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Experts question prevalent stereotypes about autism

As theories about autism spread like wildfire in the media and the general public, a panel of autism experts will reflect on the validity of four widely held - and potentially inaccurate - assumptions about the developmental disability.

Drawing on the latest in autism research, a psychologist, an epidemiologist, a psychiatrist and a physician will critically assess widespread stereotypes about autism during a symposium entitled "Science of Autism," at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

"With the surge in both scientists and society turning their attention toward autism, there comes responsibility," says Morton Gernsbacher, a Vilas Research Professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the symposium's chair and organizer.

"It behooves us as scientists to distinguish uninformed stereotypes from scientific reality and to move beyond myths and misconceptions."

During her talk, Gernsbacher will cast doubt on the prevalent notion among autism researchers that autistic individuals lack a "theory of mind." The belief that autistic children lack a sense of both their own minds and those of others emerged about 20 years ago, becoming a seemingly undisputed tenet in the literature since then, says Gernsbacher.

When the psychologist began delving into the question, however, she found that scientists usually ascertain how well individuals perceive the mind with tasks that require a relatively sophisticated level of linguistic ability. Since a common diagnostic criteria for autism is the impairment of communication skills, Gernsbacher says it's not surprising that most autistic children don't fare well on such theory-of-mind tests.

"I think we as a society fall prey to a slippery slope when we begin talking about members of our society as not appreciating that they or others have a mind," says Gernsbacher. "An uncritical acceptance of the hypothesis that autistic individuals lack a theory of mind can seriously compromise how autistic individuals are treated in the workplace, the community and society in general."

The other panelists will similarly address other stereotypes about autism. Judith Grether, an environmental epidemiologist who works for the state of California, will contest the popular notion that North America is reeling from an autism epidemic. Grether will make the point that a higher number of reported autism cases - due to looser diagnostic criteria - doesn't necessarily translate into an actual rise in the overall number of cases.

Panelist Irving Gottesman, a psychiatrist at the University of Minnesota, will similarly dispute



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the idea circulating among some researchers that childhood vaccines potentially cause autism. Recent large-scale literature reviews, he says, fail to support that link.

Finally, Laurent Mottron, an autism researcher and physician at Montreal's Hopital Riviere des prairies, will discuss the common idea that most autistic people are cognitively impaired. Mottron will assert that the numbers of cognitively impaired autistic individuals have been over-estimated - a fact that has important implications for the kind of therapies that autistic individuals receive.

Ultimately, Gernsbacher hopes that events such as today's AAAS symposium will help to set the record straight. "I would like scientists to become more skeptical of the stereotypes that flourish about autism and members of society to become more skeptical of the myths that are circulated."

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PHOTO EDITORS: High-resolution images are available for downloading at http://www.news.wisc.edu/newsphotos/images/Gernsbacher_Morton_hs05.jpg

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