



# AUTISM: IS AWARENESS THE SAME IN JAPAN AND KOREA?

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*ABSTRACT: There have been studies on autism as well as other forms of neurodiversity in the United States, but less is known about how other countries fare with awareness of these disorders. This paper is meant to look at how much the public in other countries know about this information and how they will treat people based on their behavior. Autism is the primary focus of this research because there is more information available about this topic on a global scale. As it is a developmental function that affects behavior, the actions of affected individuals will vary. Korea and Japan were chosen for the setting of this topic, since they are known to be well-developed countries and would have a greater chance of having the resources needed for those who are neurologically diverse compared to other countries.*

*Keywords: Autism, Awareness, Japan, Korea, Neurodiversity*

## Introduction

Through my research, I have surmised that neurodiversity is a word that has many meanings, and the most important aspect is that it is about people that are different in how they think and act. It can be considered as an umbrella term for various kinds of disorders, with one such disorder being autism spectrum disorder (ASD), better known as autism. How autism is seen can differ based on the culture of the country. Behaviors that are considered autistic in the U.S. are not viewed in the same manner as they are in Japan, and such behaviors can even be considered normal within the social standards of Japanese culture (Atherton et al., 2023). That is not the case for the rest of the world. In Korea, the culture can make it more difficult for autistic people to fit in because of how different they can act from the rest of the population. When compared to the United States, there is more stigma against those with ASD in Korea (Kim et al., 2022). The reason for this difference could be because there are different levels of support people need on the autism spectrum, which affects how they adapt

to their environment. A few reasons I have identified in my research that have contributed to this issue would be lack of information about the subject, social norms in different cultures, and preconceived notions about ASD.

As a result of the factors listed above, people who are on the autism spectrum struggle to be seen, while it is already difficult for them to communicate with people (Sumiya, 2018). For people who have autism to be understood and gain assistance, more knowledge and awareness of ASD needs to be spread to the public of South Korea and Japan. Doing so would improve the treatment of those with autism in these countries and could lead to people gaining more support in managing their daily lives.

## Methodology

To research this project, I wanted to narrow my focus to specific countries because of time constraints. Since there seems to be many studies done on several types of neurodiversity in many places, deciding what I wanted to make the main point was a struggle. When I first started



## Ramachandran

my research, the topic that came up the most frequently regarding neurodiversity in different countries was autism, which is what prompted my interest. The next step I took to make my research more manageable was to choose a few countries instead of the whole world, so I decided on Japan and South Korea, because I knew little about their views on autism and wanted to explore that.

Unfortunately, when I decided to choose Japan and South Korea as the countries I would focus on for ASD, it created some obstacles for me in my research. A lot of the content I found would not have the information I was looking for and would not even be accessible through my computer. This caused me to take more time in finding sources. From there, I would identify sources that mentioned the cultural environment, the perspective of a person with ASD, and the public's thoughts on said information about them. Many of the sources I found were qualitative, but there were some which had quantitative data. I focused on the population of those diagnosed with ASD, as well as those of the general population, who are not likely to be familiar with said topic in order to gain information on their overall awareness of neurodiversity.

The databases I used for this research were the UW libraries, Google Scholar, and non-governmental organizations (NGO) online to see how those with ASD are supported. Most of my sources are through the UW library database. This research is meant to give an idea of what people think and feel in their respective countries regarding autism. It does not speak for other countries aside from South Korea and Japan. My goal was to analyze these sources and organize what I found in a manner that summarizes my findings.

### **Interdisciplinary Statement**

The interdisciplinary parts of this topic are the common factors that cause a lack of awareness.

This includes not understanding what autism is, how social norms affect perception of autism, and preconceived notions about ASD. This overlaps with ideas in different subjects. All these elements require information and experience from different fields. A lack of knowledge and preconceived notions can lead to issues in education that need to be addressed, or it can lead to the issue of not having the technology needed to spread that information, issues in communication, and so on. The aspect of social norms is connected to many different fields of study, like psychology, sociology, law, culture, and more. For example, the culture of a country affects the social norms and law, which in turn affects how people think and act, also affecting the structure of the society that takes place. There are many connections between the problems caused by autism awareness, and it is the combination of these factors that makes this topic an interdisciplinary issue.

### **Literature Review**

Research in Japan and South Korea have independently shown a difference of awareness about autism in each country. For South Korea, it was found that only 25% of the population is aware of ASD (Rim et al., 2019). As for Japan, their population's overall awareness for recognizing autism was found to be 45.8% (Koyama et al, 2009). While these results were approximated based on participant recognition of autistic traits, it can be concluded awareness in both countries can still be improved to greater lengths. According to the ION, the Institute of Neurodiversity (2023), there are over 100 countries that are a part of their organization, and Japan and Korea are not a part of this. This only continues their lack of information on such disorders as ASD. Both Japan and South Korea would need to improve awareness to alter how their social norms affect autistic people.

In Japan, the social scripts of people's interactions with others affects how they treat those who have ASD. Compared to the



## Autism Awareness in Korea and Japan

United States, Japan places more emphasis on conversations that follow a standard pattern, which can make it less difficult for autistic people to follow along. The repetitive nature of Japan's social scripts creates a pattern that those with autism can use to adhere to societal norms (Atherton et al., 2023). This means that social scripts in Japan are less free flowing, allowing people with autism to converse more easily. They will blend in easier in Japan compared to the United States. Socialization can be difficult in homogeneous societies, as it makes it challenging for those with ASD to create relationships.

In South Korea, it was found that cultural tightness (an emphasis on social norms) made it harder for those who are autistic to socialize with others, especially towards those who are not autistic. The reason for this is because the population in Korea is more of a homogeneous group, which means that there will be stronger norms established than if the population was a heterogeneous group (Kim et al., 2022). A homogeneous population allows less leniency in outlying behaviors due to how similar the population is to each other. This also contributes to the Social Identity Theory, where those who follow the social norms are favored and a part of the in-group, while people with autism are pushed into the out-group (Kim et al., 2022).

For those on the autism spectrum, socialization is challenging to different degrees. Difficulty in communication creates similar negative emotions among those with autism. There is a study in Japan where students with ASD found it difficult to make friendships with others due to social and communication challenges. They experienced loneliness and anxiety when making friendships as well as distress when it came to "masking" their irregular behaviors (Sumiya et al., 2018). It was already found that there is less information known by the public about autism in Japan, but if the other students had knowledge about it, they could have interacted differently with students with ASD. More isolation could

have been avoided. Knowing more about a subject does not necessarily mean that social norms surrounding it will change. Social norms are a factor that can create difficulties for people with ASD, but changing the social norms of an entire country would be unfeasible. Altering people's perspectives at an individual level is a more possible solution.

When PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) was used in Japan, it was meant to help those with ASD without intellectual disabilities develop their social skills, communication, behavior, and emotional issues. There were positive results to this, and it did not come at the cost of changing an entire country's social actions. PEERS was originally U.S. based, but it was able to be adjusted to fit Japan's cultural context of what is considered normal social interactions and still be successful (Yamada et al., 2020).

While PEERS was successful in its endeavor, there are still misconceptions that cause stigmas against those with autism. People who are not autistic in South Korea were found to be less inclined to interact with those who have ASD compared to the United States (Kim et al., 2023). This public stigma against people with autism can cause them to internalize it, leading to worse mental health. Because there is less information on neurodiversity in South Korea, this affects the misconceptions surrounding autism, causing there to be more stigma (Kim et al., 2023). There are different reasons for such a stigma. Lack of knowledge about the subject is one cause, but the other is the fear of how people will view those who are autistic. It can create a cycle of misunderstandings that will only continue if there is little information spread on the subject. For example, there was a study in Korea about autism that required community engagement, but they found it challenging to collect the required population because of the misconceptions and stigma around the subject (Grinker et al., 2012). There was worry that being identified as a part of the



## Ramachandran

autism spectrum would affect life opportunities, like jobs, marriage, etc. (Grinker et al., 2012). Some of these concerns could be solved if there was more education about interactions with autistic people. Many of these worries come from people already connected to those with ASD. Even those who are close to people with autism can have a difficult time understanding them. There was another study in South Korea that was meant to improve occupational therapy by making parents of autistic people learn more about how to properly interact with those on the spectrum (An, 2017). They found that parents better understood their children and were able to connect with them better than before (An, 2017). Being able to understand how to communicate with those on the autism spectrum is an important aspect of awareness when it comes to talking to different kinds of people, but this is only effective if people can be accurately diagnosed with ASD to begin with.

### Counter Argument

There can be variations in how it is diagnosed in different countries. Different countries can determine autistic traits differently due to many factors, so there is no clear way to determine if a diagnosis is accurate (Horiuchi et al., 2023). When trying to detect ASD in children in Japan, it was found that there were variations in how they determined autistic traits. Some of these components are non-standardized screenings, lack of skill in organizing healthcare providers, and caregivers' interactions with patients (Horiuchi et al., 2023). If there is already a lack of ability in determining people who have autism, then it defeats the purpose of raising awareness towards public knowledge. If awareness was spread, it would be difficult for a general audience to use that knowledge if all the symptoms found vary (Huang et al., 2023).

### Defense of Thesis

It is true that the possibility of a misdiagnosis will always be there, regardless of the

information given, due to the external factors that go into determining autism, but people who are autistic are already on the spectrum. That means that everyone's results will be different even if they do get correctly identified as a person with ASD because symptoms are exhibited differently. There is a wide variation on the autism spectrum, ranging from low to high support needs, and it is based on the symptoms individuals come across. To help with this, there are two main measuring scales that can be used: the Childhood Autism Rating Scale, and the Social Responsiveness Scale. The Childhood Autism Rating Scale has two versions. One is the Standard Version, and the other is the High-Functioning Version. These different versions are meant to help differentiate between distinct parts of the spectrum. The Social Responsiveness Scale is meant to help identify older people on the spectrum (Huang et al., 2023). It is because there are so many different variations of autism that awareness is important. Testing will not always be accurate, but acceptance can still be given regardless of the result found, and that can come from awareness about the subject.

### Conclusion

From what can be seen, Japan and Korea could be doing better with their autism awareness. There are people who have struggled with their autism, and the people around them have struggled to understand them. The lack of awareness around autism leads to assumption-based misconceptions that stigmatize the behavior of those with ASD in different social norms. To combat this lack of awareness, the public in Japan and Korea should be educated more on autism as a subject. There are different organizations in the world that assist in spreading awareness of autism and how to interact with people on the autism spectrum. PEERS and the Institute of Neurodiversity are just a few examples, but these are operations that can be used on a global scale. Japan and Korea could use one that is on a smaller scale for



their countries as a starting point for introducing education on the subject. An instance of this is the Autism Society (2023), which is only in use in the United States. It teaches about how there is a spectrum to autism and supports the needs of people on the spectrum by connecting them with resources for employment education, healthcare, etc. Having more programs like this in Japan and Korea would be beneficial to spreading awareness to their populations, and it would help in clarifying any false information about ASD that has been spread, while simultaneously decreasing the stigma in social norms. With increased awareness, autistic people can receive more acceptance for who they are.

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## Ramachandran

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