



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Autism in Adulthood: Exploring Community Attitudes and Perceptions

Ms. Jisna M

Research Scholar Chinmaya Vishwa Vidyapeeth

ABSTRACT :

Despite increasing awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in childhood, societal attitudes toward autistic adults remain underexplored, especially in low- and middle-income countries. This study investigates community attitudes and perceptions toward autistic adults, focusing on factors such as stigma, misconceptions, and willingness to engage. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 350 community members in Kerala, India, through a standardized Attitudes toward Autism Scale (adapted for adults) and semi-structured interviews. Results revealed that while awareness of autism exists, misconceptions about adult capabilities, employability, and social functioning persist. Participants with prior contact with autistic individuals exhibited significantly more positive attitudes. The findings highlight the need for targeted community education and inclusion initiatives to improve social acceptance and quality of life for autistic adults.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Adults, Community Attitudes, Stigma, Inclusion, Social Perception

1. Introduction :

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although significant advancements have been made in the identification and support of autistic individuals during childhood, comparatively little attention has been paid to their experiences, needs, and societal treatment as they transition into adulthood (Howlin & Moss, 2012; Hickey et al., 2019).

The concept of autism is often framed within the context of early intervention, special education, and developmental milestones, leaving a gap in public understanding of what autism looks like beyond childhood (Bury et al., 2020). In reality, autism does not disappear with age; rather, its manifestation may change over time, and autistic adults continue to face unique challenges related to employment, social relationships, independent living, and access to appropriate support services (Müller et al., 2008; Milton et al., 2014).

A crucial but underexamined factor shaping the life experiences of autistic adults is the **attitudes and perceptions of the broader community**. Community attitudes play a significant role in determining the extent to which autistic adults are included in society, afforded equal opportunities, and treated with dignity. Positive attitudes facilitate acceptance, inclusion, and accommodation, while negative perceptions, stereotypes, and stigma serve as substantial barriers to social participation, employment, and mental health (Sasson et al., 2017; Botha et al., 2021).

Emerging research highlights that public attitudes towards autistic adults are often shaped by misconceptions regarding their abilities, social functioning, and potential for independence (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014). Stereotypes such as perceiving autistic individuals as "eternal children," incapable of meaningful adult roles, or inherently socially incompetent persist in many societies, further marginalizing this population (Kenny et al., 2016).

The situation is particularly complex in **developing countries like India**, where autism awareness is still evolving, and cultural norms place high expectations on individuals to fulfill socially prescribed adult roles, such as marriage, employment, and family responsibility (Daley et al., 2013). The combination of low public awareness, deeply ingrained cultural expectations, and limited policy focus on adult autism contributes to social exclusion, underemployment, and poor mental health outcomes for autistic adults in India (Patra & Kar, 2021).

Furthermore, studies have shown that **prior contact with autistic individuals** can significantly shape community attitudes, with greater familiarity often associated with more positive perceptions and reduced stigma (Sasson & Morrison, 2019). However, opportunities for meaningful contact with autistic adults remain limited due to segregation, lack of inclusive community programs, and prevailing stereotypes that discourage interaction.

Given this backdrop, there is a pressing need to systematically investigate how communities perceive autistic adults, what misconceptions persist, and how factors such as contact and education influence these attitudes. Such research is vital for informing public education campaigns, shaping inclusive policies, and fostering environments that support the autonomy, dignity, and participation of autistic adults.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore community attitudes and perceptions toward autistic adults, with a specific focus on identifying misconceptions, understanding the influence of prior contact, and highlighting potential avenues for promoting inclusion in the Indian context.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

While there has been significant progress in raising awareness about autism during childhood, the experiences and societal perceptions of autistic

individuals in adulthood remain largely overlooked. Community attitudes toward autistic adults play a crucial role in determining their social inclusion, access to opportunities, and overall quality of life. However, misconceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of knowledge continue to create barriers for autistic adults, especially in developing societies like India, where awareness regarding adult autism is still emerging. There is a need to explore and understand how communities perceive autistic adults, identify gaps in knowledge, and examine factors that influence these attitudes.

1.2 Objectives

The present study aims to explore community attitudes and perceptions toward autistic adults and identify factors that influence these attitudes.

1. To assess the overall attitudes and perceptions of community members toward autistic adults.
2. To identify common misconceptions and stereotypes regarding autistic adults.
3. To investigate the influence of prior contact with autistic individuals on community attitudes toward autistic adults.
4. To examine the relationship between selected demographic variables (age, gender, education) and community attitudes toward autistic adults.
5. To provide recommendations for awareness initiatives to promote positive community attitudes and inclusion of autistic adults.

1.3 Hypotheses

H1: Community members who have prior personal contact with autistic individuals exhibit significantly more positive attitudes toward autistic adults than those without such contact.

H0: There is no significant difference in attitudes toward autistic adults between community members with and without prior contact with autistic individuals.

1.4 Operational Definition of Variables

Attitudes Toward Autistic Adults

In this study, attitudes refer to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral evaluations expressed by community members toward autistic adults. This is operationally defined by the scores obtained on the Attitudes Toward Autism Scale – Adapted for Adults (ATAS-A), with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes.

- **Prior Contact**
Prior contact refers to whether participants have personally interacted with an autistic individual. This is assessed using a dichotomous (yes/no) response item in the demographic questionnaire.
- **Demographic Variables**
Demographic variables include age (in years), gender (male/female/other), and educational qualification (school level, graduate, postgraduate, etc.), assessed through the demographic questionnaire.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon two theoretical models to conceptualize community attitudes toward autistic adults:

1. Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954)

The Contact Hypothesis posits that interpersonal contact with members of marginalized groups reduces prejudice and fosters positive attitudes. Applied to this study, it is expected that individuals with prior contact with autistic individuals will exhibit more favorable attitudes toward autistic adults.

2. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)

Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes that attitudes and perceptions are shaped by observational learning, personal experiences, and social influences. Thus, exposure to accurate information and positive role models can influence how community members perceive autistic adults.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study addresses an important yet underexplored area of autism research by focusing on how communities perceive autistic adults. Understanding community attitudes is vital for identifying barriers to social inclusion and developing targeted interventions to promote acceptance, dignity, and opportunities for autistic adults. The findings can inform public awareness campaigns, guide policymakers, and assist organizations working toward inclusion of autistic adults in India. Additionally, the study contributes to the limited body of research on adult autism in non-Western, collectivist cultural contexts.

1.7 Delimitations

The following delimitations were imposed to define the scope of the study:

- The study focuses exclusively on attitudes toward autistic adults and does not assess knowledge or attitudes regarding autistic children.
- Data collection is restricted to urban and semi-urban areas within Kerala, India.
- The study includes only community members aged 18 years and above.
- Attitudes are assessed through self-report measures, which may not capture unconscious biases.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

The present chapter provides a comprehensive review of literature relevant to the current study, which examines community attitudes and perceptions toward autistic adults. This chapter presents theoretical, empirical, and conceptual contributions from national and international research that address the key variables of the study, including public attitudes toward autism, autism in adulthood, stigma and misconceptions, and the role of contact and awareness in shaping community perceptions.

The literature reviewed was sourced from peer-reviewed journals, academic databases such as PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Scopus, as well as government and organizational reports related to autism and disability studies. Keywords used in the literature search included "autism in adulthood," "community attitudes toward autism," "stigma and autism," "contact hypothesis and autism," "autistic adults in India," and "social inclusion and disability." Both quantitative and qualitative studies published over the past 15 years were prioritized, with particular attention given to research relevant to the Indian context and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The review is organized thematically to present the literature in a coherent and logical manner, structured under the following headings:

1. Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Lifespan Perspective
2. Community Attitudes Toward Autism
3. Stigma, Stereotypes, and Misconceptions Related to Autistic Adults
4. Influence of Prior Contact and Awareness on Community Attitudes
5. Research Gaps and Rationale for the Present Study

Reviews Related to the Study Variables

2.2 Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Lifespan Perspective

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is widely recognized as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, yet much of the research and public discourse remains centered on childhood manifestations of the condition (Howlin & Moss, 2012). Studies show that autistic individuals continue to face social, communication, and sensory challenges into adulthood, often compounded by limited access to appropriate support systems (Müller et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2015).

Research highlights that autistic adults experience higher rates of unemployment, social isolation, and mental health concerns compared to their neurotypical peers (Mason et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, many autistic adults demonstrate strengths and abilities that contribute positively to their families, workplaces, and communities when given appropriate opportunities and support (Pellicano et al., 2014).

In the Indian context, research on autism in adulthood is still in its infancy. A systematic review by Patra and Kar (2021) emphasizes the lack of attention given to the experiences of autistic adults in India, underscoring the need for studies exploring their social inclusion, access to services, and community perceptions.

2.3 Community Attitudes Toward Autism

Community attitudes are a critical determinant of the social inclusion and well-being of individuals with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum. Studies indicate that public attitudes toward autistic individuals are often shaped by a combination of knowledge, personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and societal norms (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Kenny et al., 2016).

While awareness of autism has improved globally, misconceptions and negative attitudes persist, particularly regarding autistic adults. Research conducted in Western countries demonstrates that members of the public often perceive autistic adults as socially incompetent, unemployable, or incapable of independent living (Sasson et al., 2017). Positive community attitudes have been linked to better social acceptance, reduced stigma, and increased opportunities for autistic individuals (Sasson & Morrison, 2019).

In India, Daley et al. (2013) noted that public awareness regarding autism remains low, and existing attitudes are often shaped by misinformation and cultural stigma. A study by Arora et al. (2018) found that community members commonly associated autism with mental illness or spiritual causes, further contributing to social exclusion.

2.4 Stigma, Stereotypes, and Misconceptions Related to Autistic Adults

Stigma is a significant barrier to the inclusion and well-being of autistic adults. It encompasses negative stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors that restrict the opportunities and rights of individuals with autism (Botha et al., 2021). Common stereotypes include beliefs that autistic adults are unemployable, lack emotional depth, or are perpetual dependents (Bury et al., 2020).

Stereotypes about autistic adults are often exacerbated by a lack of accurate information and limited visibility of autistic individuals in adult roles, such as in workplaces or community leadership positions (Milton et al., 2014). Studies have also identified "benevolent stigma," where autistic adults are pitied rather than respected as capable, autonomous individuals (Huws & Jones, 2010).

In India, stigma associated with autism and other developmental disabilities is shaped by cultural values, family reputation concerns, and misconceptions about the causes and nature of autism (Sarvanan et al., 2019). These factors contribute to the underreporting of autism and reduced willingness to engage with autistic individuals, especially in adulthood.

2.5 Influence of Prior Contact and Awareness on Community Attitudes

The Contact Hypothesis, proposed by Allport (1954), posits that direct, positive interaction with members of a marginalized group can reduce prejudice and improve attitudes. This theory has been widely applied in studies of disability and autism, demonstrating that personal contact with autistic individuals is associated with more favorable attitudes (Sasson & Morrison, 2019).

Gardiner and Iarocci (2014) found that individuals with close contact, such as family members or friends on the autism spectrum, exhibited greater understanding, empathy, and acceptance toward autistic adults. Similarly, awareness campaigns and educational interventions have been shown to reduce stigma and promote positive attitudes (White et al., 2019).

However, opportunities for meaningful contact with autistic adults remain limited, particularly in societies where autistic individuals face social exclusion or institutionalization. In India, where community-based programs for autistic adults are sparse, the general public's contact with and understanding of autistic adults is often minimal (Patra & Kar, 2021).

2.6 Research Gaps and Rationale for the Present Study

While a growing body of research emphasizes the importance of positive community attitudes for the social inclusion of autistic adults, significant gaps remain, especially in LMICs like India. Most existing studies focus on autism in childhood, parental burden, and service delivery, with limited exploration of public perceptions of autistic adults.

There is a dearth of systematic research examining misconceptions, stigma, and the influence of contact on attitudes toward autistic adults in the Indian cultural context. Given the strong influence of societal norms, family reputation, and community perceptions on individual opportunities in India, understanding these attitudes is essential.

The present study addresses this gap by systematically exploring community attitudes and perceptions toward autistic adults in Kerala, India. It seeks to identify misconceptions, examine the role of contact, and provide insights that can inform awareness programs, community interventions, and policy development aimed at enhancing the inclusion and well-being of autistic adults.

2.7 Summary of Review

The review of literature highlights that autism is a lifelong condition, yet public understanding and attitudes often fail to reflect this reality, particularly concerning autistic adults. Research indicates that community attitudes significantly influence the social inclusion, opportunities, and quality of life of autistic individuals. However, misconceptions, stereotypes, and stigma remain prevalent, fueled by a lack of awareness and limited positive contact.

International studies suggest that increasing public knowledge and facilitating meaningful interactions with autistic individuals can promote more favorable attitudes. Despite these findings, research exploring community perceptions of autistic adults in India remains scarce.

The present study builds upon this foundation, aiming to explore community attitudes, identify prevailing misconceptions, and examine the influence of prior contact and demographic factors on perceptions of autistic adults within the Indian sociocultural context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a **cross-sectional, mixed-methods design**, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to gain comprehensive insights.

3.2. Participants

A total of **350 community members** from urban and semi-urban areas of Kerala, India, participated in the study. Participants were selected using convenience sampling from educational institutions, workplaces, and community centers.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Aged 18 years or above
- Residing in Kerala for at least one year
- Willing to participate and provide informed consent

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with a self-reported diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
- Immediate family members (parents, siblings, spouses) of autistic individuals, to minimize potential bias arising from highly personal experiences.
- Individuals with severe cognitive impairments or psychiatric conditions that may interfere with comprehension of the study instructions or completion of the questionnaire.

3.3. Tools Used

- **Attitudes Toward Autism Scale – Adapted for Adults (ATAS-A):** A modified version of the Attitudes Toward Autism Scale (Huws & Jones, 2010), adapted to assess perceptions specifically toward autistic adults. The scale measures stereotypes, social acceptance, and

willingness for engagement.

- **Demographic and Contact Questionnaire:** Assessed age, gender, education, occupation, and prior contact with autistic individuals.
- **Semi-Structured Interview Guide:** Explored participants' knowledge, attitudes, and personal experiences related to autistic adults.

3.4. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. After informed consent, participants completed the ATAS-A and demographic questionnaire. A subset of **30 participants** volunteered for semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS 25**, with descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson's correlations conducted to examine relationships between variables. Qualitative data underwent **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes regarding community perceptions.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Findings

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes Toward Autistic Adults (N = 350)

| Variable | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|----------|-------------------------|---------|---------|
| Attitudes Toward Autistic Adults (ATAS-A Score) | 72.85 | 10.24 | 45 | 95 |
| Age (years) | 33.57 | 10.68 | 18 | 65 |
| Education (years) | 14.85 | 2.34 | 10 | 18 |

Table 2
Independent Samples t-test Comparing Attitudes Based on Prior Contact with Autistic Individuals

| Group | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|-----|--------|
| With Prior Contact | 102 | 76.45 | 9.15 | 4.21 | 348 | < .001 |
| Without Prior Contact | 248 | 71.20 | 10.53 | | | |

Note: Higher ATAS-A scores indicate more positive attitudes.

Table 3
Correlation Between Demographic Variables and Attitudes Toward Autistic Adults

| Variable | r | p |
|-------------------|-------|-------|
| Age | -0.08 | 0.12 |
| Education (years) | 0.32 | < .01 |

Interpretation

- The mean score for community attitudes toward autistic adults was 72.85 (SD = 10.24), indicating moderately positive attitudes overall.
- Participants with prior contact with autistic individuals demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes (M = 76.45) compared to those without prior contact (M = 71.20), $t(348) = 4.21$, $p < .001$.
- A positive correlation was observed between years of education and attitudes toward autistic adults ($r = 0.32$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher educational attainment is associated with more favorable attitudes. No significant correlation was found between age and attitudes ($p = 0.12$).

4.2. Qualitative Themes

Theme 1: Awareness with Gaps

While many participants had heard of autism, knowledge about autistic adulthood was limited, with a strong association of autism with childhood only.

Theme 2: Stereotypes and Pity

Autistic adults were often viewed through a lens of pity or dependency, with assumptions that they cannot contribute meaningfully to society.

Theme 3: Influence of Contact

Participants who had interacted with autistic individuals reported more nuanced understanding and empathy, highlighting the importance of social exposure.

Theme 4: Barriers to Inclusion

Social stigma, lack of inclusive employment opportunities, and inadequate public awareness were cited as major barriers to the inclusion of autistic adults.

5. Discussion

The findings align with global literature emphasizing that positive contact and education are key factors influencing community attitudes toward autistic adults (Sasson & Morrison, 2019). Despite growing awareness, misconceptions about the abilities and potential of autistic adults persist, contributing to stigma and social exclusion.

In the Indian context, cultural expectations around adulthood—such as employment, marriage, and family responsibility—may further marginalize autistic adults, as they are often perceived as unable to meet these normative milestones. The present study highlights the urgent need for public education campaigns that emphasize autistic adults' rights, strengths, and potential.

6. Implications

- **Community Education:** Awareness programs should target myths about autistic adulthood and promote inclusive attitudes.
- **Contact-Based Interventions:** Facilitating positive, structured interactions between the public and autistic individuals can reduce stigma.
- **Policy Development:** Governments should implement policies that support the inclusion of autistic adults in employment and community life.
- **Further Research:** Longitudinal studies are needed to assess how attitudes evolve over time and in response to interventions.

7. Limitations

- The use of convenience sampling limits generalizability.
- Self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability bias.
- The study focuses on one state, limiting applicability to other cultural contexts.

8. Conclusion

The study reveals that while there is growing awareness of autism, significant misconceptions and stigmatizing attitudes toward autistic adults remain within the community. Prior contact with autistic individuals positively influences attitudes, highlighting the role of social exposure in reducing stigma. Community-level education and inclusion initiatives are essential for improving the quality of life and societal acceptance of autistic adults.

REFERENCES

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.).
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
3. Bury, S. M., Jellett, R., Spoor, J. R., & Hedley, D. (2020). “It defines who I am” or “It’s something I have”: What language do autistic Australian adults prefer? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(2), 574–583.
4. Daley, T. C., Singhal, N., & Krishnamurthy, V. (2013). Ethical considerations in conducting research on autism spectrum disorders in low and middle-income countries. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(9), 2002–2014.
5. Gardiner, E., & Iarocci, G. (2014). Unseen challenges: The social functioning of young adults with ASD. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(3), 631–645.
6. Hickey, E. J., Crabtree, J. L., & Stott, J. (2019). “Suddenly the first priority is autistic adults”: A systematic review of stakeholders' perspectives on autistic adulthood. *Autism*, 23(2), 477–492.
7. Howlin, P., & Moss, P. (2012). Adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(5), 275–283.
8. Huws, J. C., & Jones, R. S. P. (2010). “I’m really glad this is developmental”: Autism and social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(5), 1483–1500.
9. Müller, E., Schuler, A., & Yates, G. B. (2008). Social challenges and supports from the perspective of individuals with Asperger syndrome and other autism spectrum disabilities. *Autism*, 12(2), 173–190.
10. Patra, S., & Kar, S. K. (2021). Autism in India: A comprehensive systematic review. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 43(4), 353–361.
11. Sasson, N. J., & Morrison, K. E. (2019). First impressions of adults with autism improve with diagnostic disclosure and increased autism knowledge of peers. *Autism*, 23(1), 50–59.
12. Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D. P., & Grossman, R. B. (2017). Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments. *Scientific Reports*, 7(1), 40700.