

HOW DIFFERENT IS DIFFERENT: AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISTIC TRAITS DEVELOP PERSONAL IDENTITIES

ERINN BARRY (ADVISOR: DR. NICOLA NEWTON)

BACKGROUND

High Functioning Autism (HFA) & Feeling Different

- Many high functioning persons are under/misdiagnosed and therefore may feel “different” from others without knowing why

Female Autism Phenotype

- Male to female ratio of diagnosed cases of HFA is 5.7:1-11:1
- Females with higher intellectual ability exhibit HFA traits different from those seen in males, and may camouflage symptoms, causing more delays in diagnosing females
 - Therefore, higher-functioning females are “different” rather than more severe than high-functioning males, conceptualized as the female autism phenotype

Personal Identity Theory

- Marcia’s (1980) four types of identities: *Foreclosed*; *Diffused*; *Moratorium*; *Achieved*
- Research conducted on LGBTQ minorities may be analogous to individuals with HFA traits, as both groups are invisible minorities of a different kind
- LGBTQ minorities had more of an Achieved identity (Konik & Stewart, 2004)
 - Suggested individuals, as part of a minority group, examine themselves in more detail compared to individuals who are part of a majority group

CURRENT STUDY

Purpose

Address a gap in the literature regarding the perspectives of persons with HFA traits, and how those traits relate to the formation of an Achieved identity

Exploratory Research Questions & Hypothesis

- Does ‘feeling different’, operationalized as high self-consciousness, affect identity formation?
- Does a high level of HFA traits affect self-consciousness and subsequent identity formation?
- Do gender differences impact the development of an Achieved identity in a population with HFA traits?
- Hypothesis:* Based on Konik and Stewart’s (2004) study, individuals in the high HFA traits group will exhibit more of an Achieved identity

METHOD

N = 306 (65 males; 241 females)

Scales:

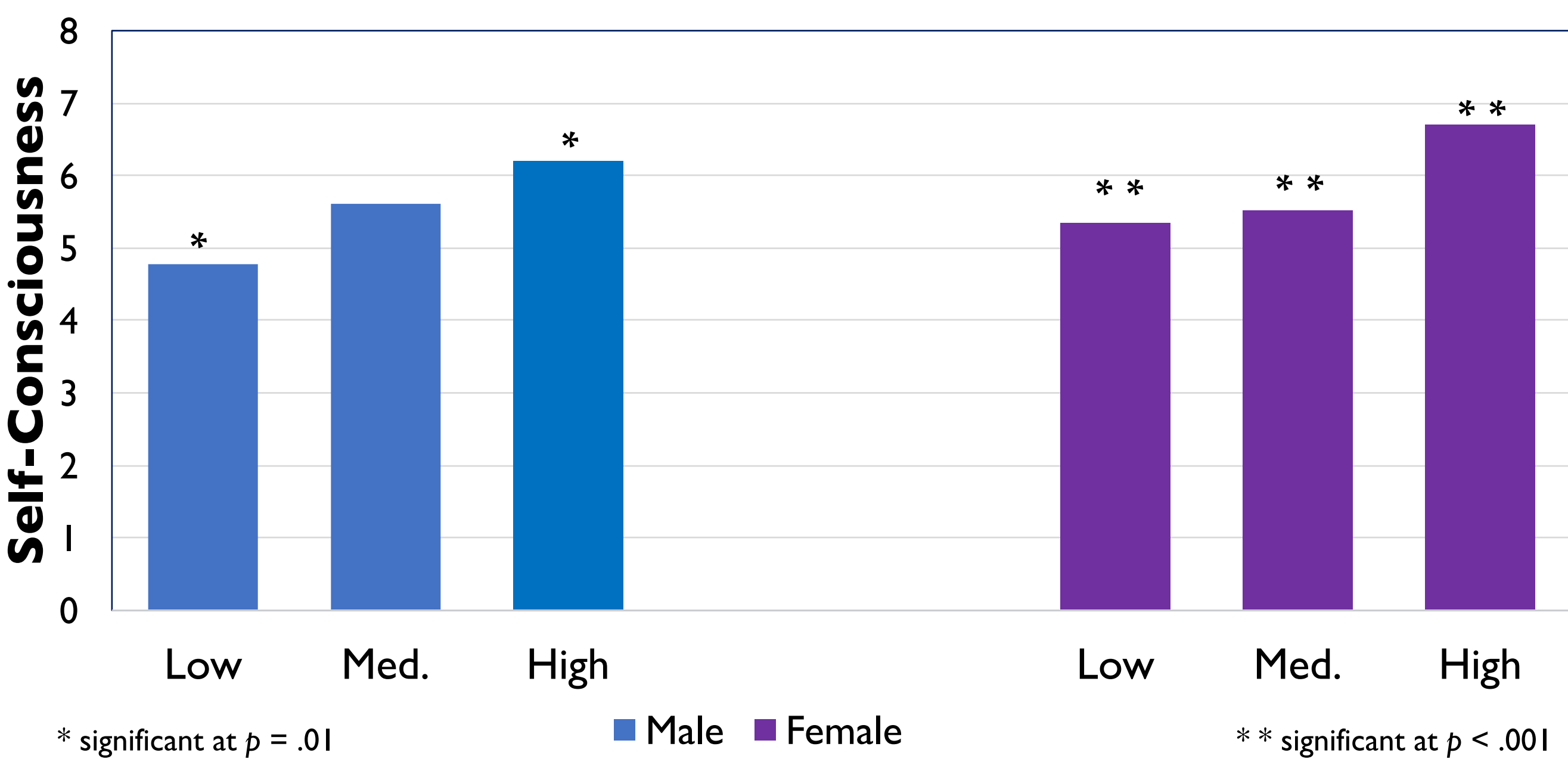
- ¹ Autism Spectrum Quotient (ASQ): measures level of HFA traits
- ² The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Statuses Scale (OMEIS): measures Achievement
- ³ Self-Consciousness Scale Revised (SCS-R): measures ‘feeling different’

ASQ Cut-off Scores

	Low Traits Group	Medium Traits Group	High Traits Group
Overall Cut-off	Bottom 16% (ASQ score: 13 and below) n = 49	Middle 40% - 58% (ASQ score: 16 – 19) n = 82	Top 20% (ASQ score: 23 and above) n = 82
Male Cut-off	Bottom 23% (ASQ score: 14 and below) n = 15	Middle 40% – 60% (ASQ score: 16 – 20) n = 20	Top 20% (ASQ score: 23 and above) n = 17
Female Cut-off	Bottom 17.4% (ASQ score: 13 and below) n = 42	Middle 39% – 58% (ASQ score: 16 – 19) n = 63	Top 18.3% (ASQ score: 24 and above) n = 51

RESULTS

Mean Comparisons of ASQ on Self-Consciousness (SCS) by Gender



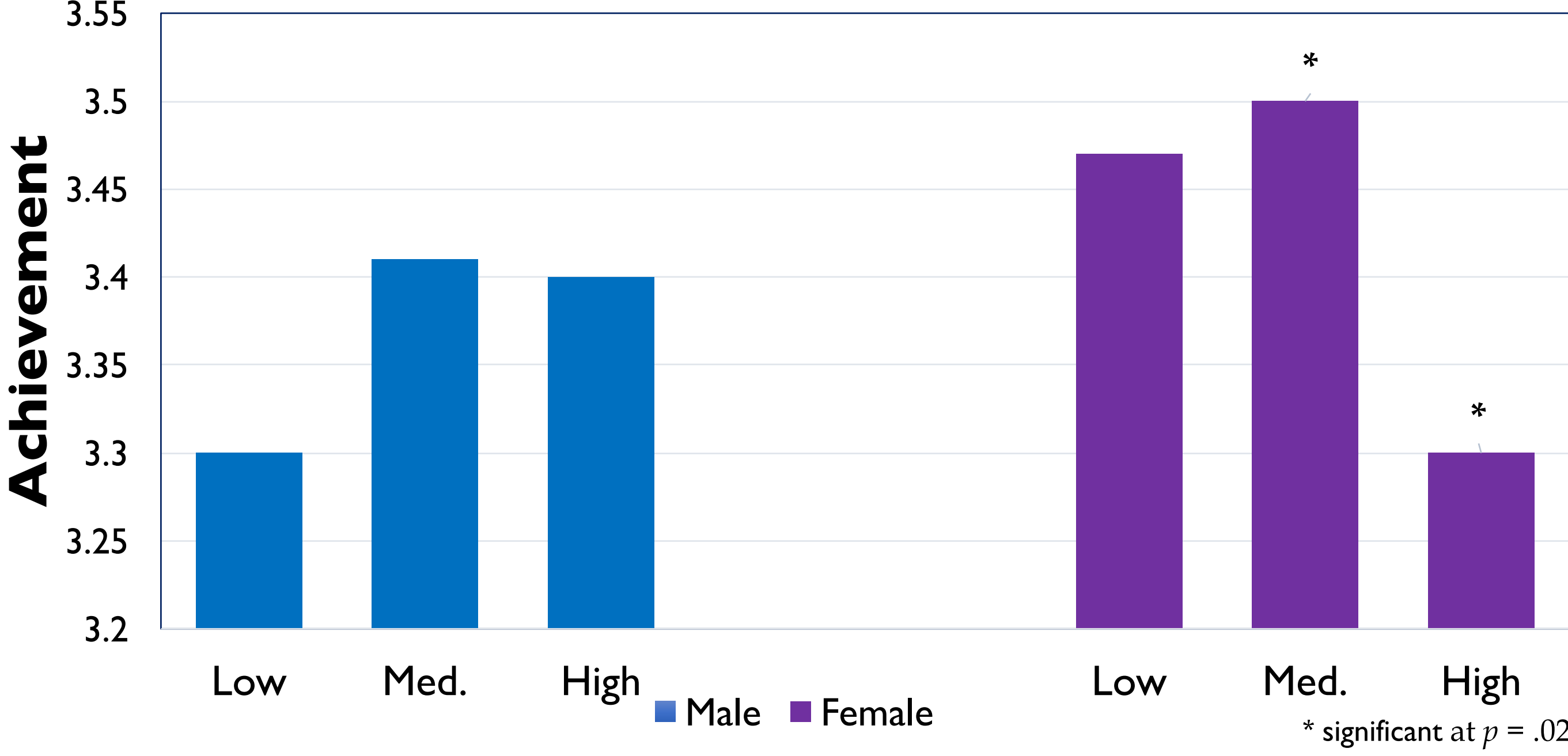
Overall ANOVA for ASQ traits on SCS for males was significant at $p = .02$
Multiple post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) showed significant differences between:

- low traits group ($M = 4.78$) and high traits group ($M = 6.20$)

Overall ANOVA for ASQ traits on SCS for females was significant at $p < .001$
Multiple post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) showed significant differences between:

- low traits group ($M = 5.35$) and high traits group ($M = 6.70$)
- medium traits group ($M = 5.52$) and high traits group ($M = 6.70$)

Mean Comparisons of ASQ on Identity Achievement by Gender



Overall ANOVA for ASQ on Achievement for females was significant at $p = .02$
Multiple post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) showed significant differences between:

- medium traits group ($M = 3.50$) and high traits group ($M = 3.3$)

DISCUSSION

- Post-hoc comparisons of ASQ traits on SCS revealed similar differences between genders, but only females showed a significant difference between the medium traits group and high traits group, with the high traits group showing more self-consciousness
 - However, self-consciousness on its own did not significantly impact the development of an Achieved identity
- Contrary to the initial hypothesis, post-hoc analysis indicated significant differences between the medium traits group and high traits group for females only, with the medium traits group showing a higher level of Achievement
- Results support the proposed female autism phenotype, as only female participants in the medium traits group reached significance on both self-consciousness and achievement variables, suggesting autism traits are exhibited differently in females, subsequently impacting identity development
- Results support Konik & Stewart’s (2004) findings that feeling different from others impacts identity development, perhaps through membership in a minority group (i.e., LGBTQ) or via an invisible condition (i.e., level of HFA traits)

Future Research

- Future research should investigate why females in the medium traits group – and not females in the high or low traits groups – had an Achieved identity, and why males did not reach significance for Achievement
- Perhaps females with a medium level of autism traits feel an augmented sense of being different from others, as they may not feel accepted by individuals with a low amount of autism traits (i.e., neurotypicals), or by individuals with a high amount of traits (i.e., diagnosed persons), making this feeling of difference all the more pronounced, and thereby affecting identity development
- It is possible the SCS-R scale did not adequately measure this feeling of difference experienced by individuals with HFA traits, as self-consciousness may not be the best construct by which to measure “feeling different”
 - In the future, it may be useful to conduct a semi-qualitative study to investigate what this ‘feeling of difference’ entails, as researchers could directly ask individuals with HFA traits what ‘feeling different’ means to them

KEY REFERENCES

- ¹ Baron-Cohen, S. Wheelwright, R. Skinner, J. Martin, & E. Clubley, (2001). *The Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ): Evidence from Asperger Syndrome/High Functioning Autism, Males and Females, Scientists and Mathematicians*. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 31:5-17
- ² Bennis, L. D., & Adams, G. R. (1986). *A revision of the Extended Version of the Objective Measure of Ego-identity Status: An identity instrument for use with late adolescents*. Journal of Adolescent Research, 1, 183-198.
- Konik, J., & Stewart, A. (2004). *Sexual identity development in the context of compulsory heterosexuality*. Journal of Personality, 72(4), 815-844.
- ³ Scheier, M. F., & Carver, C. S. (1985). *The Self-Consciousness Scale: A revised version for use with general populations*. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 15, 687-699.
- Marcia, J. E. (1980). *Ego Identity Development*. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. New York: John Wiley.

