

# The Young ones

His father was awkward but brilliant, his brother has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and he himself is renowned for his social ineptitude. **Toby Young** wonders whether his talent for causing offence is more than it seems



Toby with his father Michael, Lord Young of Dartington, who founded the Open University and the Consumers' Association, in 2001

**T**he other day, my wife wrote a newspaper article about the trials and tribulations of living with 'Britain's most socially inept man'. She described various incidents, such as the time I asked her mother at what age she became sexually active, and said that I am unable to grasp even the most basic rules of social etiquette. 'He makes Homer Simpson look like George Clooney,' she concluded.

Almost as soon as the article appeared on the paper's website, a reader posted the following comment beneath it: 'I am very disappointed to read an article by Caroline Bondy that holds up to ridicule a man who clearly has Asperger's syndrome. Has she never seen any literature on this? It is surprising when so much has appeared in the media. These people need help and understanding and can, indeed, be helped.'

This isn't the first time it has been suggested that I might be suffering from Asperger's. This syndrome is an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and was first diagnosed by Hans Asperger, the celebrated Viennese paediatrician. One of the symptoms is a lack of rudimentary social skills. Typical sufferers simply don't know the appropriate way to behave in any given situation. At least, not until someone tells them. They often come across as rude, but in fact they don't intend to give offence. The cause of their behaviour is ignorance rather than arrogance, something that isn't immediately obvious because people with Asperger's are often highly intelligent. Indeed, Hans Asperger believed that

a dash of autism is essential for any great achievement in art or science.

I haven't just looked this up on Wikipedia. I actually know a bit about it because my half-brother, Christopher, has been clinically diagnosed with Asperger's. This is another reason why some people think I may be a sufferer - the cause is believed to be genetic. My late father, Michael Young, was never diagnosed himself, but he could certainly behave very oddly at times. To give just one example: I remember him telling me that he'd come up with a brilliant wheeze to reduce the amount of luggage he had to take on business trips. He was leaving for Australia at the time and was taking nothing larger than a briefcase. 'Look,' he said, unbuttoning his trousers to reveal another pair of trousers underneath. 'I'm wearing two suits.'

On the other hand, I am nothing like my half-brother. He was originally diagnosed with schizophrenia and requires constant supervision. He can dress himself and go to the bathroom, but he takes a very, very long time to get from A to B. I have taken him out to lunch and, in the time it takes him to get out of the car, I have sat down, ordered a meal, eaten it and paid the bill. He currently lives in a Steiner community in South Devon.

Generally, though, people with Asperger's are high-functioning, so the fact that I am not like Christopher doesn't mean anything. It is a popular misconception that you can spot an Aspie at 100 yards because when people think of Asperger's syndrome they think of the Dustin Hoffman character in *Rain Man*. In fact, the vast majority of Aspies appear completely normal - which is why their behaviour so often causes offence.

For instance, in 1995 I was offered a job on

*Vanity Fair* in New

York. Before arriving at work on my first day, I called the office to ask what the dress code was. 'Keep it casual,' was the response. When I duly arrived at the magazine's offices, I was surprised to discover that my outfit was judged 'inappropriate'. I had elected to wear a T-shirt with a picture of a movie star on it and the legend 'Young, Dumb and Full of Come'. Later, my boss explained to me that 'casual' meant khakis and a polo shirt.

Not being able to grasp simple instructions that a normal person would get instantly is a sure-fire symptom of Asperger's - and I have some others, too. I have difficulty distinguishing left from right; I tend to lose my temper very quickly; and I have an encyclopedic knowledge of obscure subjects, such as the life and times of Larry David, the actor, comedian and creator of *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. (Larry is often singled out as someone suffering from Asperger's syndrome, too.)

But I'm not convinced that this makes me an Aspie. Surely, if the above cluster of symptoms is sufficient to diagnose me, then at least half the population should be classed as having Asperger's? I suspect I may have a very mild personality disorder - the same disability, in fact, that most men suffer from. One of the fascinating things about autism is that it is far more common among men than among women. There's just something about the way the male mind works - our predilection for maps, our fascination with cars, our inability to multitask - that can easily tip over into full-blown autism. But I don't think I fall into that category. On the other hand, I have three sons myself and I wouldn't be surprised if one of them turns out to be a little different. Of course, I'll love him just the same - and I'll love him because he's a little strange, not in spite of it. ■

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