

College students' attitudes toward peers with High Functioning Autism

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Background: The transition to college for emerging adults with milder forms of autism (HFA; Asperger's and high functioning autism) has become an increasingly salient concern for parents and professionals, yet it remains understudied. Reactions of typically developing college students to the presence of peers on the spectrum is of importance given the link between feelings of social belonging and retention of college students with disabilities (Belch, 2005).

Objectives: To compare university students' affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes toward vignette characters demonstrating social behaviors characteristic of HFA.

Methods: Participants were 195 college students at a four-year university in the southwestern U.S., aged 18-24 years ($M_{age} = 19.6$, $SD = 1.42$; 52% male). The majority of participants were Asian American (58.5%; 19.4% European American, 18% Hispanic or Latino, 3.2% Pacific Islander, and 1% African American). Participants read three vignettes depicting social interactions between peers in a university setting. The main character in each vignette was male and exhibited behaviors characteristic of HFA. Students were randomly assigned one of three labeling conditions for the main character; HFA label, typical college student label, or no label. Participants completed an adapted version of the Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities (MAS; 33 items; Fidler, Vilchinsky, & Werner) for each vignette main character and the 41-item Autism Knowledge questionnaire (Kuhn & Carter, 2006). Scores on the affect ($\alpha = 0.84$), cognition ($\alpha = 0.92$), and behavior ($\alpha = 0.86$) subscales of the MAS were averaged across the three main characters for each participant. Separate OLS regressions controlling for age, gender, and autism knowledge compared the three labeling condition groups on affect, cognition, and behavior subscale scores.

Results: No significant difference was observed on the affect subscale between students in the three groups. In contrast, for both the cognition and behavior subscales, students in the HFA label group reported significantly more positive attitudes than the group that received no label [cognition: $\beta = -0.30$, $t(189) = -3.80$, $p < .001$; behavior $\beta = -0.19$, $t(187) = -2.35$, $p = 0.02$]. However, the HFA and typical college student label groups did not differ significantly.

Conclusion: Results reveal a more positive disposition on the part of contemporary college students toward peers who display symptoms of HFA when they know that the person has HFA compared to not having the person labeled. These experimental findings could mitigate parental and professional concerns about what would happen to HFA emerging adults in a typical university setting if the diagnostic label became known. The media and scientific awareness and publicity around the autism spectrum over the last few years may have worked to create an accepting attitude on the part of the generation coming to adulthood. Additionally, increased community awareness may yield an effect similar to that of the diagnostic label condition in this study.