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Health and community awareness of autism spectrum disorder - a field study of a sample from Annaba

الوعي الصحي والمجتمعي باضطراب طيف التوحد - دراسة ميدانية لعينة من عنابة

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أوكيل عتيقة

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Abstract:

The current study aimed to reveal the reality of community awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the city of Annaba, to reveal the extent to which the community knows the causes of ASD, its characteristics and symptoms, facts about ASD, misconceptions and cultural perceptions ;through the use of a questionnaire as an instrument that included the four axes of the study on a randomly selected sample of 50 individuals, including 45 women and 05 men, who are not necessarily parents of autistic children and do not require any educational level.

The results of the study showed a significant decrease in the level of awareness of the sample members. This included deficiencies in all aspects related to autism, especially its causes, methods of care and treatment, which calls for the intervention of the concerned authorities to work to raise the level of awareness related to autism in the community.

Keywords: Health awareness; Community awareness; Autism.

الملخص

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى الكشف عن واقع الوعي المجتمعي باضطراب طيف التوحد في مدينة عنابة، والكشف عن مدى معرفة المجتمع بأسباب اضطراب طيف التوحد وخصائصه وأعراضه والحقائق المتعلقة به، والمفاهيم الخاطئة والتصورات الثقافية، وذلك باستخدام استبيان كأداة شملت محاور الدراسة الأربعة على عينة تم اختيارها عشوائياً مكونة من 50 فرداً منهم 45 امرأة و05 رجال، ليسوا بالضرورة آباء لأطفال توحديين ولا يشترط فيهم أي مستوى تعليمي، وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة انخفاضاً ملحوظاً في مستوى الوعي لدى أفراد العينة. شمل ذلك قصوراً في أسباب وطرق رعاية وعلاج التوحد، مما يستدعي تدخل الجهات المعنية للعمل على رفع مستوى الوعي المتعلق بالتوحد في المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوعي الصحي – الوعي المجتمعي – التوحد .

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the most difficult and complex developmental disorders, as it affects many different aspects of the child's development, so we find that the child with autism syndrome suffers from developmental deviations, especially at the level of language and motor development and in the processes of attention, cognition and social communication, in addition to a deficit in social skills and social communication (**Khaoula Mohammed, 2021, p. 348**), therefore, many efforts have been made in recent decades to raise awareness of autism spectrum disorder by specialists or those interested in the disorder, and it has been known on many occasions in the last 20 years through international action plans such as health management, the development of vocational training programs , raising awareness and training in accepting autistic peers, the spread of health organization campaigns such as the World Autism Awareness Month led by the United Nations, and the issuance of a series of laws in most countries of the world and charitable donations aimed at educating the community, According to Marx, consciousness is the result of the interaction between ourselves and the material world around us, and is therefore a historical product. According to Marx, humanity is constituted by the material world and it is only through our engagement with it that we can exercise our power or authority and assert our reality (**Eagleton, Terry, 2011, p.135**). through interaction between community members and direct and indirect communication with professionals, an individual's awareness of various health and disease phenomena is formed, as community education and clarification of

misconceptions in general is necessary to raise awareness and seek first consultation and early intervention in the case of any child suspected of being at risk of autism spectrum disorder or any other developmental disorder, as lack of awareness of autism spectrum disorder leads to delay in the diagnosis process or failure to seek advice from professionals.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to assess the level of awareness of ASD among members of society because of the cultural and economic influence of societies on the level of awareness, and the low level of awareness of ASD has been observed in many societies except the American society which reaches a level of awareness of 70, and a comprehensive understanding of autism spectrum disorder needs to take into account social influences and examine the relationship between knowledge and attitudes in different cultures because the relationship between them may vary between cultures, so the need to measure the level of awareness of autism spectrum disorder in Algerian society, especially among non-specialists in the field of special education.

Does the level of awareness differ between males and females or due to the different nature of the sample or from one age group to another in order to identify needs according to the findings and then contribute to the early identification of screening children routinely in the first consultation and start intervention in any child suspected of suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder and based on the above, the current study question is crystallized in the main question: What is the level of community awareness of the manifestations and causes of ASD?

And the following sub-questions:

- 1- Does the level of awareness of autism spectrum disorder vary according to demographic characteristics?
- 2- What are the causes of autism according to the responses of the sample members?
- 3- What are the different sources of information about autism?
- 4- What are the most important symptoms known to the study sample?
- 5- Is it possible to cure autistic children?

2. Importance of the study

- 1- The study provides a simplified representation of autism that helps to increase awareness among non-specialists .
- 2- The current study measures community members' awareness of autism spectrum disorder .
- 3- The study provides a basis on which to target outreach programmes to raise awareness of autism spectrum disorder .
- 4- The study will present the differences between individuals in forming the correct image of ASD according to gender, years of experience and type of sample, and then identify the most targeted group for awareness courses.

3. Methodology and limits of the study

The scientific research methodology requires approaching objectivity to reach logical conclusions and control the framework of analysis related to the nature of this study, by defining the limits of the

subject, while setting the framework that allows a correct understanding of the proposed path of analysis and the methodology for testing its hypotheses.

To achieve this, we have defined the limits of the research in two aspects, the first is theoretical and related to the definition of the variables of the study and the theoretical approach to the subject of the study, while the second is related to the applied aspect by relying on the questionnaire and linking these results with the study questions and objectives to the study theory and previous studies.

4. Research methodology

In accordance with the topic and in order to achieve the desired objectives and results, the descriptive-analytical method was used to describe the variables of the study, which is based on collecting information and facts about the two variables and analyzing them to determine their significance in relation to the study tools and then applying a questionnaire that includes 4 main axes that cover the topic of the study:

The first axis: Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

The second axis: Knowledge of the causes of the disorder

Axis III: Knowledge of the symptoms of autistic disorder

Axis IV: Knowledge about the possibility of recovery from the disorder.

4. Areas of study

The timeframe of the exploratory study: The study lasted approximately two months, from 15 February to 10 April 2024.

Spatial scope: It was an exploratory study in many places because the study did not require the identification of a specific community, such as parents of autistic children or specialists in developmental disorders, the aim was to collect information about the awareness of the community in its various segments of the disorder and then after that the 8 May 45 Hospital Centre was identified for easy access to the place and because the centre is multidisciplinary and therefore there is the possibility of obtaining an acceptable and representative sample.

Human domain:-Sample survey method: Selecting a random sample of the study population, which includes 50 individuals between females and males, and then interviewing them in the hospital unit 08 May 45, which is a multidisciplinary unit, we did not specify the gender or age of the sample as much as the questionnaire targeted all those who welcomed the response to our request, especially in the evening period when the waiting for doctors is long in the waiting rooms.

5. Study results and discussion

Findings related to the demographic characteristics of the study sample

The total number of participants in the study was 50 individuals, and the majority of them were female (82%) because of the greater response from the female gender and because they are more interested in the topic according to what I concluded from interviewing them, and more than half of the participants were between the ages of (24 - 45) years. 45 years old, the majority of the sample, which was random, had a final level of education of 45% (third year of secondary school) 20% qualified university level between bachelor and doctorate and the rest of the sample members at the final level, we did not limit the age of the sample members so much as we focused on the facts or information that the sample had about the disorder and the sources of its acquisition, where the results of the study were as shown in the first table.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study sample

Demographic characteristics of the study sample			
		Total number	Percent
Sex	Male	%82	
	Female	%18	
Age	Under 24 years old	%2	
	35-25	%32	
	46-36	% 66	
Scientific level	Less than final level	%47	
		50	

	Final level	% 43	
	University and post-graduation	% 20	

Findings on the source of information related to autism

When asked about the source of obtaining information related to autism, the participants reported that social networking sites are among the most common sources of documentation, definition and presentation of cases, especially in light of the existence of some associations that review the diaries of the children in their care, such as the “Annaba Dolphins Association”, especially after the problems it faced following the decision to evict it from its old headquarters and the protest stances of officials of the association and parents of autistic children, which received great resonance, response and solidarity from Algerian society in general and Annaba society in particular ; The former director was replaced by the new director, whom they consider competent for this great responsibility, and once she was settled, she showed all the services and trips that she makes for the benefit of this category, the role of television sessions associated with the World Autism Day, this is agreed by all the members of the sample, But the educated group followed everything related to the disorder through official websites such as the World Health Organization and some publications that deal with health in general and psychologists in some cases, including those who have advanced in pregnancy for fear of some of those who have a history of the disorder, while a small sample went to the official websites. Official websites such as the World Health Organization and some

publications that deal with health in general and psychologists in some cases, including those who have advanced in pregnancy for fear of some medical precedents, while a small sample went to Pediatric medicine directed by school medicine clinics to diagnose their children (direct interaction with doctors and children with autism), against the background of school difficulties; Public places, such as buses and medical centers in general, remain a large space where information about all phenomena is disseminated, information that we cannot say is true or false, but that gives an idea of the disorder, which increases community awareness and therefore solidarity and sympathy with this group, while more than 10% of the sample indicated that they received information from relatives and friends. The lack of health awareness is shown by the large interaction with social networking sites, the belief in some information and the sharing of information by people who are not specialized or do not follow the medical developments in this field and here comes the role of associations and communication media that host specialists and review some cases. What we noticed is the abundance of facts about the disorder among some of the sample members who had direct meetings or direct dealings with the disorder by presenting their children for diagnosis after special communication difficulties or academic difficulties where guidance is provided by the central medicine or teachers, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Autism Information Source Acquired

Autism Information Source acquired	
Books and scientific journals	%05
Social networking sites, especially (facebook)	%78
Health centres	%23
Relatives and friends	%25
World Health Organisation	%08
Direct contact with infected people	%12
Public places (buses/gymnasiums)	%21

Participants' answers about the symptoms of autism

The responses of the sample members about the extent or some of the symptoms that show the child's autism disorder, the participants reported that the most important of these symptoms are the difficulty in communicating with others by 67%, the tendency to play alone 72%,

introversion and isolation 68%, Difficulty in pronouncing words and forming sentences 43%, physical and mental unresponsiveness 34%, inability to express his feelings, inability to express his needs 38%, excessive movement and activity 35%, attachment to objects such as toys 33%, inability to recognize the feelings of others 27%.

Nearly half of the participants

indicated that the inability to communicate audibly and visually with family members, which makes them locked in the house and lost and unaware of the world around them (43%) is one of the most important common symptoms of autism, and that the tendency to aggression is a dominant feature in children with autism, and the loss of the ability to feel pain (13%), It turns out From the responses of the study participants - regarding the common symptoms of autism in children with autism - it is clear that there is a lack of general awareness and knowledge of the symptoms of autism. The majority of the responses expressed by the participants are a dominant or common feature in all children with autism, because autism has different degrees and therefore differences exist from one child to another, some symptoms may appear in one child while others do not, but all children share some general features such as deficits in pronouncing some words and arranging sentences, attachment to toys and imitation of them, repeating words and behaviors and actions that they witness; While they differ in the presence or absence of the following symptoms; inability to express needs, lack of preference for changing the pattern of eating, clothing and play, strong desire for introversion and isolation, inability to socialize and communicate with others, and excessive movement and activity. Not all children with autism tend to be isolated, withdrawn, and unwilling to socialize with others, and lack auditory and visual communication with others, as some studies have indicated that many children with autism show a certain level of social interest and make some attempts to initiate social interactions with others (**Mohamed Galal Hussein, 2022 p. 138**), Some show a preference for social activities over

individual activities ,as pointed out by Neurologist Oliver Sacks, in an experiment with autistic twins in their early thirties in a government hospital, observed the twins “John and Michael” sitting in a corner with each other and playing some digital brain games. He observed them from afar, and as soon as he approached them and gave him the opportunity to participate, they showed their willingness to play with them (**Solomon Olga, 2010,p247**) ; This confirms that the desire for introversion and isolation and the unwillingness to socialize with others is not a dominant characteristic of all autistic children. Many normal children are characterized by hyperactivity, and their parents complain about their hyperactivity, while they show no symptoms of autism and have been diagnosed with autism. Misconceptions about common symptoms of autism, which the study uncovered by analyzing the responses of the study participants, include that autistic people share an aversion to kissing and hugging, a lack of awareness of other people's feelings and a lack of sensitivity to pain.

Although there have been some studies that suggested that children with autism do not feel pain, these studies have been proven to be incorrect (**Allely, 2013; Clark, 2015; Failla, 2020**). A number of studies have emerged that refute this misconception and emphasize that children with autism do feel pain, but their ability to express it may be weaker due to a number of considerations; The presence of difficulties related to social interaction, in addition to the tendency to aggression and violence in dealing with others, which are also common misconceptions and misunderstandings. Several studies such as Community Awareness of Autism in Egyptian Society: A Field Study in Anthropology Al-Rasid

Journal of Social Science Studies: Volume 2(01), Conclusive evidence that people with autism are more violent than those without autism is attributed to childhood experiences, although some children exhibit a degree of negativity, poor parental control, bullying and social rejection, physical and sexual abuse, or mental illnesses such as psychosis; She also noted that the widespread public perceptions and perceptions of a link between autism and violence were primarily due to increased global attention and coverage of the 73 mass shootings and killings, one of which was at Sandy Hall Elementary School in Newtown in 2012, This media coverage has contributed to the perception that people with autism are violent. Although the number of people with autism involved in these crimes was only 7 out of a total of 73 cases.

In conclusion, although some studies have acknowledged the existence of a relationship between autism and violence, they have not provided conclusive evidence to generalize on the basis of individual cases. Violence that appears from an individual case of an autistic person exposed to a situation that has triggered his feelings and anger, so violence and aggression in this case is a reaction to social stigmatization and stereotypes that are manifested in his non-acceptance and aversion to him.

In light of what has been reviewed,

Table 3: Knowledge related to autism symptoms

Extent of knowledge related to recurring autism symptoms	Redundancy
Inability to socialize and communicate with others	85%
Tendency to play alone	72%
Difficulty pronouncing words and arranging sentences	58%

it can be said that the knowledge of autism symptoms among the sample is low, as all respondents believe that most of these symptoms are common to all people with autism; This lack of knowledge may be due to the lack of general agreement among autism specialists and stakeholders about the nature of common symptoms ; Due to the lack of knowledge of the actual cause and the conflicting opinions, explanations and scientific assumptions related to autism (Mohamed Galal Hussein, 2022, p. 138), respondents were surveyed about some general facts and cultural perceptions related to autism and those with autism. We found that 51% of respondents still believe that autism affects females more than males and that autism is considered a disease77% and affects children from low-income families more than children from high-income families and 87% affects children from low-education families compared to children from high-education families; Regarding the time period in which autism symptoms appear, more than two-thirds of the sample (43%) said that autism symptoms affect children from birth to 3 years of age, 47% from 4 to 10 years of age, and 10% did not know the exact age at which autism symptoms appear. In terms of how long autism lasts, only 24 per cent of the sample said that autism is a lifelong condition.

Findings related to autism symptoms

Excessive movement and hyperactivity	35%
Loss of the ability to feel pain	13%
A strong desire to become withdrawn and isolated	68%
Repeating the words, behaviors and actions they see	34%
Aversion to kisses, hugs and contact with people	43%
A tendency towards aggression is a predominant feature of autism	26%
Inability to express emotions or feelings	27%
Inability to recognize the feelings of others	23%
Not favouring changes in eating, dressing and playing	27%
Not being able to express their needs	38%
Inability to communicate audibly and visually with others	43%
Attachment to worthless objects such as children's toys	33%

Respondents' response about the possibility of recovery

In our question about the possibility of curing autistic children in particular, respondents showed conflicting opinions about the possibility of curing autistic children, due to the lack of information about treatment methods, especially the lack of special centres for the disorder known to the public, for example, in Annaba, once the disorder has been diagnosed, the child is

referred to specialists and psychologists to take care of the child in the children's ward of the psychiatric hospital, where many parents are reluctant to go for fear of social stigma, but health and community awareness of the disorder and empathy have increased parents' confidence in their children and their acceptance of this category, despite the difficulties the family faces in finding a solution or improving his condition and behavior.

Table 4: Parents' views on whether it is possible to cure their child of autism

The Possibility of Healing	Percentage
Possibility of healing	%05
There's no possibility	% 43

I have no idea	%52
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The results: Autism may hinder the normal course of development in various developmental areas, especially psychological and social, which makes him unable to perceive the external world and those around him, and autism as a developmental disorder varies from one type to another, and appears before the age of three, and the affected child bears a number of symptoms and characteristics that distinguish him, especially in visual communication.

Each study looks at the cause of autism from its own point of view and theoretical background, so autism remains a mystery that requires early intervention and treatment to prevent it becoming a developmental disability in adulthood, Here it is necessary to recruit specialists and those interested in developmental disorders to spread awareness of the causes of the disorder, despite different points of view, as well as methods and centres of care to facilitate the process for parents, since Marx believes that man is superior to animals and differs from them by his consciousness; This awareness begins as soon as man begins to produce the means of subsistence, which are primarily determined by the conditions and possibilities of nature. Thus, when people produce these means, they begin to produce their material and spiritual life (**Abdelbaset Abdel-muta, 1981, p. 102**).

Awareness awakens, unites and mobilizes people and gives them the driving will for change, so community awareness was one of the most important factors to improve physical and mental health as well

as the health of individuals in society is the goal that planners seek to achieve because health development is essential for social and economic development as it is the real driving force for development and this is what is advocated by the functional constructivist theory which treats social phenomena in general as a community issue and not an individual issue, thus becoming a community issue and a social pattern that shares in adversity, Clarifying the troubled feelings about having an autistic child provokes anxious reactions in all families about the nature of the disorder, providing them with an explanation of the nature of the disease and talking openly about their fears, helps to solve many difficulties and such a strategy helps more to deal socially better, tips and guidelines dealing with everyday issues is helpful in understanding autism, and this can help to reduce feelings of anxiety, annoyance, anger and increase their ability to achieve efficiency.

6. CONCLUSION

The emergence of health and community awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder in recent years, after many television channels addressed the disorder among the many issues affecting childhood, especially on occasions such as the World Autism Spectrum Disorder Day, where many civil society associations and specialists participate in the international day during which society becomes aware of this disorder based on scientific information, not to mention the role of social networking sites as a source or space through which many issues are circulated, but in most

quarters the information is circulated with confusion or ambiguity.

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