella, Beth also pointed to the impact that communication issues had on her mental health:

I went through that period where I questioned my own sanity. I thought well “is that what I said?” Because he can actually twist my words to something so unpleasant, that it is completely contrary to the kind of person I am, and then I begin questioning whether I actually did say it like that, or I did say something, so I mean when you think about all this, they’re almost impossible to live with, really.

Carol discussed mental health issues as well:

Cause you just have to be a woman and go to one of those support groups or Katrin’s seminars to know that these women, if they are not mentally unhinged, they are very close to it. Cause, like everyone tried to give the synopsis briefly, but most people failed because once they start talking they’re just an emotional mess ... Is it possible to keep your mental health and have a long-term relationship with an Aspie is the question?

Anne described how lonely her relationship had become as a result of the communication roundabout. Paradoxically, she revealed that she dealt with the situation by further distancing herself from her partner.

I am angry and disappointed and I am sad. I feel more isolated. I feel as though I am on my own, again. I will go and do everything myself ... I feel alone. Yeah, I feel as though I carry the weight in the marriage. I feel I am pushed into a position of, I am the one. I am it. Yeah. I am it ... I leave him out of the loop. Yeah, I've become a bit more guarded. I leave him out of the loop.

In contrast to NT partners, AS partners' difficulties with communication, and resulting conflict, drove them towards self-protective behaviours. Moreover, when presented with challenging communication interactions, AS partners frequently became confused providing further motivation to become self-protective. Accordingly, a tendency to withdraw from communication through passive or aggressive behaviour was a common theme that emerged in interviews with AS partners. They regularly reported that their angry outbursts were a way of avoiding communication in instances where they were confused by the problems that communication presented, or where the intention was to avoid communication altogether.

Contemporaneously, many AS partners appeared to be unaware that their self-protective behaviours contributed to communication problems experienced in the relationship. The view expressed by some AS partners was that their NT partners were to blame for communication problems, disagreements and arguments. Often this perception arose through an apparent lack of recognition that their tendency to withdraw from communication contributed, in part, to these problems. For example, Rob voiced his need on occasions to avoid communication about certain issues that were important to his partner. He also expressed confusion at his partner's apparent attempts to prompt.

She might see something that she is real fired up about, and I'm thinking "Oh shit. Can't do anything about it, so forget about it", you know ... So as I said I just walk away. I don't bother. Why, why hassle? I have got enough hassle in my life now without adding more. Yeah, I just get disappointed in her behaviour, but get over it. Got to. Well that's all you can do, but the point is, okay it has happened get over it. The old saying, it's happened you can't do anything about it. Let's get over it and walk away. Build a bridge ... She said "well you should try" and I'm thinking, but try at what? You know, and this is where the crux is. She said "well you should be doing something better." Yeah but at what? And I'm thinking well okay fine I don't argue, I don't muck around and just keep on plugging ... but for me when someone says you should try more. Yeah well try at what? It's a big question mark.

Jeff's comments exemplified a commonly held perception of relationship conflict among AS partners. He further related his need to stay "even", and in "tight control" contrasting this to what he saw as spontaneous emotional responses characteristic of "normal NT behaviour". He nevertheless acknowledged that responding in a "neutral" manner was sometimes met with an angry response.

And that's this anger problem that we can't understand. And I've read a lot of entries from people writing on the internet forums. It's one of the topics that we cannot understand, these reactions which were being quite, all we can do is to be quite neutral, and even that causes anger. What can you do? You can't do anything.

And of course it's a spontaneous thing, and what probably makes normal NT behaviour what it is. Respond instantly to emotional responses. Create them from recognizing in others. I can't do that so at least I can keep on an even keel by controlling, keeping a tight control. Otherwise you're going up and down without knowing why.

Accordingly, Jeff described how his need to withdraw from difficult communication exchanges had become almost an involuntary reaction for him:

And in a marriage you have, the triggers are hit all that more often, so you're always in pain of some sort. So it's not just a choice of how to act or how to think, how to react, it's involuntary. And overcoming that is, if you can, is part of the question.

The long-term experience of communication difficulties and breakdowns resulted in a tremendous emotional burdens for AS and NT partners that permeated their relationships. NT partners universally reported that repeated communication failures had left them emotionally conflicted and exhausted with some reporting significant impacts on their mental health. For them, the persistent failure of prompting—the key strategy they used to achieve reciprocal interaction—led to feelings of frustration, anger and resentment, which for many gave way over time to guilt, despair and loneliness. For AS partners, in contrast, communication problems left them feeling confused and disoriented. Commonly, their response in any specific interaction was “fight” or “flight”, that is, either responding aggressively or becoming withdrawn, and retreating from the interaction. Both of these behaviours reflected a desire to avoid communication as a means of self-protection. Over time, however, AS partners reported a tendency to further withdraw from interaction in an attempt to avoid altogether the additional negative impacts of the communication roundabout. Hence, the communication roundabout continued to cycle, with the NT partner feeling an intensified need for emotional connection (Reciprocity - Core condition in the model) and the AS partner being unaware of these needs or avoiding interaction (Unresponsive - Guiding condition in the model).

4. Discussion

Interpersonal communication is the lifeblood of every relationship (Harvey & Wenzel, 2002; McGraw, 2000) with its many layers providing the core ingredient for building relationships into intimate partnerships. Moreover, the everyday behaviours that partners use to communicate with each other are those which either sustain or deplete their ongoing commitment towards each other (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2012). We began this paper by characterising the communicative interactions between NT and AS partners as a “communication roundabout” in which reciprocity was a pivotal point in the cycle of prompt dependency. The grounded theory analysis identified the central problem as the NT partners’ unsatisfied need to experience a healthy reciprocal relationship with their AS partners. Moreover, NT partners in this study often entered these exchanges with little expectation that their needs would be met.

On the one hand, NT partners typically felt that this unmet need resulted from their partners’ limited or inadequate interactions and responses created by their communication difficulties and differences associated with the AS disorder. On the other hand, AS partners often failed to respond, reporting that they did not understand the implicit expectations within the communicative exchange defined by their partners’ need for reciprocity and emotional connection (Aston, 2003). This apparent dissonance often resulted in the AS partner withdrawing from the exchange, and at times, from all interactions for an extended period of time.

At this point in the exchange, NT partners frequently resorted to prompting their AS partners as a means of triggering a response and reconnecting. These prompts took the form of reminders, instructions and explanations. While these prompts were intended to sustain communication and interaction, NT partners reported that these desired outcomes were often thwarted by a chain of behaviours exhibited by the AS partners that often negated further communication. These intervening behaviours included the AS partner becoming confused frustrated, anxious, or angry. These behavioural states often resulted in the AS partner responding aggressively or withdrawing from the communication altogether (Grigg, 2012).

Following disagreements, NT partners often sought to remediate communication through further prompting. These repeated actions resulted in asymmetrical development of the relationship that often resulted in the NT partner feeling responsible for assuming a dominant caretaker role. This continual requirement to manage the partnership was such that some NT partners described it as resembling that of a parent/child relationship. This persistent expectation was most commonly

reported by NT partners as the greatest source of frustration and regret. This lack of reciprocity—the emotional fulfilment they were seeking through communication in the first instance—left many NT partners feeling frustrated, isolated, lonely and depressed. Others expressed anger about the circumstances of their relationship while a few conveyed a sense of guilt about the need to prompt for interaction, companionship and intimacy.

These findings and the model described above foreground the significance of social context with respect to communication difficulties associated with the AS disorder. In doing this, they highlight the social conditions that shape this disorder within intimate relationships. The resulting complexities observed in the communication and interaction that emerge in the dependency cycle go beyond the common observation that the AS condition involves a lack of sensitivity to social cues and implicit social messages. Rather, the patterns of behaviour of the AS partner—typically attributed to the biological dimensions of the condition—are the result of the complex interconnection between competing needs, roles and expectations, and problem-solving behaviours within the ongoing communicative enterprise that defines the intimate relationship. These findings suggest that biological interpretations of communication and social difficulties associated with the AS disorder are insufficient and require further investigation.

Findings from our study suggest that a potentially useful framework for guiding such investigation is dynamic systems theory (DST). DST has become influential in the field of developmental psychology for describing complex phenomenon in fields such as linguistic development (Barsalou, 2008; Lang, 2014; Lewis, 2000; Thelen & Smith, 1996). Megremi (2014) adopted a dynamic systems framework to review the literature on the aetiology and pathogenesis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) suggesting that such an approach may have the potential to illuminate how ASD might be regarded not as an aggregation of different symptoms within an individual but rather an outcome of a non-linear pattern of system self-organisation. While Megremi was interested in exploring the complex relationships between environmental and biological and neurodevelopmental factors that influence the expression of ASD in individuals, we suggest that DST has the potential to inform therapeutic interventions for individuals who have lived with the condition for many years, and have had to learn to adapt to function in complex social environments such as long-term intimate relationships. DST explains observed patterns of behaviour such as (e.g. motor behaviour) as the result or outcome of complex interactions between three domains: individual's developed capacities and psychological states, performance constraints relating to the particular task, and contextual features or rules of performance (see Lewis, 2000; Thompson & Varela, 2001; Thelen & Smith, 1994). Any elements or conditions within these domains may act as affordances of constraints with respect to particular behaviour, making some behaviour more likely to emerge than others, given particular individual capacities and task and performance contexts. Significantly, DST rejects the idea that observed behaviour is determined by the status of a particular underlying system (e.g. genetics, cognitive stage of development). Rather, it suggests that observed behaviour is emergent, resulting from the interaction of multiple systems and contextual factors.

We suggest that for understanding AS interactions within the context of intimate relationships, an approach using DST may illuminate the importance of task constraints (reciprocal interaction) in social contexts (intimate relationships). We further suggest that refocusing attention on the task and performance contexts for understanding AS communication and behaviour patterns may lead to a reconsideration of the way intervention strategies are conceptualised, devised, and implemented for this disability group.

We note that many counselling programmes and clinical interventions focus on remediating apparent cognitive and information processing deficits associated with the condition of AS (Frost, 2007; Lorant, 2011). In terms of the prompt dependency model outlined above, programmes and interventions are typically concerned with remediating internal psychological processes assumed to occur at the “Unresponsiveness” phase in the model. Findings from this study suggest that intervention for the AS-NT couples needs to commence with a focus on the “Reciprocity” phase of the model.

Specifically, this suggests that intervention should encourage NT partners to explicitly articulate their needs in relation to emotional connection and the social rules for reciprocal interactions. Moreover, our data would suggest that intervention should commence as early as possible in the relationship before the cycle of prompt dependency becomes ingrained.

However, findings and implications from this research should be considered with two key limitations in mind. First, we acknowledge that this is a small-scale study and that the findings therefore may not be generalised to a larger population. That is, the views expressed by the 18 participants in the present study may not necessarily represent the views of the majority of AS-NT couples. Yet, understandings of AS interactions and intimate relationships gained through this study provide a valuable starting point for future research and potential interventions. This position is supported by Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010) who argue that as theories produced from grounded theory studies “tend to be very specific to the context studied they often have strong implications for the design of effective practice. What they lack in terms of generalisation they gain in terms of applicability” (p. 192).

Second, while this study highlighted selected areas of difficulty characterising communication between AS-NT couples, factors underlying prompt dependency within adult relationships remain poorly understood. Intimate relationships are complex and these findings and the proposed model should be regarded as preliminary. There is a need to further test the model with a larger sample of adults with AS before it can be used within counselling programmes and clinical interventions.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present the model which details what we have called the cycle of prompt dependency. This cycle emphasises the communication roundabout experienced by AS-NT couples arising from the unmet emotional needs of the NT partner and prompt dependency of the AS partner. Our associated findings suggest an alternative theorisation of AS behaviours in communicative exchanges which highlight the embeddedness of performance expectations within complex social environments. We have suggested that DST may be a suitable theoretical framework for understanding communicative performance in action and for framing intervention strategies. We recommend that the hypotheses generated by a DST orientation to intervention warrant further investigation and that the proposed model be tested in diverse social and cultural contexts.

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