



# VALIDATING A QUESTIONNAIRE TO ASSESS KNOWLEDGE AND STIGMATIZATION OF ASD IN THE PERUVIAN POPULATION: A REAL NEED

VALIDAR UN CUESTIONARIO PARA EVALUAR EL CONOCIMIENTO Y LA ESTIGMATIZACIÓN DEL TEA EN LA POBLACIÓN PERUANA: UNA NECESIDAD REAL

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## Dear Editor:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in awareness and early detection of ASD, significantly improving opportunities for intervention and support. However, individuals with ASD often face stigmatization and discrimination due to a lack of understanding about their condition, which can negatively affect their emotional and social well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to promote greater education and awareness about ASD to reduce stigma and foster a more inclusive society<sup>(1)</sup>.

Various efforts have been made to promote greater awareness of this disorder. Harrison et al. (2017) developed an instrument to assess knowledge and stigma about autism (ASK-Q) in the United States. This questionnaire, designed to be useful in various cultural contexts, could be adapted and validated in countries like Peru, significantly contributing to the evaluation of the effectiveness of psychoeducational interventions<sup>(2)</sup>.

In a subsequent study conducted by Harrison et al. (2023), the ASK-Q questionnaire was used to evaluate knowledge and stigmatization of ASD in 13 countries across four continents, finding a notable 17-point difference between the country with the highest knowledge (Canada) and the one with the lowest knowledge (Lebanon). The study revealed that participants from countries with higher economic incomes and individualistic designations had greater knowledge about ASD. Additionally, factors such as relationships with autistic individuals, being female, educational level, and age positively influenced adequate knowledge of ASD. These findings highlight the importance of adapting and validating culturally sensitive assessment tools to improve awareness and reduce stigma associated with ASD globally<sup>(3)</sup>.

In Latin America, studies conducted to quantify the prevalence of autistic individuals are scarce, as mentioned in the study by Morocho et al. (2021).

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According to the statistics presented by the Red Espectro Autista Latinoamérica, Chile has the highest population of autistic individuals, while Argentina reports the fewest cases. There are between 25 and 30 autistic individuals per 10,000 inhabitants in Latin America based on data from 2011-2013. The lack of research on ASD affects individuals with this condition and their families by not obtaining a timely diagnosis and subsequently appropriate treatment to improve their quality of life, making them vulnerable in their interactions with their social environment<sup>(4)</sup>.

Due to these difficulties, adequate knowledge about ASD would greatly help to combat the stigmatization of this population. In Peru, the Ministry of Health certified 5,328 individuals with ASD in 2020, an insignificant figure considering that the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates a global prevalence of 62 cases per 10,000 inhabitants. According to this estimate, approximately 204,818 ASD cases are projected in our country.

This suggests that more than 97% of autistic individuals in Peru do not have a formal diagnosis<sup>(5)</sup>. It is important to highlight that in 2019 the TEA Plan was approved and published, which sets objectives and indicators to be achieved by 2021 in areas such as accessibility, health and rehabilitation, education, employment and work, transportation, social protection, among other aspects. Nevertheless, to date, the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP, by its Spanish acronym) has not presented the evaluation report on the progress in the implementation of this plan<sup>(5,6)</sup>. All these difficulties both in diagnosis and the lack of adequate psychoeducational interventions in a middle-income country like Peru lead us to the need for a validated questionnaire that can assess knowledge of ASD and stigmatization in order to properly carry out these interventions, which would result in improved certified diagnosis and reduced social stigma for this population.

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