Aberrations in the Default Mode Network and Its Association with Autistic Traits in ASD

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Commentary

Received: 26-Nov-2024, Manuscript No. Neuroscience-24-156691; **Editor assigned:** 29-Nov-2024, PreQC No. Neuroscience-24-156691 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 13-Dec-2024, QC No. Neuroscience-24-156691; **Revised:** 20-Dec-2024, Manuscript No. Neuroscience-24-156691 (R) **Published**: 27-Dec-2025, DOI: 10.4172/neuroscience.8.4.004

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Citation: Ivanov A. Aberrations in the Default Mode Network and Its Association with Autistic Traits in ASD. RRJNeuroscience. 2024;08:004

ABOUT THE STUDY

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by a range of behaviours, including deficits in social communication, restricted interests and repetitive behaviours. Recent neuroimaging studies have brought attention to abnormalities in the brain's Default Mode Network (DMN), which might contribute to these clinical manifestations. The DMN is a network of brain regions that is active when a person is at rest or engaged in self-referential thought, such as daydreaming, memory recall, or planning. This network includes regions such as the Medial Prefrontal Cortex (MPFC), Posterior Cingulate Cortex (PCC) and the angular gyrus.

In neurotypical individuals, the DMN is deactivated during goal-directed tasks requiring external focus. However, research suggests that in individuals with ASD, the DMN may show atypical patterns of activation. This disruption is thought to impact processes like social cognition, self-awareness and perspective-taking, which are often impaired in ASD.

The role of the default mode network in typical development

In healthy individuals, the DMN is crucial for various cognitive functions, including introspection, social cognition and emotional processing. The Medial Prefrontal Cortex, which is a key component of the DMN, is involved in understanding others' thoughts and emotions, a process known as Theory of Mind (TOM). This is particularly important for social interactions. Furthermore, the Posterior Cingulate Cortex contributes to autobiographical memory and self-referential thinking, which are essential for understanding personal experiences and social contexts.

Aberrations in the DMN in autism spectrum disorder

Studies employing Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FMRI) have shown that individuals with ASD exhibit several key differences in the activity of the DMN. First, the connectivity between the regions of the DMN is often

altered. For example, the MPFC may show hyperactivity or insufficient deactivation during tasks that require external focus, such as social interactions. This means that the brain regions responsible for self-referential thinking may be overactive, even when attention should be directed outwardly.

Moreover, the PCC and other areas of the DMN may also show altered connectivity. This is important because the PCC is involved in autobiographical memory and the ability to integrate past experiences with current social contexts. In individuals with ASD, this dysfunction may lead to challenges in social interaction, as they may struggle to integrate personal experiences and adapt their behaviour to social cues.

Implications for social cognition and autistic traits

The aberrations in the DMN in ASD are particularly relevant when considering the social cognitive deficits characteristic of the disorder. Since the DMN is involved in self-referential thought and social cognition, its disruption can result in difficulties with TOM, empathy and perspective-taking. These cognitive impairments hinder the ability to interpret social cues, understand the intentions of others and engage in reciprocal communication.

Furthermore, the difficulty in modulating DMN activity may lead to rigid thinking patterns and a tendency toward repetitive behaviours. Since the brain's self-referential network is not appropriately deactivated during social interactions, individuals with ASD may become fixated on their own thoughts or interests, leading to restricted and repetitive behaviours.

Aberrations in the Default Mode Network in Autism Spectrum Disorder have significant implications for understanding the neural basis of the disorder. Disruptions in the connectivity and functioning of the DMN contribute to the social and cognitive deficits that define ASD, including difficulties in social cognition, perspective-taking and self-reflection. Understanding these neural mechanisms provides insight into the developmental trajectory of autism and may guide the development of targeted interventions. Addressing these DMN abnormalities could offer therapeutic avenues to enhance social engagement and cognitive flexibility in individuals with ASD, ultimately improving quality of life and social integration.