Are You In The Zone?
Social Awareness for the Socially Impaired

Timothy P. Kowalski, M.A.,C.C.C.

Professional Communication Services, Inc.
1401-A Edgewater Dr.
Orlando, FL 32804
www.socialpragmatics.com

What’s the Zone?

Borrowing from a movie…
“The Zone” is...

- a term used to describe what most people would expect to see in a given situation
- based on the idea that for any situation, a set of expectations has already been decided upon by a majority of individuals

Good social skills are seldom noticed

- we only pay attention to the “unusual” or “unexpected”
- Richard LaVoie calls this concept “Zero Order Skills”
  - "skills that are only significant when they fail to exist"

When walking in a mall...
But then you see...

What do you do?

No one enjoys going to the dentist. But is THIS what you expected?

We’ve all been “Out of the Zone” at times
Ever been told your zipper is down?

But did you purposely leave the house knowing it was down?

How do people see you?

Many people with AS are unaware how they are seen by others.
Surprise! People DO think about you

What the?

Terms used to describe these individuals

odd • weird • rude • foolish • unusual

Why do they act that way?
Could it be a smaller brain mass?

Could it be Mirror Neurons?

Mirror Neurons: an accidental discovery
Do mirror neurons impact individuals with AS?
Research supporting mirror neuron theory

- EEG studies support the hypothesis of a dysfunctional mirror neuron system in high-functioning individuals with ASD

- Mirror neurons necessary for normal development of recognition, imitation, theory of mind, empathy, and language

- Research suggests that ASD is associated with altered patterns of brain activity during imitation, which could stem from poor integration between areas serving visual, motor, proprioceptive and emotional functions. Such poor integration is likely to adversely affect the development of ToM through imitation as well as other aspects of social cognitive function in ASD

Face reading
This guy’s face is hard to read

It’s also hard for him to “read” us

Can you decide how the person sitting next to you feels right now?
Use a “camera”

But some people can’t

Video: “Clay Marzo: Just Add Water”
Provided by QuikSilver, Inc.
Prosopagnosia


- can’t read the face of others
- may focus only on individual components of the face
- may not realize one expression has multiple meanings

Yale Eye-Gaze Study

Feelings
Can you decide how you feel right now?

But not everyone can

Alexythymia

- the inability to identify and describe feeling states
- can’t read emotions in others
- limited vocabulary to describe these states
  - especially with subtle states
How can we help these individuals develop this skill that the rest of us simply take for granted?

That's where "The Zone" can help

The circle is "The Zone"

It represents what most people expect to see at that moment in time.
The dot is the client

Ever overdress for a party?

Embarrassing, right?
Being “Out of the Zone” is not where you want to be 😞

Appropriate social skills require one to:

- realize a message comes in many forms
- identify when a message is being sent
- successfully decode the message
- produce an “action plan”
- implement the plan
- look for feedback to assess its “correctness”
- revise as necessary

Does this guy use these skills?
But I don’t care!

Why is it important to care?

Individuals who recognized the need for improved social thinking had higher salaries than those who didn’t recognize the need.

Those lacking social cognition had less positive employment experiences and showed more preference for solitary activities.


Outcome in AS was good in 27% of cases. However, 26% had a very restricted life, with no occupation or activity and no friends. Why? Poor awareness of social thinking.


But I only want to talk about the things I like

...although some mammals do lay eggs. The duck billed, beaver tailed, otter-footed platypus of Australia...
Do teachers want the same things out of their students as their students want from their peers?

No

What’s important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adolescent Viewpoint</th>
<th>Teacher Viewpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nonverbal comprehension</td>
<td>turn taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perspective taking</td>
<td>perspective taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocal tone interpretation</td>
<td>logical communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clarification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What’s unimportant?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adolescent Viewpoint</th>
<th>Teacher Viewpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eye contact</td>
<td>humor comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narrative</td>
<td>slang usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humor comprehension</td>
<td>nonverbal comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>topic maintenance</td>
<td>topic maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slang usage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How often do we communicate?

- 80% of waking hours are spent communicating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neuroscience discovered...

- our brain’s design makes it **sociable**
- it is drawn into a brain-to-brain linkup whenever we engage with another person
- this linkage allows me to affect you and you to affect me

How can that be?
Thank the amygdala

• Happiness
• Surprise
• Fear
• Anger
• Sadness
• Disgust

Which of the 6 human feelings arouses the amygdala the most?

What’s with the amygdala?
The amygdala reads emotions

- elation in the tone of someone’s voice
- hint of anger around the eyes
- posture reflecting defeat

It then processes this information subliminally, beyond the reach of conscious awareness

“When I wish to find out how good or how wicked anyone is, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my own mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.”

...Edgar Allen Poe

The amygdala instantly recognizes the emotion we see in others
• the stronger the emotion displayed, the more intense the amygdala’s reaction

• when 2 people interact face-to-face, contagion spreads via multiple neural circuits within each person’s brain

Which picture causes you more reaction?

• the human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems used to:
  • mirror actions
  • read intentions
  • read emotions
Social skills depend on mirror neurons

How fast does our brain make a pro or con decision about another person?

1/20th of a second

We need Social Intelligence
Back to this slide again

- realize a message comes in many forms
- identify when a message is being sent
- successfully decode the message
- produce an “action plan”
- implement the plan
- look for feedback to assess it’s “correctness”
- revise as necessary

Let’s return to “The Zone”

Ever feel out of place?
You used mirror neurons to help you analyze the situation.

Friends can help too.

So can your eyes.
So, use your eyes, your amygdala, and your mirror neurons to decide if you are “In the Zone”

Because you don’t want to be “Out of the Zone”

If you want more information, check out my books.
Thank you for attending. My next presentation is “Managing the Emotional Roller Coaster of AS” Today, 11:00 am