

DOCUMENT SUMMARY This 2018 chapter from the APA Handbook of Psychopathology is a powerful resource, providing a mainstream academic overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) assessment that is filled with critical admissions. It details the unstable history of the diagnostic criteria, including a stunning 60% false positive rate for the DSM-III-R in some cases, and explicitly discusses the gender and cultural biases that lead to under-detection. While describing the ADOS/ADI-R as the "gold standard," it also reviews the known psychometric weaknesses of many other commonly used standardized questionnaires, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced approach.

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Hall_2008_RESEARCH_conference_abstract_ADI-R_Critique_PDDBI_ADOs.md,
Lord_2012_RESEARCH_research_article_ASD_Developmental_Trajectories_diagnostic_instability.md, Kalb_2022_RESEARCH_research_article_ADOs-2_BIAS_racial_sex.md

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Why This Matters to Enliten

This handbook chapter is an essential piece of evidence because it comes from the heart of the establishment (the American Psychological Association) and validates nearly every critique we have of the traditional assessment model. It provides a detailed history of the arbitrary and unstable nature of the DSM criteria for autism, including a shocking statistic about the high rate of false positives in a past edition. The authors openly discuss the "gold standard" while also cataloging the known flaws and biases (gender, cultural) of standardized tools. The chapter's discussion of "diagnostic overshadowing" and the concept of "the autisms" directly supports our neurodiversity-affirming, whole-person approach. We can use this chapter as a foundational document to show that our revolutionary stance is not just an opinion, but a necessary evolution based on the acknowledged weaknesses of the current system.

The Shifting Sands of Diagnosis: A History of the DSM

The chapter provides a history of the diagnostic criteria for autism, demonstrating its instability over time.

- **DSM-III (1980):** Officially recognized autism as a unique disorder called "infantile autism," placing it in a new class of "pervasive developmental disorders" (PDDs).
- **DSM-III-R (1987):** Renamed the condition "autistic disorder" and adopted a polythetic approach requiring 8 of 16 criteria to be met.

- **CRITICAL FLAW:** An international field trial revealed that the **DSM-III-R criteria resulted in a high rate of false positive cases**. In cases with a co-occurring intellectual disability, the **false positive rate was about 60%**.
- **DSM-IV:** Aligned more closely with the ICD-10 and introduced other PDDs, including Asperger's disorder. However, the diagnostic validity of these subtypes was later challenged.
- **DSM-5 (2013):** Transformed the PDD umbrella into a single "Autism Spectrum Disorder" (ASD) category, collapsing the previous triad of impairments into two domains (social-communication and RRBs).
- **Ongoing Instability:** The chapter notes that the DSM-5 criteria may be less likely to identify young children, women, and those with normative IQs who were diagnosed under DSM-IV. In response to this concern, the DSM-5 included a "grandfather clause" stating that anyone with a previous DSM-IV PDD diagnosis should retain a DSM-5 ASD diagnosis.

A Critical Review of "Evidence-Based" Assessment Tools

The "Gold Standard" (ADOS & ADI-R)

- The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) and the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (ADI-R) have become the "sine qua non of assessment in research—and, increasingly, clinical—settings".
- The ADOS is a semi-structured, play-based evaluation administered directly to the individual, which has transformed ASD from one of the least reliably diagnosed childhood disorders to one that is now assessed reliably.
- The ADI-R is a semi-structured parent interview focusing on current and historical symptoms.
- **Crucial Caveat:** The authors note that even with these gold standard tools, the complexities of clinical cases "often necessitate the augmentation of these diagnoses by clinical expert evaluation according to DSM-5 criteria, as well as chart review".

Commonly Used (and Flawed) Questionnaires

The chapter mentions several other common tools and their psychometric weaknesses:

- **Social Responsiveness Scale, Second Edition (SRS-2):** Often used as an outcome measure, but there are "questions about divergent validity".
- **Gilliam Autism Rating Scale (GARS):** Easy for parents to complete, but "tends to have relatively low specificity in clinical settings".
- **Autism Quotient (AQ):** A self-report instrument that is highly face-valid but "sometimes shows poorer convergence with other ASD measures".

Systemic Biases in Assessment

Gender Bias

- Girls with ASD may be "more likely to go undetected because of subtler presentation of symptoms".
- Core features can differ by gender; boys' perseverative interests may be on clearly atypical topics (e.g., a 14-year-old interested in Thomas the Train), while girls may

perseverate on more normative topics (e.g., dolls, the social hierarchy of their school), making their interests less obvious as a "symptom".

- These presentation differences may impact early detection efforts in girls.

Cultural Bias

- Cultural variations can impact symptom expression and detection.
- The chapter uses eye contact as a key example: it is a normative social behavior in many Western cultures but less so in some Eastern cultures.
- Because many autistic people show an aversion to direct eye contact, these "ASD-related behaviors may not be as immediately detected (or even viewed as atypical) in cultures where eye contact is generally rare".
- The authors conclude that "It is worthwhile to consider cultural context when evaluating individuals for potential ASD".

Key Concepts for Our Work

- **"The Autisms"**: The chapter validates the concept of neurodiversity by stating that the ASD category encompasses "a myriad of largely as-yet-unspecified genetically and environmentally determined conditions and syndromes that are sometimes called 'the autisms'".
- **Diagnostic Overshadowing**: The text defines this practice as symptoms that are non-core to ASD being "subsumed under the ASD diagnosis". The authors note that there is now "exponentially greater appreciation for the existence of comorbidity and the clinical importance of its recognition".

The Search for Biomarkers (The System's "Impossible Dream")

The chapter discusses the future of assessment, highlighting the field's search for "functional biomarkers" to provide more objective measures.

- The stated goals for these biomarkers include:
 - Applicability across a wide range of functioning and development.
 - Being scalable and cheap for clinical use.
 - Sensitivity to subtle neural changes, not just observable behavior.
 - Objectivity that does not require clinician reliability training.
- Current research in electrophysiology and eye-tracking shows "great promise" in meeting these goals.