

19 January 2009

Simon Baron Cohen Fails To Deliver For Common Humanity



Simon Baron Cohen, Psychologist

One Click Note: On Friday 16 January 2009, One Click published an article by John Stone that we titled [Simon Baron Cohen - Malefic Idiot Psychologist](#) concerning the 'research' and various activities of this man in relation to autism.

Originally published by [Age of Autism](#) on 15 January 2009, the article received many [online comments](#) concerning Baron Cohen's work including: "*The fact that the 'powers that be' are looking at ways to eliminate those that are vulnerable to vaccines is so sickening to me. What's next?*" to "*Shocking stuff. Anything but looking at the damage of vaccines. They seem to think that all Autism is classic Autism and savant, nothing else*" to "*The latest on this schmoe, this guy is something!!!*", Baron Cohen's work has not been well received. From his Assorted Mating project, curvy women and autism, 'embedded numerals' project, and now the proposition that he is addressing that foetuses at risk from autism might be aborted, this psychologist's antics funded by the UK government have offended many.

Psychologist Simon Baron Cohen did not like John Stone's article one little bit. So much so that he has requested that his response to John Stone's article be published. We are happy to comply. One Click now publishes the correspondence of both men – Simon Baron Cohen first followed by John Stone's response. This psychologist consistently fails to speak for common humanity.

The Simon Baron Cohen/John Stone Correspondence

From Psychologist Simon Baron Cohen

16 January 2009

John Stone, rudeness and black and white thinking

The One-Click Group seems to be a website for those who want to see more research into environmental risk factors in autism, and to me this seems to be a very worthy agenda. We know that autism is not 100% genetic in origin, since in the case of identical twins (who share 100% of their genes), there are instances of one twin having autism and the other not having it. In fact, the likelihood of the co-twin also having autism where one of them has it (in monozygotic (MZ) pairs) is about 60%. This means that there must be

some non-genetic (i.e., environmental) factors that are part of the cause of autism.

Genes are nevertheless important risk factors as among dizygotic (DZ, i.e., non-identical) twins where one has autism the likelihood of the co-twin also having it much lower (5%). This difference in concordance rates between MZ and DZ twins (60% vs 5%) strongly implicates genes as risk factors. At [AutDB](#) one can see the list of the 133 published genes that have been found to be linked or associated in some way with autism).

John Stone seems to want to portray me as believing in genetics exclusively, and I hope the above statement shows clearly and unambiguously that I regard autism as most likely the result of a gene-environment interaction. It may be that John Stone wants things to be black-and-white, and wants to put me totally in the genetic determinist category, in which case he is attacking a straw man. It is black-and-white, either-or type thinking; when what is needed is something a little more subtle, that recognizes both are important. I remain open-minded about possible environmental factors in autism, but John Stone's article suggests his mind is not only quite happy to be insultingly rude but also rather categorical.

As for the idea that I support eugenics, I think it might be time for John Stone to find a new straw man to attack, as I do not. My views on pre-natal screening are not pro-eugenics and are actually the opposite, as can be seen [here](#).

I hope the oneclickgroup will give those who it attacks the right to reply by posting this letter. An apology for the rudeness would also be a sign of kindness.

Simon Baron-Cohen
Cambridge University, Autism Research Centre.

* * *

From John Stone
18 January 2009
[Simon Baron-Cohen: 'Thinking differently about autism'](#)

Dear One Click Editor

I cannot see that psychologist Simon Baron Cohen represents my critique accurately at all - I didn't ascribe to him the position of believing purely in genetics as a cause of autism, but I did point to inconsistencies in his position, and a failure to give due acknowledgement to probable environmental triggers such as vaccine in any public forum, leaving the children to suffer, and bolder colleagues to drown - while, over many years, pushing a much more tenuous argument regarding a cultural/genetic cause - [Assortative Mating Theory](#) - for the rise in incidence.

This is a theory which is almost impossible to test, and related studies - such as the [Bath "curvy women" study](#) - must inevitably be biased by the self-selecting group of parents who agree to take part. It is troubling that such research is preferred, while research into the bio-medical condition of autistic children is endlessly delayed and side-lined by the Government, the Medical Research Council and the National Autistic Society, which always defers to them.

I believe Baron-Cohen's [article on BBC-online](#) also made matters worse - apart from causing widespread distress, it gave too much weight to genetic determinants, and gave a false impression of the likelihood of accurate screening ever being possible. It dismayed me to hear other people announce on the back of it that we should have such tests, when they were not much more than a fantasy, but also because he did not acknowledge the real problem that there might be bio-markers for environmental triggers such as mitochondrial dysfunction, which he needed to explain in any introduction to the subject. See [New Research Shows One in 200 People Born with DNA Mutation That Can Lead to Devastating, Often Fatal Disease](#).

I suspect that he now recognises that the terms of his article were mistaken. I did not argue that he was in favour of eugenics, but that he offered a poor argument against it - one which did not speak to common humanity but focussed on such things as mathematical ability.

By now parents are screaming for attention to the vaccine problem, incidence of autism has long ago spun out of control, and Prof Baron-Cohen just stands by. When drawn into the Observer row about MMR and the increase of autism in 2007 he denied there was a real increase of autism despite a current declared rate of 1 in 100 as against 4 in 10,000 in 1970 (a figure he mentioned in an article in the Edge in 2002 when floating his Assortative Mating Theory). It is no good if the autism rate is admitted to rise in order to support AMT, and then sweepingly denied when MMR is mentioned. On the other hand behind closed doors at the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee last year he admitted to a questioner that "more research is needed into the vaccine autism connection". See [Secret British MMR Vaccine Files Forced Open By Legal Action](#)

So why can we not have these matters brought into the open, and exactly when does it become urgent?

John Stone, Parent of an Autistic Child