Title: Maternal and Child Characteristics as Predictors of Interactions with the Religious Community

Authors: Sydney Lerner, Megan Pruitt, Lisa Timmons, Naomi V. Ekas

Introduction: Although mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience elevated levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (Olsson & Hwang, 2001), researchers have identified several factors that may buffer these negative experiences. One factor that is associated with increased life satisfaction and positive affect is religion and spirituality. However, involvement in organized religious activities was associated with increased negative outcomes (Ekas, Whitman, & Shivers, 2009). One possible reason is that parents may feel that their religious community is unsupportive of their child’s special needs. Another explanation may be that characteristics of the parent, such as difficulties in social interaction, contribute to difficulty seeking or receiving support from members of the congregation. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine the associations between maternal and child characteristics and the quality of interactions with their congregation.

Methods: Participants consisted of 73 Christian mothers of a child with ASD (under 18 years old). Mothers were predominantly White, college educated, and the majority reported a household income greater than $40,000. Mothers provided informed consent and completed surveys online using Qualtrics. A well-validated measure of perceptions of negative interactions with the religious community was used. Maternal characteristics were assessed using the Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire (BAPQ; subscales and total score computed) and child characteristics were measured using the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; subscales and total score computed).

Results: A linear multiple regression model was tested with the BAPQ and SRS total scores entered as predictors of negative interactions with the religious community. Higher BAP symptomatology was associated with increased negative interactions with members of the religious community, $B = .46, p = .023$. Similarly, increased child ASD symptomatology was associated with more negative interactions within the religious community, $B = .01, p = .043$. Follow-up Pearson correlations were computed to examine which subscales of the SRS and BAPQ were associated with increased negative interactions. Results showed that mothers of children with lower awareness, impaired cognitive skills, less motivation, and increased repetitive mannerisms reported greater negative interactions. In addition, mothers with increased pragmatic language difficulties and a more rigid personality style also reported greater negative interactions with their religious community.

Discussion: Maternal BAP characteristics and child ASD symptomatology were associated with negative interactions within the religious community. Although parents anecdotally report that they feel unsupported by their religious community, this is the first study to test predictors of interactions with the religious community. Given the emphasis on social interaction and community building within the Christian faith, mothers with characteristics of the BAP may have difficulty interacting and building relationships with members of their religious community. Moreover, the child’s behaviors may create additional difficulties. Building awareness of ASD and the challenges that families face within religious communities is an important target given the psychological benefits associated with religion.

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