

## Parental attitudes toward the marriage of adult children with autism spectrum disorder and mental disability



Nermeen A. Qutub \*

Department of Special Education, College of Education, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 6 August 2022

Received in revised form

28 November 2022

Accepted 31 December 2022

#### Keywords:

Autism

Mental disability

Marriage

Parental attitude

### ABSTRACT

For those who have autism or another mental disability, the prospect of marriage may be of concern for parents. Unfortunately, much of the literature is concerned with marital issues of the parents of grown children with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and such concerns for their children have been rarely addressed. Furthermore, while literature has addressed the issue of culture and ASD it has rarely been associated with interventions that consider cultural and socio-economic perspectives. Towards understanding and the development of the strategy to help families and professionals deal with the marriage of those with mental disabilities entering adulthood, this paper investigates if there are differences in attitudes of parents towards the marriage of their adult children based on socio-cultural status and gender in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, socio-cultural and gender factors are addressed as influencing factors for such attitudes in a country that has strong cultural attitudes to family life and gender. Towards further understanding the issue, these factors were also investigated as determinants of the attitude of the young adults themselves toward marriage. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and their adult children. The results revealed that there were more positive attitudes towards marriage from those parents who perceived themselves to be of a higher social status and that attitudes were more positive towards males getting married. The study contributes to a gap in the research about the implications of culture for interventions for people with ASD.

© 2022 The Authors. Published by IASE. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

### 1. Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood for those who have a mental disability or autism spectrum disorder is a challenge for the family in terms of the future of their children and how they will adapt to expected roles in society. The transformation and transition into the adult life of young people with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) require special practices which require the involvement of educators, the community, and parents (Clements et al., 2010). It is a worrying time for parents when they have to launch their grown-up children into to being functional citizens and fears that parents had when their children were young resurface at this stage of transition (Neely et al., 2012). It has been shown that when these children

eventually leave the family home it is a difficult time for the parents because these children are not moving to an independent life but instead are moving to supported community residences (Hartley et al., 2012). Parents often still remain involved in the lives of these children after they leave (Hartley et al., 2012). Parental involvement in the preparedness of their grown children with Autism Spectrum Disorder extends to sexuality education, and without this those individuals with ASD are less likely to take part in meaningful relationships, however, parents may be uncomfortable with sexuality education for these children (Travers and Tincani, 2010). The development of sexuality is relevant to marriage and is a concern for parents of children with ASD, Peixoto et al. (2017) mentioned that associated marital problems are a particular concern of these parents.

Marriage of such adult children is often a controversial subject where there are differences of opinions between family members depending on the social status of the family, gender (parents and child), and the type and severity of the disability. Parents do have a justification to be concerned as people with ASD do have relationship problems with

\* Corresponding Author.

Email Address: [nabqutub@uqu.edu.sa](mailto:nabqutub@uqu.edu.sa)

<https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2023.03.025>

Corresponding author's ORCID profile:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3254-2595>

2313-626X/© 2022 The Authors. Published by IASE.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

partners due to problems associated with social communication and social interaction (Lewis, 2017). The importance of addressing this issue has become increasingly pertinent in the Arab world because according to the estimates of the World Health Organization, the number of individuals with disability in the Arab world is about 40 million, and more than half of them are children and by 2020 many will become adult children of marrying age. There has been a gap in the literature about the cultural dimensions of ASD (Barrio et al., 2019), especially for interventions in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon (Alallawi et al., 2020). The impact that culture has on barriers to using services for ASD has not been explored in the literature (Gordillo et al., 2020) but it has been shown that culture plays a role in the decision-making of parents about their children with ASD regarding treatment (Mandell and Novak, 2005). Culture is certainly a significant factor in parental attitudes to children with ASD in the Arab world where parents are more tolerant of these children, however, they misunderstand and under-report their child's difficulties (Daley, 2004). In fact, interventions must be developed within a cultural context, and research for ASD that is culturally informed is essential for increasing awareness of the need for educational and psychological interventions in cultures where autism is stigmatized (Kang-Yi et al., 2013). In the Arab world, culture has an effect on adults with ASD in terms of communication, especially with the opposite gender (Mashat et al., 2014). This requires intensifying the efforts of specialists and families toward understanding the issue and the formation of a strategy to support these groups.

The current study aims to clarify if there are these differences to provide guidance for families of special needs as regards the marriage of their adult children with a mental health disability, in order to be able to make decisions about marriage. Specifically, the study sought to reveal differences in attitudes between families of individuals with autism and mental disabilities towards marriage according to the different social status, gender (parents and children), and type and level of severity of the disability, the study also sought to determine if there are differences in marriage attitudes between those individuals with mental disability. In order to reveal attitudes 16 interviews were conducted with parents and those with a mental disability.

The study addresses an important research gap where most of the studies that involve marital relationships and children with ASD relate to the marital concerns of parents (Sim et al., 2017; Benson, 2020). It is hoped that the study will contribute to awareness of such attitudes and the development of alternatives and strategies used to support decision-making in relation to the marriage of adults with autism spectrum disorder, and mental health disability. This process will involve the extrapolation of the families' opinions, a survey of those who have these disabilities, and ultimately the development of a system to guide families of adult

children with mental disabilities in making marriage decisions (Fig. 1).

## 2. Research questions

In order to achieve the aims of the study the following research questions were determined:

1. Is there an agreement between the attitudes of families of individuals with autism and mental health disability towards the marriage of their adult children according to different social statuses?
2. Is there an agreement between the attitudes of families of individuals with autism and mental health disability towards the marriage of their adult children according to the gender of the parent?
3. Is there an agreement between the attitudes of families of individuals with autism and mental health disability towards the marriage of their adult children according to the gender of the adolescent?
4. Is there an agreement between the attitudes of families of individuals with autism and mental health disability towards the marriage of their adult children according to the type and severity of the disability?
5. Is there an agreement between the attitudes of individuals with autism and individuals with intellectual disabilities toward marriage?

## 3. Methodology

The exploratory study relied on interviews with families of adult children with autism spectrum disorder and mental health disabilities. The study aimed to reveal the opinions of parents and adult children and semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees the freedom to express their opinions. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the adult children themselves. The interviews were conducted with families from Saudi Arabia. There were 16 families in total that were interviewed. The participants were also requested to complete a questionnaire showing the degree of agreement with items that represented socio-cultural and gender factors.

## 4. Results and analysis

The results indicated that there were significant differences in attitudes to marriage according to social status and gender (Table 1).

### 4.1. Gender

There was a level of agreement between the families whereby they were more in favor of marriage for those with autism and mental disability who were male. This was accompanied by a significant level of disagreement by family members that females with

autism and mental disability should be married. Furthermore, fathers were more positive about marriage than mothers if their adult children had

autism (Fig. 2), whereas mothers were more positive about marriage for adult children with other mental disabilities (Fig. 3).

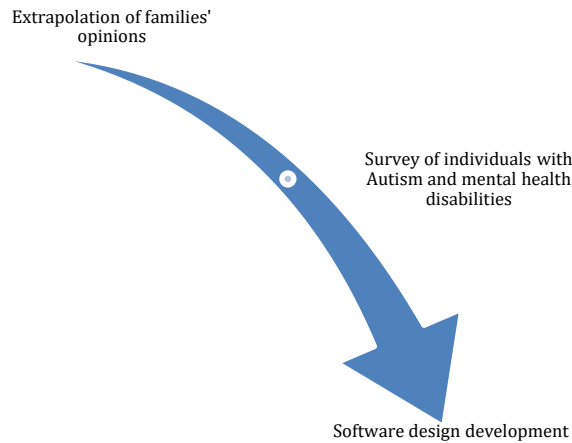


Fig. 1: Research design

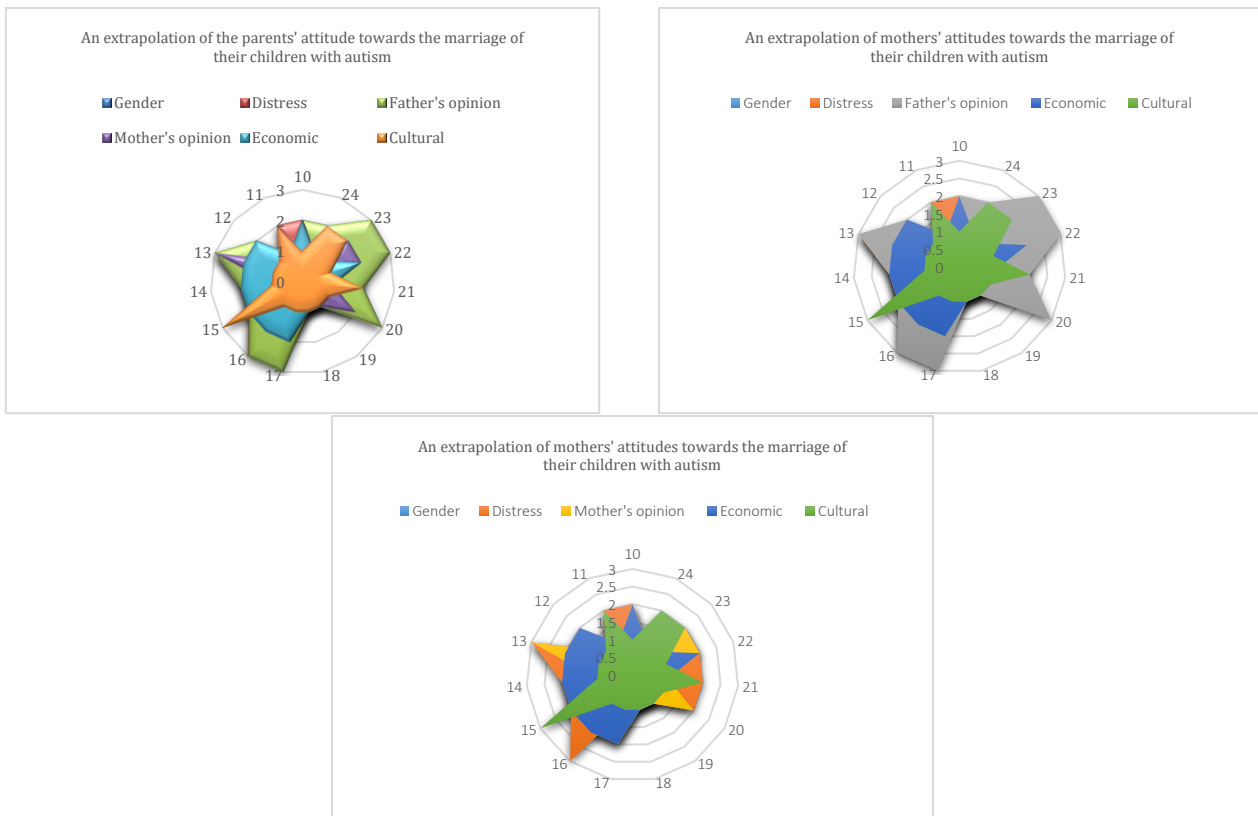


Fig. 2: Attitudes to marriage by parent gender (Autism)

#### 4.2. Social status

The social status of families was found to be significant in that there was agreement that their adult children should marry, social status was found to have an effect on these attitudes, the higher the social status, the higher the tendency of families to agree with the marriage of their adult children (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the family's attitudes towards the marriage of their adult children improved according to social status, however, this decreased according to

the degree of the disorder. Similarly, the better the social status of the family the more likely they would agree with the idea that their adult children should marry.

#### 4.3. Type and severity of disability

There is an agreement between the attitudes of families of individuals with autism and mental disability towards the marriage of their adult

children according to the type and severity of the disability.

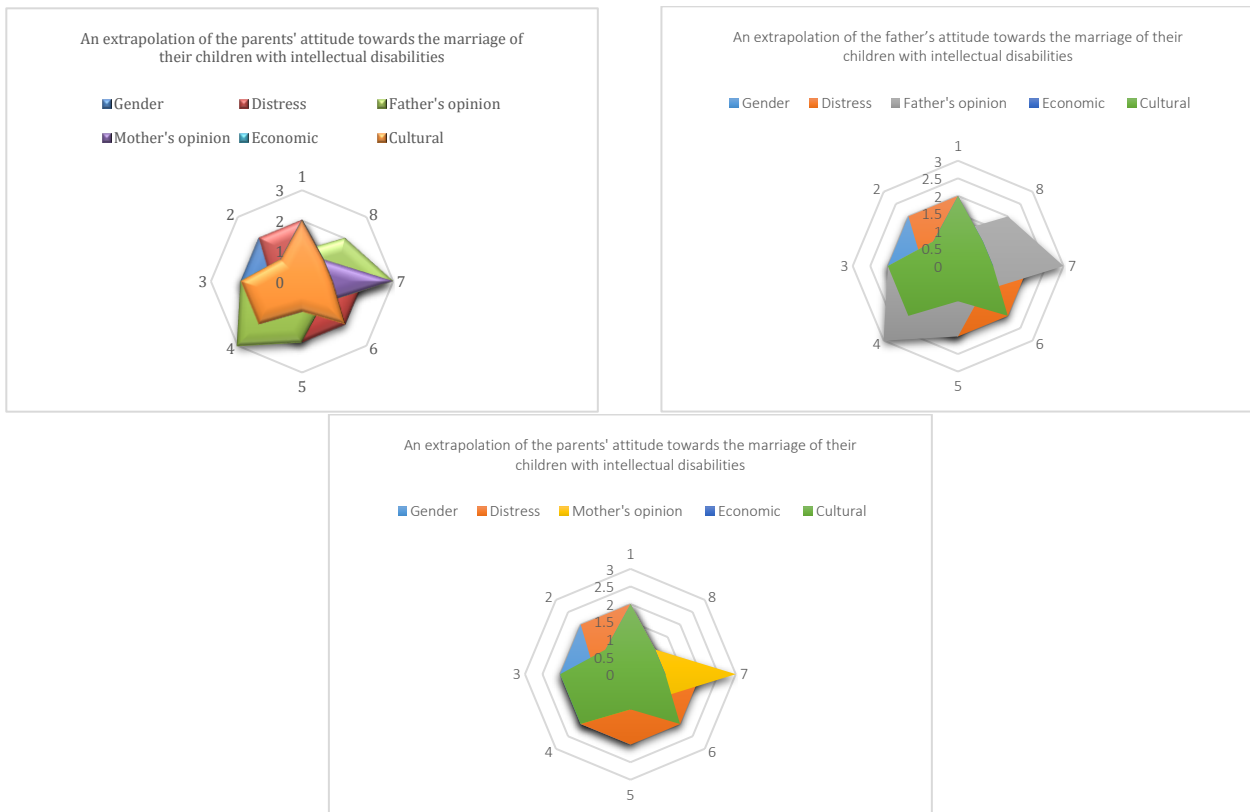
**4.4. Individuals with autism and mental disability**

The interviews revealed that there were differences among the attitudes of individuals with

autism and mental disabilities in adult children towards asking for marriage. Those who had autism, both male and female, had a more negative attitude towards marriage, this was in contrast to those with other mental disabilities who were more positive towards the idea of marriage.

**Table 1: Questionnaire results**

No.	Disability	Gender	Intensity	Father's opinion	Mother's opinion	Economic status	Social status
1	M	Male	2	1	2	2	2
2	M	female	1	1	1	1	1
3	M	female	1	2	1	1	2
4	M	female	2	3	2	1	2
5	M	female	2	2	1	1	1
6	M	Male	2	1	1	1	2
7	M	female	2	3	2	1	1
8	M	male	1	2	1	1	1
9	T	female	3	3	2	2	1
10	T	Male	2	2	2	2	1
11	T	Male	2	1	1	1	2
12	T	Male	1	2	1	2	1
13	T	Male	3	3	3	2	1
14	T	Male	2	1	1	2	1
15	T	female	2	2	2	2	3
16	T	Male	2	3	2	2	1



**Fig. 3: Parents attitudes to marriage (Other mental disabilities)**

**5. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study set out to establish if certain characteristics of family members with adult children who have autism or mental disability had an influence on their attitudes to their adult children

marrying. The study found that social and economic status were strong influencing factors for such attitudes and that the gender of parents and the adult child also played a role, however, to a lesser extent.

Based on these results there is a number of recommendations. There is a need to develop counseling programs for both adults and their parents to overcome some of the more negative attitudes to marriage and to prepare both parties for marriage and overcome associated obstacles. Furthermore, towards the development of strategies for coping with the marriage decision and marriage itself, this study recommends the development of ways to measure determinants of abilities and capabilities for individuals with autism and other mental disabilities.

### Compliance with ethical standards

### Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### References

- Alallawi B, Hastings RP, and Gray G (2020). A systematic scoping review of social, educational, and psychological research on individuals with autism spectrum disorder and their family members in Arab countries and cultures. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 7(4): 364-382. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-020-00198-8>
- Barrio BL, Hsiao YJ, Prishker N, and Terry C (2019). The impact of culture on parental perceptions about autism spectrum disorders: Striving for culturally competent practices. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, 14(1): 20160010. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2016-0010>
- Benson PR (2020). Examining the links between received network support and marital quality among mothers of children with ASD: A longitudinal mediation analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 50(3): 960-975. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04330-4> **PMid:31853756**
- Clements J, Hardy J, and Lord S (2010). *Transition or transformation? Helping young people with autistic spectrum disorder set out on a hopeful road towards their adult lives*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, UK.
- Daley TC (2004). From symptom recognition to diagnosis: Children with autism in urban India. *Social Science and Medicine*, 58(7): 1323-1335. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(03\)00330-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(03)00330-7) **PMid:14759679**
- Gordillo ML, Chu A, and Long K (2020). Mothers' adjustment to autism: Exploring the roles of autism knowledge and culture. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 45(8): 877-886. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa044> **PMid:32647887**
- Hartley SL, Barker ET, Baker JK, Seltzer MM, and Greenberg JS (2012). Marital satisfaction and life circumstances of grown children with autism across 7 years. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(5): 688-697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029354> **PMid:22866933 PMCID:PMC3590801**
- Kang-Yi CD, Grinker RR, and Mandell DS (2013). Korean culture and autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(3): 503-520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-012-1570-4> **PMid:22723126**
- Lewis LF (2017). "We will never be normal": The experience of discovering a partner has autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 43(4): 631-643. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12231> **PMid:28394020**
- Mandell DS and Novak M (2005). The role of culture in families' treatment decisions for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews*, 11(2): 110-115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mrdd.20061> **PMid:15977313**
- Mashat A, Wald M, and Parsons S (2014). Improving social and communication skills of adult Arabs with ASD through the use of social media technologies. In the International Conference on Computers for Handicapped Persons, Springer, Cham, Lecco, Italy: 478-485. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08596-8\\_75](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08596-8_75)
- Neely J, Amatea ES, Echevarria-Doan S, and Tannen T (2012). Working with families living with autism: Potential contributions of marriage and family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 38: 211-226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00265.x> **PMid:22765335**
- Peixoto C, Rondon DA, Cardoso A, and Veras AB (2017). High functioning autism disorder: Marital relationships and sexual offending. *Jornal Brasileiro de Psiquiatria*, 66: 116-119. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0047-2085000000159>
- Sim A, Cordier R, Vaz S, Parsons R, and Falkmer T (2017). Relationship satisfaction and dyadic coping in couples with a child with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(11): 3562-3573. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3275-1> **PMid:28871461**
- Travers J and Tincani M (2010). Sexuality education for individuals with autism spectrum disorders: Critical issues and decision making guidelines. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 45(2): 284-293.