

Asperger (1906–1980) and Kanner (1894–1981), the two pioneers of autism

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Received: 25 January 2007 / Accepted: 20 March 2007 / Published online: 6 October 2007
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More than 60 years ago, two very similar descriptions of children displaying severe social deficits and unusual behaviours were published, one in English, one in German, both using the term ‘autistic’. Leo Kanner (1943) in Baltimore, USA, described 11 children with ‘early infantile autism’ in his seminal paper ‘*Autistic disturbances of affective contact*’. In the same year, October 1943, Hans Asperger, in Vienna, Austria, submitted his thesis on ‘*Autistic psychopathy in childhood*’, which was published in 1944, describing four children with ‘autistic psychopathy’. Both authors used the term ‘autistic’ which was coined by Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist, who used this label to describe the characteristics of individuals with schizophrenia. However, only Asperger acknowledged the fact that he had adopted Bleuler’s terminology in his doctoral thesis, whereas no references to Bleuler are evident in Kanner’s paper as highlighted by Schirmer (2002).

Leo Kanner has always been seen as the pioneer of autism research, with Hans Asperger being thought of as the second in line. Kanner’s paper was published in English and very soon became well-known worldwide while Asperger’s writings were mainly known within the German speaking scientific community and only came to greater attention when his work was described by Lorna Wing in 1981 in an English-language journal, and after his doctoral thesis was translated into English by Uta Frith in 1991.

It has often been mentioned that Asperger may not have been aware of Kanner’s paper, which most certainly is true. However, nobody seems to have considered the opposite scenario (Schirmer, 2002; Colin, 2006). In fact, already 5 years before Kanner’s publication, Hans Asperger gave a lecture in the Vienna University Hospital on October 3, 1938 describing the characteristics of ‘autistic psychopaths’ based on his case studies (Schirmer, 2002). This lecture entitled ‘*Das psychisch abnormale Kind*’ [The psychically abnormal child] was printed in the same year in the ‘*Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift*’ [Viennese Weekly Clinical Magazine] (Asperger, 1938) as reported by Asperger’s daughter, Maria Asperger-Felder (2000). One can assume that Kanner, who was a native German speaker—he was born in Austria, studied in Vienna and emigrated to the USA in 1924 –, may have been aware of relevant scientific publications in his home country. Of particular interest is the fact that Kanner’s by now classic article begins with the words ‘*Since 1938, there have come to our attention a number of children.....*’ without giving any indication to the significance of the year 1938. One explanation for mentioning this specific year is that Kanner met his patient Donald T., the first of the 11 children he described in his article, in October 1938 as suggested by Schirmer (2002). Another explanation is that Kanner was aware of Asperger’s 1938 article which might have given him a new perspective on some of the children he described in his 1943 paper (Schirmer, 2002).

Asperger believed that despite considerable similarities Kanner and himself described different syndromes and acknowledged in his later writings that Kanner was the first to describe ‘infantile autism’ (Asperger, 1974). However, it is a strange coincidence that the two pioneers of autism, Kanner and Asperger (who never met), were both born in Austria and spoke the same first language, were both

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describing the same type of children, were both using the same adjective for depicting their syndrome and finally were both writing their landmark papers in the same year 1943.

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