In 1999, Brian Hughes, a San Antonio-based tech entrepreneur, discovered that his 13-year-old son, a brilliant boy who had nonetheless struggled socially and in school, had Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. With this revelation, his parents and teachers were better able to meet his needs, and after attending a public high school for gifted children, he followed in his mother's and father's footsteps by attending MIT and then went on to a successful career as a computer programmer.

The story might have ended there, except that shortly after his son's diagnosis, Hughes became president of the MIT alumni association. Heading a career panel at his 25th reunion, he listened, riveted, as the conversation turned in a curious direction: "The chairman of the MIT Corporation told a story of how he could never hold a job, was always insulting people, and how he'd finally given up and started his own company," he recalls. "The next speaker said that he'd just been diagnosed with Asperger's and was just starting to make sense of his life. Next, a successful engineer started saying, 'I don't think like other people. I think in pictures.' Here we were, a randomly selected sample of MIT alums, and we all were on the spectrum."

In 2003, Hughes wrote an article for the MIT alumni website, raising the question of whether "the 'abnormal' condition known as Asperger's syndrome" could be "remarkably similar to the 'normal' functioning of an engineer's mind," and was contacted by dozens of MIT alumni, many married to alums of similar schools, who also had children on the autism spectrum. Were their kids, he wondered, getting a double dose of some kind of autism-causing genes?
Across the Atlantic, Simon Baron-Cohen, director of the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge, had been asking himself some very similar questions about the families who were visiting his clinic. In the late 1990s, he'd come to believe that a common cognitive profile—a tendency toward what he called systemizing (focusing on systems and how they work), combined with noted deficits in empathy, or the ability to relate to and read others—existed both in people with autism and, to a much lesser extent, in many of their relatives. He'd begun to theorize that this sort of brain type would be common in any population that brought people with very strong math, science and tech skills to cluster together—and to think that if these high systemizers were choosing one another as mates, they might be particularly likely to have autistic children.

Baron-Cohen, a psychologist who happens to be a first cousin of comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's, is the U.K.'s leading autism researcher. His flair for such creative if controversial theories has brought him worldwide renown. At an international autism conference in San Diego in May, he was frequently mobbed by fellow attendees and treated with near universal adulation. ("Still cranking out the books and papers?" one middle-aged American academic groused jealously.) His "assortative-mating theory of autism"—the musings that led him to get in touch with Hughes in the early fall of 2003—is perhaps his most seductive idea.

Assortative mating—or, in common language, the tendency of birds of a feather to flock together—has long been known to play a big role in how people choose their marriage partners. Traditionally, people have assortatively mated, or sorted themselves, by height, socioeconomic standing, religion—and psychiatric profile. People with depression, bipolar disorder, OCD, ADHD, personality disorders and substance-abuse issues are all more likely to marry other people who either have those problems or have family members who do. "People are attracted to each other based on their similarities," says Carol Mathews, a psychiatrist with the UCSF Medical Center who has studied the role of assortative mating in psychiatric disorders. "It's not necessarily a conscious choice."

Baron-Cohen and Hughes approached MIT about surveying its alumni, but the university nixed the project. So Baron-Cohen decided to go ahead with it on his own. He recently launched a survey on his research center's website that aims to poll a wide range of college graduates—not just engineering and science majors—about their occupations, favorite hobbies, talents (things like perfect pitch, unusual memory and musical ability) and possible mental-health diagnoses and then ask similar questions about their children.

Beyond certain familiar links that he expects he may find between, say, engineer parents and children with speech delays, Baron-Cohen, whose wife is a lawyer, says he's intentionally remaining hypothesis-free about what sorts of associations will come to light. "We are also collecting data on dyslexia and ADHD," he says, "but precisely which types of parents are more at risk for having such a child is exactly what we are wanting to discover."

That willingness to go out on a limb, to take intellectual risks and float ideas that may or may not prove to be entirely true, has made Baron-Cohen, 53, a kind of pop-science hero ("a celebrity," as a camerawielding fan in San Diego put it) and a controversial figure. He most dramatically wandered into fraught territory in 2003, when he published the book *The Essential Difference*, which called autism a manifestation of an extreme "male brain"—one that's "predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems," as opposed to a "female brain," one that's "predominantly hard-wired for empathy"—and ended up on the wrong side of the debate on science and sex differences. His public comment that autism should be seen as an extreme case of systemizing traits shared by all of us—traits that can have positive aspects, that should be cultivated and not "cured" or "defeated," in the words of activists—has earned him the ire of some parents of autistic children, who complain that he underestimates their families' suffering. Thomas Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health in Rockville, Md., says some of the tension between Baron-Cohen and his detractors stems from the fact that they're focusing on very different autistic populations. "Simon has focused on what used to be called high-functioning autism. These people are very different from 7-year-olds with severe language disorders, severe systemic problems," he says. "But he has this enormous popularity among the social-neuroscience community—deservedly. He's really one of the founders of the field. He just seems to get into controversy even when he's not looking for it."

Baron-Cohen's outspokenness—uncharacteristic among research scientists, who are typically cautious and reserved—links him not only to his more famous cousin Sacha but to a family with a lot of out-of-the-box creative thinkers. Simon's brother Ash Baron-Cohen is a movie director, his daughter Kate Baron is a singer-songwriter, and his son Sam Baron is a comic filmmaker. Simon attended Oxford as an undergraduate, majoring in human sciences, and was introduced to the field of autism in the early 1980s when he began work as a teacher in a small program for autistic children. At the time, though, there was no concept of autism as a spectrum disorder that ranges from mild to severe.

**Similarities Attract. The assortative-mating theory of autism**

1. In the 1970s and '80s, women began getting math and science degrees and entering related professions in unprecedented numbers; the percentage of female graduates at MIT jumped from 8% to 45%
2. Marriage patterns changed. People started meeting their future spouses at school or work, where chances were greater that they would be like-minded
3. For the first time, people began sorting themselves, marrying-partnerwise, by similar talents and temperaments

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During the 1990s, the dotcom boom raised the social capital and personal wealth of people with genius-level tech minds and, occasionally, low people-skill levels.

### Asperger's Syndrome

People with Asperger's are verbally adept but impaired socially and can show restricted and repetitive behaviors.

### Autism Disorder

This disorder is currently defined by impairments in social interaction and communication and a limited repertoire of activities and interests.

When Baron-Cohen began his work with autistic children in the 1980s, the condition was believed to exist in only 1 out of 1,000 kids. Today in 1 in 110 is thought to be on the spectrum. This explosion in diagnoses appears to be linked to much more than just better screening. There are genetic factors at work too, aided, it is believed, by still unknown environmental factors and perhaps—the assortative-mating theory—by social change as well. The same decades that saw a vast increase in the prevalence of autism witnessed an unprecedented movement of women into the workforce and into marriage. This meant that future parents with similar talents and temperaments—not just like-minded but like-brained—began getting together to a greater extent than ever before.

The dotcom boom raised the social capital of high systemizers enormously, making them more desirable as mates. It is possible, Baron-Cohen has suggested, that people who have Asperger's or who simply have much higher than average levels of autistic traits without any full-blown disorder— are marrying and having children at higher rates than ever before.

### Baron-Cohen's Work

Baron-Cohen has been using software and games to help screen for autism. He has developed software that can be easily used by family doctors and pediatricians.

The term Asperger's didn't come into widespread use until the 1990s. Autism was poorly known, Baron-Cohen has said, when he told people about his work, they frequently misunderstood and thought he said he was teaching "artistic" children.

By the time he received his Ph.D. in psychology at University College London, Baron-Cohen had begun pioneering research into the specific kind of social deficit typical of autistic kids. He showed that such children had difficulty developing a "theory of mind": the ability to perceive that other people have thoughts, perceptions and feelings different from their own. His lab has developed software aimed at teaching social skills to young autistic children (by helping them recognize facial expressions as modeled by animated train engines) and has worked to simplify and disseminate screening tools for autism that can be easily used by family doctors and pediatricians.

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**Theodore Insel, Director, National Institute of Mental Health**

*He's really one of the founders of the field. He just seems to get into controversy even when he's not looking for it.***

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**Warner is the author of We've Got Issues: Children and Parents in the Age of Medication**