

## **Beyond Rain Man: Characterizing Knowledge, Attitudes and Awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder**

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### **Introduction**

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. A growing population of individuals with ASD are starting to enter higher education (Sasha M Zeedyk, Y. B., 2019). We seek to find the extent of knowledge, awareness, and attitudes regarding ASD at Pacific University. With a growing population of neurodiverse students in higher education, it is critical to provide them with the necessities that they will need to transition successfully. Autism spectrum disorder is one type of neurodivergence that can be expressed in many ways. However, there are commonalities in the experiences of most people who are diagnosed with ASD. Lack of social support could explain why more students with ASD have not enrolled in higher education. Postsecondary students with ASD are likely at a higher risk for social exclusion than students with disabilities considering the impairments of social communication that characterize the disorder (Mathews, 2014). Though some factors of their disorder may cause them to have difficulty interacting with their peers, awareness can help neurotypical students be supportive.

### **Empirical Question**

The DSM-V (2013) assert that for an autism diagnosis there must be “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following: deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships.” We are interested in the extent to which the public understands the needs and characteristics of people with ASD. This project explores the nature of college students’ understanding, awareness, and attitudes of those with ASD and the degree to which the stigmatization of ASD persists in an educated sample.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study will include anyone 18 years of age or older. Participants will be convenience samples from within the academic community of Pacific University, including students, faculty, and staff. The sample from the general population will include adults recruited through convenience and snowball sampling from social media. We plan to address both an academic and non-academic community of adults for comparison with a large enough sample to further compare students from the college-aged generation (i.e., Generation Z) with previous generations (e.g., Millennials, Gen X, Boomers).

### **Proposed Method**

The materials for this study included a standard demographic measure as well as the following published, cited measures:

**The Autism Stigma and Knowledge Questionnaire (ASK-Q)** assesses three ASD knowledge domains including symptoms, etiology, treatment, and ASD stigma endorsement (Harrison et al., 2019).

**Illness Belief Scale (IBS)** assesses negative stereotypes of people with ASD, namely dangerousness, personal responsibility for the disorder, discontinuity, and social inappropriateness

This cross-sectional descriptive design is a replication of the Zu et al. (2021) study among Chinese academics, however with an American sample and includes a comparison across generations and between academics and non-academics. We formulated a 52-question survey that measures the degree of knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward ASD. The survey questions are compartmentalized into sections as knowledge, awareness, and attitude. This study involves questionnaire research and utilizes the online survey platform Qualtrics for data distribution, collection, and storage. The demographic questions and all previously published assessments will follow an informed consent page with an implied consent protocol. The participants received no monetary compensation. This will also help us determine the attitudes that could affect someone’s perception of ASD. Since the survey will be administered to faculty and students, the data will also provide a difference among people within different generations.

### **Proposed Results**

To identify our sample, we will conduct descriptive analyses on all demographic data (e.g., gender, age, occupation, etc.). We anticipate generational differences in ASD knowledge, attitude, and awareness, to access this we will delineate our sample by birth date into their respective cohorts: Baby boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1976), Millennials (1977-1995), and the current generation, Gen Z (1996-today). We plan to conduct a 3 Gender (i.e., males, females, nonbinary) x 4 Generation (i.e., Baby boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) analysis of variance for each measure including an effect size estimate and post hoc tests for all significant main effects using a Bonferroni adjustment. Finally, to access the internal consistency of scores and the homogeneity of our sample, we will conduct a Cronbach’s alpha reliability test on each measure.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this study is to understand the differences in knowledge, attitudes, and awareness among generations, faculty and students. This study is important in order to increase people’s understanding and decrease reliance on stereotypes surrounding ASD. If the data were to support our predictions, it would show that the younger generations, students, have less knowledge, rely heavily on stereotypes, and have less awareness about ASD. Thus, the findings would emphasize the need to educate students about ASD to increase their knowledge. Some possible confounds include a limited sample size and biased results caused by social desirability. Pacific University is small and private. Thus, the sample size maybe limited. Furthermore, the proposed method uses self-reported measures, which may produce biased results due to participants social desirability. For further research, it would be interesting to replicate this study sampling students and faculty from larger colleges and different types of colleges (i.e., community college, liberal arts colleges, etc.).

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