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Parents' awareness of the psychological and social characteristics Of their children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate the level of awareness among parents of children with autism regarding the psychological and social characteristics of their children. The researcher employed the descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing a form designed by Al-Hammad (2015) to assess the psychological and social traits of autistic children. The form was administered to 63 parents, including 33 fathers, whose children attend the EL-Shorouq Center in the Ain Defla province. The results indicated a high level of awareness among both parents, with consistent awareness levels across different types of characteristics. The study also recommended certain measures to further enhance this awareness, emphasizing its importance in the care and support of these children.

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I. Introduction

The family is considered a fundamental unit in society, where individuals find the essential foundation for learning behavioral norms and ways to interact with others, while receiving care and attention. This role becomes particularly crucial for individuals with special needs, who require tailored care and attention that aligns with the nature and severity of their specific needs. Among this group, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) stands out with psychological and social characteristics that distinctly differ from other special needs categories. Understanding the diverse characteristics of children with autism is crucial for enhancing their quality of life and developing their abilities. These children face unique challenges in communication and social interaction, necessitating a deep understanding of their individual needs and capabilities through a well-considered environment, especially within the family context, as well as through specialized educational programs. Such awareness also facilitates their effective integration into society, contributing to the development of healthy relationships and tangible progress in their personal and social development trajectories.

II. Problem Statement

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is recognized as a neurodevelopmental disorder, impacting a child's neurological development, affecting their ability to engage in social interaction and communication. It is characterized by a wide range of behavioral and interactive challenges. Autism is part of the broader spectrum of autism spectrum disorders (ASD), which includes a variety of symptoms and difficulties that can manifest to varying degrees.

The primary feature of autism is difficulty in social interaction and communication. This may manifest as difficulty in interacting naturally with others, understanding body language and facial expressions, and developing social relationships. Additionally, individuals with autism may exhibit limited interest in social activities and repetitive behaviors or patterns. The presentation of autism varies significantly, with symptoms ranging from mild in some cases to severe in others. Individuals with autism may also display exceptional skills in specific areas, such as music, art, or mathematics. Therefore, early diagnosis, effective intervention, and social and educational support are crucial for improving the quality of life for individuals with autism and enhancing their individual capabilities.

Parental awareness of this disorder is highly significant in understanding and supporting their autistic children. This awareness varies according to culture, society, and educational attitudes (Makino, Al., 2021). Often, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the nature and impact of autism. Some parents may have a general knowledge of autism, while others lack precise information.

Good awareness among parents about autism is beneficial in identifying early signs and seeking early diagnosis and intervention. Awareness also contributes to enhancing social support and active participation in providing care and education for children with autism.

The level of parental awareness is also influenced by the quality of information available to them and the sources they rely on. Media, associations, and organizations dedicated to raising awareness about autism can play a vital role in providing accurate information and educating society about the challenges and abilities of this group (AlAlmaei Asiri et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to encourage parents to seek reliable sources and participate in awareness events about autism, as effective communication and understanding can play a crucial role in improving the lives of children with autism and enhancing the social understanding and support they need.

Based on the above, this study aims to explore the level of awareness among parents of children with autism regarding the psychological and social characteristics of this group. This general question leads to the following sub-questions:

- Are there statistically significant differences in the level of awareness attributed to the type of characteristics?
- Are there statistically significant differences in the level of awareness attributed to the parent's gender (father/mother)?

III. Importance of the Study

-The significance of this study lies in its focus on the topic of autism, which is increasingly vital due to the rising prevalence of this population in Algeria year after year, and the impact it has on families and society at large.

- **Identifying the distinctive psychological and social traits of children with autism:** This study aims to summarize and document these traits to highlight the key characteristics that differentiate these children.

- **Highlighting the importance of parental awareness:** The study underscores the need for parents to understand these psychological and social characteristics to better support their children, taking these unique aspects into account.

- **Raising awareness and directing attention:** The study emphasizes the importance of improving awareness and focusing on this special group within society, particularly children with autism.

- **Scientific contribution:** From a scientific perspective, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the key traits of individuals with autism.

IV. Objectives of the Study:

1. Defining the psychological and social characteristics of children with autism.

2. Assessing parental awareness of the characteristics of their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
3. Identifying statistical differences in parental awareness between psychological and social characteristics.
4. Exploring statistical differences between fathers and mothers in their awareness of the characteristics of their children with ASD.

V. Study Concepts:

Psychological and Social Characteristics of Children with Autism: Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) exhibit a set of psychological and social characteristics that distinguish them from others. Children with autism typically like to play with iPads, hate crying, and sleep less than the general population. However, they have eating and consumption habits similar to their typical peers, as noted by (Almsmary et al., 2022). The impact of these characteristics varies from person to person, but there are common psychological and social traits that are commonly observed across different conditions, including:

1. Psychological Characteristics:

- Difficulty understanding emotions and feelings: Children with ASD often face challenges in understanding others' emotions and expressing their own. They may show a preference for rational information over emotional interaction.
 - Communication difficulties: There may be challenges in understanding facial expressions and interpreting emotions.
 - Difficulty in building and maintaining friendships and relationships: These children may struggle with forming and sustaining social connections.
- Additionally, sensory deficits are often noticeable, including:
- Lack of sensory perception and response to stimuli.
 - Emotional isolation and emotional coldness.
 - Prolonged engagement in repetitive behaviors and unusual interests in trivial things.
 - Episodes of anger, self-harm, and aggression towards others, as well as laughing, crying, or screaming without a clear reason.
 - Delayed or halted language development: This can result in a complete lack of verbal and non-verbal communication, making it difficult to learn and develop cognitive skills.
 - Self-focused thinking.
 - Deficits in adaptive behavior: Compared to typically developing children of the same age, children with autism may lack imitation, pretend play, and participation in play and activities with peers.

- **Resistance to routine change:** These children often reject any changes to their routine behavior and resist changes in daily life patterns.

2-Social Characteristics:

The primary disorder experienced by children with autism revolves around difficulties in social relationships. Social interest is associated with increased social communication gains in children with autism spectrum disorder, as noted by researcher (Vivanti et al., 2022). These difficulties can be summarized in the following key points, as mentioned by several researchers, including Farouk and Al-Sharbiny (2010):- **Social Development:** There is a deficiency in terms of eye contact, an inability to comprehend the reciprocal nature of social interactions, and difficulty in understanding and interpreting the emotions of others through non-verbal behavior.

- **Social Communication:** There is a disturbance and deficiency in the ability to pay attention and socially interact within the family environment.

- **Social Isolation:** This isolation is evident in the inability to form relationships with the surrounding environment and a lack of emotional responsiveness, which leads to the child with autism being isolated in their own world.

- **Play Interaction with Peers:** A child with autism is often characterized by arranging objects with a focus and engaging in repetitive, stereotyped play. They are generally indifferent to others and unable to participate in group or even paired games.

- **Unusual Interaction with the Environment:**

- Increased sensitivity or unusual responses to sensory stimuli such as sounds or lights, which some researchers attribute to a neurogenetic problem, such as researcher Johnson (2004).

- They may exhibit an unusual interest in objects, like spinning objects or shapes.

- **Difficulty Adapting to Sudden Changes in Routine or Environment:**

These characteristics vary widely, and it is important not to treat all individuals with autism in the same way. Individual understanding and early support can be crucial in enhancing social and interactive improvement for individuals with autism.

VI. Previous Studies:

1. **Adel Shaib's Study (2008):** This study aimed to explore the psychological, social, and cognitive characteristics of children with autism from the perspective of their parents. The study focused on two children with autism, and the researcher used interviews to collect data from the parents of the children.

Key Findings of the Study:

Parents' Knowledge:

- It was found that parents have knowledge of the psychological, social, and cognitive characteristics of their children with autism.

- However, the degree of knowledge varied between the parents, with the parents of the second child having a greater level of understanding.

Impact of Characteristics on Family Interaction:

- The study showed that parents' lack of understanding of the characteristics and symptoms of autism can affect their interactions and relationships with their children.

- It was found that parents' lack of understanding of the impact of these characteristics may influence the treatment and rehabilitation of the child.

Impact of Accurate Understanding of Characteristics

- The study indicated that parents' understanding of the characteristics of autism and how they affect children's behavior impacts their relationship with their children.

Challenges in Dealing with Children

- The researcher found that parents' actions may reflect a lack of genuine understanding of the characteristics and symptoms of autism.

The study also highlighted the importance of providing comprehensive understanding to the parents of children with autism regarding their children's characteristics to improve family interactions and ensure appropriate support and rehabilitation for children with autism.

2- Study of **Mahjoub and Majzoub (2017)**: This study aimed to explore the psychological and social characteristics of children with autism from the perspective of their parents in the Northern State of Sudan, considering the influence of various variables such as gender, educational level, economic status, and age. The study utilized a descriptive approach and included a sample of 66 individuals, divided into two groups. The sample consisted of 25 parents, randomly selected from different community sectors in various regions.

Key Findings:

The study found that the degree of impact of the psychological characteristics of children with autism was low. However, some differences emerged based on social variables such as gender, educational level, economic status, and age. The study also concluded that there is a need for greater attention to improving understanding and awareness of the characteristics of autism and their impact on individuals, both socially and psychologically. It highlighted that the lack of interpretation of these behavioral manifestations leads to a decline in the quality of services and treatment programs provided. The study recommends enhancing the knowledge and skills of specialists in understanding and interpreting these behavioral manifestations to improve the quality of services provided to children with autism.

3- Study by Abd (2018): This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of the special education community in the West Bank, focusing on 62 teachers. The study utilized the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS), which is designed to assess behaviors associated with the autism spectrum.

Key Findings:

- The most common characteristic observed in children with autism was verbal communication disorders, with an average score of 3.1, which is higher than the median score of 2.5. Non-verbal communication disorders ranked second, with an average score of 2.9. The third rank was shared by four aspects: imitation, adaptation to change, fear and anxiety, and the use of the body.

VII. Commentary on Previous Studies:

The points highlighted in the context align with the findings of previous studies on autism. These key points are as follows:

1. Psychological Characteristics of Autistic Children:

- Stereotypical Behaviors: Autistic children are characterized by repetitive movements and behaviors.
- Withdrawal: This refers to the child's tendency to engage in solitary activities and avoid social interaction.
- Isolation: Describes the social detachment and the inability of autistic children to communicate normally with others.
- Social Communication: Indicates the difficulties autistic children face in understanding and correctly interacting within social relationships.

2. Lack of Parental Knowledge:

- Research indicates a significant lack of parental knowledge regarding the psychological and social characteristics of autistic children.
- This lack of understanding can affect how parents interact with their children and their ability to provide necessary support.

3. Impact of Lack of Understanding on Handling Autistic Children:

- The text suggests that parents' lack of understanding of these characteristics impacts their interaction with their autistic children.
- This deficiency in understanding may lead to challenges in providing effective support and guiding these children toward improvement.

This study aims to explore the extent to which parents of autistic children at the Shorouk Center in Ain Defla, Algeria, are aware of the specific nature of their children's condition.

VIII. Applied Aspect

-Research Method:

To achieve the study's objectives, we used the descriptive-analytical method, which is suitable for the nature of the study. This method involves studying the

existing reality or phenomenon by applying an appropriate research tool, followed by analyzing and interpreting the results.

-Study Population and Sample:

The study population consisted of the parents of children diagnosed with autism by a specialized committee, who are enrolled at the Shorouk Center for Autistic Children located in Ain Defla, Algeria. The total number of children was 83 for the 2022/2023 academic year. The study sample, which cooperated in applying the research tool, included 63 parents, of whom 30 were mothers.

-Research Tool:

The researcher used the Psychological and Social Characteristics of Autistic Children questionnaire by Al-Hammad (2015), as it was deemed most suitable for the purpose and goal of this study. This tool was found to have very acceptable psychometric properties regarding both validity and reliability. The internal consistency correlation coefficient for the first and second axes ranged between 0.66 and 0.90. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.95, indicating a very high and good level of reliability.

The scale consists of 60 items divided into two axes: the first axis covers psychological characteristics with 30 items, and the second axis concerns social characteristics, also with 30 items. The questionnaire dimensions are categorized into three levels: "applies to a small degree" (1), "applies to a moderate degree" (2), and "applies to a large degree" (3).

-Psychometric Properties of the Tool in the Current Study:

1. Internal Consistency Validity:

To verify the internal consistency validity, the correlation coefficient between the total score of the questionnaire and the scores obtained from the application was calculated. The results are detailed in the table below:

Table 1: shows the correlation coefficients between the total questionnaire scores and the scores for each individual item

| Items | Correlati on Coefficie nt | Items | Correlat ion Coeffici ent | Items | Correla tion Coeffic ient | Items | Correla tion Coeffic ient |
|-------|------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------|
| Item1 | ,517** | Item16 | ,517** | Item31 | ,517** | Item46 | ,517** |
| Item2 | ,334** | Item17 | ,334** | Item32 | ,334** | Item47 | ,444** |
| Item3 | 0,459* | Item18 | 0,459* | Item33 | 0,459* | Item48 | 0,459* |
| Item4 | 0,583** | Item19 | 0,583** | Item34 | 0,583** | Item49 | 0,583** |
| Item5 | ,607* | Item20 | ,607* | Item35 | ,607* | Item50 | ,607* |

| | | | | | | | |
|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
| Item 6 | ,491** | Item21 | ,491** | Item36 | ,491** | Item51 | ,491** |
| Item 7 | ,575** | Item22 | ,575** | Item37 | ,575** | Item52 | ,575** |
| Item 8 | ,382** | Item23 | ,382** | Item38 | ,382** | Item53 | ,382** |
| Item9 | ,517** | Item24 | 0,583** | Item39 | ,517** | Item54 | ,517** |
| Item10 | ,334** | Item25 | ,607* | Item40 | ,334** | Item55 | ,334** |
| Item11 | 0,459* | Item26 | ,491** | Item41 | 0,459* | Item56 | 0,459* |
| Item12 | 0,583** | Item27 | ,575** | Item42 | 0,583** | Item57 | 0,583** |
| Item13 | ,607* | Item28 | ,382** | Item43 | ,607* | Item58 | ,607* |
| Item14 | ,491** | Item29 | ,334** | Item44 | ,491** | Item59 | ,491** |
| Item15 | ,575** | Item30 | 0,459* | Item45 | ,575** | Item60 | ,575** |

**At the 0.01 significance level

At the 0.05 significance level*

It is observed from the table above that the correlation coefficients between each item score and the overall questionnaire score are all significant and positive, indicating a high degree of internal consistency, which reflects the validity of this tool. To calculate the reliability of the tool, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated, yielding a value of 0.916, which is very high, indicating strong reliability of the tool.

VIII- Results and Discussion:

1. Results for the main question: What is the level of awareness among the parents of children with autism about their psychological and social characteristics?

To answer this question, we calculated the "T-test" for a single sample and compared the hypothetical and actual mean scores of the study sample. The results were as follows:

Table 2: shows the t-test for the sample of parents of children with autism on the research instrument.

| Sample | Hypothetical Mean | Sample Mean | t-Value | Significance Level |
|--------|-------------------|-------------|---------|--------------------|
| 63 | 120 | 130,34 | 6.16 | 0.05 0.00 |

From the table above, it is observed that the calculated mean is greater than the hypothetical mean, and the t-value is 6.16, which is significant at both the 0.01 and 0.05 significance levels. This indicates a good level of awareness among the parents of children with autism regarding the psychological and social characteristics of their children. This awareness is likely due to their interest in their children's condition and their efforts to understand the disorder to better comprehend and assist their children in adapting and improving their situations. This may also be attributed to the cultural level of the parents at this time, where self-learning has become more prevalent among individuals, particularly when faced with problems, such as having a child with special needs, which in this study is defined as autism.

2. Results of the Study's First Sub-question: Are There Statistically Significant Differences in the Level of Awareness Attributed to the Type of Characteristics?

To answer this question, the means of the two domains (psychological and social characteristics) were calculated and compared, and the results were as follows:

Table 3: illustrates the T-test and the differences in arithmetic means for awareness between psychological and social characteristics.

| Sample | Characteristics | Hypothetical Mean | Sample Mean | T-value | Significance Level |
|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|---------|--------------------|
| 63 | Psychological Characteristics | 60 | 65.38 | 4.87 | 0.00 |
| | Social Characteristics | 60 | 64.88 | 5.79 | 000.0 |

We observe that there is a similarity in the level of awareness among the parents of children with autism regarding both psychological and social characteristics. The calculated mean for awareness of psychological characteristics is 65.38, which is very close to the mean for social characteristics. This indicates that psychological and social characteristics are interrelated in terms of structure, behaviour, and emotion, and it is often impossible to separate them in many situations due to their mutual influence.

3. The second sub-question explores whether there are statistically significant differences in the level of awareness attributed to the parent's gender (father/mother). To answer this question, we calculated the T-value for two independent samples based on the parent's gender (father/mother), and the results were as follows:

Table 4: illustrates the T-test and the differences in arithmetic means for awareness of psychological and social characteristics attributed to the gender of the guardian.

| Sample | Guardian's Gender | Number | Arithmetic Mean | T-value | Significance Level |
|--------|-------------------|--------|-----------------|---------|--------------------|
| 60 | Mother | 30 | 130.96 | 0.73 | At 0.05 |
| | Father | 63 | 129.36 | | Not Significant |

From the table, we observe that the average awareness of psychological and social characteristics among mothers and fathers is quite similar, with mothers scoring an average of 130.96 and fathers scoring 129.36. This close similarity indicates that there are no significant differences in awareness between parents. This is likely due to the presence of a child with autism in the family, which naturally leads both parents to be equally attentive to their child's needs. This level of awareness can also be attributed to the parents' educational and cultural backgrounds, which often surpasses a basic level of education.

IX. General Conclusion and Study Recommendations:

The study concludes that the level of parental awareness regarding the psychological and social characteristics of their children with autism is high. This is a crucial indicator of parents' understanding of their children's needs, which can significantly improve communication and interaction with children in this category. Although there is no difference between the awareness levels of mothers and fathers, this suggests that parents, in general, are equally aware of the psychological and social aspects of their children with autism. This is encouraging in terms of providing a supportive environment and a mutual understanding of the challenges faced by children with autism. However, it is essential to consider that this conclusion may be based on a specific sample of participants in the study, and differences could exist among individuals and cultures. Therefore, these findings should be considered within a broader context and complemented by other studies to validate the conclusion and deepen the understanding, given the importance of family awareness of these characteristics, which positively impacts the child's progress.

This study recommends several approaches to achieve this:

1. Workshops and Training:

- Conduct specialized workshops and training sessions for parents to explain the unique traits and needs of children with autism.
- Provide information on the latest therapeutic and educational techniques used to support children with autism.

2. Digital Resources and Websites:

- Create websites and digital resources that offer reliable information about autism.

- Provide educational videos and explanations for parents about the challenges and special needs of children with autism.

3. Consultation Sessions:

- Offer opportunities for parents to participate in consultation sessions with specialists in autism and special education.

- Provide emotional and psychological support to parents to help them cope with challenges and enhance their understanding.

4. Regular Communication:

- Encourage parents to maintain regular communication with teachers and specialists working with their children.

- Provide regular reports detailing the child's progress and improvement in skills.

5. Community Events:

- Organize community events that allow parents to connect and share experiences with each other.

- Hold awareness events in schools and local communities.

6. Social Support:

- Encourage the formation of support groups for parents where they can share experiences, problems, and solutions.

- Provide social and psychological support services for parents.

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