

Simple test could improve public attitudes to autism

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Using a simple 'thermometer scale survey' to measure public attitudes towards people with autism could help improve public understanding and acceptance, say researchers.

In a new study, published in the journal *Experimental Results*, psychologists from the universities of Bath and Essex, propose a simplification in the way in which attitudes are measured—replacing existing, complex surveys with just one question that would gauge [public attitudes](#) and acceptance.

They say that changing the way we measure attitudes towards people with [autism](#) and mental health conditions would increase the usefulness of such measures and improve public understanding of such conditions.

Public attitudes about autism can feed into government and NGO policies when, for example, they decide on levels of funding and other support directed towards autistic people, they add.

In a new study, Dr. Punit Shah, an autism expert from the University of Bath, and Dr. Paul Hanel, an [attitude](#) expert from the University of Essex, analyzed data from the only survey for measuring attitudes towards autism.

Their results suggest that this outdated scale, which includes questions such as - 'people with autism should not have children' - was confusing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors towards autistic people. They concluded that it is not fit for purpose.

In its place they created a simple 'thermometer' scale, where members of the public were simply asked, "please provide a number between 0 and 100 to indicate your overall evaluation of an autistic person." They found that this sliding scale was as accurate as time-consuming surveys at predicting how much people said they wanted to interact with autistic people.

Dr. Punit Shah from the University of Bath's Department of Psychology explained, "Autism is the 'costliest health condition' in the UK, more so

than the cancer, stroke, and heart disease, combined. This is because it is a lifelong condition, meaning that autistic people are impacted by societal attitudes which influence behaviors towards them from non-autistic people.

"Despite the impact that non-autistic people have on the lives of those with autism, overall public attitudes towards autistic people are very poorly understood. This is because there has been no scientifically-robust way to measure public attitudes and therefore no robust way at devising interventions to improve acceptance and cohesion."

The researchers found that, on average, non-autistic students rated autistic people relatively favorably—71/100; they have since found this to be around 62/100 more generally in the UK. The researchers say that it is good to see that public attitudes towards autistic people are generally more favorable than unfavorable, but that there is a long way to go in understanding and changing negative attitudes to autism and mental health conditions.

Dr. Shah, adds, "Our research is a critical step towards improving the science of attitudes towards people with autism and mental health conditions. Our scale, which is freely available for use by researchers and policymakers, will enable us to better understand the many reasons for negative and positive attitudes towards autistic people and other neurodevelopmental conditions. Using this scale, researchers in my group are now looking into how people's autism knowledge and level of contact with [autistic people](#) are linked to their attitudes towards people with the conditions."

Dr. Paul Hanel, a Lecturer at the University of Essex and researcher at Bath, added, "Our scale is an important step towards a better of understanding and ultimately improving attitudes towards people with autism. Because it is so simple it can also be translated and used in other

countries and cultures, whereas old measures could not. While attitudes towards people with autism are on average favorable in the UK, and also in India and the USA, we are currently discussing ways how those attitudes can be further enhanced.

"For example, many people still have some misconceptions about autism and might believe that people with autism are more different to them than they actually are on various attributes such as their personality or beliefs. We want to test whether correcting misconceptions improves intergroup attitudes. To test for attitude change it is crucial to have a reliable and valid measure of attitudes towards people with autism, as we have developed in this study."

More information: Paul H. P. Hanel et al, Simplifying the Measurement of Attitudes towards Autistic People, *Experimental Results* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/exp.2020.36](https://doi.org/10.1017/exp.2020.36)

Provided by University of Bath

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