"What's in a name?": How Just the Word "Autism" affects Autism Stigma

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism has a variety of definitions and characteristics that are not always agreed upon. This is largely because of its complicated history. Along Autism's winding path to how it is known today, it has taken on many names and definitions: Bleuler's original use in schizophrenia patients, Kanner's work with Childhood Autism, and Hans Asperger's involvement in the killing of autistic children have all shaped the definitions of what is considered today different forms of autism. Even today, the nature of the neural basis of Autism is debated in scientific literature. Some argue for a deficit model, but others argue for a model of hyper-connectivity and hyper-functionality, such as the "Intense World Theory of Autism". One thing common to all forms and definitions of autism, though, is autism stigma, defined as negative beliefs and stereotypes about autistic people. In the current study, just the word "autism" in a non-symptomatic vignette was enough to show a tendency of increased stigma, though this effect was not significant. In addition, because of German and German-speaking countries' history with autism and cultural similarities and norms in line with some autistic traits, autism stigma was measured in a German-speaking population. However, there were not enough participants to draw a meaningful conclusion. This does not mean, however, that autism stigma in the US and German-speaking countries does not exist. In fact, it does suggest a high prevalence of autism stigma because a trend of autism stigma could be identified in such a small group of people.

Cross-Cultural Analysis

Many important figures in the history of autism were natives of German-speaking countries. The most notable include the Swiss father of Autism, Eugen Bleuler; the Austrian-American psychiatrist who was the first to clearly define Autism, Leo Kanner; and Nazi physician Hans Asperger. In addition, during my semester abroad, I noticed a few key similarities in autistic traits and German culture, such as directness and rule-following, that at least partly inspired this project.
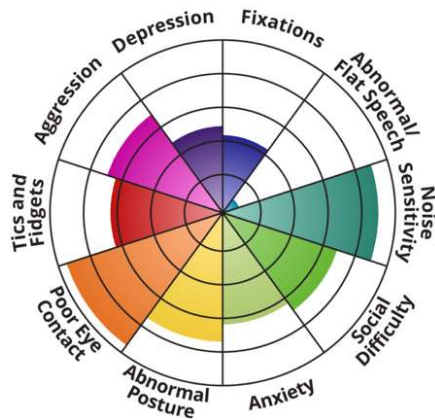
Background

Stigma
- Negative beliefs and stereotypes about a person whose attributes or actions differ from a societal norm.

Linguistic Relativity
- The idea that language influences culture and culture influences language.
- Often used in strategies to fight stigma (i.e., person-first language (person with autism) and identify-first language (autistic person)).

Autism
- Autism is a circular spectrum associated with many different autistic traits that need different levels of support.
- Autism is defined as "persistent deficits in each of three areas of social communication and interaction plus at least two of four types of restricted, repetitive behaviors" in the DSM-V, but autism can present differently than this definition.
- Common autistic traits include:
  - Stimming (repetitive behaviors)
  - Social difficulties
  - Difficulty with eye contact
  - Intense interests and hyperfixations
  - Sensory sensitivities
  - Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA; extreme stubbornness and internal motivation)
  - Masking/Camouflaging of autistic traits
- Several theories the neural basis of autism exist. Many agree that altered connectivity and reactivity is a factor in autism, but whether the autistic brain is under- or over-reactive is still debated.

Method

Participants
- Participants of different nationalities (69 Americans, 3 Germans, 1 Austrian) were recruited through word of mouth to complete a survey created using Qualtrics.

Procedure
- In their corresponding language, participants were given a demographic questionnaire. Then participants were asked to read one of three vignettes describing a person with a gender-neutral name exhibiting common behaviors indicating stress and using no label or the label "Autism" or "anxiety disorder" as a diagnosis.

Results
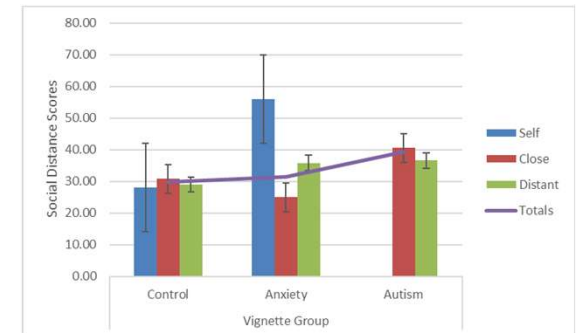
The main effect of the vignette category (no label, anxiety, or autism) on modified social distance scores was not significant, $F(2,3) = 2.161$, $p = 0.126$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.078$, but a nonsignificant tendency of higher stigma in the autism vignette group was shown.

Unfortunately, data from only 4 participants from German-speaking countries was collected, so this result was not able to be compared cross-culturally.

Notes on Terminology

Identity-First Language
- The vast majority of autistic adults prefer the term "autistic" to "person with autism".

Functioning Labels
- Terms such as "high/low functioning" are inaccurate so the terms "high/low support needs" are preferred by autistic adults when referring to autism "severity".