

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Predictors of Attitudes of Faculty Members Towards Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Received: 28 June 2024 | **Revised:** 15 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 2 July 2025

Keywords: attitude | autism | autism awareness | university

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined how variables such as the age of faculty members, autism awareness, and readiness to work with individuals with autism predict their attitudes toward individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This study included 240 faculty members from various faculties. Data were analyzed using stepwise multiple regression analysis. The results indicate that higher autism awareness and readiness to work with students with autism are associated with more positive attitudes towards individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, whereas older faculty members tend to have more negative attitudes. These findings show that faculty members' awareness and readiness affect their attitudes towards working with students with autism and support their use of universal design principles in education.

1 | Introduction

There are many definitions for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Among these definitions, the most accepted was made by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 2013. According to APA, ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction and repetitive and limited actions in behavior, interests, and activities (American Psychiatric Association (APA) 2013). ASD is a disorder with symptoms that can be observed in early childhood and persist throughout life, with inadequacies in communication and social life skills, limited and repetitive behaviors, and different situations. Although the exact causes of ASD are not known, studies are being conducted on hereditary and environmental causes. Studies in the literature show that environmental factors increase the effect of ASD, but do not cause it (Helfin and Alaimo 2007; Nordenbæk et al. 2014; Simpson 2005). Therefore, it is possible to say that ASD is a hereditary disorder.

ASD is a disability whose prevalence has increased over the years. According to recent studies, the prevalence of ASD

symptoms in school-age children has increased by 200% over the last 20 years (Maenner et al. 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an organization that monitors the prevalence of ASD, stated in its latest report published in 2023, has a prevalence of one in every 36 children. In a situation where the prevalence of ASD has increased significantly, it is expected that the awareness and attitudes of society towards ASD should be improved. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The inadequacies in the communication skills of individuals diagnosed with ASD and the difficulties they experience in social interactions make it difficult for them to be accepted by society. Rafferty and Griffin (2005) examined the attitudes of parents and preschool teachers towards students with ASD. They stated that the cognitive, emotional, language, and speech skills of students with ASD were effective in improving their attitudes towards them. Additionally, the difficulties they experience in peer relationships and social life cause individuals with ASD to have negative attitudes (Carter et al. 2013; Orsmond et al. 2013). Orsmond et al. (2013) reported that

Summary

- Enhancing autism awareness improves faculty attitudes.
- Faculty members with higher levels of autism awareness exhibit more positive attitudes toward students with autism, suggesting that targeted awareness training can foster a more inclusive and empathetic university environment.
- Faculty readiness predicts inclusive behavior.
- Faculty members who feel more prepared to work with students with autism are more likely to adopt supportive teaching practices, underlining the need for practical training and professional development initiatives to build readiness.
- Younger faculty tend to hold more positive attitudes.
- Younger faculty members show more favorable attitudes toward individuals with autism, possibly reflecting exposure to contemporary inclusive education practices, which highlights the importance of updating older faculty through continuous training.

students with ASD were not preferred in social activities, were not seen in out-of-school environments, and were not communicated with by their friends. Again, Hendricks and Wehman (2009) stated in their study that students with ASD continue their activities in isolation, even if they participate in social activities. It has been reported in the literature that the problems experienced by students with ASD in skills such as establishing, initiating, and maintaining communication affect their relationships with friends (Liptak et al. 2011; Newman et al. 2009). Since the first years of their educational life, individuals with ASD have been supported by their educators in preschool (Liu et al. 2016; Rafferty and Griffin 2005; Stoiber et al. 1998), primary education (Chung et al. 2015; Finke et al. 2009; Horrocks et al. 2008; Park and Chitiyo 2011) and high school (Horrocks et al. 2008; Park and Chitiyo 2011). In addition, studies conducted with school administrators show that students with ASD do not meet the positive attitudes of educators (Humphrey and Symes 2013; Rodríguez et al. 2012). The aforementioned studies have focused on the pre-undergraduate education experiences of students with ASD. Undergraduate education plays an extremely important role in the employment of students with ASD.

Today, the employment rate of individuals with ASD is low (Barnhill et al. 2011). One of the biggest obstacles is that students with ASD cannot reach an environment that will improve their communication and socialization skills after high school education (Harvard Mental Health Letter 2011). Dudley et al. (2018), in their study with 274 adults diagnosed with ASD, stated that they wanted to be included in undergraduate education to be employed, but they could not receive undergraduate education due to the lack of necessary conditions. Clarke et al. (2020) studied 97 adults diagnosed with ASD. The results of the study indicated that individuals who did not receive undergraduate education could not use their daily life, communication, and social life skills, and that the training they had previously received was forgotten. Turcotte et al. (2016) stated that the most important factor for individuals with ASD to develop

their social skills is to provide an appropriate educational environment and to make the necessary preparations for their employment. We examined whether the variables of autism awareness score, age, and readiness to work with an autistic student explained the attitude scores of individuals with ASD.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants. The study scales were created in Google Forms and distributed to academics working at two state universities by the authors. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. A total of 240 participants (225 women and 15 men) were included in this study. There were 114 (47%) between the ages of 23–31, 108 (45%) between the ages of 32–43, and 18 (8) aged 44 and over. When the distribution of academicians who participated in the research as volunteers is examined according to their faculty: The results are as follows: Faculty of Health Sciences (51, 21%), Faculty of Education (47, 20%), Faculty of Science (46, 19%), Faculty of Human and Social Sciences (50, 21%), and Faculty of Engineering (46, 19%). A total of 78 (33%) academicians reported having had a student with autism in their professional life. The academicians, 89 (37%) were ready to work with students with autism, 121 (50%) were partially ready, and 30 (13%) were unready. There are 52 (22%) people had heard about autism from TV/radio, 26 (11%) from books, and 162 (68%) from in-service training.

2.2 | Ethics

The Declaration of Helsinki was complied with during the conduct of the study. The authors obtained permission from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Dicle University before beginning data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Information Form

In this form, there are questions about the faculty where the academics work, gender, age, having students with autism in their class before, where they have heard about autism before and their readiness to work with ASD.

2.3.2 | Societal Attitudes Towards Autism (SATA) Scale

The Societal Attitudes towards Autism Scale developed by Flood et al. (2013) was adapted into Turkish by Batum and Aydın (2021). The 16-item form, each item in the 4-point Likert-type scale is scored between 1 (strongly disagree) and 4 (strongly agree) and the 2nd, 9th and 13th items are reversed. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 16 and the highest score is 64. The higher the scores obtained from the scale, the more negative the social

attitudes towards individuals with ASD. Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was calculated as 0.86.

2.3.3 | Autism Awareness Scale

The Autism Awareness Scale, developed by Yazici and Karsantik (2023), consists of seven subscales. The subscales are: Limited Interests and Repetitive Behaviors in Autism, Social Interaction and Communication in Autism, Causes of Autism, Friendships in Autism, Key Elements of the Intervention Process in Autism, Physical Characteristics in Autism, and Early Warning Signs of Autism. The 32-item form is a 5-point Likert-type scale with each item ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was calculated as 0.91.

2.4 | Data Analyses

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the data. The assumptions of multiple linear regression analysis such as normal distribution, linearity, constant variance, absence of autocorrelation and absence of multicollinearity among independent variables were examined. Tolerance value greater than 0.20, VIF value less than 10, CI value less than 30 indicate that there is no multicollinearity problem (Büyüköztürk et al. 2018). It is expected that the Durbin-Watson value is between 1.5 and 2.5 (Albayrak 2008; Kalaycı 2009). To compare the obtained results with the mentioned criteria, appropriate analyses were performed. Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the normality and linearity assumptions of the multiple linear regression analysis of the data obtained.

When Figures 1 and 2 are analysed, it can be said that the histogram and normal distribution curves created for the predicted values show a normal distribution, the points in the scatter diagram tend to gather around an axis, and the scatter diagram defines a linear and positive relationship. After testing the normality and linearity assumptions, it was examined whether there was a multicollinearity problem. Tolerance values were found to vary between 0.74 and 0.89 and variance inflation factor (VIF) between 1.00 and 1.01. These statistics are evidence that the data meet the assumptions of stepwise multiple regression.

The predicted variable of the study is the level of attitude towards individuals with ASD. Predictor variables in the study consist of continuous and discontinuous variables. Autism Awareness Scale was included in the analysis by obtaining the total score. Discontinuous variables (age and readiness to work with individuals with autism) were coded as "dummy variables" and included in the analysis. The coding process for discrete variables that are coded as pseudo variables is given below; (a) The 32–43 and 44-and-older age groups were assigned as pseudo variables and coded as "1," while the 23–31 age group was coded as "0." (b) Being prepared to work with autistic students was assigned as a dummy variable and coded as "1," while being undecided or not being prepared was coded as "0." The dummy variables were included in the analysis in the same order.

3 | Results

In this section, findings related to the predictive power of autism awareness score, age and readiness to work with a student with autism variables on attitude scores towards individuals with ASD

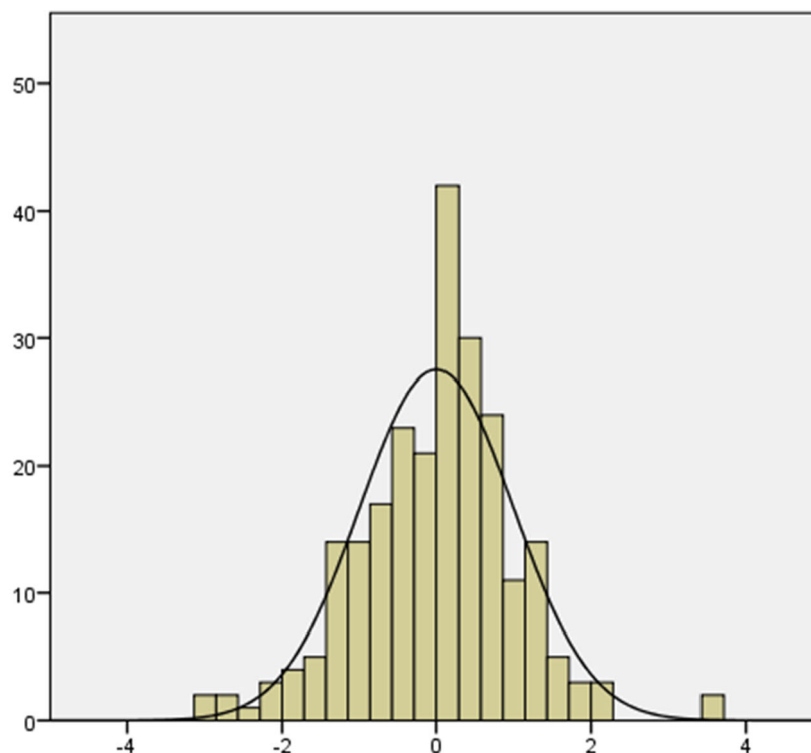


FIGURE 1 | Histogram and normal distribution curve for standardized predicted values.

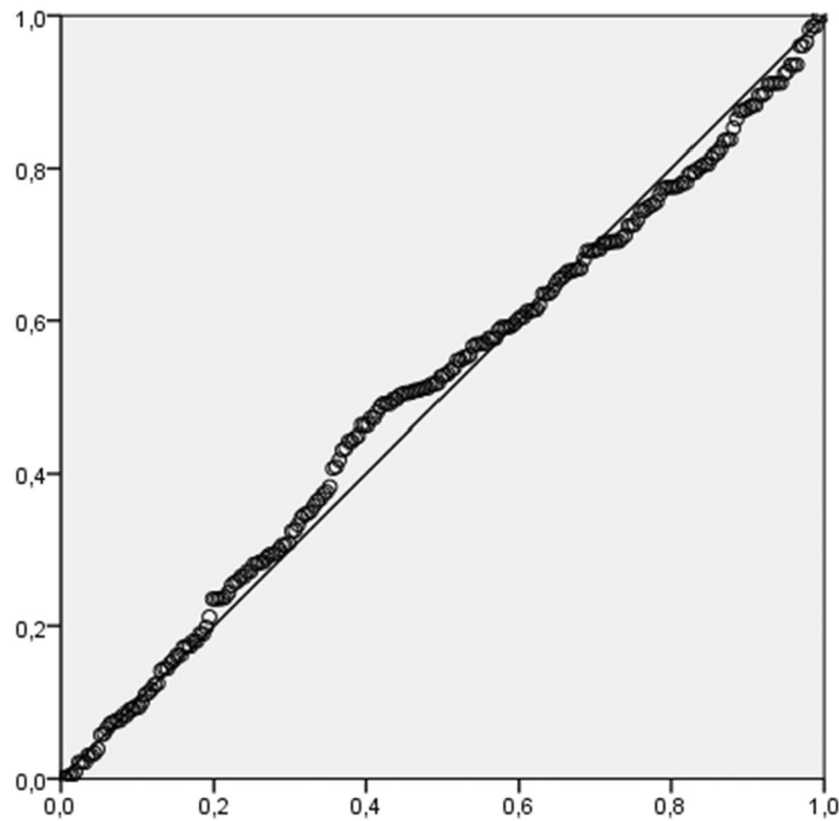


FIGURE 2 | Scatter diagram for standardised residual values and standardized predicted values.

TABLE 1 | Progressive multiple regression analysis results regarding variables predicting attitude scores towards individuals with ASD.

	Variable	B	B _{se}	β	t	p
Model 1	Constant	58.26	1.62		35.86	0.000
	RW	-6.28	1.73	-0.228	-3.61	0.000
Model 2	Constant	79.54	6.89		11.53	0.000
	RW	-6.16	1.70	-0.224	-3.61	0.000
	Awareness	-0.192	0.06	-0.197	-1.17	0.002
Model 3	Constant	79.71	6.78		11.75	0.000
	RW	-5.98	1.67	-0.218	-3.56	0.000
	Awareness	-0.21	0.06	-0.216	-3.52	0.001
	Age	3.35	1.11	0.184	3.00	0.003
Model 1	R = 0.228 R ² = 0.048 F(1, 238) = 13.081 p < 0.05					
Model 2	R = 0.301 R ² = 0.091 F(2, 237) = 11.823 p < 0.05					
Model 3	R = 0.352 R ² = 0.124 F(3, 236) = 11.152 p < 0.05					

Note: RW, readiness to work with students with autism.

are presented. The data related to the regression models obtained are presented in Table 1.

Autism awareness score, age and readiness to work with a student with autism entered the regression equation as predictors of attitude towards individuals with ASD ($R = 0.35$; $R^2 = 0.12$; $p < 0.01$). When the t -test results of the regression analysis were analysed, it was

concluded that all variables entered into the equation were predictors of academic achievement.

When the binary and partial correlations were analysed, there was a low level and negative relationship between readiness to work with students with autism ($r = -0.22$), autism awareness ($r = -0.20$) and attitude towards ASD. There is a low and positive relationship

between age and attitude towards ASD ($r = -0.16$). When the other variables are controlled, it is seen that the relationships do not change to a great extent and remain the same.

Standardised regression coefficients (β) show the relative order of importance of the predictors in explaining the attitude towards ASD. In this case, it is seen that the relative order of importance of the predictors explaining the attitude towards ASD is readiness to work with a student with autism, autism awareness score and age. When the $\otimes R^2$ values of the predictor variables are examined, readiness to work with a student with autism contributes 4%, readiness to work with a student with autism and autism awareness contribute 9%, readiness to work with a student with autism, autism awareness and age together contribute 12% in terms of explaining the total variance of attitude towards ASD.

4 | Discussion

This study aimed to examine in depth the attitudes of faculty members who teach or are preparing to teach at the undergraduate level towards individuals with ASD. First, it was observed that awareness of ASD plays a critical role in determining the attitudes of faculty members. This finding suggests that faculty members with a high awareness of ASD exhibit more supportive and understandable approaches in the educational processes of these individuals. It was determined that ASD awareness programmes and trainings held especially in educational institutions positively affected the attitudes of faculty members. It is a prerequisite for quality education and integration that the lecturers who conduct the courses for students with autism have knowledge about autism and make educational adaptations for these students in their courses. While ASD is generally defined as an “invisible” disability, it is seen that the lecturers are aware that these students may be in their classes. Despite this awareness, some have emphasized the lack of information on how to meet the needs of these students (Zeedyk et al. 2019). As it is known, students with autism need educational adaptations in their educational process (Sarrett 2018). These adaptations are similar to the adaptations in secondary and high schools (Zeedyk et al. 2016), such as giving extra time in exams, using visuals, and setting flexible dates for homework (Sayman 2015). For instructors to make these adaptations, they must first know how to apply them. This will be facilitated by higher education institutions raising awareness of autism in campuses (Sarrett 2018). One of the important benefits of raising the awareness of lecturers about the potential problems faced by individuals with ASD in higher education is that it will also benefit all students with autism on campuses in terms of enriched classroom structure and curriculum, and positive and clearer communication. Many studies have reported the need for better faculty and staff training on autism, and the needs of students with autism in higher education (Couzens et al. 2015; Fabri et al. 2016). In a study conducted by Knott and Taylor (2014), faculty members were unaware of the sensory and daily life needs of students with autism and even underestimated them. This situation leads to negative attitudes, prejudices, and labelling towards students with autism (Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2015).

Another finding of the study was that attitudes towards individuals with ASD were significantly predicted by autism awareness and readiness to work with students with autism. The results revealed

that autism awareness scores had a negative relationship with attitudes towards individuals with ASD. In other words, faculty members with high autism awareness have more positive attitudes towards individuals with ASD. This finding is consistent with other studies (Yazici and Karsantik (2023); Wenzel and Rowley 2010; Zeedyk et al. 2019) and shows that increasing autism awareness can be effective in reducing negative attitudes towards individuals with ASD. Although the success of university students with autism depends to a large extent on their communication, cooperation, and relationships with lecturers, university lecturers often lack knowledge and experience about the individual needs of these students and their legal rights (Wenzel and Rowley 2010; Zeedyk et al. 2019). Therefore, the awareness and knowledge of lecturers are critical to the quality of inclusion and academic success of students with autism (Grogan 2015; Knott and Taylor 2014). Educators’ and faculty members’ knowledge about autism may contribute to their being more empathetic and supportive of individuals with ASD (Grogan 2015). Therefore, the importance of in-service training and awareness-raising programs is emphasized once again. Regarding this issue, UNICEF (2013) stated that teachers are not ready to include students with special needs in their lessons, even if they are included in the classroom; therefore, it is necessary to prepare teachers to teach students with special needs. The best way to prepare is to design educational processes with a universal design for learning. Inclusion practices will be supported and spread globally when the principles of universal design in learning (UDL) are based on higher education. This will facilitate the design and implementation of accessible courses and assessments for all students (Meyer et al. 2014). Many universities adopt UDL as a framework for course design and content delivery (Karisa 2022). In the reviewed studies, it was found that when UDL applications are used at the highest level, they are beneficial for both university lecturers and students (Almeqdad et al. 2023).

The number of university students with autism is increasing (Shattuck et al. 2021; Zeedyk et al. 2019). This increase affects not only students with autism but also lecturers. Educational and institutional support for students with autism may need to be developed for this growing population and for the faculty members who teach them (Anderson and Butt 2017). Thus, the UDL Framework requires inclusion in the general education curriculum for an increasingly broader range of students and faculty, and serves as a tool to facilitate greater access. Challenging behaviors can be reduced if the students’ learning needs are met through UDL, maximizing students’ individual learning strengths creates independent learners, and the inclusion of many techniques in lessons increases accessibility for all students, thus creating a learning atmosphere based on engagement and trust (Lowrey et al. 2017).

This study found that readiness to work with a student with autism had a significant negative relationship with attitudes towards individuals with ASD. This shows that faculty members’ experience and readiness to work with students with autism positively affects their attitudes towards these students. This finding is consistent with that reported by Turcotte et al. (2016). Educators who are adequately equipped to work with students with autism can positively affect both the academic achievement and social integration of students.

The findings of this study show that age has a positive effect on attitudes towards individuals with ASD. Older faculty members

were found to have more negative attitudes towards individuals with ASD than their younger counterparts did. This finding has also been observed in previous studies (Clarke et al. 2020). The effect of age on attitudes can perhaps be explained by the fact that younger faculty members gain more knowledge and awareness of autism during their education process.

5 | Limitations and Recommendations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the sample consists only of academics working at two university, which limits the generalisability of the results. The results need to be diversified and compared with studies to be conducted in different universities and regions. In addition, participants' attitudes and awareness were self-reported, which may cause biases such as social desirability bias and affect the accuracy of the results. The cross-sectional design of the study cannot examine long-term changes in faculty members' attitudes. Finally, validity and reliability studies of the scales used in the study should be conducted in different cultural contexts.

Considering these limitations, various suggestions are offered to better support individuals with ASD in their educational processes and to improve the attitudes of faculty members towards these individuals. In-service training programmes should be organised for faculty members to increase their autism awareness and educational skills. Seminars, workshops and informative activities should be organised in universities to raise awareness about autism. It is important to develop and implement policies to support the educational processes of individuals with ASD; in this context, universities should provide special support services and resources for students with ASD. In addition, studies should be conducted to examine in more detail the difficulties faced by individuals with ASD in their educational processes and the attitudes of faculty members.

In conclusion, the attitudes of faculty members are of great importance in overcoming the difficulties faced by individuals with ASD in undergraduate education. Increasing the knowledge and awareness of faculty members about autism through in-service trainings and awareness-raising campaigns may positively affect the academic and social success of individuals with ASD. In this direction, the long-term effects of awareness-raising interventions should be evaluated in long-term studies. Considering these limitations and recommendations, individuals with ASD can be better supported in their educational processes and better integrated in the society.

Author Contributions

Mustafa Ceylan: writing – review and editing, writing – original draft, project administration, methodology, funding acquisition, formal analysis, data curation. **Özlem Altındağ Kumaş:** writing – review and editing, methodology, writing – original draft, data curation. **Halime Miray Sümer Dodur:** writing – review and editing, funding acquisition, formal analysis, data curation. **Emel Sardohan Yildirim:** writing – review and editing, funding acquisition, formal analysis, data curation.

Acknowledgments

The authors have nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Dicle University.

Data Availability Statement

However, researcher who wish to obtain additional data or conduct further analysis may contact the relevant authors to request supplementary information or materials. The authors is willing to collaborate and provide the necessary information to support the results presented in the article.

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