College Students’ Reactions to Behaviors Associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract
The primary goal of this study was to investigate college students’ reactions toward individuals who displayed behaviors characteristic of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). We examined whether participants had more negative perceptions of the classmate who exhibited symptoms characteristic of ASD than the classmate who did not show any symptoms of ASD. Some gender differences also emerged.

Method
Participants
- 133 participants (41 Males, 92 Females)
- Ethnicity: 74% Caucasian, 15% African-American, 7% Hispanic, and 4% Other

Materials
Scenarios:
Two scenarios were developed for this study. Each scenario described entering on the first day of class and having an interaction with another classmate. In the ASD condition, the classmate was described as exhibiting behaviors characteristic of someone with mild ASD including failing to make eye contact, stereotyped behaviors (spinning a pen on the desk) and speaking loudly and out of turn with little regard for others who were speaking. In the No ASD condition, the scenario described a typical interaction with a classmate who did not exhibit any symptoms of ASD. Each participant read only one scenario followed by a survey.

Perceptions Survey:
The Perceptions Survey contained several items developed specifically for this study. The Likert-type items were on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely), and inquired about the participant’s perceptions of the classmate. Sample items included, “Is what servant would this person make you feel uncomfortable?” and “How likely would you be to avoid sitting near this person during the next class meeting?” We also asked for demographic items such as age, gender, ethnicity, class level, and knowledge of ASD symptoms.

Big Five Inventory (BFI):
The BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999) consisted of 44 items designed to measure the “Big Five” dimensions of personality. Strength of agreement with the statements was measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale with response options ranging from “1” disagree strongly to “5” agree strongly.

Procedure:
Upon arrival to the classroom, participants were given a brief overview of the study and invited to participate. Those who volunteered were given an informed consent form. Once the informed consent forms were read, signed, and received, each participant was given a packet. Participants were asked to read the scenario and imagine they were in the situation. The scenario was followed by the perceptions survey and the BFI. Once all of the packets were completed, the participants were debriefed and given the researchers’ contact information for any questions, comments, or concerns they may have following completion of the study.

Results
One-way ANOVA tests revealed that participants had more negative reactions to the classmate who displayed behaviors typical of ASD than the classmate who did not exhibit behaviors typical of ASD on all items on the perceptions survey. Each item was significant at the p<.001 level.

Discussion
- Participants responded more negatively towards the classmate who displayed behaviors characteristic of ASD. They felt less comfortable, more annoyed, more distracted, and would be more likely to avoid socializing or sitting near the classmate who exhibited symptoms of ASD in future classes.
- Previous research showed that males expressed higher openness toward peers with autism spectrum disorder than females (Novell & White, 2011); however, our results showed that males would be less likely to sit near or socialize with the classmate who exhibited symptoms of ASD in the future. More research is needed to better understand the implications of the effect of gender on perceptions of those who exhibit symptoms of ASD.
- The results of this study highlight the importance of raising awareness of the symptoms associated with ASD among college students. Perhaps opening a dialogue about the autism spectrum will alleviate fears, which may contribute to the negative perceptions of those who exhibit symptoms of ASD.
- Future research could focus on identifying the causes of negative perceptions of individuals with ASD. Also, it would be interesting to replicate the current study manipulating the gender and ethnicity of the classmate exhibiting symptoms of ASD to investigate whether participants are more sympathetic toward members of their own ingroup.

Hypotheses
We excepted participants to have more negative reactions to a classmate who displayed behaviors characteristic of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) than a classmate who do not exhibit symptoms typical of ASD.

We expected some differences to emerge with respect to gender. Specifically, we expected females to have more negative reactions to the classmate who exhibited symptoms of ASD than males.

References