Sociocognitive Models of Autism

Theory of Mind Hypothesis
• Ability to understand that you have different mind to mind
  o Understand others mental states and emotions
• Tested by the Sally-Anne task (Baren-Cohen, 1985)
• Abilities that rely on ToM
  o Committing social faux pas (Happe, 1994)
  o Recognising facial expressions (Baren-Cohen, 2001)
  o Struggle with joint attention (following gaze)
• Suggest that other symptoms of ASC (language and social difficulties) arise from ToM
  o Autistic people are ‘mindblind’- blind to mental states of other people

Weak Central Coherence Theory
• The ability to process globally and meaningfully
  o Ability to look past details and see the whole picture
  o Common in autistic people to not see the whole picture
• Measured using visuo-spatial paradigms (see small letters not big)
• Cognitive style of autistic people explains performance in tests
• Explains other elements of ASD
  o Routine- upset if something is changed
  o Language difficulties- can’t understand irony/sarcasm
    ➔ Not able to process wider context, process literal words (Kaland 2002)
  o So in problems- stuck on one thing someone said so cant process whole sentence

Executive Dysfunction Account
• The higher order things we do in our brain e.g. planning, reasoning and complex demands
• People with ASD resemble patients with ‘dysexecutive syndrome’ (Baddeley, 1988)
  o Frontal lobe damage
  o Difficulties planning, set-shifting and inhibition
• Cognitive style characterised by perseveration- can’t switch from one task to another
• EF deficits and ASD symptoms:
  o Impaired generativity= impaired ability to generate new plan when routine abandoned (Turner, 1999)
  o Impaired mental flexibility and inhibition= problems understanding non-literal language (Mashal, 2011)
• EF deficits explain failure in ToM tasks
  o Inability to disengage from what you know is in the box (perseverating) so can’t switch to the other perspective