Title: The Relationship between Social Anxiety and Perceived Intelligence and Happiness among Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Background: Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) typically show signs of social skills deficits in addition to displaying signs of anxiety (Bellini, 2004). Despite appearing as though they prefer low levels of social contact, research has shown that individuals with ASD notice how socially disconnected they are and desire that their social situation were different (White, Oswald, Ollendick, & Scahill, 2009). Research has also found that individuals with ASD exhibit a physiological hyper-arousal that exposes them to a greater likelihood of being adversely conditioned by negative social experiences, which may lead to increased social anxiety and unhappiness (Bellini, 2006). Studies have shown a bi-directional influence effect between anxiety and perceptions of happiness and intelligence in individuals with ASD (Myles, Barnhill, Hagiwara, Griswold, & Simpson, 2001). Previous research has looked at the extent to which the perception of intelligence and happiness is effected by high levels of social anxiety in school aged children with ASD, however, to our knowledge there has yet to be a thorough exploration of the relation between anxiety and self-perceived intelligence and happiness in older adolescents.

Objective: This study seeks to examine the relationship between social anxiety and perceived happiness and intelligence in adolescents with ASD. It is hypothesized that as social anxiety increases, perceived happiness and intelligence will decrease.

Methods: Three hundred twenty one adolescents ranging from 11 to 18 years of age (M= 13.6, SD= 1.76) attending weekly social skills treatment as part of the UCLA PEERS® for Adolescents program participated in this study. In order to examine the relationship between social anxiety and perceived intelligence and happiness, adolescents completed the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS-A; La Greca, 1999) to measure levels of anxiety and the Piers Harris Self-Concept Scale Second Edition (PHS2; Piers, Harris, and Herzberg, 2002) to measure perceived self-esteem, intelligence, and happiness. The SAS consists of subscales that measure fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance and distress specific to new situations, and social avoidance and distress experienced generally Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between ratings of social anxiety on the SAS and perceived happiness and perceived intelligence on the PHS2.

Results: Results indicate higher baseline total scores on the SAS are correlated with lower baseline subscales scores on the PHS2 perceived intelligence (p <.001) and PHS2 perceived happiness (p< .001). In addition to these findings, higher scores on all SAS subscales are correlated with lower baseline scores on the PHS2 perceived intelligence (p <.001) and PHS2 happiness (p < .001). Higher total scores on the SAS are also correlated with lower total scores on the PHS2 at baseline (p <.001).

Conclusion: Findings suggest support for the original hypothesis in that adolescents reporting higher social anxiety perceive themselves as less intelligent and less happy than those reporting less social anxiety. These findings are important in that they suggest that the social skills deficits in adolescents may be related to levels of social anxiety and self-esteem. These findings also suggest that social anxiety and self-esteem have important roles in social interactions between adolescents with ASD.

References: