

Stigma of People with Autism: Analysis of Current Research Status in China and Future Outlook

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Abstract. Stigma is a persistent problem in society and culture, especially for individuals with autism who face significant stigmatization, which negatively impacts their life satisfaction and well-being. While early autism research focused on the diagnostic and treatment challenges of childhood, the increase in the age range of autism has led to a recent shift in research towards understanding the causes of autism. There is also a deeper understanding of the impact of autism, with social and mental health factors being brought into the focus of research. The impact of stigma on people with autism has been included as a key research focus. This research aims to discuss the impact of stigma on life satisfaction and well-being of Chinese autistic people. By analyzing the existing literature, this research summarizes the current state of research on stigma experienced by people with autism in China. It focuses on how stigma affects the mental health and social adjustment of autistic people, as well as the help of social support. This research not only reviews relevant theoretical studies, but also suggests possible directions for future research. In particular, it focuses on the influence of cultural context on the unique challenges faced by people with autism in China. This research also discusses interventions and recommendations to reduce stigmatization, aiming to build a foundation for future research to understand the Chinese autistic population.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder; stigma; mental health; life satisfaction; well-being.

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by difficulties in social communication interactions, narrow interests and repetitive behaviors [1]. Since autism is usually found in childhood, most of the research has mostly focused on early diagnosis and developmental challenges of individuals with autism. In recent years, as the number of individuals with autism has increased, the widening age range of diagnosis has led researchers to note the impact of autism across the lifespan. Related studies have also shown a significant increase in the number of adults diagnosed with autism, and many of these individuals are not diagnosed with autism until adulthood [2,3]. Research on autism has also progressively shifted from early identification and diagnosis to a more in-depth study of the underlying causes and influences of autism, as well as moving beyond the developmental challenges of childhood. This shift has also led to the realization that stigma is a key factor in exacerbating the severity of the illness and affecting the life satisfaction and well-being of individuals with autism. Stigma not only affects society's opinion of people with autism, but also their opinion of themselves.

Stigmatization is the negative perception or devaluation of the status of individuals and specific groups. Stigmatization is a negative process and a source of victimization. Stigmatization is also a social process and phenomenon that often occurs in the context of power imbalances. Stigma occurs when labeling, stereotyping, loss of status, and discrimination occur simultaneously [4]. In the process of stigmatization, certain differences in individuals or groups are identified and then labeled by people with labels or marked by society. These labels are usually associated with negative stereotypes or discrimination. Stigmatization often occurs in the experiences of minority groups. Minority stress theory emphasizes that social stressors such as prejudice and discrimination affect minorities and lead to a variety of negative outcomes, including stigmatization [5].

For individuals with autism, labels such as “odd” or “loner” are often associated with additional stigmatization. Although some research has now begun to recognize autism as an identity-based minority group, research on the specific stigmatizing experiences of individuals remains relatively

limited [6]. In research with adults with autism, it has been found that co-occurring disorders such as anxiety also complicate the process of their diagnosis. This complication has resulted in the lack of accurate diagnostic criteria for autism in the adult population to date, and delays in diagnosis and even missed diagnoses. Therefore, this is one of the reasons why many researches nowadays prefer to focus on the group of children with autism. Indirect stigmatization experiences for family members of children with autism and misconceptions by healthcare professionals are also major groups that have been studied. In individuals with autism, stigma is often manifested in negative attitudes, prejudice, and marginalization from social and intimate relationships. For people with autism, stigmatization seriously affects their integration into society and their achievement of well-being.

Stigmatization of autism is particularly evident in China, but research has been limited. This is largely influenced by traditional values of conformity to social norms. Chinese parents emphasize their children's "normally and compliant". In poorer and less educated areas, some parents are even reluctant to accept and believe that their children need treatment for their illnesses. Public awareness and understanding of mental health and mental health issues remains limited, leading to denial and general misunderstanding of individual differences in the social environment. There are still many people in society who categorize all mental disorders and label them as "mental illness". Stereotypically, people spontaneously distance themselves from people with mental disorders. Studies have shown that negative stereotypes of people with autism contribute to the social alienation of people with autism. Such misconceptions exacerbate stigmatizing behaviors, reinforce social exclusion, and seriously affect the self-esteem and mental health of people with autism [7]. However, stigmatization research specifically focused on autism in China is still limited, suggesting that a deeper understanding is needed to explore the importance of social attitudes and the overall impact on people with autism.

The purpose of this research was therefore to analyze the current state of existing research on stigma experienced by Chinese autistic individuals. To explore the impact of stigma on patients' life satisfaction and well-being, and to fill the gap of less research on Chinese autistic patients. This research also proposes future research directions as well as measures and suggestions for alleviating stigma for people with autism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Autism Prevalence and Stigma

In recent years, the prevalence of autism has increased significantly worldwide. According to data from a global survey in 2022, the global prevalence of autism is approximately 1%, and the prevalence of autism in China is close to this level [8]. Although this reflects improved diagnostic techniques and increased social awareness of autism, people with autism still face significant social stigma and misunderstanding in China. Influenced by traditional cultural perceptions, Chinese society has high expectations of individual behavioral norms, which has led to frequent isolation of families with autism.

According to Turnock, Langley, and Jones' theoretical model, stigma can usually be categorized into three main types: public stigma, self-stigma, and associative stigma. Public stigma refers to social attitudes toward individuals with autism, which are usually expressed in the form of negative stereotypes and social rejection behaviors. Self-stigma is internalized stigma. Self-stigma occurs when individuals internalize these negative views. Excessive obsession with oneself or the belief that one is "different" leads to low self-esteem and poor mental health. Associative stigma is evident across cultures and affects family members of individuals with autism, who may feel shame for caring for or interacting with an individual with autism. Further analysis of the social stigma faced by people with autism can be done with the help of the Minority Stress Model to gain insight into their specific sources of stress. The Minority Stress Model states that minorities often experience specific stressors including prejudice life events, everyday discrimination, expectations of rejection, stigma management, internalized stigma and non-event stress. In studies of stigma for adults with autism,

there has been literature exploring the mental health issues experienced by people with autism and the challenges they face in seeking employment [9,10].

Stigma for people with autism often comes from their negative experiences in everyday life. A research by Cage, Monaco, and Newell found that people with autism are dehumanized by others and even viewed as having disruptive behaviors or difficulty communicating. In particular, adults with autism experience discrimination in their lives, such as being socially shunned and refused cooperation at work. There are many challenges that people with autism face in their daily lives and work environments. These negative interactions may increase their likelihood of being bullied and can also lead to a decrease in their quality of life. These negative consequences are exacerbated by society's negative reactions to people with autism.

2.2. Current Status of Autism Research in China

In China, awareness of autism and related research is still in the developmental stage. Currently, society generally lacks a basic understanding of autism. Many families feel a sense of shame due to the fear of negative social evaluation after their child's diagnosis, and they tend to conceal their child's autism diagnosis. Relative stigma is a significant issue, as this family may place a higher value on reputation and may exacerbate the stigma experienced by children with autism [11]. In the workplace, adults with autism will tend to choose to conceal their condition to minimize the harm that stigmatization can cause them.

Differently from countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where the experiences and stigmas of people with autism have been clearly understood and researched, China is still staying in the process of investigating how stigma affects the negative labeling of children with autism by their parents, schools, and healthcare professionals [12]. Furthermore, most of the autism research in China is also focused on Hong Kong. Due to Hong Kong's unique historical and cultural background, social attitudes and social support for individuals with autism differ from those in mainland China. It is worth noting that there are still significant gaps in existing research on the experiences of people with autism in mainland China. Existing studies have mainly focused on the stigma faced by children with autism and their behavioral manifestations. However, there is a lack of systematic data support, and it also can not fully reflect the actual situation of children with autism. For the adult population, some researches have used autism as a social disorder to conduct relevant studies on adults' employment and interpersonal interactions.

Large scale researches exploring public understanding and social attitudes towards autism have also been relatively limited. Compared with countries such as the United States, China has less basic research on autism diagnosis and intervention. This is partly due to varying levels of public awareness and different health policy priorities. Yu, Stronach, and Harrison's research suggests that fewer people in China are aware of the extent of public understanding of autism and are aware of the characteristics, etiology, and various manifestations of autism.

Tang and Bie's research analyzed media reports between 2003 and 2012 and found that many reports had negative labels added to people with autism. The media emphasized the abnormal behaviors of people with autism, which further exacerbated the misconceptions and stigmatization of autism in society. This research gap has also resulted in the real life situation and diagnostic characteristics of Chinese autistic people not yet being fully presented, and has limited public awareness and social attention. The general misunderstanding of mental health and other issues in society and the denial of abnormal people in traditional culture have led to stigmatization that not only affects the self-esteem and mental health of patients, but also reduces their life satisfaction and sense of well-being.

2.3. Impact of Stigma on Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an individual's assessment of overall life situation, which includes multiple perceptions of life resources, emotional relationships, and personal accomplishments [13]. Stigmatization often leads to feelings of loneliness, decreased self-worth and internalized shame, all

of which can reduce an individual's life satisfaction. Research has shown that stigmatization of individuals with autism in a social context has a significant negative impact on their life satisfaction. Stigmatized individuals with autism often feel isolated and misunderstood, and this sense of social exclusion also weakens their social support, which in turn affects their quality of life [14]. Family members also appear to experience psychological stress and reduced support for the patient due to stigmatization.

2.4. Impact of Stigma on Well-being

Wellbeing is often defined as an individual's positive evaluation and positive experience of life. Subjective well-being, quality of life, happiness flow and life satisfaction are among the ways in which researchers have studied well-being [15]. Research has shown that stigmatization has a wide-ranging impact on individuals with autism and their families, with an overall effect on well-being [16]. Negative family and societal perceptions can yes people with autism and their families feel isolated and their mental health is generally poorer. As a result of these factors, these individuals are less likely to participate in social activities and lose the opportunity to make new connections with others, which affects their well-being [17]. Therefore, it is of great relevance to conduct an in-depth study on how stigma affects the life satisfaction and well-being of adult patients with autism.

3. The Impact of Stigmatization on Autistic People in China

3.1. Impact on Autistic Children

For people with autism, stigma often exists during childhood. Childhood patients are often ostracized by their peers due to behavioral and language disorder problems. As a result, they also grow up with a greater sense of self-doubt, which is mainly manifested in lower self-esteem and social adjustment.

Children with autism often face stigmatization in their development in China, especially in the school environment. Due to a lack of social understanding of autism, many autistic children are ostracized by their peers at school and even misunderstood by teachers. Due to their social impairments and behavioral characteristics, autistic children are often seen as “special children” and “difficult to manage”. This also leads to exclusion from education and daily socialization, such as isolation from peers and bullying. This stigma not only affects their academic performance, but also has a long term impact on their emotional well-being and self-identity. Stigma also limits their opportunities to interact with others on an equal footing, and has long-term negative impacts on their emotions, self-identity and mental health. Prolonged lack of peer support also contributes to lower levels of self-esteem in children with autism, who are also prone to feelings of isolation and psychological frustration. Children with autism are also often labeled as “lonely geniuses” or “star children”, which reinforces the public's impression that they prefer to be alone or are gifted, thus neglecting their individual needs and contributions [18].

Stigmatization may also be exacerbated by a lack of awareness of autism among teachers and schools. Teachers often lack understanding and support for the special needs of children with autism in their classroom management, and some teachers appear to be overly concerned. This also indirectly reinforces the stigmatization of children with autism by other classmates, causing them to have even lower self-esteem. This negative social and educational experience also affects their overall development and has a negative impact on their mental health and future social integration.

3.2. Impact on Adults with Autism

Stigma also has a negative impact on the lives of adults with autism, particularly in terms of employment, socialization and mental health. Many employers are skeptical of the abilities of people with autism, believing that they have difficulty with job positions and tasks. This prejudice leads to unfair treatment in the workplace, limiting career advancement opportunities, as well as affecting their financial standards and life satisfaction [19]. This stigma also exposes adults with autism to

higher rates of unemployment and employment instability, as well as increasing their economic stress and feelings of social exclusion. Socially, adults with autism are often isolated due to stigma. This social isolation leads them to develop internalized negative emotions such as low self-esteem and anxiety [20]. The internalized stigma also weakens their self-esteem and has a negative impact on mental health, to the point that some adults develop problems such as depression. Workplaces are particularly intolerant of behaviors that may be exhibited by people with autism, which also allows for camouflage and concealment. People with autism try to appear like neuro-normal people to alleviate the stigma they suffer. But this behavior can be mentally taxing and can lead to deteriorating mental health or suicidal tendencies.

3.3. Cultural Factors

In China, the stigmatization of people with autism is heavily influenced by cultural factors. Influenced by Confucianism and other cultures, traditional cultural beliefs emphasize the importance of family reputation. The behaviors of autistic people are often seen as “abnormal” and thus negatively labeled. It is extremely prominent in Chinese culture that people with mental or developmental disabilities are still viewed as a burden to the family or as a punishment by society. Perceptions and social identities that value the external environment largely influence the stigmatizing experiences of people with autism. Family and societal expectations of “normal” behavior isolate individuals with autism and their families due to the “associated stigma” [11]. This cultural background causes individuals with mental or developmental disabilities to be viewed as a burden to their families. This stigma also leads to stricter family and societal behavioral expectations for individuals with autism, and many individuals are expected to behave in a manner consistent with neurologically normal individuals [20]. As a result individuals with autism also experience social isolation and inadequate social support. The pressure of cultural background further exacerbates discrimination against autistic people, causing them to encounter more obstacles in seeking social support and integrating into the community, which in turn affects their life satisfaction and well-being.

4. Stigma Reduction Strategies and Research Limitations

Reducing stigma and mitigating the stigmatizing experiences of individuals with autism requires multifaceted strategies. Enhancing public education is key. By popularizing knowledge about autism, it can increase society's awareness of autism, as well as understanding and acceptance of the traits of people with autism. Schools can help students and teachers better understand autism and reduce stigma on campus through curriculum development and teacher training. In the work environment, develop specialized employment support policies and positions. Providing reasonable job adjustments for adults with autism can help adults with autism achieve financial independence and career advancement. Enterprises can also try to provide personalized work adaptation programs for autistic employees and foster inclusiveness among co-workers, thus creating a friendly atmosphere in the workplace. The government can also set up special funding programs to provide financial incentives and encourage social participation of autistic people to companies that employ autistic people.

In the current research, although the stigmatization faced by people with autism in China and its impact on life satisfaction and well-being have been explored, there are still some limitations. Primarily, most studies have focused on pediatric populations, resulting in a poor understanding of the needs of adult patients. Second, the impact of stigmatization is often based on subjective data collected in the form of questionnaires or interviews and lacks the support of objective physical or psychological indicators, which may limit the broad applicability of the research. In addition, autism research in China has mainly focused on urban areas, with fewer studies on people with autism in rural and remote areas. This makes the research sample potentially underrepresented. More relevant studies focus more on specific areas and do not describe the specific experiences of stigmatization they suffer in their daily lives.

These limitations show that future studies should further improve on data collection methods and sample diversity to provide a more comprehensive picture of the current stigmatization situation of people with autism in China.

5. Future Research Directions and Outlook

Future research should further focus on the unique needs of adults with autism, especially the challenges of stigmatization in the workplace and social situations. Cross-cultural comparative studies can also provide valuable references for the development of stigmatization interventions that are appropriate for the Chinese social context. Social support and community support can be a new research direction. In the Chinese context, community culture also plays a different role than in other countries. Improvements in public education, policy support, and mental health services can create a more inclusive social environment for Chinese individuals with autism. In addition, long-term follow-up of patients can crystallize the phenomenon of stigma in order to more fully measure the impact of stigma on the life satisfaction and well-being of people with autism.

6. Conclusion

In summary, stigma has a profound impact on the life satisfaction and well-being of Chinese adult patients with autism. By collecting and analyzing existing literature, this research found that stigma not only affects patients' daily lives and limits their social integration and career development, but also has a negative effect on mental health. The strategies to reduce stigma include enhancing public education, optimizing the work environment, and providing social policy support. This research also discusses China's unique culture, pointing out the causes and phenomena of stigmatization of people with autism. Future research should pay more attention to the needs of adults with autism and draw on cross-cultural experiences to create a more inclusive and supportive social environment for people with autism in China.

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