"It Defines Who I Am" or "It’s Something I Have": What Language Do [Autistic] Australian Adults [on the Autism Spectrum] Prefer?

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Olga Tennyson Autism Research Centre (OTARC) conducted a survey in 2019 sent out broadly across Australia. OTARC were interested in what autism terms Australians diagnosed with autism preferred, and what they found offensive, and why. A brief overview of the paper:

“198 participants rated six terms individually for preference and offensiveness, and we found that Autistic, Person on the Autism Spectrum, and Autistic Person, were rated most preferred, and did not differ statistically.

Ratings of offensiveness were not overly high, but Person with ASD, Person with ASC and Person with Autism were rated most offensive. When asked to rank the terms in order of reference, Autistic was most often ranked in first place as most preferred, but it was also highly rated in the last position, showing a split in participants on this term. However, when comparing the rankings, Person on the Autism Spectrum was most commonly ranked highest overall.

When asked why they picked their most preferred and offensive term, we found 6 themes that helped explain people’s decisions. 1) Being autistic is core to my identity – that is participants thought autism was integral to how they saw themselves. 2) Having autism is part of my identity – these participants stated autism was important, but only a part of their identity. 3) Diversity within the spectrum – this was most preferred by those who liked a term including ‘spectrum’, as it highlighted to them the broad variation and individuality of autism. 4) I am different not disorder – this theme primarily rejected the use of medical terms (e.g., disorder/condition). 5) Language can stereotype and stigmatise – this theme rejected terms people thought were used to stereotype. 6) Pragmatic – preference was based on which term we were most clear as a communication tool.

Overall this research showed that there is no real consensus amongst people with a diagnosis of autism on what term is preferred. We suggest it is important to ask people their personal preference and use that, but that Person on the Autism Spectrum is a reasonably safe option if you don’t know someone’s personal preference, and that terms with ‘disorder’ or ‘condition’ should be used sensitively.”

To view the paper the publishers provided this link https://rdcu.be/b2kbm that allows people to view a ‘read-only’ version of the full text. This link has been approved to be shared.