

Autism Awareness of Academicians in a Law School in İstanbul: A Single Center Pilot Study

İstanbul'da Bir Hukuk Fakültesi Akademisyenlerinde Otizm Farkındalığı: Tek Merkezli Pilot Çalışma

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ABSTRACT

Aim

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects individuals' interaction with others, communication, learning, and behavior (1). Awareness of ASD in the field of law and the literature on this subject is limited. This quantitative study aims to evaluate the awareness and approach towards ASD among law school academicians working at a public university, in İstanbul, Türkiye.

Materials and Methods

The population of this descriptive study consisted of academicians (n=101) working at the law school of a public university in İstanbul, Türkiye. Among the academicians 56 participants who could be reached and who voluntarily accepted to participate were included in our study. Data were collected through face-to-face surveys between December 2023 and April 2024. The survey consisted of 10 questions regarding the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, 44 five-point Likert-type questions evaluating the awareness of ASD and 17 questions assessing their approach towards autism. Data were analyzed using a statistical software package. Pearson's chi-square and Fisher's Exact tests were used, and statistical significance was accepted at $p<0.05$.

Results

Of the participants, 57.1% (n=32) were females and 42.9% (n=24) were males; 44.6% (n=25) worked in public law practice, and 51.8% (n=29) in private law practice. When asked about the types of legal cases most likely to involve ASD individuals, 37 participants (31.6%) identified the "appointment of a legal guardian" and 30 participants (25.6%) cited "abuse". Female participants gave the answer "abuse" (68.6% n=22) significantly more than male participants (33.3% n=8) ($p=0.009$). Among participants 30 (53.6%) expressed willingness to take part in such a case and believed they would be able to communicate effectively with an ASD individual. When asked about the necessity of establishing special courtrooms for ASD individuals, female participants answered "yes" (90.6% n=29) significantly more than male participants (66.7% n=16) ($p=0.021$). More than half of the participants (53.6%, n=30) supported ASD awareness to be added into the school curriculum.

Conclusion

This study is a pilot study examining awareness and approach towards ASD of law school academicians. Most participants supported establishment of autism-friendly regulations. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of an autism awareness scale and inclusive regulations in the legal system in future studies with larger samples.

Keywords: Awareness, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), academicians, law school

ÖZET

Amaç

Otizm spektrum bozukluğu (OSB), bireylerin diğerleriyle etkileşimini, iletişimini, öğrenmesini ve davranışlarını etkileyen bir nöro gelişimsel bozukluktur (1). Hukuk alanında OSB farkındalığı ve bu konudaki literatür sınırlıdır. Bu nicel çalışma, bir devlet üniversitesinde görev yapan hukuk fakültesi akademisyenlerinin OSB'ye ilişkin farkındalık ve yaklaşımlarını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Gereç ve Yöntem

Tanımlayıcı tipteki bu araştırmanın evrenini İstanbul, Türkiye'deki bir kamu üniversitesi hukuk fakültesinde görev yapan akademisyenler (n=101) oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmamız kendilerine ulaşılabilen ve görüşmeyi kabul eden gönüllü 56 hukukçu akademisyen ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Aralık 2023 ile Nisan 2024 arasında yürütülen çalışmada, veriler yüz yüze anketlerle toplanmıştır. Bu anket katılımcıların sosyodemografik bilgilerinin sorulduğu 10 soru, otizm farkındalıklarını değerlendiren 5'li Likert tipinde 44 soru ve otizme ilişkin yaklaşımlarını sorgulayan 17 sorudan oluşmaktadır. Veriler istatistiksel paket program kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir Pearson Ki-kare ve Fisher's Exact testleri yapılmış olup, $p < 0,05$ düzeyinde istatistiksel anlamlılık kabul edilmiştir.

Bulgular

Katılımcıların % 57,1'i (n=32) kadın, % 42,9'u (n=24) erkek olup, % 44,6'sı (n=25) kamu hukuku, % 51,8'i (n=29) özel hukuk alanında çalışmaktadır. Otizmlili bireylerin sık dahil olduğu vakalar sorulduğunda 37 katılımcı (% 31,6) "vasi tayini" ve 30 katılımcı (% 25,6) "istismar" yanıtını vermiştir. İstismar yanıtını veren kadın katılımcılar (% 68,6 n=22), erkek katılımcılardan (% 33,3 n=8) anlamlı derecede yüksek bulunmuştur ($p=0,009$). Katılımcıların (% 63,6 n=30) otizmlili bir bireyin dahil olduğu bir vakada gönüllü olarak yer almak isteyebileceklerini ve otizmlili birey ile yeterli iletişim kurabileceğini bildirirken, Otizmlili bireylere özel mahkeme salonları kurulması gerekliliği sorulduğunda "evet" diyen kadın katılımcılar (% 90,6 n=29), erkek katılımcılardan (% 66,7 n=16) anlamlı derecede yüksek bulunmuştur ($p=0,021$). Katılımcıların yarısından fazlası (% 53,6 n=30) müfredata otizm farkındalığının eklenmesini desteklemiştir.

Sonuç

Bu çalışma, hukuk fakültesi akademisyenlerinde OSB farkındalık ve yaklaşımlarını inceleyen bir pilot çalışma niteliğindedir. Çalışmada, otizmlili bireylerin yasal hakları konusunda yeterli bilgiye sahip olduğunu bildiren az sayıda katılımcı bulunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte katılımcıların çoğunun otizm dostu yasal düzenlemeleri desteklediği görülmektedir. Elde edilen sonuçların, daha geniş örneklemle yapılacak araştırmalarda bir otizm farkındalık ölçeği geliştirilmesine ve hukuk sisteminde kapsayıcı düzenlemelerin geliştirilmesine katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Farkındalık, otizm spektrum bozukluğu (OSB), akademisyenler, hukuk fakültesi

INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition influencing social interaction, communication, learning, and behavior (1).

While some autistic individuals possess advanced speech and communication skills, others may be nonverbal (2). The level of support required in daily life varies widely, ranging from individuals who regularly need assistance for tasks easy to their neurotypical counterparts to those capable of managing their work and daily activities with minimal or no help. Autistic individuals often experience difficulties recognizing and interpreting social cues, which can hinder their ability to adjust their behavior across different social contexts. Many prefer familiar environments characterized by established routines, and the presence of restricted interests, sensory sensitivities, and heightened anxiety can turn even minor changes into highly stressful situations. Consequently, planning and preparation for changes in daily routines and activities are essential.

The relationship between ASD and the criminal justice system has recently attracted increased academic and public attention. As understanding of neurodiversity expands, there is growing recognition of the unique challenges autistic individuals face within legal settings. Autistic individuals may demonstrate a childlike innocence in social skills, rendering them particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Their rigid adherence to routines and obsessive tendencies can, under disruption, contribute to behaviors that may escalate to criminal acts. Moreover, difficulties understanding social situations and limited negotiation skills can further predispose individuals to conflict and aggression (3). In some cases, an obsessive interest may drive behavior that results in a legal offense. These interactions can have consequences for the individual and families, communities, and the justice system at large.

Beyond these vulnerabilities, the core characteristics of ASD, such as communication difficulties, struggles with adaptation to new environments, and emotional confusion, can lead to misunderstandings, fear, and anxiety during arrest, investigation, trial, and incarceration. These challenges highlight the urgent need for increased autism awareness within the field of law to promote a more inclusive and adaptable system for autistic individuals.

A survey conducted between 2015 and 2020 among lawyers who had represented both autistic and non-autistic individuals facing similar charges revealed significant disparities. Only 43% of autistic defendants had been afforded the right to have an accompanying adult during legal proceedings. Furthermore, 59% of opposing lawyers and 46% of judges demonstrated insufficient understanding and awareness of autism through their behaviors and statements. Compared to non-autistic defendants, autistic defendants were associated with a 7.58-fold greater concern regarding passive participation during trial and a 3.83-fold greater concern regarding the risk of self-harm. These findings highlight persistent challenges within the criminal justice system in recognizing and accommodating the needs of autistic individuals. They also point to the necessity of mandatory autism awareness training for police officers and judges to facilitate reasonable adjustments during legal proceedings (4).

Autistic individuals may misunderstand their legal rights and the implications of their statements within the context of criminal justice. When the burden of effectively communicating and presenting evidence under stressful conditions falls entirely on the defendant, autistic individuals may be placed at a considerable disadvantage.

Some research suggests that autistic individuals experience higher rates of interaction with the criminal justice system compared to non-autistic individuals, often through increased reports of victimization and assault (5). It has been proposed that autistic individuals face a higher likelihood of arrest and police detention (6).

Because autistic traits can be subtle, the stages between first police contact and the courtroom are critical. Security and police officers who recognize core signs of ASD can defuse situations and arrange low-stress custody. Without essential knowledge, authorities may misread compliant yet unconventional behavior, such as defiance or theft, leading to wrongful charges. Addressing these issues is vital to protect autistic people from misinterpretation and to secure equity in the justice system.

Aforementioned systemic shortcomings make the justice system fundamentally unequal for autistic individuals, so practical and ethical reforms are urgently needed. Our study aims to provide data for potential training and awareness programs that will correct the lack of equity towards autistic individuals in legal systems.

While numerous studies have explored autism awareness among university students, healthcare professionals, teachers, and the general public, research involving members of law schools remains scarce. Investigating autism awareness within this population represents a critical step toward fostering legal environments that are more just and accommodating for autistic individuals and may guide the development of necessary legislative reforms.

Through this research, we aim to increase awareness of the injustices autistic individuals face within the legal system. By identifying potential gaps in awareness and offering recommendations for enhancing autism sensitivity in legal contexts, this study seeks to contribute meaningfully to efforts toward a more inclusive and fair justice system.

To this end, this quantitative study aims to evaluate the awareness and approach towards among law school academicians working at a public university, in İstanbul, Türkiye.

MATERIALS and METHODS

This descriptive study was conducted through face-to-face surveys among academicians working at the law school of a selected public university in İstanbul province of Türkiye. Before beginning the data collection process, the necessary Institutional Permission (E-70737436-605.01-668576, 23.11.2023) and Ethics Committee Approval were obtained. The study was carried out between December 2023 and April 2024. The completed questionnaires, filled out by the participants and administered by the researchers, were collected at the Department of Public Health of the concerned university for analysis.

The study population consisted of 101 academicians at the law school of a university in İstanbul. The study attempted to reach the entire population without sampling. The study was completed with 56 academicians and the participation rate was 55.4%. Of the academicians contacted during the data collection process, 20 initially agreed to participate but stated that they would like to complete the survey at a later date due to time constraints; however, they did not return the forms. Five academicians declined to participate, citing limited time as the reason. The remaining 20 academicians could not be reached due to scheduling conflicts such as congresses or meetings.

The questionnaire was prepared by researchers who had conducted several autism awareness studies before, furthermore a thorough literature review was carried out and expert opinions were referred to (7-12). A prior testing of the questionnaires was administered with three academicians of a different law school, necessary changes were made, and the final version was created.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections and a total of 71 questions. The first section, the “Sociodemographic Information Form,” included multiple-choice and open-ended questions regarding gender, age, academic title, field of law practiced, years in the profession, marital status, whether they have children, and having acquaintances with autism. The second section, “Autism Awareness,” contained 44 questions in a five-point Likert scale format. The third section, “Approach Towards Autism,” consists of 17 questions evaluating participants’ approach towards autism. The questionnaire does not have any reverse-scored items. Due to the low number of participants, analysis was done after combining results for Definitely Disagree, Don’t Agree, and Not Sure to “Don’t Agree and Not Sure,” and combining results for Definitely Agree and Agree to “Agree.”

A statistical software package was used for data analysis, and Pearson’s chi-square and Fisher’s Exact tests were applied. Statistical significance was accepted at a level of $p < 0.05$.

LIMITATIONS

The participation rate was 55.4%. Of the academicians contacted during the data collection process, 20 initially agreed to participate but stated that they would like to complete the survey at a later date due to time constraints; however, they did not return the forms. Five academicians declined to participate, citing limited time as the reason. The remaining 20 academicians could not be reached due to scheduling conflicts such as congresses or meetings.

The sample size and demographic distribution of participants in this study limited the ability to make statistical comparisons between certain sociodemographic subgroups.

RESULTS

Among the 56 participants, 32 were females (57%) and 24 were males (43%). Five participants had a bachelor's degree, 18 had a master's degree, and 33 had a doctoral degree. The mean age was 35.3 ± 8.2 years, ranging from 24 to 54. Among the participants, 22 (60.0%) were under 35 years old. Thirty-one participants (56.4%) reported having encountered an individual with autism in their social circle, and seven (12.7%) reported that either they or a close relative had a child with autism.

Regarding autism awareness, gender-based response distributions and chi-square test p-values for the 44-item Likert scale are presented in Table 1. The statements that received the highest number of "agree" responses were: "An autistic individual may sometimes appear as if they cannot hear you," agreed upon by 46 participants (82.1%); "An autistic person may stare off at objects such as a falling item or flashing colored lights," and "An autistic person may have restricted or obsessive interests (e.g., zebras, trains, pigeons)," both agreed upon by 45 participants (80.4%). The items with the fewest "agree" responses were: "An autistic individual may misuse the words 'yes,' 'no,' personal pronouns, or first-person language," agreed upon by 21 participants (37.5%); "An autistic person may have difficulty following verbal commands such as 'Sit!' or 'Stand up!'" (26 participants, 46.4%); and "An autistic individual may interpret a fictional story as if it were real" (27 participants, 48.2%).

Certain awareness items showed statistically significant differences based on sociodemographic characteristics (all $p < 0.05$). Female participants were significantly more likely than males to agree with items concerning difficulty following verbal commands ($p = 0.003$, Pearson chi-square), echolalia (echoed or repetitive speech) ($p = 0.023$, Fisher's exact), restricted or obsessive interests ($p = 0.010$, Fisher's exact), and meltdowns triggered by sensory changes or disruption of routines ($p = 0.030$ – 0.045 , Fisher's exact). Participants with a family history of autism were significantly more likely to agree with the statements "loud auditory stimuli can trigger meltdowns" ($p = 0.044$, Fisher's exact) and "an autistic individual may suddenly shout or make abrupt movements" ($p = 0.036$, Fisher's exact).

Table 1. Assessment of Autism Awareness Among Academicians of a Public Law School

	Women (n=32)		Men (n=24)		p value
	*Don't Agree and Not Sure n (%)	**Agree n (%)	*Don't Agree and Not Sure n (%)	**Agree n (%)	
1) An individual with autism has difficulty maintaining eye contact.	5 (15.6)	27 (84.4)	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)	0.172
2) Calling by name might not be enough to draw an individual with autism's attention.	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	10 (41.7)	14 (58.3)	0.323
3) An individual with autism may seem as if they do not hear you at all.	5 (15.6)	27 (84.4)	5 (20.8)	19 (79.2)	0.764
4) An autistic individual's gaze may become fixed on objects such as a falling item or a flashing colored light.	4 (12.5)	28 (87.5)	7 (29.2)	17 (70.8)	0.284
5) An autistic individual may experience difficulties with language skills and self-expression (for example, they may be unable to communicate that they are hungry or thirsty).	9 (28.1)	23 (71.9)	10 (41.7)	14 (58.3)	0.487
6) A person with autism may have difficulty following verbal prompts such as "Sit!" or "Stand up!"***	11 (34.4)	21 (65.6)	19 (79.2)	5 (20.8)	0.003
7) An autistic individual may reverse the use of words like "Yes!" and "No!", as well as personal pronouns and self-referential language.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	18 (75.0)	6 (25.0)	0.87

8) An autistic individual may respond to questions by repeating the question itself, a behavior known as parrotting or echolalia.***	7 (21.9)	25 (78.1)	12 (50.0)	12 (50.0)	0.023
9) An autistic individual's speech may sometimes be difficult to understand (for example, they may sound robotic, skip syllables, be excessively fast or slow, have incorrect intonation, or speak in a whisper).	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	5 (20.8)	19 (79.2)	0.349
10) An autistic individual may speak with pre-formed phrases like a machine would instead of forming their own sentences.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	13 (54.2)	11 (45.8)	1.000
11) An autistic individual may sometimes spontaneously recite a long book, script, advertisement, or similar content from memory in inappropriate situations.	9 (28.1)	23 (71.9)	10 (41.7)	14 (58.3)	0.116
12) An autistic individual may sometimes make sounds such as murmuring to themselves.	6 (18.8)	26 (81.3)	6 (25.0)	18 (75.0)	0.360
13) An autistic individual may have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, such as jokes, metaphors, or idioms. For example, when hearing the phrase "Don't cut me off," they may not understand its meaning because there is no actual pair of scissors involved.	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	12 (50.0)	12 (50.0)	0.805
14) An autistic individual has difficulty reading body language, facial expressions, and gestures.	11 (34.4)	21 (65.6)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.7)	0.228
15) An autistic individual may have social skill difficulties such as reading the intentions of others, imitating their behavior, or understanding the thoughts underlying behavior.	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)	0.703
16) An autistic individual may have difficulty with balance, and their posture may appear slightly hunched or uneven.	20 (62.5)	12 (37.5)	17 (70.8)	7 (29.2)	0.832
17) An autistic individual may walk with small steps and knees bent.	23 (71.9)	9 (28.1)	16 (66.7)	8 (33.3)	0.882
18) An autistic individual may have restricted or obsessive interests such as zebras, trains, or pigeons.***	2 (6.3)	30 (93.8)	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)	0.010
19) An autistic person may have tics such as shaking their hands, clapping, snapping their fingers, chewing their hair, or biting their nails.	9 (28.1)	23 (71.9)	13 (54.2)	11 (45.8)	0.113
20) They may exhibit repetitive behaviors like opening and closing a book or pressing the tip of a pen again and again.	9 (28.1)	23 (71.9)	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)	0.553
21) They may have their own rules, like always eating at the same time, sitting in the same place, watching the same movie, or wearing the same shirt. Changes to these routines can trigger meltdowns.***	8 (25.0)	24 (75.0)	12 (50.0)	12 (50.0)	0.045
22) An autistic person often likes to stick to daily routines, such as doing things in a certain order, at a certain time, or a certain number of times. Changes to these routines can lead to aggression or meltdown episodes.***	5 (15.6)	27 (84.4)	13 (54.2)	11 (45.8)	0.030
23) Interrupting an activity they are focused on can also trigger a meltdown.***	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	15 (62.5)	9 (37.5)	0.022
24) They may be perfectionists and have certain habits or rituals, like tapping their foot once before entering a room.	11 (34.4)	21 (65.6)	11 (45.8)	13 (54.2)	0.266

25) Autistic individuals might have an object they always want to carry with them, such as a prayer bead, keychain, wallet, or watch. Losing this item can make them very upset or cause a meltdown.	12 (37.5)	20 (62.5)	14 (58.8)	10 (41.7)	0.309
26) New environments can make them feel nervous or uncomfortable.	8 (25.0)	24 (75.0)	9 (37.5)	15 (62.5)	0.519
27) Certain visual stimuli, like fluorescent lights, specific colors, or dark spaces, can trigger a meltdown. ***	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	18 (75.0)	6 (25.0)	0.026
28) Loud sounds such as ambulance sirens, a baby's cry, teeth grinding, vacuum cleaners, or other noisy environments can also cause distress.***	11 (34.4)	21 (65.6)	17 (70.8)	7 (29.2)	0.019
29) Some smells, tastes, or food textures can lead to aggression.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	19 (79.2)	5 (20.8)	0.092
30) They may dislike being touched or touching others.	7 (21.9)	25 (78.1)	10 (41.7)	14 (58.3)	0.149
31) They might suddenly shout or make quick, unexpected movements.***	5 (15.6)	27 (84.4)	11 (45.8)	13 (54.2)	0.046
32) They can be hyperactive and insist on doing things their own way.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.7)	0.934
33) Sometimes they may seem uninterested in their surroundings and may not recognize dangers like fire or earthquakes.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	11 (45.8)	13 (54.2)	0.928
34) During a meltdown, they usually dislike being touched or held back.***	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	16 (66.7)	8 (33.3)	0.013
35) Helping them calm down by quietly moving them to a peaceful room can help the meltdown end more quickly.	23 (71.9)	9 (28.1)	19 (79.2)	5 (20.8)	0.641
36) An autistic person may have difficulty with impulse control. For example, they might lick toothpaste, smell soap, or turn lights off.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.7)	0.930
37) They may struggle with abstract thinking and imagination. They often cannot "pretend" and tend to act exactly as they feel.	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	13 (54.2)	11 (45.8)	0.127
38) They may have trouble putting themselves in someone else's place. For example, they might not realize if the person they are talking to is getting bored.	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	11 (45.8)	13 (54.2)	0.754
39) They might interpret a story as if it were real.	20 (62.5)	12 (37.5)	17 (70.8)	7 (29.2)	0.645
40) They may find it hard to follow when several people are talking at the same time.	19 (59.4)	13 (40.6)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.7)	0.934
41) They can understand better when others speak in short, clear, and slow sentences.	13 (40.6)	19 (59.4)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.7)	0.091
42) They might easily believe what others say and are prone to being tricked or misled.	17 (53.1)	15 (46.9)	11 (45.8)	13 (54.2)	0.528
43) They do not grasp concepts such as deceiving, scheming, gossiping, stealing, or harming others.***	10 (31.3)	22 (68.8)	17 (70.8)	7 (29.2)	0.008
44) An autistic person may sometimes use tactless, inappropriate, or vulgar language without understanding the implications.	21 (65.6)	11 (34.4)	17 (70.8)	7 (29.2)	0.878

* Combined results for Definitely Disagree, Don't Agree, and Not Sure.

** Combined results for Definitely Agree and Agree.

*** $p < 0.05$, Pearson Chi-square test or Fisher's Chi-square test used for analysis.

Attitudes and approaches regarding autism are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. When asked about the types of legal cases most likely to involve ASD individuals, 37 participants (31.6%) identified the appointment of a legal guardian and 30 participants (25.6%) cited abuse. In cases where the ASD individual is the victim, 42 participants (75.0%) supported increasing penalties for the defendant. Additionally, a considerable portion of the participants (34

participants, 60.7%) expressed the opinion that specific legal regulations should be established for ASD individuals within the legal system.

Only 10 participants (17.9%) declared that he / she was familiar with the legal rights and accommodations currently available for individuals having autism. Only one participant (1.8%) had previously worked on a legal case involving an individual having autism. However, 30 participants (53.6%) expressed willingness to take part in such a case and believed they would be able to communicate effectively with an autistic individual. Meanwhile, 20 participants (35.7%) were unsure about their willingness to participate in such cases, and 14 (25.0%) were uncertain of their ability to communicate effectively.

Thirty participants (53.6%) supported the inclusion of autism awareness in the law school curriculum, with this support being significantly higher among women ($p = 0.011$, Pearson chi-square). Additionally, 45 participants (80.4%) supported the establishment of special courtrooms with reduced sensory stimuli system for autistic individuals such as courtrooms with noise/sound isolation, minimal visual stimuli, support from companions, psychologists, social workers, special education experts, or legal professionals trained in autism.

This support was significantly more common among women (29 participants, 90.0%) than men (16 participants, 66.0%) ($p = 0.021$, Fisher's exact).

Participants who had an autistic individual in their social circle were significantly more likely to cite "neighbor/relative/friend" as their source of information on autism ($p < 0.001$, Fisher's exact). Among this subgroup, only four (12.9%) felt adequately informed about autism-related legal regulations, but 19 (63.3%) expressed willingness to participate in a legal case involving an autistic individual. Thirteen (41.9%) of them, however, stated that they might not be able to communicate effectively with an autistic person in such a case. Moreover, 19 participants (61.3%) in this subgroup supported the inclusion of autism awareness in legal education programs. None of the attitude items showed a statistically significant association with whether the participant had an autistic individual in their close environment ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2. Assessment of Autism Attitude Among Academicians of a Public Law School

	n (%)
What do you think could be the most common types of legal cases involving autistic individuals? *	117 (100)
A) Appointment of a legal guardian	37 (31.6)
B) Inheritance	8 (6.8)
C) Abuse	30 (25.6)
D) Deception/Manipulation	19 (16.2)
E) Being exploited to commit a crime	18 (15.3)
F) Other (specify.....)	2 (1.7)
G) I don't know	3 (2.5)
In your opinion, in a case where an autistic individual is the victim, should any sentence reduction or increase be applied to the offender? **	56 (100)
A) Sentence reduction should be applied.	2 (3.6)
B) Sentence increase should be applied.	42 (75.0)
C) The approach should be the same as non-autistic individuals.	5 (8.9)
D) Other (specify.....)	5 (8.9)
E) I don't know	2 (3.6)

* Questions with multiple answers.

** Questions with a single answer.

Table 3. Assessment of Autism Approach Among Academicians of a Public Law School

	YES n (%)	NO n (%)	NOT SURE n (%)
1. Are you familiar with the legal rights and accommodations currently available for autistic students/individuals?	10 (17.9)	33 (58.9)	13 (23.2)
2. Do you think there should be special courtrooms for autistic individuals in the legal system (for example, with noise/sound isolation, minimal visual stimuli, support from companions, psychologists, social workers, special education experts, or legal professionals trained in autism)?	45 (80.4)	1 (1.8)	10 (17.8)
3. Do you think there should be special laws specifically for autistic individuals in the legal system?	34 (60.7)	9 (16.1)	13 (23.2)
4. Have you ever been involved in a legal case that included an autistic individual?	1 (1.8)	55 (98.2)	0 (0.0)
5. Would you be willing to participate in a legal case involving an autistic individual?	30 (53.6)	5 (8.9)	20 (35.7)
6. If you were involved in such a case, do you think you would be able to communicate effectively with the autistic individual?	30 (53.6)	12 (21.4)	14 (25.0)
7. Do you believe that autistic individuals can succeed as students in legal education?	30 (53.6)	10 (17.9)	16 (28.6)
8. Are there any specific approaches or strategies you currently apply or have observed to support autistic students?	1 (1.8)	38 (67.9)	16 (28.6)
9. Do you think autism awareness in law is sufficient?	0 (0.0)	44 (78.6)	11 (19.6)
10. Do you think autism awareness should be included in the curriculum of law faculties?	30 (53.6)	9 (16.1)	17 (30.4)

DISCUSSION

This descriptive study aims to evaluate the awareness and approach towards among law school academicians working at a public university, in İstanbul, Türkiye. The research is particularly significant as it is one of the limited studies on autism awareness in law. It is compared to broader studies on autism awareness conducted among other professional groups, such as those in health, education, and law enforcement.

Through this research, we aim to increase awareness of the injustices individuals with autism face within the legal system. By identifying potential gaps in awareness and offering recommendations built from our findings and referenced research for enhancing autism sensitivity in legal contexts, this study seeks to contribute meaningfully to efforts toward a more inclusive and fair justice system.

In our survey, the question that received the highest number of agree responses was about whether an autistic individual may appear as if they cannot hear the person addressing them.

In a cross-sectional study on childhood autism awareness of otorhinolaryngology residents in research and training hospitals in İstanbul, the top-recognized signs reported in the survey were difficulty making eye contact and language delay (11). The participating residents also reported that they have observed children with autism having hypersensitivity and showing signs of not hearing despite normal hearing test results (11).

In a study on autism awareness of security officers, one of the highest-scoring questions in the conducted survey was the irresponsiveness of an autistic individual when they are called by their name in public (9).

Among many others, these elements show potential to be integrated into brief autism screening tools provided to professionals through training.

The second question receiving the highest "agree" answers was about whether an autistic individual may have their vision fixed on objects, such as "staring off" at things that are falling or flashing with colored lights.

A study comparing ASD and non-ASD children's visual exploration using an eye-tracker reports that children with ASD fixate on objects more frequently and have more difficulty disengaging compared to their non-ASD peers (13).

The third most-agreed-upon question is about whether an individual with autism may have restricted or obsessive interests.

On the matter of restricted interests with obsessive properties, a study compared high-functioning autistic individuals with controls on the quality and quantity of their interests. The study shows that the type and intensity of interests are better predictors than the number of interests (14).

The least-endorsed survey item was whether an autistic individual might misuse "yes," "no," personal pronouns, or first-person language. Studies on long-term speech sampling show that pronoun reversals are infrequent, so this sign could be used as a possible red flag rather than a universal diagnostic clue for ASD (15).

Fewer than half of the participants agreed that an autistic person may struggle to follow simple verbal commands. American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many autistic toddlers cannot perform even the 12-14-month developmental skill of one-step requests despite seemingly advanced expressive capacity and vocabulary. This data warrants the inclusion of early receptive-language gaps in practitioner training (16).

Roughly the same percentage of participants believed autistic individuals might interpret fictional stories as real. Eye-tracking experiments show that adults with ASD detect "reality-violating" fantasy words as quickly as non-autistic readers, indicating intact counterfactual understanding once basic reading and IQ thresholds are met (17).

Although autistic youth are three-to-six times more likely than peers to develop schizophrenia, the elevated risk does not make psychosis a routine feature of autism, and according to the eye-tracking study on distinguishing reality-fiction, confusing fictional stories as real (18). The task of constructing an autism awareness tool on reality perception should avoid framing delusional thinking as typical for ASD individuals (18).

In our study, female legal professionals recognized command-following difficulties, echolalia, obsessive interests, and sensory-triggered meltdowns more reliably than male legal professionals. However, a 35-study review of healthcare staff found no consistent gender effect (19). Knowledge and self-efficacy varied with training exposure, not sex. A teacher survey in Germany showed only moderate knowledge and self-confidence across both genders (20). These findings create an environment for discussion on shaping training courses targeting potential deficiencies in knowledge based on demographics.

When asked about legal contexts, participants most often linked autism to guardianship and abuse, and overwhelmingly supported harsher penalties when autistic people are victims. A recent criminal law review confirms the prominence of victimization. These prevalence figures in the review support the ideas of the participants of our study to prioritize safeguarding and enhancing victim-protection laws (21).

In our study, only one in six legal professionals felt they knew the legal protections available to autistic people, and only one participant had ever worked on an autism-related case. However, more than half believed they could do so successfully. This finding contrasts with a study in England and Wales, where family-court practitioners scored high on factual knowledge but averaged low for self-efficacy, attributing their uncertainty to the absence of formal autism training (22). This difference in attitude and enthusiasm to take on cases that they must adapt to their circumstances could be attributed to an overall personality trait difference between the study samples.

Over half of our sample wanted autism content added to the law school curriculum, and four-fifths favored sensory-friendly courtrooms, making the willingness to bridge that gap apparent. These results compare to British practitioners' recommendations for plain-language guidance and courtroom adjustments (22).

Participants who knew an autistic neighbor, friend, or relative cited that social contact is their primary information source. Our findings mirror data from a study in Australia that reports word-of-mouth and social media are more dominant sources than professional education (23).

In our study, social contact did not significantly relate to attitude scores. In contrast, a meta-analysis shows that only sustained, high-quality contact improves non-autistic people's attitudes toward autism (24). This data highlights that goodwill alone will not translate into competent, bias-free practice without structured education.

The existing literature on the relationship between autism and criminal behavior presents mixed findings. Some studies suggest that autistic individuals have higher rates of criminal behavior. In contrast, others show that people with ASD are less likely to engage in criminal activities compared to their neurotypical peers (25). These inconsistencies can be attributed to various limitations such as small sample sizes, lack of appropriate tools, and absence of control groups, which make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the relationship between ASD and the criminal justice system (25). Furthermore, there is a significant gap in research examining the cognitive differences between autistic individuals who commit crimes and those who do not (25).

Communication difficulties and unusual behavior lead to misunderstandings when interacting with law enforcement. Approximately a fifth of autistic individuals reported that they encountered at least one law enforcement officer before they reached their mid-twenties (26). The frequency of contact happens due to the likelihood of misinterpretation of behaviors naturally seen in autistic individuals, such as wandering, "stimming," poor eye contact, and repetitive behaviors (27). Escalation is common in situations where these behaviors are interpreted as suspicious activity, defiance, or disrespect, and can lead to restraint, arrest, or death (27).

In a survey study with 372 practitioners and caregivers, 60% of participants reported that they were fearful of law enforcement officer encounters for their autistic relatives or clients (27).

A nationwide U.S. survey found that almost three-quarters of police officers reported receiving no formal instruction on how to assist people with autism (28).

Autistic individuals often present a more nuanced, less immediately recognizable profile than individuals with many other neurodevelopmental or psychiatric conditions. Therefore, the "in-between" stages of one's experience with the law system, from the initial police contact and security screening to transport and pre-hearing holding areas, are critical. Officers who can spot hallmark signs of autism (e.g., flat or convoluted speech, purposeless roaming, hypersensitivity to noise or touch, or seemingly indifferent responses to questions) are better equipped to de-escalate incidents and ensure the person reaches the courtroom under suitable, low-stress conditions without unnecessary conflict. Without such awareness, an autistic suspect might be subject to misinterpretation. An adult with Asperger's syndrome who has fluent speech yet has behavior and mannerisms considered inappropriate may be branded uncooperative, or a young person who takes an item through misunderstanding of the situation may be charged with theft. Building autism training and screening tools for security staff and police is, therefore, essential to prevent unjust criminalization and ensure a safe environment for an individual with autism from first contact to the final stages of court proceedings.

Since law school academicians play a critical role in the criminal justice system, their understanding of autism can significantly affect the treatment and outcomes of autistic individuals within this system. The observed gender differences in recognizing the need for special courtrooms highlight the importance of adopting a more inclusive

approach in legal education and practice. We recommend that autism awareness and sensitivity training be incorporated into the curricula of law schools. Furthermore, there is a need to develop more tools and methods to examine differences between autistic individuals who have committed crimes and those who have not, as behavioral elements that are a part of cases become more nuanced in people with autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions. Such a goal will create an environment of understanding autism within the context of the legal system.

In an interdisciplinary study on autism spectrum disorder and the criminal justice system, a survey was conducted on law students before a session, giving information to the participants about the questions (21). The study reports that a post-survey showed an increase of about a fifth of their previous accuracy in knowledge on autism (21).

These results suggest that surveys could help assess legal professionals' knowledge as part of training programs. We believe current literature provides ample sources to construct education-oriented questionnaires, and using these tools to target gaps in knowledge will allow for an adaptive and evolving model that can be shaped to suit different demographics and levels of knowledge.

We recommend developing scenario-based training with realistic case examples and interactive exercises, such as recognizing lower capacity for abstract thought compared to peers, rigidity in thinking, coexisting neuropsychiatric and medical conditions, and testing or assessing orientation. Practical workshops could train legal professionals to identify signs such as echolalia or other non-verbal signals that may indicate autism or other neurocognitive conditions, preparing the legal worker for various issues unique to cases involving individuals with such disorders. Participants should be trained to adjust their questioning strategies, for example, by asking two-way or rephrased questions, to avoid being misled by echolalia or other communication difficulties. Early interpretation of these signs during legal procedures may help prevent miscommunication or misinterpretation of intent, ultimately promoting fairer legal outcomes.

Strengthening the connection between law and psychiatry education is critical to building autism-aware legal environments. Law school curricula could benefit significantly from interdisciplinary collaboration with psychiatry departments, particularly by integrating content on psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Exposure to mandatory seminars or short courses on common psychiatric conditions could equip future legal professionals with the basic knowledge needed to recognize signs of cognitive and communication differences in legal contexts.

Legal education could incorporate clinical exposure through mandatory observational work in pediatric and adult psychiatry clinics, allowing law students to develop a practical understanding of psychiatric presentations. Given the increasing prevalence of autism and other neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions, legal professionals are increasingly likely to encounter individuals with such challenges, whether as defendants, witnesses, or victims.

The scope of autism awareness efforts should not be limited to judges and lawyers alone. Similar additions to educational programs and training courses could be extended to law enforcers, security officers, pharmacists, hospital security staff, nurses, and other frontline service providers, all likely to interact with individuals on the autism spectrum in their professional roles (9).

Raising awareness about autistic individuals' responses to physical contact, environmental dangers (such as earthquakes), and other atypical behavioral responses should be an essential part of these educational efforts. Increasing sensitivity to these issues could reduce misunderstandings and improve interactions in both legal, healthcare, and emergency settings.

Additionally, our findings point to the need for environmental adjustments to create autism-friendly courtroom designs. Such practice would minimize sensory stressors such as fluorescent lighting, loud noises, and other

overstimulating environmental factors. Creating quieter, less stimulating courtroom settings could help individuals with sensory sensitivities feel more comfortable and able to participate meaningfully in legal proceedings. Literature on autism-friendly homes and sensory-friendly environments could provide applicable models for such adaptations in legal spaces (29).

We believe that further studies on the topic of autism awareness in legal professionals are needed, with larger samples that span multiple law schools. Creating and conducting surveys to gain more generalizable data would help clarify gaps in knowledge and the changes that are needed in the legal education and justice systems.

An individual with autism dealing with the legal justice system, from the initial police encounter to the courtroom, is prone to experiencing unfair situations due to the gaps in awareness, knowledge, and attitude of the professionals involved. The nuanced and variable elements in unsupportive environments during such processes may cause misunderstandings, harsher penalties, failure to access due process, unjust legalistic treatment, and ethical harm. The deficiencies of the systems' capacity to deal with the needs of individuals with neuropsychiatric conditions create an inequitable world for autistic individuals. Steps to make the change needed to correct this imbalance are crucial, both for the sake of ethicality and practicality.

This study revealed that law school academicians have limited knowledge about certain aspects of ASD, particularly its social and communicative dimensions. Only a small proportion of participants indicated that they were sufficiently knowledgeable about the legal rights and protections of autistic individuals, while most supported concrete measures to improve their experiences within the justice system. Most participants supported autism-friendly court arrangements, the inclusion of autism awareness in legal education, and the introduction of legal regulations specifically designed to meet the needs of autistic individuals. A significant portion of participants believed that cases involving autistic individuals often involve issues such as guardianship and abuse, indicating that perceptions of autism-related legal issues are focused more on protection and representation. Additionally, a large majority supported increased penalties in cases where autistic individuals are victims, demonstrating a strong sense of justice and protection for vulnerable groups. These findings indicate a positive trend toward inclusive legal reform among legal scholars, despite gaps in knowledge. In this context, integrating autism awareness into the legal curriculum would be an important step toward promoting equal access to justice.

Following this pilot study, validity and reliability studies are planned to further develop and standardize the measurement tool. In addition, to conduct multivariate analyses and better understand the determinants of autism awareness in a legal context, future research with larger and more diverse academic samples is recommended. Furthermore, as the direct experiences of legal professionals involved in cases concerning individuals with ASD may provide new perspectives and help uncover practical challenges, conducting qualitative research with this group is recommended for future studies.

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