

# Knowledge and Beliefs about Autistic Communication and Sociality among Non-Autistic Students in Healthcare Majors

Siva priya Santhanam, Carly Hudson, Victoria VanUitert, Juliette Gudknecht  
Bowling Green State University, Ohio

## Background

- Children on the autism spectrum and adults – more likely to visit emergency rooms (Ianuzzi et al., 2014; Saqr et al., 2017).
- Premature deaths, chronic and long-term health challenges increased hospital visits – more common in autistic people (Nicolaidis et al., 2015).
- **Low satisfaction** experienced by autistic adults with their healthcare providers (Nicolaidis et al., 2013).
- **Fear and anxiety** experienced by autistic adults in seeking medical help (Raymaker et al., 2016).
- Barriers to healthcare access and satisfaction with healthcare provider:
  - **Sensory mismatch** in the setting (Doherty et al., 2010)
  - **Anxiety** associated with limited knowledge of procedures (Doherty et al., 2010)
  - **Limited understanding** and appreciation of autistic communication (Nicolaidis et al., 2015)
  - **Limited inclusion** in one's own healthcare decisions (Raymaker et al., 2016)
  - **Inadequate knowledge** and training on autistic people among healthcare professionals (Bruder et al., 2012; Austracio et al., 2019)

## Purpose

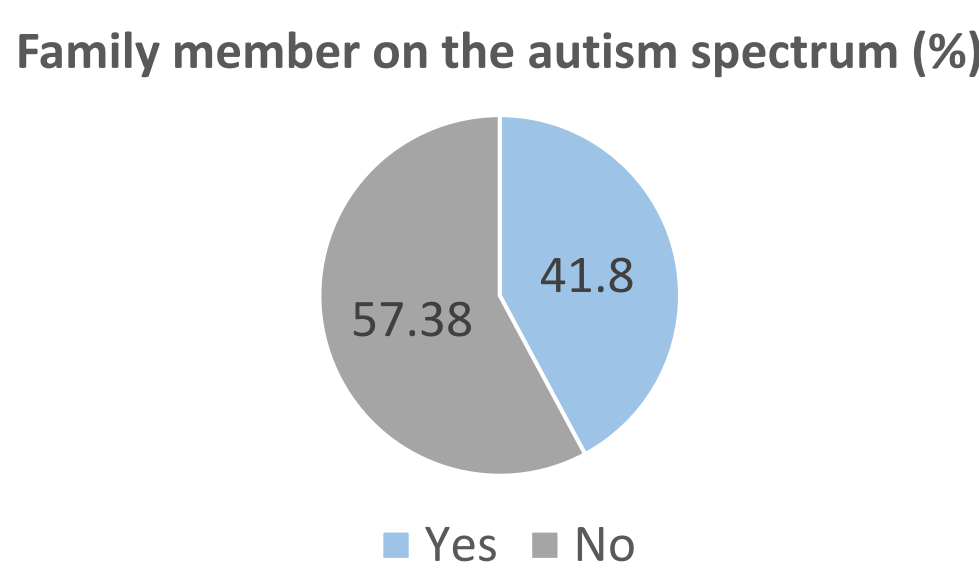
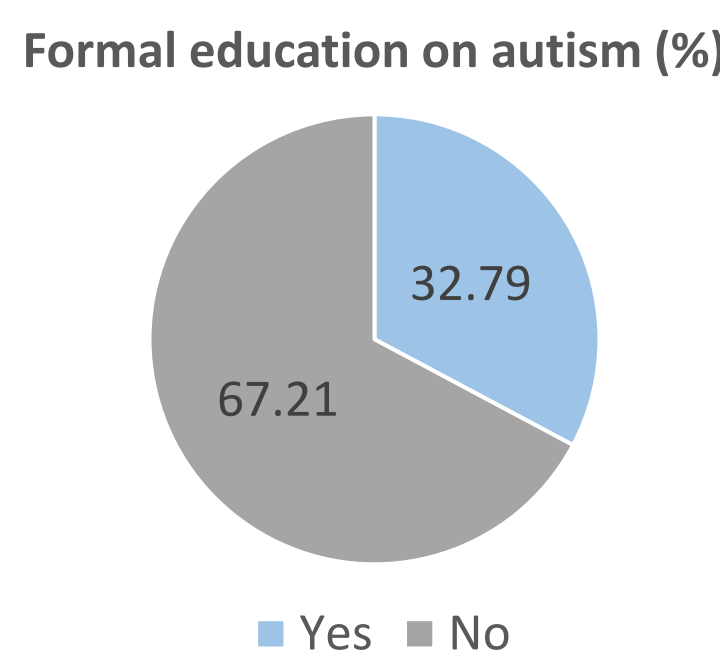
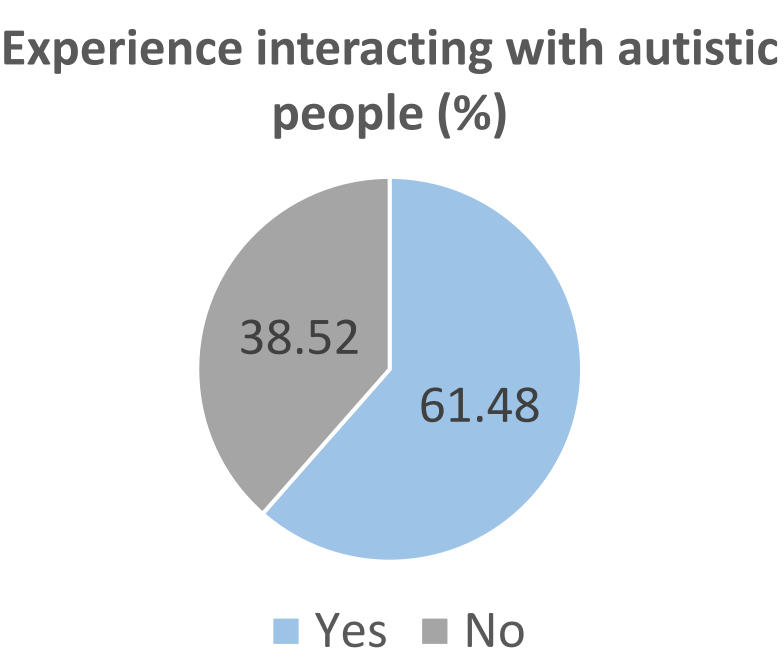
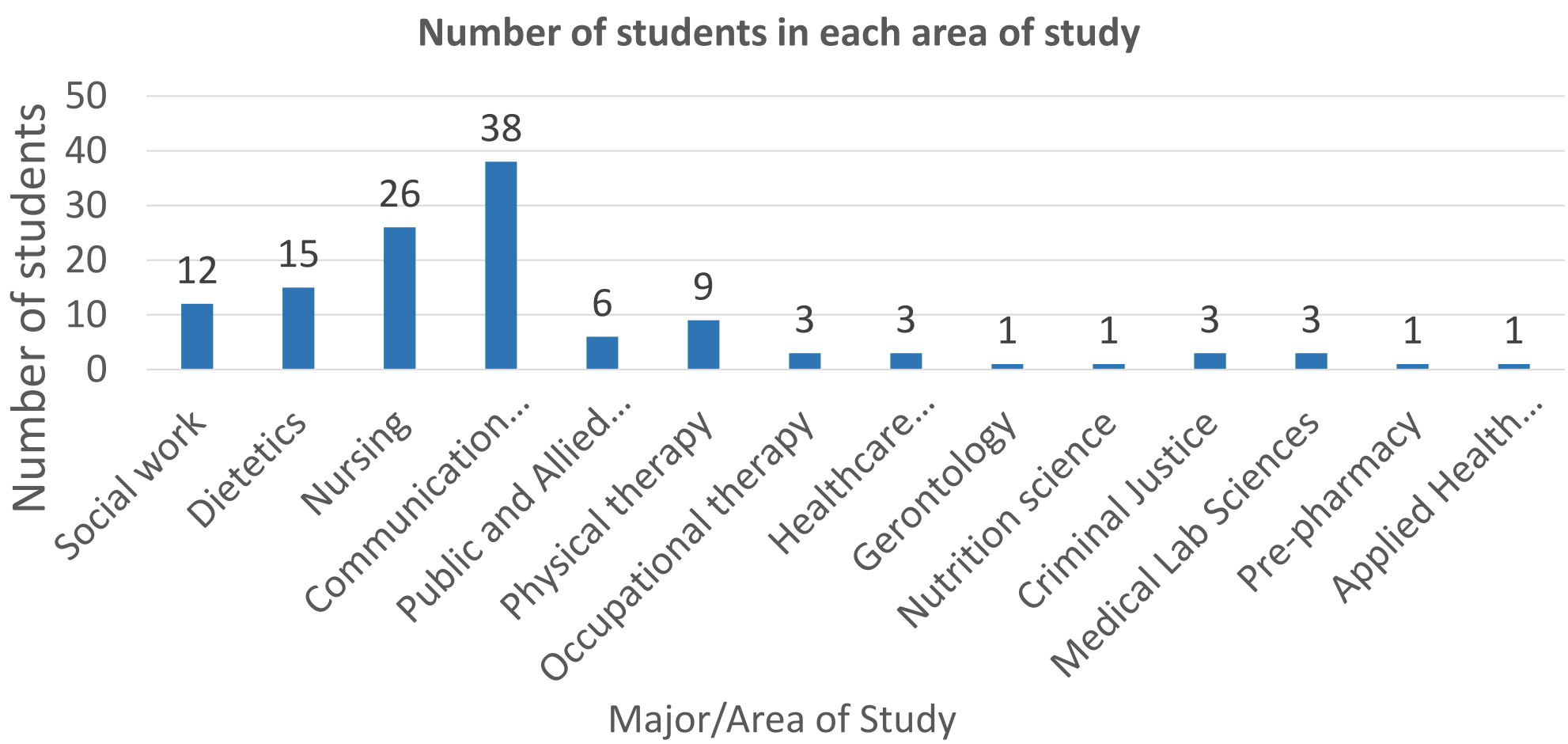
- **Assess baseline knowledge of autism** among students in healthcare majors to identify gaps in understanding before implementing educational interventions.
- **Inform the development of targeted autism education** for future healthcare providers to improve healthcare experiences and outcomes for autistic individuals.

## Research Question

What are the perceptions/beliefs of autistic communication and sociality among non-autistic college students in healthcare majors?

## Methods

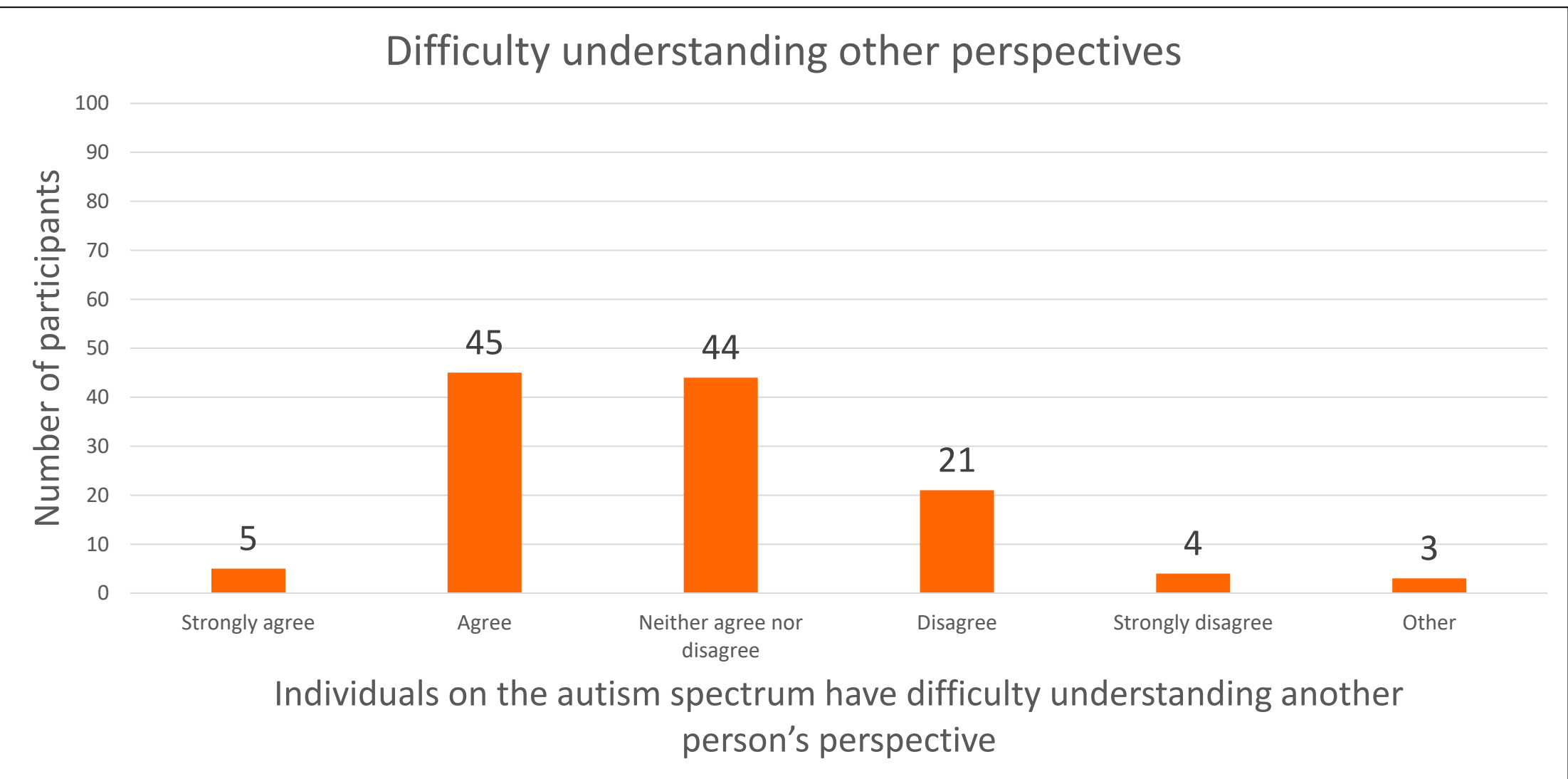
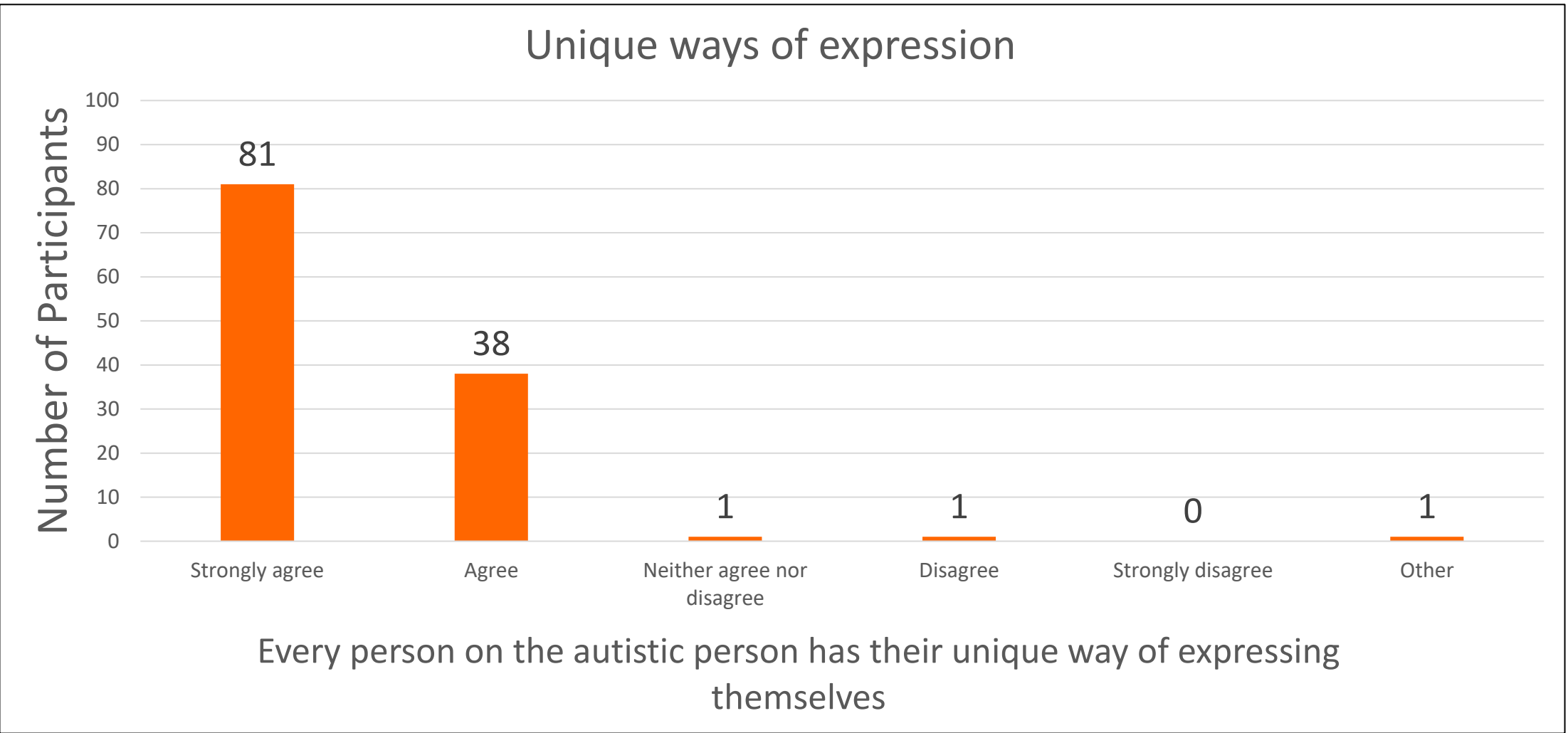
- The study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design using a participatory approach (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2019).
- Participants were 122 BGSU students in healthcare majors; 110 (Female) 11 (Male) 1 (Other gender); 15.25% (non-White background). Mean age was 25 years.



- Participants completed:
  - A demographic questionnaire
  - Beliefs about autistic communication scale (54 items)
  - Two open-ended questions describing autistic communication
- Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the survey data.
- Thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to analyze participants' responses to open-ended questions.
- Inferential statistical analyses will be used to determine if factors such as participants' chosen major, prior exposure to autistic people, participants' age, and identified gender have an influence on their beliefs about autistic communication

## Results

Beliefs about autistic communication – Sample responses



### Thematic Analyses Results

Open-ended responses about communication in autistic children – three themes

#### 1. Communication is challenging

*“When I think of a child with autism, I think of them having a lack of communication.”*

*“They can be difficult to communicate with. They are either very literal or do not know how to clearly say what they are thinking.”*

#### 2. Communication is multimodal

*“Autistic children may communicate differently from one another, whether they are nonverbal, use AAC, or have little oral speech. They use different modes of communication, such as AAS, sign language, gestures, etc.”*

#### 3. Communication is varied

*“Children with autism communicate in different ways. Some children are verbal while others have limited verbal communication and require tools and skills to help them express how they are feeling or what they want. “*

## Results

Open-ended responses about communication in autistic adults – three themes

#### 1. Communication is impaired but better than children

*“Depending on how intense their autism is, they might not communicate that well. They may not want to be involved in a gathering setting.”*

*“I think they communicate a little better than kids. They have a less reactive behavior but still don't talk too much”*

#### 2. Communication is multimodal

*“I believe that an adult with autism communicates through multiple modes, this could be verbal, nonverbal (gestures/signs/body language), AAC devices, and through Echolalia.”*

#### 3. Limited knowledge of communication

*“I am not sure what changes occur in the communication of autistic adults after childhood. Maybe adults are better able to manage their ability to divert their attention from preferred tasks when necessary?”*

## Discussion

- The study is the first to explore beliefs and perceptions of autistic communication among non-autistic students.
- Open-ended responses reveal the need for more knowledge and training on autistic communication to address misperceptions.
- Survey responses are mixed with some revealing positive beliefs and others reflecting deficit-based beliefs (prejudice) about autistic communication.
- Social desirability bias and prior exposure to autistic people are potential contributors to students' positive impressions.
- Nevertheless, the study indicates a need for further education and training specific to autistic communication and social interaction differences.

## Funding Acknowledgement

BGSU Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship Fall 2024 Grant