

## **Decoding Mental Disorders: The Value of Practical Experience in Perceptions of Autism Spectrum Disorder**

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**Abstract :** The purpose of this paper is to explore the value of practical experience with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a microcosm of mental disorders, in psychology students' attempt to fully understand it in all of its intricacies. The study follows a one-year program where students of psychology volunteer at a school for Autistic children of ages 3-18. The individual levels of experience with, and theoretical understanding of, ASD varies measurably amongst the volunteers; these volunteers are then intermittently interviewed, observed and surveyed throughout the program in order to determine any decline or growth in their understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder. A panel of professionals all of whom are active in the world of ASD (headmasters of Autistic schools, psychologists, child development specialists, special needs teachers, parents of autistic children and Occupational Therapists) were used specifically for this study, in order to develop the guideline for understanding ASD that will be used comparatively against the information gained from the volunteers in order to establish the individual results. The paper concludes by illustrating how psychology has a responsibility to the community to understand disorders past what is academic and theoretical, and how increasing student experience with a disorder can aid in a more holistic psychological approach to mental disorders in the future.

**Keywords :** autism, mental disorders, practical experience, psychology

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