

## University of Groningen

### Solitary Persons?

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## Summary

*Solitary persons?* is the first work to offer a conceptual analysis and comparison of the complete autism theories of George Frankl (1897-1975), Hans Asperger (1906-1980) and Leo Kanner (1894-1981). These medical doctors were among the first to work with autistic children. Frankl's role in the history of autism has only been discovered in 2015 and is further clarified here. Asperger and Kanner are well-known as the founders of autism research, but the dissertation presents new discoveries about their work and a new interpretation of their theories as a whole.

Frankl, Asperger and Kanner each have a metaphor for autistic children. Frankl's metaphor was that of 'prisoners': he believed that autistic children, even when they are among people, are stuck in a solitary state, in which it is not self-evident to express how you feel. Asperger's metaphor for autistic children was that they are 'machines'. He believed that autism involves an overdevelopment of intellect and of autonomy vis-à-vis the environment. Kanner wrote that autistic children are 'barometers' who are sensitive to the emotional climate in their home, as he believed that autism is an emotional disorder that affects and is affected by the whole personality.

This conceptual-historical study is motivated by a search for a historical concept of autism that covered all of its symptoms. Specifically, it investigates two assumptions. The first assumption is that in the work of Frankl, Asperger and Kanner there was a convergence – that now has been abandoned – between the term autism, the symptoms of autism and a concept of autism. The second assumption is that they described what is now called autism spectrum disorder as a 'contact disorder'. These two assumptions are examined by reconstructing the historical context in which Frankl, Asperger and Kanner developed their ideas.