

Post-High School Social Experiences and Perceptions Among Autistic Young Adults

Jessica Steinbrenner, Ph.D.



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Background

Studies have documented that many autistic individuals experience markedly less involvement during adulthood compared to their peers across a range of outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Gotham et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012). However, many of those samples involve cohorts that aged into the adult system many years ago and/or samples that offer limited diversity.

Research Aims

The current study examines data from the Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism (CSESA) follow-up study to:

- Describe the social experiences of autistic young adults
- Describe the perceptions of young adults and their parents about those experiences

About CSESA

Original CSESA Study

- Large randomized controlled trial in 60 schools across three states
- Significant differences in autism program quality and student goal attainment (Hume et al., 2021)

CSESA Follow-Up Study

- Followed CSESA participants into young adulthood
- No significant differences between groups

Methods

Young adults (YAs) and parents completed standardized measures, questionnaires, and interviews on a variety of topics including social and community participation
*Nearly all data collected prior to COVID

Measures

Young Adult Interview

- Participation in, satisfaction with, & desire for change in social experiences (Y/N)
- Open-ended questions

Parent Questionnaire/Interview

- Frequency of social interactions (5-pt scale from never to several days a week)
- Open-ended questions about post-secondary experiences generally

Participants

- Approximately 38% of original sample

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Participants

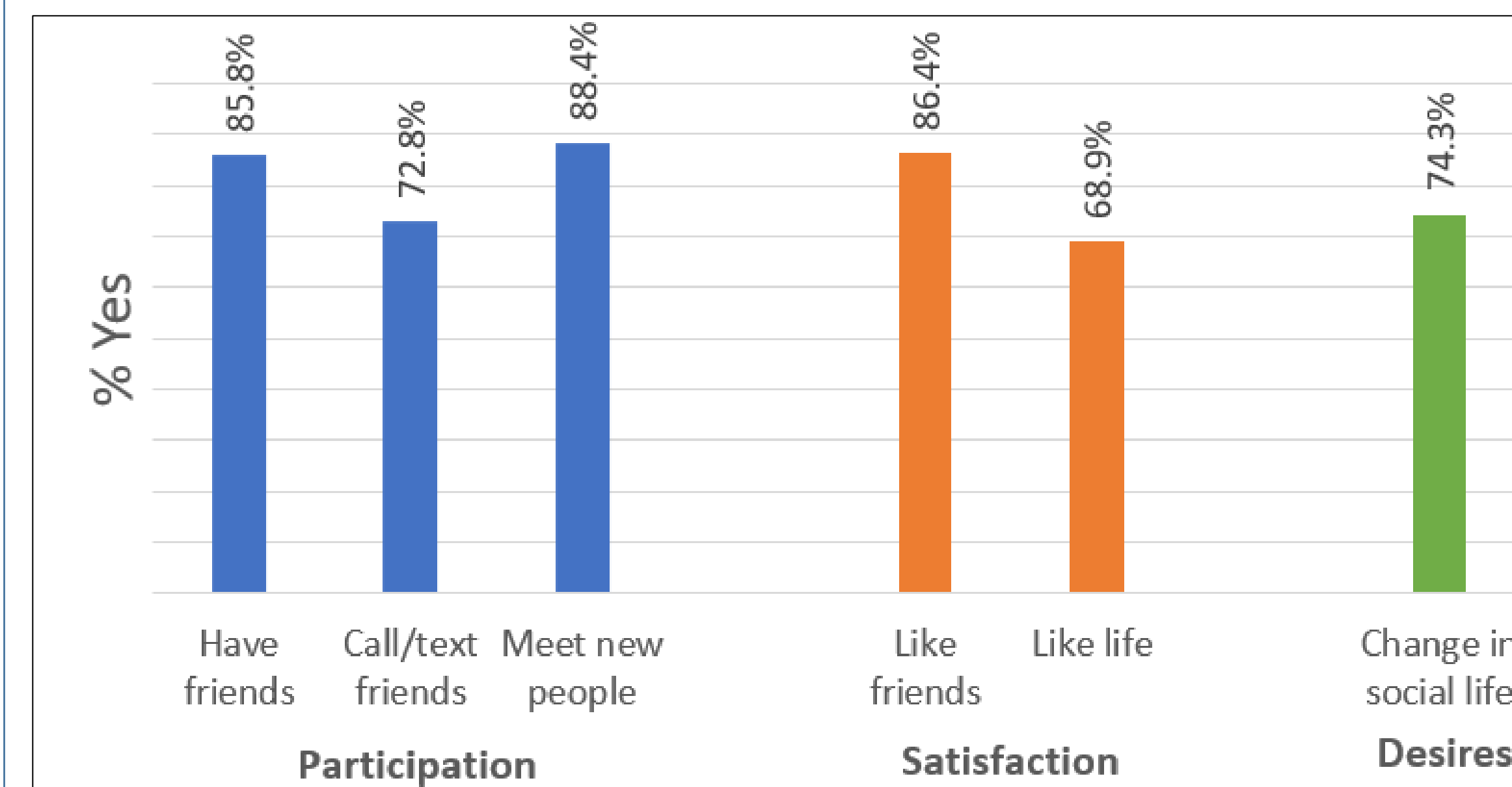
	CSESA	CSESA Follow-Up
Participants	N = 547 students	N=211 young adults
Age	16.0 years (13-21 years)	20.2 years (17-25 years)
Gender	85.9% male	84.1% male
	13.7% female	14.9% female
	0.4% non-binary	1.0% non-binary
Race	32.2% from historically marginalized racial groups	29.7% from historically marginalized racial groups
Ethnicity	20.3% Hispanic/Latino	16.2% Hispanic/Latino
Caregiver 1 Education	49.8% with bachelor's or graduate degree	64.0% with bachelor's or graduate degree
Caregiver 2 Education	44.2% with bachelor's or graduate degree	57.7% with bachelor's or graduate degree
Family Income	62.6% earned ≥ \$60,000 in previous year	70.0% earned ≥ \$60,000 in previous year

Results

Examined descriptive statistics & open-ended questions from social items

Young Adult

Figure 1. YA Report of Social Experiences



Open-Ended Responses

- Desires for social life: Many noted wanting to meet new people, have more friends, see friends more often, have a significant other, be more open
- Other social activities: Hanging out with friends, social media, volunteer, team sports, organized programs

Parent

Table 2. Parent Report of Social Experiences

Items	% any in 1 month	Mean
Saw peers in organized activity	68.1%	2.63
Saw peers outside of organized activity	52.1%	2.11
Called or texted friends	67.0%	2.90
Interacted with friends on internet	66.3%	3.14

Open ended responses

- Other activities (work/ed) bridge to social
- Struggles with isolation, staying at home
- Limited availability of supports post-HS

Conclusions

- Range of social experiences, but appear to be frequently engaged overall
- Open-ended responses reflect larger range of experiences
- YAs are active and satisfied with social activities, but still want change
- Parents report lower levels of social participation compared to YAs
- Other activities may be a facilitator to friendships

Limitations: <40% response so may not represent original sample, use of non-standardized, adapted measures

Implications

- Continue to explore social experiences and desires of autistic YAs
- Examine potential facilitators for YAs who are satisfied with social experiences (including HS experiences)
- Build supports for social participation within other activities (work, education)

Acknowledgement

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grants R324C120006 and R324A180091 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not represent of the Institute of the U.S. Department of Education.

References

Anderson, K. A., Shattuck, P. T., Cooper, B. P., Roux, A. M., & Wagner, M. (2014). Prevalence and correlates of postsecondary residential status among young adults with an autism spectrum disorder. *Autism, 18*(5), 562-570.
Hume, K., Odum, S. L., Steinbrenner, J. R., Smith DaWalt, L., Hall, L. J., Kraemer, B., ... & Bolt, D. M. (2022). Efficacy of a school-based comprehensive intervention program for adolescents with autism. *Exceptional Children, 88*(2), 223-240.
Gotham, K., Marvin, A. R., Taylor, J. L., Warren, Z., Anderson, C. M., Law, P. A., ... & Lipkin, P. H. (2015). Characterizing the daily life, needs, and priorities of adults with autism spectrum disorder from Interactive Autism Network data. *Autism, 19*(7), 794-804.
Shattuck, P. T., Narendorf, S. C., Cooper, B., Sterzing, P. R., Wagner, M., & Taylor, J. L. (2012). Postsecondary education and employment among youth with an autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics, 129*(6), 1042-1049.