

DECONSTRUCTING PERSONALITY STATUS OF AUTISM IN NIGERIA TOWARDS NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is an attempt towards a conceptual redefinition of autism personality status in Nigeria. This study applies both expository and analytic methods to expose some Nigerians' conceptual assumptions of autism in comparison to global practices, hence by analytical method re-frame prevalent autism definitions in Nigeria. Autism is a neurodevelopmental phenomenon characterized by differences in reciprocal communication. It is a spectrum manifest in variations of verbal and non-verbal communication styles, repetitive behaviors, preference for structured routines, etc. They have been proven to have a very high intellectual capacity, high level of concentration leading to expertise in special career paths, etc. The findings of this research reveal that the greatest challenge to autism in Nigeria is the problem of misconceptualization, hence demarcating autistic persons as abnormal humans. This misconception include; defining autistic people as sick, caused, spiritual/evil/demonic possession, etc. Similarly, this study shows that beyond the misconceptualization of autism, raising autistic children poses daunting physical, psycho-spiritual and social challenges to their care givers in Nigeria, hence exposing autistic people to poor care. From the findings, this study proposes immediate and informed targeted psychosocial support interventions to assuage the stigma and demarcations of people with autism. Also, the key stakeholders ought to provide suitable healthcare facilities and resources for autistic people. In conclusion, when there are informed targeted psychosocial support interventions and the key stakeholders become intentional, hence there would be an assurance of full integration and participation of autistic people in societal life.

Keywords: Autistic people, misconceptions, Stigma, psychosocial support, and Nigeria.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a major and growing public health problem worldwide, with approximately 95% of affected individuals living in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs).¹ In Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, the condition is a major difficulty, reflective of sociocultural and economic systemic familiarities. Although there is an upward trend in the world population prevalence of ASD, research output from sub-Saharan Africa (2.74 million patients) remains limited and accounts for only 1% of this². This gap in knowledge is particularly critical in Nigeria, where prevalence estimates indicate that one in every 125–150 children may be on the spectrum resulting in an estimated 600,000 children.³ Consequently, despite these figures the narrative around autism in Nigeria is plagued with grave misconceptualizations that leech heavily onto the lives of autistic persons and their families, thereby limiting their inclusion in community life and ultimately national growth.

¹ Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria" in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 20,947–955. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11088825/>

² Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria"

³ Aderinto, N. (2023). "Autism in Africa: Prevalence, Diagnostic Practices, Treatment Modalities and Cultural Beliefs". *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 85(9), 4567. https://journals.lww.com/annals-of-medicine-and-surgery/fulltext/2023/09000/autism_in_africa__prevalence,_diagnosis,_treatment.36.aspx

This paper challenges the predominant “personality status” of autism in Nigeria which is a personality status characterized by stigma, trepidation, and misinformation. The mainstream story often treats autism not as a neurodevelopmental difference, but as divine punishment, demonic possession or a shameful disease.⁴ This idea crisis is the main barrier to diagnosis, care and social inclusion. It develops a chokehold that places unbearable psycho-spiritual and economic demands on caregivers, and denies the autistic person safe access to their unique gift-set. This study thus undertakes a conceptual redefinition of autism in the Nigerian setting. Using both exposition and analysis, it disassembles those damaging myths, and offers a conceptual framework for understanding autism that accords with global best practices but is sensitive to national realities. It is our belief that addressing these misconceptions and creating an accepting and supportive environment goes a long way in allowing Nigeria to harness the full potential of its autistic population, changing what it sees as a burden into a national resource that contributes to local development.

2. Conceptualizing Autism

2.1 The Global Perspective of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental disorder defined globally by the presence of persistent deficits in social communication and interaction as well as restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities.⁵ The word spectrum was chosen to highlight the variety of presentations and types of intellect and functioning skills in individuals with autism. This means that the modern perspective on autism is less one of sickness more one of a way to experience and interact with the world; in addition, many autistic individuals will possess attributes typical humans lack such as amazing attention detail, coherence and mapping like logical reasoning between categories, but also hyper-fixation towards their interests.⁶ In particular, an early diagnosis and the provision of evidence-based treatments tailored to the individual are critical for promoting healthy development and maximizing quality of life. A more recent understanding is that this perspective supports the idea of neurodiversity, where neurological differences such as autism are seen as human brain variations rather than deficits.⁷

2.2 Misconceptualizations and Stigma in Nigeria

The conceptualization of autism in Nigeria is mainly influenced by sociocultural and religious ideologies, as opposed to the neurodiversity paradigm global perspective. This widespread misconceptualization and profound stigma is often due to the fact that the layman understanding of MMFS deviates greatly from its scientific and medical definitions.⁸ These misunderstandings take several important forms:

3 Spiritual and Demonic Attribution: Autism is often attributed to spiritual forces in many Nigerian communities, especially the rural ones. Behaviors associated with autism are often viewed as manifestations of demonic possession, witchcraft, curses due to ancestors or evil spirits⁹. Children who show autistic characteristics may be called "spirit children," or "ogbanje" (the Yoruba word for a child that dies and is reborn) and again this can create severe neglect, abuse or infanticide in extreme circumstances.¹⁰ When approached from a spiritual lens, children may be taken to traditional healers or religious leaders for exorcisms and other spiritual interventions potentially postponing or entirely pre-empting access to appropriate medical and therapeutic care.¹¹

⁴ Aderinto, N. (2023). “Autism in Africa: Prevalence, Diagnostic Practices, Treatment Modalities and Cultural Beliefs”. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 85(9), 4567.

⁵ Grandin, T. (2013). “The Autistic Brain” in *Thinking Across the Spectrum*, 9(2), 23-40.

⁶ Silberman, S. (2015). “The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity” in *NeuroTribes*, 7(23) 1-17.

⁷ Silberman, S. (2015). “The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity” in *NeuroTribes*, 7(23) 1-17.

⁸ Chinawa J M (2023) “Prevalence and Socio-economic Correlates of Autism among Children in Enugu, South East Nigeria” in *Journal of Clinical Sciences*. 13(4),183-187. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5398438/>

⁹ Chinawa J M (2023) “Prevalence and Socio-economic Correlates of Autism among Children in Enugu, South East Nigeria” 183-187.

¹⁰ Autism Parenting Magazine. (n.d.). “The Long Road to Acceptance: Autism in Africa” accessed on March 3, 2026. https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/autism-africa-road-to-acceptance/?srsltid=AfmBOoqywKM3uV_ZuqEiAQI-vnnQuoZUvRjOWcwoZKYI9iXypCF3TLU7

¹¹ Aderinto, N. (2023). “Autism in Africa: Prevalence, Diagnostic Practices, Treatment Modalities and Cultural Beliefs”. *Annals of Medicine and Surgery*, 85(9), 45-67.

Medical Misinformation: Besides spiritual reasons, autism is also often misattributed to diseases of conventional medicine or a contagious disease¹². This medical misinformation drives social isolation for the affected person and their family, as communities can fear contagion or see autism as a punishment for parental sins. The misconception is further compounded by inadequate information from healthcare providers and a lack of diagnostic tools, which prevents early diagnosis and treatment.¹³

Mistaking Interference for Impairment: Failure to recognise these misconceptions leads to the cumulative effect of seeing autistic individuals as fundamentally other than human, or broken; something more insidious emerges in misdiagnosing true intent or interference as an impairment. This social labelling results in serious social ostracism, discrimination and deprivation of basic rights. This narrative builds an exclusionary perspective where autistic persons are excluded from educational opportunities, the community life, and even family acceptance further subjecting them to isolation and hindering development.¹⁴ Such harsh stigma, which parents and caregivers frequently internalize, serves as a barrier to obtaining help and discussing the condition in open dialogue, continuing to perpetuate the problem.¹⁵

2.3 Challenges of Caregivers of Autistic Children in Nigeria

The misconception and stigma attached to autism in Nigeria places a burden on care givers, most commonly mothers who tend to suffer the consequences of physical, psycho-spiritual and social difficulties.¹⁶

Without facilities: The lack of public healthcare infrastructure¹⁷ and specialized services for autism means families are left burdened with the task of seeking private medical intervention in most cases, overwhelming financially. This burden is compounded by the specialized therapies, educational assistance and, in some cases, 24-hour care that these patients require, resulting in impoverishment for many families.¹⁸ The absence of coverage and support from the government means families must pursue this journey alone, shouldering this financial burden on top of it all.

Psycho-spiritual Distress: Caregivers often suffer high levels of psychological stress, such as anxiety, depression and hopelessness due to stigma from society and the burdens of caregiving. When traditional cures don't succeed, and the authority of faith-based responses is put to the test (how long can you pray for a cold to go?) this creates an added conflict within people, who scramble between wanting to be righteous by following the seemingly God-given good thing to do in lieu of trying anything 'non-God' and guilt when they fail at attaining miraculous outcomes. Social support networks are often lacking, as families may be ostracised by their communities, exacerbating this psycho-spiritual burden.

Social Isolation and Stigma: Parents of autistic children experience both "felt stigma" (internalized shame and embarrassment) as well as direct discrimination and rejection from others (enacted stigma). This prevents families from engaging in community activities out of fear of being judged or have a negative experience. Family members and friends who do not understand or feel for the life that has been lost add to the isolation and lack of hope which affects the whole family.

3.0 Misconceptions of Autism and Implications to National Development

Drawing on available literature, this paper illuminates the far-reaching systemic consequences of pervasive misconceptualization on autism in Nigeria that extends beyond personal and household suffering to negatively impact national development. Explore these findings in this section as the present comprehension of autism presents additional barriers to social integration, economic participation, and a nation.

3.1 Social Exclusion and Human Capital Loss

The facts that many people believe autism to be a curse or punishment from God, in addition to common medical misinformation, result in high rates of social exclusion for autistic individuals. Family members are often ashamed and

¹² Mater Mental. (2024, September 13). "Breaking Stigmas And Building Understanding: Autism Awareness In Nigeria". <https://matermental.com/autism-awareness-in-nigeria-breaking-down-stigmas-and-building-understanding/>

¹³ Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria" in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*,

¹⁴ Bakare, M. O., Taiwo, O. G., & Bello-Mojeed, M. A. (2019). "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Nigeria: A Scoping Review of Literature and Perspectives on Future Research and Social Policy Directions" in *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 30(4), 1435–1450. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/731357/summary>

¹⁵ Bakare, M. O., Taiwo, O. G., & Bello-Mojeed, M. A. (2019). "Autism Spectrum Disorders in Nigeria: A Scoping Review of Literature and Perspectives on Future Research and Social Policy Directions"

¹⁶ Azubuike, A. O.; Akpan, U. A.; Macoho, P.; Onyeamaeke Anyaegbunam James. (2024) "Autism Caregiving in Nigeria" in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 21, 1–9. doi:10.1186/s13052-016-0290-4[(3)] <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11893948/>

¹⁷ Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria"

¹⁸ Azubuike, A. O.; Akpan, U. A.; Macoho, P.; Onyeamaeke Anyaegbunam James. (2024) "Autism Caregiving in Nigeria"

afraid of being stigmatized, and therefore keep them in the back room while communities actively ostracize them¹⁹. His exclusion deprives autistic children of mainstream education, an essential right and a pillar of human development.” Where educational opportunities do exist, they often fail to implement the specialist support and inclusive practices that are needed for autistic learners to thrive.²⁰ The result is a huge drain on human capital. Proven by machine learning, this inhumane stance deprives these individuals of the opportunity to nurture their talents and contribute meaningful additions to the collective workforce.²¹ This should be a major underutilised asset that otherwise can engender innovation, economic growth and also the progress of society in Nigeria.

3.2 Pressure on Healthcare and Social Support Systems

The misunderstanding of autism also adds to the burden on Nigeria’s frail healthcare and social support systems. Autistic individuals may experience a long delay before obtaining appropriate medical and therapeutic interventions, as they often seek spiritual cures; thus, when they finally do receive professional help, their needs are more complex and difficult to address.²² Additionally, the underrecognition and undertreatment of this condition is likely due to healthcare professionals not being aware of its burden or having training on how to treat it.²³ This results in a vicious cycle in which scarce resources are wasted, and the burden on families is exacerbated, contributing to deteriorating psychosocial distress among caregivers. The lack of social policies and specialized structures (such as autism centers) left a gaping hole in the support infrastructure that is already insufficient for the existing population of autistic people.²⁴

3.3 Economic Deterioration and Cycle of Impoverishment

In Nigeria, the economic impact of autism is significant and can itself create a poverty cycle for families. Significant out-of-pocket spends on private therapies, education or care combined with the loss of our ability to work (usually mothers who have to give up their opportunities for working due to caregiving) creates financial hardship in many families.²⁵ This economic disadvantage goes beyond individual families; it has national development implications. The costs of autism either directly affect a large percentage of the population, or indirectly by loss of productive labor. It's clear that the exclusionary job market for autistic adults doesn't just impact individuals, it keeps many dependent when they could and should be contributing members of society who pay taxes instead. Which is why addressing this unequal economy with targeted intervention and welfare programs can help raise the floor, while also building infrastructure and networks to uplift people above poverty and build sustainable interdependences.

3.4 Policy Gaps and the Path to Inclusive Development

While Nigeria has begun to demonstrate early interest in this issue, the existing policies are inadequate and mostly fail to meet the needs of the autistic community. To date, however, no two populations have the same goal with similar metrics, and while early suggestions exist between groups, promulgating such centers across the U.S. remains a challenge on many fronts. This also comes in the absence of a national strategy on autism which includes early detection, diagnosis and intervention as well as inclusive education and employment support — leading to fragmented efforts that don’t yield results. In other words, for Nigeria to be able to actualize its national development pursuits and aspirations as envisaged by such goals through global framework targets as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities; it is imperative that autistic people are fully integrated into society.²⁶ It also needs a fundamental shift in orientation — from seeing autism as deficit, harmful and horrid toward seeing autistic people are uniquely able to contribute, whether big or small, to the betterment of our nation.

¹⁹ Silberman, S. (2015). “The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity”

²⁰ Odunsi, R. (2019). “Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Inclusive Education; Case Study of young person with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Nigeria”, *University of Northampton Repository*.
<https://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/id/document/26958>

²¹ Aderinto, N. (2023). “Autism in Africa: Prevalence, Diagnostic Practices, Treatment Modalities and Cultural Beliefs”.

²² Adams, S. N. (2024). “Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria”

²³ Adams, S. N. (2024). “Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria” 20,947–955

²⁴ Bakare, M. O., Taiwo, O. G., & Bello-Mojeed, M. A. (2019). “Autism Spectrum Disorders in Nigeria: A Scoping Review of Literature and Perspectives on Future Research and Social Policy Directions” 30(4), 1435–1450. <https>

²⁵ Azubuike, A. O.; Akpan, U. A.; Macoho, P.; Onyeamaeke Anyaegbunam James. (2024) “Autism Caregiving in Nigeria”

²⁶ United Nations. (n.d.). Sustainable Development Goals. Retrieved from <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

4. Autism and Inclusive National Development

In order to deconstruct the notion of this powerful misconception of autism in Nigeria and pave way for one that fosters national development from it, a multi-pronged approach is required. This strategy need to address the pervasive cultural beliefs and invest in institutional capacities and empowerment not only of autistic people, but their caregivers as well. Key recommendations based on synthesising findings from this research include:

4.1 Targeted Psychosocial Support Interventions

Immediate and informed targeted psychosocial support interventions are critical to allaying stigma and demarcations faced by autism-spectrum peoples. These interventions should be culturally sensitive and contextually relevant, emphasizing community-based approaches instead of merely relying on a medical model. Key aspects include:

- **Community Awareness and Education Campaign:** These types of campaigns can be an especially critical aspect, raising awareness about autism through the use of local media (e.g. radio, television) as well as local languages to share accurate information. Such campaigns should challenge teachings related to autism, clarify spiritual explanations for its occurrence and strive to instil a view of autism as not only normal but also non-pathological neurodevelopmental difference. Highlighting autistic people's strengths and unique abilities can transform public perception from fear and stigma to acceptance and appreciation.²⁷

- **Caregiver Support Networks:** Create and grow formal and informal support networks for caregivers. These networks have the potential to provide emotional support, practical advice and a platform for sharing experiences, thus alleviating psychosocial distress and feelings of isolation.²⁸ Caregiver training on evidence-based approaches to managing autistic behaviors and supporting development should be critical, too.

- **Mental Health Services;** Mental health services should be integrated into primary healthcare. The mental well-being of people with autism and their caregivers must also be taken care of. This may consist of counseling, therapy and support groups to help manage the difficulties that can come with autism and stigma.

4.2 Improving Healthcare Systems and Curriculum

This includes ensuring the provision of appropriate healthcare facilities and resources for autistic people, which again falls on key stakeholders such as government body, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international partners. This represents a massive investment in both infrastructure and human capital:

- **Detection and Diagnosis:** Establishing national standards for detection, diagnosis and early screening of autism. This means training healthcare professionals (pediatricians, nurses, community health workers) to detect early signs of autism and then make timely referrals. There is a need to set up accessible diagnostic centers in each of the geopolitical zone.²⁹

- **Focused Therapy Services:** Raising the availability and access to specialized therapeutic services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or behavioral therapy. This requires training a pool of qualified professionals and embedding these services in the local healthcare system.

- **Research and Data Collection:** Funding for local research focused on the specific manifestations, prevalence, and needs of autistic individuals in Nigeria. The collection of robust data is critical for informed policy design and the allocation of resources.

4.3 Perception of Public Acceptance and Utilization of Services

Education is also a powerful tool for integration and national development. Nigeria must begin to work towards a truly inclusive education system that meets the diverse learning needs of autistic children and young adults:

- **Inclusive Education:** Autism inclusive education policies allowing autistic students to attend mainstream schools and making necessary adjustments and accommodations. It entails teaching teachers using inclusive pedagogical techniques, putting in individualized education plans, and a supportive school environment.³⁰

- **Training Skills and Jobs:** Creating vocational training programs focused on the strengths and interests of autistic individuals, to prepare them for work that is fulfilling to those, with meaningful job opportunities. Employment strategies

²⁷ Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria" in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 20,947–955

²⁸ Silberman, S. (2015). "The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity"

²⁹ Adams, S. N. (2024). "Raising the Mask on Autism in South Africa and Nigeria" in *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 20,947–955.

³⁰ Odunsi, R. (2019). "Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Inclusive Education; Case Study of young person with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Nigeria",

involving business and industry partnerships can leverage the distinctive talents of autistic adults and serve to enhance economic productivity [20].

Policy advocacy: Advocating for full implementation of laws and policies to protect disabled people (including the autistic) from disability-based discrimination, affirming access to education, health care, employment, etc. The next steps proposed the establishment of National Autism Centers, where practitioners will be trained in evidence-based interventions are excellent ideas that require a strong push for implementation and funding [18].

4.4 Promoting National Development through Inclusiveness

The interest of national development demands the full integration and participation of autistic people within general society, not just as a matter of human rights. Nigeria can unlock a wellspring of untapped potential by embracing neurodiversity. With specific talent often towards areas such as pattern recognition, logical thinking skills and sustained concentration, autistic people can add much in many sectors [5] (technology, arts, sciences ex.) An inclusive community that values and supports the contributions of all its members is stronger, more innovative and fairer. It is only when effective targeted psychosocial support interventions are implemented and key stakeholders intentionally come on board that Nigeria will eventually be a place where autistic individuals will no longer just be tolerated, as was the case before this study, but actually celebrated for their contributions to society through the enhancement of national life and acceleration towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals.³¹

5. Conclusion

These many experiences boil down to this journey of deinstitutionalizing the idea that autism is an innate part of who a person is in Nigeria and realizing that it should not only be a form for resource allocation by policy makers but also, society. The negative effects of misconceptualization, stigma, and inadequate support systems on autistic individuals and their families as described in this paper illustrate a fundamental barrier to realizing Nigeria's true potential for inclusive national development. These prevailing narratives, often seductive with spiritual and medical misinformation, have resulted in social ostracism, economic disadvantage and a loss in human capital that Nigeria cannot afford.

But the results also highlight a clear way forward. This approach can positively transform the paradigm for autistic individuals in Nigeria through a neurodiversity-affirming philosophy, applied psychosocial support interventions, enhanced health-care and educational systems and equitable policies. Given these hurdles, building national autism centres along with spreading awareness and strengthening caregiver support are significant strides needed for dealing with early detection. Reducing the enrichments to accommodate individuals with Autism is not enough. An inclusive approach will protect the human rights of autistic Nigerians and unlock their unique talents and contributions, bringing the nation closer to a more just equitable future full of innovation and prosperity. Nigeria, and Nigeria alone, will not be built on the foundation of harmful myths or xenophobia.

³¹ Bakare, M. O. (2019). "Scandiater J Work Environ Health". *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 30(4), 1435–1450. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/731357/summary>