This chapter is concerned with disorders within the autistic continuum (Wing, 1988), and not only classic autism as described by Kanner (1943, 1973). The continuum is roughly equivalent to the "pervasive developmental disorders" as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (third edition, revised) of the American Psychiatric Association (1987). The concept, in the form to be described here, was derived from an epidemiological study of a population of children in a former London borough (Camberwell) carried out by Wing and Gould (1979). The continuum comprises disorders involving the presence, in any form, of the triad of impairments of social interaction, communication, and imagination, together with a marked preference for a rigid, repetitive pattern of activities. (For the sake of brevity, in this chapter the terms autism and autistic will be used to refer to the whole continuum unless qualified as "classic" or "typical" autism, or as "Kanner syndrome" or "Asperger syndrome.")

The literature contains little in the way of systematic studies of the social impairments in higher-functioning children or adults with autism, as distinct from other features such as problems affecting cognition and language. The descriptions given here will be based on the few available studies, some published accounts of individual histories (Bemporad, 1979; DesLauriers, 1978; Grandin & Scariano, 1986; Park, 1982, 1983, 1986), and my own experience with autistic people I have known over many years. Some comments will be made concerning childhood and adolescence, but the main focus will be on adult life. This is the time when the
hopes and expectations raised by good progress in childhood are put to the test, and the consequences of the social impairments are most obvious.

It is in the high-functioning group that the central role of the triad of social impairments can be seen most clearly. The other abnormalities found in autistic disorders, such as impairment of the formal aspects of language (vocabulary, syntax, semantics), motor stereotypies, or abnormal responses to sensory stimuli may be minimal or absent—at least after the early years—and the characteristic social and communication problems and the underlying repetitiveness and rigidity of thought and action may be the only features of autism that can be observed.

THE NATURE OF SOCIAL IMPAIRMENT

The idea that autistic children have potentially normal intelligence, but do not relate to others nor use their skills because they are emotionally disturbed as a result of deviant upbringing, is opposed by the weight of the evidence that has accumulated over the years (see, e.g., DeMyer, Hingtgen, & Jackson, 1981). A major focus of current scientific work is the identification of the abnormalities of neurological and psychological function underlying autistic behavior.

Psychological Theories

Regardless of whether it was considered to be a primary or secondary phenomenon, the importance of the abnormality of social behavior in autism has been recognized ever since Kanner published his original paper in 1943 (see the multi-authored book on the subject edited by Schopler & Mesibov, 1986). In their epidemiological study, Wing and Gould (1979) found that impairments of social interaction, reciprocal social communication, and socially oriented imaginative, pretend play (the triad of social impairments) virtually always occurred in association with each other and with an inflexible, repetitive pattern of activities. It seems likely that these are different facets of some more fundamental abnormality. Various theories have been proposed as to the nature of this underlying dysfunction.

Hobson (1986a, b) has suggested that normal infants are innately programmed to be sensitive to and to comprehend other people’s emotional states from direct observation of their physical expression, and that autistic children are impaired in this function. He hypothesized that this leads to a failure to appreciate other people’s concepts, as well as their feelings, and thus impairs the development of the child’s own ability to abstract and to symbolize. This, in turn, produces the characteristic difficulty in using language appropriately within the social context and impairment of the development of imaginative activities. This formulation is similar to Kanner’s original description of autism as an “innate lack of affective contact with others.”

Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985) and Leslie and Frith (1988) saw the basic problem as cognitive rather than affective (emotional) in origin. They postulated an impairment of development of the understanding that mental events are