Using Relational Dialectics Theory to Better Understand Autistic Communication Competence

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism, causes pervasive challenges in social skills for affected individuals, resulting in communicative incompetence that interferes with an individual’s quality of life. Research and literature in autism suggests that communication challenges are caused by a lack of Theory of Mind, the ability to imagine the perspectives of others. The communication challenges associated with Asperger’s Syndrome are examined from a perspective informed by Relational Dialectics Theory, which posits that competence can only be judged from an interaction and not on an individual basis. Content from an online support forum for people with Asperger’s Syndrome is analyzed for themes related to dialectical tensions and the communication challenges associated with diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome. Results provide evidence that people with Asperger’s Syndrome are able to make attempts at establishing Theory of Mind and that a dialectical perspective is relevant in discussions and research of autistic communicative incompetence.
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Using Relational Dialectics Theory to Better Understand Autistic Communication Competence

The current study analyzes issues of communicative competence discussed between people with Asperger’s Syndrome (“Aspies”), a form of autism, and non-autistic, cognitively normative people (commonly referred to as “neurotypicals” by those on the autism spectrum). Issues related to communicative competence were discussed within an online support forum for people with Asperger’s Syndrome. The study is informed Baxter and Montgomery’s Relational Dialectics Theory (1996) and current literature on communicative competence. Recently scholars of both communicative competence and autism have begun to call for an interactional, or relationally-based, view and assessment of competence. Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is used to assess what issues of competence are identified as relevant to the autistic experience by people living with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) is a high-functioning autism spectrum disorder which largely impacts diagnosed individuals’ ability to learn and utilize social skills (White, Koenig, & Scahill, 2003). Autism spectrum disorders are the fastest-growing group of diagnosed disorders in the United States (Lord, Rist, DiLavore, Shulman, Thurm & Pickles, 2006). The social deficiencies are problematic for people diagnosed with
Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), who are typically of average or above average intelligence and desire fulfilling social relationships (White, Keonig & Scailhill, 2006).

Competence in interpersonal communication is associated with social and personal health, including psychological well-being (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). Impaired social skill development can be a risk factor in adult adjustment styles (Schrodt et al., 2008), and impaired adult social skills are regularly correlated with psychological disorders (Gresham, Cook, Crews, & Kern, 2004; Kurtz & Mueser, 2008; Magee Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forens, 1999). Autism spectrum disorders, a spectrum of developmental disorders, include significant social skill deficits that can present marked impairment in the interpersonal relationships of autistic individuals. By transitioning to an interactional perspective in assessing competence, communication research can contribute to a more refined and realistic understanding of the communication challenges faced by autistic individuals and their social networks.

Literature Review

*Autism and the Deficits Model*

Autism spectrum disorders are the fastest-growing group of diagnosed disorders in the United States (Lord, Rist, DiLavore, Shulman, Thurman, & Pickles, 2006). Autism is the general term applied to a full spectrum of autism disorders, which can range from classic autism to Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), High-Functioning Autism (HFA) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Autism spectrum disorders are classified as developmental disorders and individuals diagnosed frequently have average to above average intelligence (Lord et al., 2006). Diagnoses are made by the detection and classification of deficiencies in social skills, including emotional
expressiveness, typical conversational procedures such as turn-taking, understanding non-literal language, appropriate speech prosody, and overall contextually appropriate social behavior (Martin & McDonald, 2004; Krasny, Williams, Provencal, & Ozonoff, 2003; Nadig & Shaw, 2011; Kerbel & Grunwell, 1998; Shaked & Yirmiya, 2003; Tager-Flusberg, 2006) These identified social deficiencies in autistic behavior are similar to topics regularly examined in competence studies in the field of interpersonal communication (Table 1).

While many classically low-functioning autistic patients are uninterested in social relationships, such social deficiencies are problematic for people diagnosed with High-Functioning Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified. People diagnosed with HFA, AS and PDD-NOS are typically of average or above average intelligence and desire fulfilling social relationships (White, Keonig & Scahill, 2006) like any normative person without developmental disabilities (typically referred to within the autism community as “neurotypicals” or “NTs”).

Autism affects the ability of the individual to receive and interpret messages, as well as produce appropriate communicative messages in everyday social interactions. Autistic individuals typically face difficulty in “identifying and processing emotion” in a way that allows for effective communication with others (Harms, Martin & Wallace, 2010, p. 290). The difficulty in identifying and processing emotion encompasses a broad set of microlevel behaviors and skills. Other social problems experienced by people with autism include flattened emotional affect, as well as inappropriate body language or physical behavior, including the presence of repetitive motions or tics which often originate in the tendency of autistic people to “stim” or self-stimulate as a method of
coping with sensory sensitivities (Iarocci & McDonald, 2006). In addition, autism spectrum disorders are often associated with physical sensitivities; hyper- or hyposensitive hearing, hypersensitivity to light, or hyper- or hypo-sensitivities to physical sensations such as textures of food or certain types of clothing are common. Such sensitivity to sensory overload, often resulting in coping behaviors (Chamak et al., 2008), which can manifest as repetitive behaviors such as rocking and hand flapping (Colman et al, 1976). These sensitivities are present in between 30% and 100% of people with autism (Dawson & Watling, 2000) and can vary in their intensity. Such behaviors can, for observers, be anywhere from mildly distracting to extremely inappropriate depending on the social context. Such physical behaviors confuse and confound efforts at normative communication.

For autistic people involved in face to face interaction, a significant amount of communicated information is difficult to comprehend or incorporate into effective and appropriate communication with others. The challenges faced by people with autism in processing sensory information and producing messages can manifest as difficulty in interpreting social situations and knowing how to behave appropriately in the correct context. These challenges can result in difficulty in establishing and maintaining friendships and intimate relationships, communicating with family members, instructors, and employers, and accomplishing everyday tasks such as making a phone call or interacting with workers at a store or bank.

Difficulties in social interactions can also create a cycle of self-reinforcing challenges: by gaining more experience with facial expressions through social interaction, one learns how to recognize facial emotions (Harms, Martin, & Wallace,
2010); a lack of experience with social interaction can result in anxiety about social interaction, leading to an avoidance of social situations. A lack of social competency can also contribute to social isolation and rejection, feelings of loneliness, academic and occupational underachievement, and over time, can contribute to the development of mood and anxiety problems (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2006). These issues can contribute to elevated stress levels and decreased physical and mental health, proving a strain on the individual and their support networks as they struggle to cope.

The challenges in communication and their consequences are largely perceived as individual deficits of people living with autism spectrum disorders. The current predominant approach to studying autistic communication relies on a deficits-based model, in which participants are perceived as lacking in a certain quantity or quality of competent behaviors. Autistic individuals are diagnosed in large part on the basis of their inability to enact socially appropriate behavior (4th ed., text rev.; DSM–IV–TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000); as a result, intervention therapies often focus on addressing the deficits of the individual while frequently not addressing the role of communication partners, such as family, friends, and community members, in contributing to successful communication (Allen, Evans, Hider, Hawkins, Peckett, & Morgan, 2008). This places the responsibility for successful and competent communication in the individual.

Since the mid-1980s, clinical approaches to diagnosing and describing autism spectrum disorders have placed strong focus on the inability of people with autism to achieve Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 1988; 1989a; 1989b; 1991; 1999; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Baron-Cohen et al, 1997). Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to the
ability to assign mental states to others that may differ from one’s own mental state, and is believed to be a necessary element in achieving skilled social behavior. ToM has been assessed in much of the research on autism as an individual trait which is lacking in people with autism spectrum disorders, meaning that people with autism are not able to understand the perspectives of others. ToM has been measured utilizing experimental, task-oriented methodologies, such as the mind-in-the-eyes test. In this test, subjects are asked to intuit emotional states from images of people’s eyes (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Hill, 2001).

Another popular measure of ToM is the false-belief test, in which a confederate places an object in one of two containers in front of a child. The confederate then leaves the room, after which a second confederate enters the room and changes the location of the object to the other container, leaving the room after this task is accomplished. The child is then told that the first confederate will return to the room, and is asked where the first confederate will look for the object. A child who answers correctly (the object is in the first container) is assessed as possessing Theory of Mind.

Children typically begin to give the correct answer consistently around the age of two years. Children diagnosed with autism at older ages have been observed to give incorrect or inconsistent answers (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). From these results it is derived that people with autism do not possess Theory of Mind. However, the ecological validity of such studies is criticized, particularly pertaining to the social context of ToM (Roeyers & Demurie, 2010). Some authors point out that even neurotypical people often fail to accurately predict another’s mental state or potential behavior, challenging the notion that ToM is a necessary and sufficient prerequisite to
adequate social skills (Senju et al, 2009; Begeer et al, 2010). The typical characterization of ToM is of a specialized capacity, with no simpler components that can be acquired gradually throughout development. However, some studies have demonstrated that individuals with autism are capable of achieving mental representations that allow them to infer ToM:

Many individuals with autism even state that they are in fact the only humans with a ToM, referring to their theoretical approach to other minds. Those without autism use less theory and more intuitive simulation in their attempts to make sense of others’ subjective experiences (Sterck & Begeer, 2010, p. 7)

indicating that individuals with autism are capable of achieving ToM in a manner that is different from normative methods, but still adequate for some purposes of ToM. It is therefore possible that some individuals with high-functioning autism are capable of “mind-reading” neurotypical people and can possess an adequate viewpoint of their perspectives.

*From Communication Deficiency to Interacting Differently*

Currently, communication literature has not fully explored the difficulties in social cognition and communication competency experienced by people with autism spectrum disorders. Much of the research in these areas focuses on a clinical perspective—identifying perceived deficiencies behavior and attempting to resolve them through therapeutic or medical techniques. Therapeutic techniques frequently focus on teaching the diagnosed persons to behave differently or to adopt the typical social script for a given situation. Intervention therapies and programs focused on social skills training have
been successful in improving basic social skills, but not more complex social skills, indicating “that some skills are more amenable for teaching using scripts and concrete rules, while perhaps ‘higher level’ skills (e.g., maintaining a conversation) require different teaching approaches” White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2006, p. 1863). The authors suggest that targeted skill improvement is often confined to “those skills that are directly and explicitly taught….flexible skill use in natural environments continues to be a challenge” (p. 1866). This style of intervention assumes that the person with autism is deficient because they face difficulty in conforming to the social scripts without instruction (Bagatell, 2010). However, even neurotypical people frequently face difficulty in social communication, and are often incorrect in their attempts to determine what others are thinking or feeling (Sterck & Begeer, 2010). Additionally, the development of autism communities, especially those established on the Internet through computer-mediated interactions, has resulted in challenges to the historically clinical approach to autism as a disability characterized by its deficiencies (Bagatell, 2010):

“Behaviors…considered problematic in the biomedical paradigm, need to be understood as a difference, and not considered a behavior that needs to be changed. In this discourse, people with autism are considered worthy individuals in and of themselves, not people who need to be cured, altered, or isolated from the world. Autism is seen as a fundamental part of who they are…if their autism were eliminated, they would not be the same person (Bagatell, 2010, p. 38).

The autistic community’s characterization of autism as a manifestation of neurological difference, rather than a disease or illness, lends credence to an alternative perspective of
autistic communicators as active interactants in interpersonal communication. Often the limitations in social skills are lessened when the autistic individual has the opportunity to communicate in a way that meets their particular needs, such as through typing instead of speech. Bagatell describes an autistic individual who expressed a greater sense of freedom from writing than communicating orally, and who described computer-mediated communication as “‘kind of like what sign language is for the Deaf. It’s the autistic way of communicating.’ Indeed, the computer…offers a language that is visually received….Clearly, the Internet has given autistic people a voice” (Bagatell, 2010, p. 37).

The focus of the autistic community on autistic communicators as active interactants suggests a need for interaction- or relationship-based perspectives in the assessment and targeted improvement of autistic interactive competence.

A growing trend in autism research attempts to identify how autistic people develop non-normative strategies of social cognition (Sterck & Begeer, 2010; Losh & Capps, 2006; Ponnet et al, 2004). A focus on autistic participants as active communicators suggests support for a transition in research away from simply identifying and attempting to ameliorate deficits. Further research is needed to confirm that the education desired by members of the autistic community is congruent with current therapeutic goals as defined by clinical research. If the high-functioning autistic individual is beginning to be accepted as a participant in their own treatment, then it is important to determine what outcomes are desired by autistic individuals in order to create treatment programs with the greatest positive impact.

Relational Dialectics Theory Approach to Competence
Relational dialectics theory aims to analyze competence within the interaction between two or more interactional partners (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). Relational dialectics is based on the notion that conflict and contradiction are inherent to social life and are not necessarily negative elements of relationships. Baxter and Montgomery define this as dialectical tension, in which two or more contrasting concepts can exist in a “both/and” relationship as opposed to the “either/or” approach typified in the approaches usually applied to the study of competence. Contradiction over time creates change, so that assessments of competence within a relationship or set of relationships, or even within a social group, may evolve over time. Baxter and Montgomery identify three core dialectics, or contradictions, that may manifest within interactions: integration and separation, stability and change, and expression and privacy are each contradictions which may manifest dynamically within relationships. Dialectics are not always dichotomous; some dialectics can consist of multivocal tensions informed by many ideas or phenomena which can negate each other (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Tensions between two or more concepts within relationships cannot be solved, but only negotiated. Negotiating tension requires the use of strategies which necessitate competence in social skills. Strategies for negotiating tensions such as redefining conflicting concepts, balancing between the poles of a dialectical tension, or cycling between oppositions (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998), are enacted through interactional processes within relationships.

The negotiation of tensions is achieved through praxis, the “simultaneous subject-and-object nature of the human experience” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 9). Individuals engage in the process of creating meaning through acting and being acted
upon. In this process each person’s actions are bounded by the prior actions of both people engaged in the interaction. Consideration for praxis requires researchers to consider the role of time in interactions. The history of a relationship or interaction should be considered when determining the overall communicative competence of a person, as that history can play a significant role in shaping the choices a person makes in acting or reacting to another. The concept of totality is considered when applying Relational Dialectics Theory to the current study. Totality in dialectical approaches references the “inseparability of phenomena” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 10). Contradictions that are linked are inseparable and cannot be considered mutually exclusive. Rather than an “either/or” approach in considering the presence of different contradictions within an interaction, totality requires that researchers consider the possibility of contradictions existing concurrently when measuring competence in interactions and relationships.

Relational dialectics theory acknowledges that competence is a cultural judgment (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) and that there is no monolithic definition of competence; judgments of competence can vary from socio-cultural context to socio-cultural context. Different standards exist among and between different social groups. Instead of judging an individual’s competence, Relational Dialectics Theory seeks to judge the competence of the communication within the context of the relationship. Competence emerges from interaction; defining competence from a dialectical perspective requires consideration for the praxical processes in which individuals in relationship will engage to create competence.
It is difficult to define competence from the approach of Relational Dialectics Theory without limiting the assessment to simply measuring the individuals within a relationship’s perception of each other’s competence. This would, however, limit the voice of the relationship itself. A social approach to competence should measure the competence of the relationship or interaction itself, not the competence of the individuals involved. Imposing external criteria in defining competence, such as determining whether the communication within the relationship is appropriate, effective, or truthful, is also misguided. The interactive relationship of individuals will define for itself what criteria represent competence. Competence can be judged to the extent that an interaction satisfies the criteria, the interactional goals and desires, of the relationship. This allows each relationship that might be studied the freedom to define for itself what communication behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate. From a dialectical perspective, a relationship can be judged as competent to the extent their interactions meet the standards for competence defined within the relationship. The relational dialectics approach to defining competence allows for relationships to be judged by the standards of the relationship, which may vary from the dominant standards of competence of the society, or conflict with standards of a social network or community. This approach allows that individuals engaged in relationships seeking to improve their competence may embrace some approaches and reject others, based on the standards of their particular relationship.

Relational Dialectics Theory suggests a different approach to studying the communication competence of people with autism spectrum disorders. Through Relational Dialectics Theory, the autistic individual is approached as an actor within the
interaction; competence is not solely the result or responsibility of the individual’s actions but rather is a result of the interaction. Previous approaches addressing autistic communication skill have focused on defining and measuring competence deficits and training autistic children and adults to compensate for these deficits (Ozonoff & Miller, 1995). Such approaches have often done so from the perspective of fixing perceived deficits within the autistic individual. The autistic individual is responsible for generating appropriate and desirable social skills, which are externally judged by researchers and therapists. By approaching the study of autistic communication from a dialectical perspective, competence research can explore what social contexts, expectations, and roles are more or less effective in contributing to competent communication between the autistic person and others. The investigation of dialectics such as integration-separation, expression-privacy, and stability-change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) within the social interactions of people with autism spectrum disorders will help to formulate an interaction-based understanding of the challenges people on the spectrum face in communication.

The current study aims to identify what dialectical tensions emerge from interactions between people with AS and their partners in dyadic relationships. The study also seeks to understand what communication issues people with AS want to understand in the interest of improving competence in interactions, and to what extent those identified issues are congruent with the impairments identified in the diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome. The following research questions are proposed:

1a. What communicative competency issues do people with Asperger’s Syndrome indicate an interest in understanding?
1b. To what extent do the identified competency issues of interest match the criteria used to categorize the deficits used in diagnosing Asperger’s Syndrome?

2. What dialectical tensions emerge from the interactions between people with AS and others?

The aims of the study will be accomplished through the analysis of discourse involving people with AS on the topics of communicative competency.

Methodology

The study was conducted as an interpretive discourse analysis, using a grounded theory approach that would allow important answers to the research questions to emerge naturally from the data. Coding categories were informed by both the current diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, and relational dialectics theory.

The discourse selected for analysis consisted of posts from a discussion thread on the Asperger’s Syndrome support website and forum at WrongPlanet.net. Social support occurring within an online context allows for impacted individuals to communicate with others coping with similar challenges (Dunning, 2005), especially rare or stigmatized physical or mental disabilities, or physical distance, that may prevent social support communication face-to-face. People with stigmatized disabilities may find benefit in discussing sensitive topics anonymously (White & Dorman, 2001). The asynchronous nature of online communication allows for users to “carefully develop responses at their own speed” (White & Dorman, 2001, p. 694), which often especially serves the communication preferences of people on the autism spectrum (Bagatell, 2010).
Selecting data from mediated communication settings also presents conveniences. Using online data allows access to a rich discussion involving participants from a specialized population, giving access to more voices than may have been feasible through face-to-face interviews or focus groups. Collecting this sort of data through interviews and focus groups would be difficult, occupying much more time and effort to recruit participants, pre-test questions, schedule time to conduct interviews, and preprocess data for analysis.

While these tasks are challenging in any study, they are especially challenging when conducting research on a specialized population with a developmental disorder known to resist change or interruption of routines and activities not of personal interest (Koenig, & Scahill, 2006). Analyzing content from an online discussion allows for a study of the spontaneous responses that may emerge out of self-directed involvement or interest, instead of responses formed as a result of interview questions. Online settings, in which participants type their responses in asynchronous exchanges, has also been reported to be more comfortable and natural for people with autism spectrum disorders, allowing for accommodation of the special needs of this specialized population (Bagatell, 2010; Koenig & Scahill, 2006). In addition to limited access to resources in developing this preliminary study, the many benefits of selecting data from an online discussion forum were accepted as suitable justification for the current methodology.

The postings to be coded were taken from a specific discussion thread on the website WrongPlanet.net (http://www.wrongplanet.net), one of the first results in a Google search for the term “Asperger’s support.” The WrongPlanet community is targeted specifically at people with AS. The site takes its name from a quote often used
by Temple Grandin, a well-known autism advocate, to describe herself as an “anthropologist on Mars” (Cohen, 2005). The site has over 68,000 registered users, with over 4 million posts in the discussion forum since its inception in 2004. The site is focused on serving the needs and interests of people in the autism community.

The Internet allows for communities of geographically disparate people to be formed, especially among groups that are typically marginalized, such as people with autism spectrum disorders (Costigan, 1999). The WrongPlanet.net forum is unique in that it provides support for people on the spectrum, while most online autism or Asperger’s Syndrome support groups or forums are targeted at parents and family members of people with autism spectrum disorders. Additionally, posts on the WrongPlanet.net forum are publicly viewable without the creation of an account on the website, allowing for unobtrusive content collection.

For the purpose of this study, the content analyzed was taken from a single discussion thread on a specific topic relevant to the research questions. A review of discussion thread topics in the discussion forum revealed a thread titled “FIRST TIME IN HISTORY!!!! THE NT/AS OPEN HOTLINE !!!!!!” The discussion thread title reflected the intention for the thread to act as an “open hotline,” a place where forum users who either were neurotypical or had AIS could ask questions of each other in order to attain some understanding of each other’s behavior, perspectives, and attitudes. Purposive sampling was used to select the thread due to its relevance to the topic of the research questions related to communicative competency issues. An introductory initial post outlined the concept of the thread and explained some basic rules for the discussion thread. No criticism or debate was allowed, though clarifying questions and on-topic
conversation were encouraged. A closing comment explained the desire to “get honest NT or Aspie feedback to our specific, personal, pressing questions.” Permission was gained from Alex Plank, the owner of the WrongPlanet.net website, to collect the content for the purposes of research.

The first 500 posts were selected from the thread and cleaned to extract the desired units for analysis. Units of analysis consisted of posts containing one or more questions about communication in interpersonal contexts. Only posts asking initial questions as part of the discourse were included; posts containing follow-up questions asking for clarification or additional information on a concept or topic of another poster’s question were not included. Posts containing only responses to questions were also not included, as such posts were not relevant in determining the communication skills people with AS desire to understand. Initial posts were coded as individual units of analysis instead of individual questions because multiple questions in a post were often connected, building on each other to define the issues or concepts a poster found interesting or on which a poster desired definition and discussion.

A post was determined to contain a question based on the semantic and grammatical content of the posts. Often, posts were explicit in their questioning, containing phrases such as “I have a ? for NTs” or by ending questions with question marks. Some questions did not contain question marks but were phrased to be read as questions (e.g. “Do you feel that bullying someone with AS will rehabilitate them”). These posts were also considered to contain questions. A total of 130 posts were determined to meet the criteria of being an initial post as defined above. The 130 posts contained questions about communicative competence and were relevant to the original
topic of the discussion thread of seeking understanding between people with AS and NTs. Posts were then coded using MAXQDA 10 Content Analysis Software for data coding (http://www.maxqda.com).

**Analysis**

A grounded theory approach consisting of initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007) was used to code the data. The initial coding consisted of assessing each post for general themes, as well as constant comparison to other posts to determine similarities and differences. The initial coding was followed by focused coding, which used the most significant and frequent codes to understand the content. Significant codes were not always frequent; for example, the disclosure code emerged from only six units of analysis which specifically mentioned the issue of disclosure. However, these disclosures represented a significant enough experience for a few users that were also distinct from any other code category to warrant a separate code category. Axial coding was also used in order to inform the development of emergent categories (Charmaz, 2006).

**Coding Categories**

The coding categories first reflect the targeted audience for questions about communicative competence, allowing for an understanding of what is being asked of whom in the online discussion thread. Categories were also created to reflect dialectical tensions that emerged from the posts—these reflected the basic tensions first defined by Baxter & Montgomery (1996): separation-integration, expression-privacy, and stability-change. Finally, a series of emergent categories related to specific communication behaviors and social skills was coded, informed by the current diagnostic criteria for
Asperger’s Syndrome. These categories were later classified as subcategories of one of the central diagnostic criteria.

Posts could not be grouped according to the diagnostic status of the post’s author, as such information was not always available either in the content of the posts or in a user’s profile. In order to determine the intended audience of the questioning and establish the dominant voice within the discussion thread, initial posts were first grouped according to the intended addressee of each post. Given the nature of the discussion thread, taking place in a discourse community catering to the interests of people with Asperger’s Syndrome, the subject of the initial postings can be assumed to be adequately representative of the identity of the users writing the posts, such that questions addressed to NTs are likely being asked by people with AS, and vice versa. Categories for post addressees were “NT-directed” and “AS-directed,” meaning that the questions in the post were directed toward either NT users or users with AS, respectively. The posts were determined to be NT or AS-directed based on explicit directives such as “I have a question for AS folks,” or by the topic of the question, such as, “what exactly do NT’s find ‘scary' in some of us?” While some posts would include statements specifically indicating the group at whom the post was directed, more posts did not contain such directives or contained nonspecific directives such as stating that a question was intended for NTs and People with AS. As a result, the definitions of the question categories were expanded. Posts were coded as being directed to people with AS if the primary subject of the question or questions related to communication behaviors, skills, or competencies of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. Posts were coded as being directed to neurotypicals if the primary subject of the question or questions related to the communication behaviors,
skills, or competencies of neurotypical people, or normatively neurotypical ways of achieving such behaviors, skills, or competencies. An additional category of either-directed questions was also created to accommodate postings that were addressed to both neurotypicals and people with Asperger’s Syndrome or in which the subject of the post related to both neurotypicals and people with Asperger’s Syndrome (See Table 2 for examples).

*Coding for Dialectics*

Much of the work examining dialectical tensions in relationships has focused on tensions within romantic relationships and has been produced by interviewing romantic partners about the shared relationship (Baxter, 1990; Baxter et al., 1997; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & West, 2003; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Less studied is the existence and management of dialectics within non-romantic relationships such as family relationships (Norwood, 2012; Norwood & Baxter, 2011). The posts selected for analysis for the current study neither focused exclusively on romantic relationships nor resulted from interviews with relational partners of any relationship type. However, the posts did result from posters’ very real experiences in many types of relationships and interactions with others. Very little research has been conducted using relational dialectics theory to analyze online content, but recent advancements in the application of relational dialectics theory to online content demonstrate the viability of expanding dialectics research to the analysis of content generated online (Norwood, 2012; Norwood & Baxter, 2011). A study of online letters from potential adoptive parents to birth mothers (Norwood & Baxter, 2011) found that potential adoptive parents engage in persuasive efforts of reframing to negotiate the
ambivalence of the adoption process, in which loss and gain are often conflicting experiences occupying the same space. Norwood (2012) applied relational dialectics to understand the dialectical struggles experienced by family members of people experiencing transgender identity and transgender transition. Posts taken from online support forums revealed transition to be a stressful experience for family members, who often experienced the transition as a conflicted loss of someone who was also still physically present. Both studies demonstrate successful applications of relational dialectics theory to the study of online content.

The current study explored the existence of dialectical tensions in users’ descriptions of their personal concerns relating to communication between people with Asperger’s Syndrome and neurotypical people. Currently used strategies as well as potential strategies for managing the dialectical tensions of communication challenges in relationships involving an autistic person emerged from the content of the discussion thread posts. Coding categories reflected the primary dialectical tensions of integration-separation, expression-privacy, and stability-change (Baxter, 1990; Baxter et al., 1997; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998).

These primary categories were used because the tensions expressed in the data reflected both internal dialectics existing within a relationship and external dialectics existing between a couple and the community in which the couple is situated (Griffin, 2006). The dialectical categories were coded by interpreting the implicit meaning of the questions asked within the posts. The interpretive process involved reading posts with consideration for what sort of relational or interactional conflicts might have resulted in
the formulation of the question. Attention was given to semantic content which evinced dialectical themes. Questions containing terms such as “being in social mode,” “friends,” “getting along,” and “fitting in” or “not fitting in” were interpreted as evidence of the integration-separation dialectic, as were questions related to the enactment of normative and non-normative behavior in social interactions and its consequences.

The same process of interpreting explicit semantic content and implicit meaning was applied to the other dialectical categories of expression-privacy and stability-change. The expression-privacy tension was determined by language suggesting the disclosure or non-disclosure of information relating to social and emotional experiences, opinions, and perspectives, such as terms like “ask,” “talk,” “controlling emotions,” “should or should not say,” and “express.” The stability-change dialectic was interpreted when language referenced developments in interactions or relationships over time, such as expected patterns of behavior or modulating levels of intimacy in friendships. Terms related to this dialectic included “becoming,” and “growing out of it,” as well as semantic content referencing the significance of time or chronology within relationships, such as recognizing patterns of behavior or choosing to trust someone again after they had earlier betrayed trust.

It is important to note that these coding categories were not considered mutually exclusive; many of the posts from the discussion thread contained questions which reflected more than one type of tension in relationships. Social life is complex and the current study attempts to acknowledge that complexity by allowing for non-exclusive dialectical categories. While the content selected for analysis in the current study is not focused exclusively on romantic relationships, relational dialectics theory recognizes that
strategies for the management of dialectical tensions are implemented within non-romantic relationships, as well (Montgomery, 1993; Baxter, 1988; Montgomery, 1992; Norwood & Baxter, 2011; Norwood, 2012).

Diagnostic Categories

To reflect the interests of the study, the current DSM (4th ed., text rev.; DSM–IV–TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome were used to inform the development of emergent categories. The category impairment in social interaction reflected diagnostic category A, which is defined as qualitative impairment in social interaction manifested by at least two of four behaviors. The coding category restrictive/repetitive behaviors/interests reflects diagnostic category B, which considers “restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities,” as manifested by at least one of four specific behaviors. Diagnostic categories C, D, E, and F were not used to create categories, as C (“the disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning”) presented issues in overlapping with the coding category derived from diagnostic category A. Diagnostic categories D, E, and F are used to eliminate other possible explanations, aside from Asperger’s Syndrome, for a patient’s behavior. Since the users participating in an online discussion forum directed toward people with Asperger’s Syndrome were likely to be largely diagnosed “Aspies,” the categorization of content into these eliminatory categories was unnecessary.

For both the diagnostic and emergent categories described below, coding was accomplished by identifying the manifestation of similar themes in the subjects of the postings. Themes consisted of similar semantic content across postings. The nonverbal
behavior category, for example, was coded for postings containing phrases like “nonverbal behavior,” “body language,” “physical movement,” or “personal space.” References to eye contact, touch, hand gestures, the face, or facial expression were also indicative of the nonverbal behavior theme. This same approach to identifying similar semantic content across postings was used in the development of other themes deserving their own category.

Emergent Categories

Several additional categories merged from the data. These categories related to the disclosure of autism status, perceiving NTs as the standard for assessing social normativity, seeking additional information about nonverbal behaviors, and asking specific questions related to Theory of Mind. These categories were later classified as sub-categories of the impairment in social interaction category, the category informed by diagnostic category A. These emergent categories reflect the diversity of issues that can challenge people with Asperger’s Syndrome in practicing communicative competence.

Disclosure

The disclosure category emerged from posts which centered on the issue of sharing knowledge of one’s Asperger’s Syndrome diagnosis or the suspicion of someone else’s potential Asperger’s Syndrome status. While only a small number of posts were coded as containing mention of disclosure, the experience of disclosure was interpreted as significant enough to warrant a distinct category.

NT as Social Norm

The NT as social norm category emerged from a pattern of posts which indicated a continuing theme of assuming that neurotypical people always practice normative
behavior, are capable of recognizing and explaining normative behavior, and are consistently conscious of the normativity of their own behavior. This category was distinct from the impairment in social interaction category due to the assumption implicit within many of the NT-directed questions that people without Asperger’s Syndrome can adequately explain normative social behavior and instruct others in how to conduct themselves normatively in social interactions.

Nonverbal Knowledge

The nonverbal knowledge category emerged from posts asking questions specifically related to nonverbal communication behaviors such as eye contact, proximity, stance, personal appearance, and gestures. This category included questions about how to execute appropriate nonverbal behaviors, such as achieving eye contact for an optimal amount of time and using stance and gestures to best achieve social goals. A number of questions in this category were also not goal-directed but instead asked about NT perceptions of AS nonverbal behavior such as stimming, or why NT people did not ever express non-normative nonverbal behavior, such as spontaneous dancing, in public.

Theory of Mind

The Theory of Mind (ToM) category emerged from posts which contained questions specifically mentioning ToM (“Can you explain the concept of ToM to me?”) or referencing related concepts such as empathy, sympathy, projection, taking the perspectives of others, or “jumping into another’s mind.” These questions typically related to the idea that people with AS are incapable to achieve an understanding of others’ opinions, emotions, or perspectives in a way that is normative and easily accomplished.
Validity

The interpretive analysis of the data resulted in theoretical saturation about three-quarters of the way through the postings to be analyzed. No new themes or categories emerged after this point. The data was reviewed twice after coding to ensure the coding was accurately labeled and appropriately represented the thematic content of the data.

Results

The current study sought to determine what communication challenges would be identified as important to people with AS in an online support forum (“What communicative competency issues do people with Asperger’s Syndrome indicate an interest in understanding?”). Issues of impairment in social interaction and relating to the theory of mind construct were identified as issues of interest to the AS population participating in the discussion thread. The NT population of the thread, while less numerous, also demonstrated an interest in these issues.

The current study also intended to discover if these identified issues were congruent with the communication and social skills deficiencies identified by clinicians using DSM-IV criteria to diagnose Asperger’s Syndrome (“To what extent do the identified competency issues of interest match the criteria used to categorize the deficits used in diagnosing Asperger’s Syndrome?”). The results show that the identified social acceptance issues do match the deficiencies identified in the DSM-IV criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome. However, the following findings demonstrate that consideration for a dialectical approach will provide an interactional perspective on autistic communication. An interactional perspective will contribute greater awareness of the
roles of interactional partners in generating effective and appropriate communication between People with AS and others to the study of autistic communication.

Additionally, the study aimed to determine the dialectical content of the postings (“What dialectical tensions emerge from the interactions between people with AS and others?”) The dialectical coding resulted in a predominance of the integration-separation dialectic, providing support to the idea that issues of social acceptance, and the communication skills used to achieve social acceptance, are a key point of concern for People with AS participating in an online support forum. From the original 500 posts selected from discussion thread, 130 posts contained initial questions related to social skills. Many of the postings were coded for multiple thematic categories, resulting in 384 categorizations with intersections between many of the codes. Table 3 presents data on the quantity of coded items in each category, while Table 4 summarizes the number of posts in each question direction category according to question subject. Table 5 presents data on the intersections between codes.

Of the 130 initial posts, 92 (71%) were categorized as NT-directed questions, indicating a strong focus on gaining NT perspectives on issues of communicative competence. Less than half of those posts, 34 posts (26%), were AS-directed questions. Four posts (3%) were coded as nonspecific-directed questions to reflect the ambiguity of their intended audience.

Restrictive and Repetitive Behavior and Interests

The restrictive/repetitive behavior and interests category contained 6 posts (5%), indicating little representation in the initial posts of the discussion thread. The majority of posts in this category concerned the repetitive physical behaviors known as stimming,
and discussion of the obsessive interests of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. This was the only category in which more posts were AS-directed questions than NT-directed questions. Additionally, only one of the 6 posts in this category intersected with the impairment in social interaction category, indicating that this common feature of autism spectrum disorders is not as interesting to users of the discussion thread as demonstrative of social skill deficit, but as a unique characteristic:

1. How long does a special interest last? And when your [sic] over it does it feel like a worn out book, or are you still interested in the subject - just not 'obsessively' any more? Also what triggers an interest in things? If you go onto another special interest does it relate to the previous one in some way or can it be totally unrelated?

2. Do you have a "topic of extreme focus"? If so, what is it and how long have you had this special interest?

3. With respect to obsessions, why is it considered more appropriate to obsess about sports and cars among NTs, but when a aspie/autist is obsessed with their interest, theyre considered and [sic] oddity?

The restrictive/repetitive behaviors and interests category emerged from the posts as a discussion about individual traits and experiences and not as a social skill deficiency. For people with Asperger’s Syndrome, topics of obsessive interest could serve as a point of social connection with others who have similar interests or who understand having an interest considered to be an “oddity.”

Impairment in Social Interaction
The impairment in social interaction category contained 57 posts (44%), with significant interactions with other categories. Of the 92 NT-directed postings, 39 (42% of the NT-directed postings) intersected with the impairment in social interaction category.

Emergent Categories

The categories which emerged from the content represent challenges to the social functioning of people with Asperger’s Syndrome. The impairment in social interaction category was adapted from the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for Asperger’s Syndrome and applied to nonspecific expressions of impairment in social skills. The emergent categories represent particular challenges to the communicative competence of people with Asperger’s Syndrome as they attempt to survive in the social world and were grouped as subcategories of the impairment in social interaction category.

The impairment in social interaction category contained 58 posts (45%), reflecting a predominant interest within the thread in topics related to social behaviors and communication. The diagnostic criteria address specific symptoms of Asperger’s Syndrome, and are suitable for determining whether a patient is sufficiently impaired to diagnose with AS. However, these diagnosable symptoms can manifest in “higher level” problems with a variety of communication and competency issues. These categories represent specific strategies that can be executed by people with Asperger’s Syndrome in order to negotiate the tensions of integration-separation, expression-privacy, and stability-change that may exist within relationships with others.

Disclosure

The disclosure category emerged out of noteworthy questions about disclosing one’s AS status to NT others. While only a small number (6 posts; 5%) of these posts
were present, their unique subject was significant enough to warrant a separate category. While a number of statements coded as disclosure related to disclosing one’s AS status, some also related to an expectation that NT people could tell when someone was AS—assuming an NT familiarity with the AS phenotype strong enough to suggest that an NT was capable, and in fact responsible, for diagnosing AS:

1. Why don't you come out and say that you suspect someone is AS? I've found out some people suspected I was AS for years and didn't say anything about it. Or why do people like dropping hints but not saying it, like some people will just say I have a Bill Gates personality (my psychologist, heh) or like my roommate the other day ask out of the blue if I obsess about things.

This category of disclosure posts indicated an interest in revealing to NT individuals that one had Asperger’s Syndrome. The additional focus on NT disclosure of suspected diagnosis indicates that the experience of sharing one’s status as an “Aspie” has significant meaning for relationships involving people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

*Nonverbal Knowledge*

This category, containing 15 posts (11.5%), emerged from posts asking questions specifically about challenges in nonverbal behavior often faced by people with AS. Posts included questions about eye contact, stimming, and other nonverbal behaviors. Questions addressed how NTs perceived non-normative nonverbal behaviors by people with AS, how to effectively communicate through nonverbal behavior, and how to interpret the nonverbal behavior of others. Some questions also addressed AS perceptions of NT nonverbal behavior:
1. To NTs: Do you notice it if a person looks at your mouth instead of your eyes when you’re talking to them? How do you feel when they do so?

Posts contained questions about specific techniques for improving and performing social skills in order to better connect and integrate with others.

2. How do you calm someone down?...In movies and books, the thing to do seems to be to do a half hug and maybe rub/pat their back and say "it's ok," but I can only do this for so long before it starts to get awkward, and it's obviously not helping.

The intersection of this category with the integration-separation dialectic indicates that users posting in the discussion thread are aware of the importance of appropriate nonverbal behavior to overall communication competence and social acceptance.

*NT as Social Norm*

The initial posts from the discussion thread were heavily focused on addressing problems in communicative competence and social skill deficits. One of the primary methods of addressing these problems that emerged was to ask NT-directed questions. This category emerged out of a theme suggesting that NTs answering questions in the thread are able to extrapolate explanations for normative social behavior. The emergent category of NT as social norm contains 43 posts (33%) with questions which implicitly assume that neurotypical people behave normatively, can understand normative behavior, and are conscious of the enactment of their own normative social behavior.

These questions presumed that the NT audience to the discussion thread would be able to provide clear and thorough explanations for normative social behavior. Normative
social behavior was treated somewhat monolithically, with no mention in the initial posts of different cultural standards for normative behavior.

Questions based on this assumption ranged from questions about basic behavior within social interactions:

1. How does eye contact work with NTs? Do you constantly look into the other person's eyes when you're speaking to them?

2. This might have been asked before, but when you have a social encounter, is a long intelligent discussion enough to feel satisfied? Or is a long conversation with just words not enough?

to questions about more complex social behaviors, such as deception:

3. To an NT; why do so many NTs tell horrible lies, mistreat good people, return bad behavior for good, and act really horrible in general?

4. Why do many NT people not say what they think and say what they do not think?

5. What percentage to what degree would you say that [lying] happens in the discussions of the general public?

Especially interesting in this category were questions assuming that neurotypical people were conscious of the normativity of their own behavior:

6. A question for NT's: Have you ever wanted to have a disorder so you wouldn't have to bear the pressures of being normal?
7. How much effort does it take, on average, for someone who isn't autistic, to 'imagine yourself in the position of someone else', so to speak, to make that 'jump' into somebody else's mind?

These specific questions implied that neurotypical people who were constantly cognizant of the standards for competence in social interaction were more competent as a result of extensive conscious effort, which this particular user has interpreted as an exhausting process for neurotypical people. The NT as social norm category revealed fascinating indications of the attitudes of people with Asperger’s Syndrome towards neurotypical people and normative social behavior.

This creates a false dichotomy in which the NT is perceived to possess skill (which they are also perceived to be cognizant of) while a person with AS is seen as lacking skill. This perception of NTs could be indicative of the tendency of people with Asperger’s Syndrome to engage in absolutist, dichotomous thinking. However, this may also be indicative of AS attempts to establish Theory of Mind of NT subjects. The category also contains statements which express an assumption that NTs answering the thread can extrapolate about the behaviors of specific others, assuming an NT understanding of all social behavior performed by people not having Asperger’s Syndrome.

Theory of Mind

This category, containing 24 posts (18%), emerged from posts containing questions in which AS posters made efforts to assign theory of mind to NT behavior. These included speculations on the causes of normative behavior, generalizations or stereotypes of neurotypicals, and logical parsing of NT behavior. It also appears from the
results that the standard designation of theory of mind as an ability that is either present or not present in an individual is problematic. The common perception of ToM as an ability that is either present or not present in an individual may be impacting how people with Asperger’s Syndrome perceive their own ability to understand and assign perspectives to others. The scientific and diagnostic literature on the negative impact of Asperger’s Syndrome on empathic ability can shape how people with AS view their own abilities. It stands to question, then, what impact this commonly accepted view of AS has on the perceived behavioral control of people with AS in learning to adapt to the challenges they face in communicative competence.

This common perception of ToM may be impacting how people with Asperger’s Syndrome perceive their own ability to understand and assign perspectives to others:

1. How do you guys come up with such perfectly NT-acceptable reactions? I'm a zero at these things. Is your AS not heavy on the ToM side? My AS mostly affects my ToM.

The current structure for categorizing AS and NT based on Theory of Mind, in which neurotypical people are believed to possess ToM and people with autism spectrum disorders are not, results in reductive understandings of what the capabilities and limitations of NTs and People with AS are, respectively, in understanding the mindsets of others. The scientific and diagnostic literature on Asperger’s Syndrome and the impact of AS on empathic ability can shape how people with AS view their own abilities. It stands to question, then, what impact this commonly accepted view of AS has on the perceived behavioral control of people with AS in learning to adapt to the challenges they face in communicative competence.
A number of posts from people with Asperger’s Syndrome asking questions indicate some attempt to create ToM, through speculating at possible causes for others’ behavior:

2. To Aspies: NTs talk about sensing the emotions of others. I can do that sometimes too, but almost never by looking directly at them. Which makes no sense, because if I'm not seeing their nonverbals, how am I getting a read at all… I know I'm processing something, but what? Anyone else have this issue where cutting out visual processing helps them get a read on someone or know anything about it?

3. Several NT posts mention "feeling" and "sensing" people’s moods and attitudes[…][…]So how does someone with Asperger's feel to you? Do we ever make you nervous, scared, or tense because we are nervous, scared, or tense, or just 'odd”? Is that why we often get bullied as children and adults? I guess I just want to know what it was about me as a kid that made other kids want to bully me, even if I was just sitting quietly reading a book. Or was it simply because I was sitting quietly reading a book and not paying attention to them?

4. Only thing I've learned to do so far is once I recognize something in one person, if I see it in someone else I assume in may mean the same thing. [sic] This a bad idea?

There are clear indications from the data that people with Asperger’s Syndrome are attempting to establish theory of mind using cognitive approaches such as direct association (Hoffman, 2000). This lends support to the idea suggested by Sterck and
Begeer (2010) that theory of mind is an emergent property which can be established in a variety of ways using many techniques. While people with Asperger’s Syndrome may not be able to establish a theory of mind of others through conventional intuitive sensing, it is apparent that some people with AS are attempting to establish effective strategies for understanding the perspectives of others.

Relational Dialectics

The results indicate that dialectical tensions are relevant in discussing the communication and social skill challenges faced by people with Asperger’s Syndrome. People with AS struggle to manage these dialectic tensions in their relationships and their attempts to relate to others. Baxter & West (2003) describe dialectical tensions as existing within relationships and capable of being only managed, not eradicated. While the current study has analyzed dialectical tensions in the postings generated by AS and NT users of the support forum, and not within the context of their individual interpersonal relationships, the tensions derived from the postings for the purpose of the study are indicative of genuine tensions within the relationships of the users with others.

Integration-Separation

The integration-separation dialectic was coded in 52 posts (40%). These posts had thematic elements which indicated an interest in or concern for socially integrating with others. The predominance of the integration-separation dialectic indicates that more of the questions on communication between NTs and people with Asperger’s Syndrome related to social acceptance, conformity to social expectations, and a sense of belonging as part of a relationship or group. The prevalence of the integration-separation dialectic in the coded postings demonstrates that the posters were most concerned with issues
relating to socially integrating with others. Users posting in the thread were most interested in seeking how to balance appropriate integration and separation in their relationships.

This dialectic emerged in a variety of situations described by posters, but usually related to being perceived in a more positive light in order to facilitated social acceptance:

1. I am unable to understand social cues to the point where everyone is constantly mocking me. People say certain things when they mean other things and give me subliminal cues that I'm unable to pick up on. When I interact in a social situation people can be aggressive toward me because I am "missing something." What is is [sic] that and I'm missing? What am I not picking up on and can I learn to pick it up?

Posts such as the above example demonstrated a focus on establishing strategies for negotiating the integration-separation dialectic.

Expression-Privacy

The expression-privacy dialectic was found in 40 (31%) initial postings. These postings demonstrated interest and concern in issues of appropriateness in communicating with others. The presence of the expression-privacy dialectic as the second most frequent tension in the content indicated that users posting in the discussion thread often dealt with challenges in communicating appropriately, either in expressing things they should not, or in not understanding why others sometimes do not express things they should or sometimes express things they should not:
1. What are some good suggestions for controlling emotional outbursts?

Man, I almost lost it today over almost nothing, I've done this since I was a kid and it's annoying.

Those posts which expressed the expression-privacy dialectic also had the tendency to address issues of socially appropriate expression and determining when to maintain privacy in typical conversations or interactions. While most of the questions in this category were directed toward an NT audience, some posts also came from NT authors directing questions at people with AS:

2. I have a question for my AS friends: What makes you want to "shut down" and not talk to people? How long does this last? What can your NT friend do to help while you are in a non-social mode?

It is evident that both NT and AS partners within relationships posting in the discussion thread are interested in establishing useful strategies for managing the expression-privacy dialectic. An acknowledgement of this tension in social skill intervention treatments would allow for relationships featuring a person with AS to better negotiate the expression-privacy dialectic as part of an everyday routine.

*Stability-Change*

The Stability-Change dialectic was coded in 15 postings (11.5%). This dialectic was low in occurrence, indicating that stability-change may be a tension that is less prominent in relationships featuring people with Asperger’s Syndrome. This may be due to the nature of the discussion thread; users participating might have been more aware of specific situations for which they desired explanation or advice, while chronic issues occurring over time may have been less salient. The stability-change dialectic may have
also been inconspicuous due to the methodology of the study. Had the methods involved examining all the posts made by a participant over time, there may be more evidence of individual reflection on the history of a relationship and relevant issues of stability and change within that relationship.

Despite the low number of posts categorized in the stability-change category, some conclusions can still be drawn from the results. The posts that did express the stability-change dialectic demonstrated uncertainty of changes that may occur in a relationship. Such change could include changes within a relationship:

1. A question for the NTs: How do you know when an acquaintance [sic] becomes a friend?

or challenges in incorporating change into one’s own behaviors toward others:

2. Why would the teacher pressure me to tell, if telling is unacceptable? I don’t understand... Out of selfishness? Same at work, what do they expect you to do when you have 2 equal bosses giving you opposite instructions, one against the other? I've been fired twice in a row for not knowing what to do in this kind of situation.

The stability-change dialectic may have been the least present dialectic due to the nature of the online discussion thread. Because the discussion centered primarily on communication across the NT/AS divide, the integration-separation and expression-privacy tensions may have been more evident in posts than the stability-change tension. Had the thread been phrased differently to encourage users to post their experiences in coping with a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome, either in themselves or others, over time, the stability-change dialectic may have been more prevalent.
Intersections between Categories

Many of the coding categories intersected in interesting ways that further reveal information about the content of the questions being asked within the discussion thread. Fourteen posts that were AS-directed were also coded in the impairment in social interaction category (41% of AS-directed postings). The prominence of this category indicates the heavy focus within the discussion thread on the challenges in achieving communication competence that often occur between people with Asperger’s Syndrome and neurotypicals.

1. Do NT's feel uncomfortable around AS'ers? Are there certain situations that make NT's uncomfortable?
2. I have a ? for NT's. Do u feel AS people have very little [sic] to no humor?
3. Question: Is it ok to approach a group of people even if they are strangers to try and make conversation and if so how would you normally go about doing so without making a fool of yourself.
4. Why is it that sometimes it is ok to joke about sensitive subjects and other times it's not??

Given the intersection between the NT-directed questions and the NT as social norm category, it is evident that a relationship exists between defining a problem, seeking a solution from a specific audience, and expecting that the specific audience will be able to adequately address the defined problem. This reinforces the previously stated idea that many of the users posting in the discussion thread with NT-directed questions assumed that NT audiences could adequately define and explain normative behavior.
The disclosure category heavily intersected with the expression-privacy dialectic (5 posts; 83% of the disclosure category).

2. How do I explain to her that I have a limit on the amount of socialization that I can take before it becomes too much?

Disclosure is the act of expressing something previously kept private to another as a sharing of information, making the intersection between disclosure and the expression-privacy dialectic a logical one.

The desire to manage the integration-separation dialectic is evidenced by the intersection of the integration-separation dialectic with the impairment in social interaction category (25 posts, 19%) and “NT as social norm” category (15 posts (11.5%), demonstrating a notable focus on the part of AS posters on acknowledging their own social skill limitations and seeking advice from other posters on how to improve social skills. The interaction with the impairment in social interaction category indicates that posts containing questions which expressed the integration-separation dialectic frequently were concerned with addressing issues of social acceptance and belongingness. The secondary interaction with the NT as social norm category indicates that posts expressing this dialectic were also expressive of the belief that neurotypical behavior is normative behavior and can be explained by neurotypical forum users.

The strongest interactions for the expression-privacy dialectic were the impairment in social interaction category (17 posts; 13%) and the NT as social norm category (10 posts; 8%). These interactions demonstrate Aspie users’ interest in understanding normative behavior and obtaining explanations and understanding for such behavior. This interaction was evident in posts that asked questions such as “What are
some good lines to get a conversation going?” in which the author sought advice on normative topics of conversation that could be used to express interest in conversing with someone.

The most prominent interactions for the stability-change dialectic were with the impairment in social interaction category (5 posts; 33% of the stability-change postings) and the integration-separation dialectic (6 posts; 40% of the stability-change postings). Intersections between the stability-change dialectic and impairment in social interaction category represented questions about social behavior over time, such as knowing how to behave in particular contexts:

1. How do you judge people so you know how to behave around them - when you should or shouldn't say something, when you should alter something about your behavior [sic] to suit the situation, etc?

The interaction between the stability-change dialectic and the integration-separation dialectic represented the challenges of events in social relationships that may result in modifying the importance of those relationships:

2. After a family member betrays your trust, do you choose to trust them again? Further, even if they betray you multiple times, and because they are family, do you continue to trust them even though you know you will get burned (yet again)?

These intersections represent clear efforts on the part of users to identify appropriate strategies for managing tensions in their relationships.

Discussion
An interpretive discourse analysis was conducted to determine what communication competency issues people with Asperger’s Syndrome are interested in by interpreting postings containing questions about communication in an online social support forum. The communication issues of interest were found to focus on social skills such as nonverbal behaviors and the performance of normative social behavior. The issue of disclosure also presented in the coded postings a number of times, and the topic of Theory of Mind was prevalent, indicating an interest in understanding the perspectives of others. These issues were examined to determine whether they were congruent with the social and communication incompetencies used to diagnose Asperger’s Syndrome. The issues of interest were found to be congruent with the criteria used to diagnose Asperger’s Syndrome.

The dialectical tensions emerging from these questions about communication were also coded to determine what tensions emerge from the relationships and interactions that people with AS have with others. The incorporation of a relational dialectics approach helped to underscore themes of tensions within interactions and relationships that People with AS struggle with in their daily lives, suggesting that the application of Relational Dialectics Theory to the study of autistic communicative competence is a useful endeavor which can complement research on specific social skills deficits in autism.

One of the most interesting results to come out of the current study is the evidence of efforts on the part of users with AS participating in the discussion thread to understand others’ perspectives. By relating personal stories and attempting to explain normative social behavior to each other, the users with AS demonstrated attempts to establish
Theory of Mind. Attempts by autistic people to establish ToM in social contexts provides support for Sterck & Begeer’s (2010) conceptualization of Theory of Mind as an emergent property, in which ToM is created by numerous cognitive properties which become available for use when they have reached an advanced enough stage. Individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome may be achieving ToM through channels that are less emotional and more based in logical reasoning or observation.

A troubling pattern that emerged from the content was the trend of People with AS to characterize themselves as lacking ToM, and therefore completely unable to understand others or normative social behavior. The resignation of these statements suggests that the common characterization of autistic difficulties with empathic responses in autism literature as a total lack of ToM may be having negative consequences on the perception autistic people have of their own abilities and potential for social skill development. Further research should investigate the impact of predominant stereotypes of autism on autistic individuals’ self-efficacy and behavioral outcomes in improving social skills.

Related to this theme was the tendency for participants in the discussion thread to presume that NT respondents could adequately comprehend and explain normative social behavior. While it is reasonable that people with AS would look to NTs as more skilled in normative social abilities and would seek advice, the assumptions made during the course of the discussion thread often represented a logical extreme in which NTs were assumed to be constantly aware of their own exercise of social skills and capable of explaining the precise purpose, meaning, and effectiveness of a social action. Questions such as “why do so many NTs tell horrible lies, mistreat good people, return bad behavior
for good, and act really horrible in general?” assumed that because NTs may be able to answer questions about the process of social skills, they were also able to explain the meaning or purpose of social skills. These presumptions may also result from the common presentation of autism spectrum disorders as characterized by a lack of Theory of Mind, resulting in incompetence, with the corollary that NTs do possess Theory of Mind, and thus are competent. The false dichotomy of autistic people as communicatively incompetent and neurotypical people as communicatively competent misrepresents the reality that neurotypical people frequently experience unsatisfying or unsuccessful interactions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), and the possibility that people with Asperger’s Syndrome may be capable of achieving quite successful interactions in a non-normative fashion.

While the People with AS in the discussion thread expressed challenges in managing dialectical tensions in their relationships with others, it is clear by their questions and personal stories that they are making efforts to address these tensions by improving their social skills and seeking to understand normative behavior. Previous work on relational dialectics theory identified the tensions experienced by relationship partners and the strategies used by relational partners to cope with tensions (Baxter, 1990; Baxter et al., 1997; Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter & West, 2003; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; K. Norwood, 2012; K. M. Norwood & Baxter, 2011). The current study has identified tensions experienced by people with Asperger’s Syndrome in their effort to establish and maintain relationships with others, as evidenced by the dialectical coding categories. The emergent categories represent specific topic areas in which people with
Asperger’s Syndrome are interested in understanding appropriate skills and behaviors for achieving interactional competence. These interests, expressed by people with Asperger’s Syndrome, indicate different methods of achieving some level of improved competency in order to better manage dialectical tensions within relationships. Many of the questions asked about social skills could have easily been asked, in a more theoretical fashion, by interpersonal communication scholars (“Isn't the real challenge in expressing one's feelings and communicating, and not necessarily the ability…to empathize?”). Perhaps autistic individuals can benefit in their relationships as scholars have benefited in research by incorporating an acknowledgement and discussion of dialectical tensions in interpersonal interactions. Intervention efforts incorporating education on dialectical tensions in clear and simple language, with explicit recommendations for tension management strategies, could prove to be a valuable tool for people with AS and their communities.

The three core dialectical tensions coded for in the current study provide helpful themes around which to center discussion of the social skills issues that emerged from the content. The three dialectical tensions used to categorize content here are not exhaustive; many more dialectical tensions may emerge from the data in additional codings. However, the tensions currently used provide an excellent starting point for understanding the nature of the social skill challenges, and overall communicative competence challenges, facing people with Asperger’s Syndrome in their relationships.

The themes emergent from the current dialectical tension categories indicate that coping strategies can be used by people with Asperger’s Syndrome to manage the tensions that emerge in their relationships with others. Many of the posters asked
questions that demonstrated the relevance of a social approach in conceptualizing competence as existing in relationships:

Would you NTs find it offensive if you had an autistic presenter that was not greeting you at the door? And, what is this minister thinking by expecting me to do this? Should I get in touch with him to tell him I can't comfortably greet people like that?

These types of questions indicated that the users with Asperger’s Syndrome writing the postings were interested in establishing a mutual sense of acceptable competence; here, speaking to a crowd may be possible where greeting a large number of people individually is not. The users writing postings neither wanted to be fully accommodated for their disorder, nor did they want to expend excessive amounts of personal resources to be perceived as normative at all costs. The overall tone of these postings indicated that people with Asperger’s Syndrome wanted to know enough about communication skills to interact in a way that would not result in social rejection or ostracization. A clear preference was indicated for having satisfying relationships with others.

Managing tensions may prove to be a key challenge in the competence training of autistic individuals, many of whom are prone to literal or “black and white” thinking. The challenges of appropriately and effectively managing tensions within relationships, especially the integration-separation tension, emerged as a consistent theme in the categories based on diagnostic criteria and the emergent categories, which represented different levels of social skill impairments.
The categories representing diagnostic criteria of restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests, and impairment in social interaction, represented macro-level challenges for people with AS trying to communicate in their relationships with others. The predominance of the impairment in social interaction category demonstrated that social skills are a main concern for people with AS in the discussion thread. Literature and research in the area of communicative competence can provide useful procedural knowledge of social skills to improve the ability of people with AS to communicate effectively and appropriately. Spitzberg & Cupach’s (2011) preliminary taxonomy of interpersonal skills and functions, which serves as a stepping stone in the development of competence theory, can also function as an organizational tool for researchers and educators seeking to create effective social skill interventions for people with Asperger’s Syndrome.

Limitations

The current study's use of dialectics did not seek to identify tensions within the context of a relationship, limiting the ability to fully understand the interdependence of relational forces expressed in the data (Montgomery, 1993). “The tension of opposing dialectical forces is assumed to reside within interpersonal relationships, not between individual partners (Montgomery, 1993, p. 209).” However, the current study does not suggest that people with Asperger’s Syndrome manifest one side of a dialectical tension while the people they interact with manifest the other. Rather, the current study suggests that the tensions discussed herein, in particular the expression-privacy and integration-separation tensions, are useful in understanding the challenges facing people with Asperger’s Syndrome in developing and maintaining communicative competence.
Using data from an online forum presents a number of challenges: the sample is a convenience sample—no systematic or random method used to collect data from population. Additionally, the sample was selected from a single discussion thread—no guarantee that these patterns apply across other discussion threads, other media, or other discussions of similar topics in online or offline settings. Using online content restricts consideration of the voices of people without access to the Internet.

*Future Directions in Research*

The application of Relational Dialectics Theory has significant potential for the study and understanding of autism spectrum disorders. The next step in addressing the interpersonal challenges facing autistic people ought to focus on identifying what interactional challenges autistic people want to address in the course of their therapies. Autistic individuals are highly variable in their symptoms and in the differences they experience in communication, and come from a diverse array of socio-cultural contextual backgrounds. As discussed above, competence in communication is not monolithic; different contexts and relationships will result in different judgments of competence. Interviews and focus groups will help to establish a preliminary understanding of what practical solutions autistic people desire to their communicative challenges. Such studies would address questions of what types of communicative skills autistic participants find most desirable to learn or understand, as well as identify what current strategies autistic individuals are using to communicate in their daily interactions.

The field of communication can also contribute to the understanding of autism spectrum disorders by identifying dialectical tensions which contribute to conflict between interaction partners based on personal behaviors, or differences between expressed
behaviors and expected behaviors. A dialectical approach to interpersonal interactions involving one or more interactants with an autism spectrum disorder will re-focus therapeutic efforts on the interpersonal skills and behaviors of both interactants, contributing to a more accepting social network for autistic individuals.

Research on communicative competence among people with autism spectrum disorders should also consider the role of mediated interpersonal communication through technologies such as social networking websites and web forums on the Internet, multiplayer video and computer games, online instant messaging, and mobile phone texting behaviors in the development and maintenance of social relationships. As discussed by Bagatell (2010), the Internet, especially, presents a new territory in social interaction and may play a particularly important role in the socialization of people with autism spectrum disorders. Competence research should extend to include an examination of how mediated interpersonal communication may present particular benefits or challenges for people with autism spectrum disorders.

Progression in research on communicative competence, and its applications to the concerns of people with autism spectrum disorders, will have beneficial outcomes for people impacted by the communication challenges presented by autism spectrum disorders. Much of the existing work on competence has focused on the social skills of the individual. A similar focus on the individual has allowed autism researchers to gain great understanding into the causes of autistic symptomatology and to implement therapies focused on the social impairment of individuals. Future research can build on the existing literature on competence, autism, and relational dialectics to examine the interactional contexts in which competence is assessed.
References


## Appendix: Tables

### Table 1 Social Skills Deficiencies in People with Autism Spectrum Disorders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deficiency</th>
<th>Lack of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overly literal interpretation of language</td>
<td>Initiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncommunicative use of language</td>
<td>Sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egocentric speech</td>
<td>Deficient inference of emotional states of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of communicative gestures</td>
<td>Deficient inference of mental states of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited or lacking eye contact</td>
<td>Social motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of reciprocity</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treating people as inanimate objects</td>
<td>Social awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal from people</td>
<td>Social cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of affection</td>
<td>Restricted interests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Examples of Coded Postings for Each Question Addressee Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AS-directed questions</th>
<th>Do Aspies feel and think more intensely [sic] and deeply then Nt's?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nothing comes to my head unless it is a topic I have an interest in and then I can talk for a long time about it. I cannot make small talk. Is this what it is like for you Aspies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are autistic people prone to black and white thinking and overgeneralization? Sure looks like it. Is it a false impression or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do other people have times when they are just not feeling any emotion? Is that an AS thing or unique to me?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NT-directed questions</th>
<th>What would the best way for an Aspie to tell you that he has Aspergers?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do you judge people so you know how to behave around them - when you should or shouldn't say something, when you should alter something about your behaviour to suit the situation, etc?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have a question for an NT: Is there any way for NT's and AS's to coexist in real happiness, not the faked kind?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonspecific-directed questions</th>
<th>Can any of you, AS or NT, relate to this feeling of having a &quot;fake&quot; disability, even though you know it's real at the same time?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do any of you feel that despite traumatic experiences overall people with AS are capable of doing well in life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What does an Aspie think before speaking with someone new and what does an NT think before speaking with someone new?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Coded Postings for Each Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Categories</th>
<th>Posts per Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive/repetitive behavior/interests</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impairment in social interaction</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT as Social Norm</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonverbal Knowledge</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Mind</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialectical Tension: Expression-Privacy</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialectical Tension: Stability-Change</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialectical Tension: Integration-Separation</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonspecific-directed questions</td>
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<td>NT-directed questions</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>AS-directed questions</td>
<td>34</td>
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Table 4 Interactions between Question Subject and Question Addressee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Questions to NT</th>
<th>Questions to AS</th>
<th>Questions to Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Restrictive/repetitive behavior/interests</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>NT as Social Norm</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>Nonverbal knowledge</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Theory of Mind</td>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>Stability-Change</td>
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Table 5 Intersections between Categories

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<th>Impairment in social interaction</th>
<th>Disclosure</th>
<th>NT as Social Norm</th>
<th>Nonverbal knowledge</th>
<th>Theory of Mind</th>
<th>Expression-Privacy</th>
<th>Stability-Change</th>
<th>Integration-Separation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Restrictive/ repetitive behavior/ interests</td>
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<td>Nonverbal knowledge</td>
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