Symposium Title: Exploring Positive Adaptation in Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disability

Chair: Naomi V. Ekas

Discussant: Robert Hock

Overview: Mothers of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), often experience challenges that may negatively impact their psychological well-being. However, there is considerable individual variability and mothers also report positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction, optimism about the future, and beliefs that their child has made a positive contribution to their lives. The field of positive psychology has called for an emphasis on promoting positivity (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction, strengthening of character strengths, etc.) since reducing negativity does not necessarily translate to increased positivity. The current symposium uniquely emphasizes a variety of positive outcomes, includes the perspectives of mothers of children with intellectual disability and ASD, and includes mothers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The first presentation examines whether a general latent construct of maternal positivity could be derived from various measures of positivity and if this latent construct predicts maternal and child outcomes. The second presentation examines associations between optimism and coping strategies in a sample of Latina mothers of children with ASD. The third presentation examines the relative contribution of several dimensions of religion/spirituality for maternal positive outcomes. The three presentations share a common goal of emphasizing positive adaptation and provide a unique contribution to this growing area of research. The clinical implications for families of children with IDD are discussed.

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Paper 1 of 3

Paper Title: The Construct of Maternal Positivity in Mothers of Children with Intellectual Disability

Authors: Mikeda Jess, Vasiliki Totsika, Richard. P. Hastings

Introduction: Despite the elevated levels of stress, anxiety and depression reported by mothers of children with intellectual disabilities (ID), these mothers simultaneously report positive experiences and describe positive perceptions of their child (Hastings, 2016; Hastings & Taunt, 2002). To date, maternal positivity has been operationalized in different ways using a variety of single measures including general positive constructs (life satisfaction, family satisfaction, and positive affect), and disability specific measures such as the Positive Contributions Scale and the Positive Gain Scale. Previous research has identified small associations between these single indicators and child and maternal outcomes. In the present study, we tested whether a latent construct of maternal positivity could be derived from multiple measures of positivity. We further tested whether the association between a latent construct of maternal positivity and maternal negative psychological outcomes and maternal positivity and child behaviours would follow the same direction of associations as previous research on single indicators of positivity and child and maternal outcomes.

Method: One hundred and thirty-five mothers of children with ID participated in the research. Their ages ranged from 23 to 57 years. The majority of the mothers were married or living with a partner (n=102). A majority of the mothers had a University or college education (n=68). The children with ID were 89 boys and 46 girls ranging from 3 years to 18 years. Fifty-five children were reported as having a diagnosis of Autism in addition to ID, 25 had Down Syndrome, 16 had Cerebral Palsy, and the remainder were a mixed aetiology ID group. Mothers completed measures on parental self-efficacy, their satisfaction with life, family satisfaction, their positive affect and their positive perceptions of their ID child. These measures were used to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis of latent positivity. Four further measures were also completed by participants pertaining to their parenting stress, psychological distress, their child’s behaviour problems and their child’s positive social behaviours and subsequently tested for their association with maternal positivity.

Results: A latent maternal positivity construct achieved a statistically good fit using the five observed indicators of positivity. Parental self-efficacy had the strongest loading on the latent construct ($\theta=.80$) thus the strongest contribution to maternal positivity. Maternal positivity was significantly and negatively associated with maternal parenting stress ($\theta = -.74, p < .001$), maternal psychological distress ($\theta = -.76, p = .006$) and child behaviour problems ($\theta = .54, p < .001$). Maternal positivity was significantly and positively associated with child positive social behaviour ($\theta = .48, p < .001$).
Discussion: Findings suggest that there is indeed an underlying positivity construct that can be described using general positive measures as well as positivity measures specifically focused on the experience of parenting a child with ID. The associations identified were reasonably substantial, suggesting robust relationships with both measures of maternal mental health and child functioning. These findings are in contrast to much of the previous research suggesting weak relationships between single indicators of positivity and both child functioning and maternal psychological problems (stress, anxiety and depression). These findings lend support to the importance of examining parental positivity in families of children with ID, and using multiple indicators of positivity. There is a need for mothers to find effective ways to reduce the levels of stress and other negative outcomes associated with raising a child with ID. Associations with negative psychological outcomes suggest that interventions focused on increasing parental positivity may have beneficial effects for parents. Further research is needed, especially in relation to such interventions.

References/Citations:


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Paper Title: Optimism and Coping Strategies among Latina Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Authors: Kristina Lopez¹ & Sandra Magaña²

Introduction: For mothers of children who exhibit challenging behaviors optimism is associated with decreased distress (Baker, Blacher, & Olsson, 2005). Optimists may gain an advantage in dealing with negative events due to their preference for more active coping strategies (Dougall et al., 2001), capacity to reinterpret negative events, or ability to find meaning and growth from negative experiences. Previous research has linked optimism and coping strategies among parents of children with special healthcare needs (Willis et al., 2016). There is a consensus that the type of coping parents employ while managing their child’s needs has an impact on their levels of stress and physical health (Zablotsky, Bradshaw, & Stuart, 2013). Scheier, Wentraub, and Carver (1986) define problem-focused coping as “action that has the goal of removing or circumventing the source of the stress” and emotion-focused coping as the “attempt to reduce or eliminate the emotional distress associated with, cued by, the stressful situation” (pg. 1258). However, little is known about optimism and the impact it has on coping among Latina mothers of children with ASD. In this study we aimed to determine the impact of optimism among Latinas on their problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. We hypothesized that 1) optimism would positively influence problem-focused coping strategies; 2) greater levels of optimism would predict lower levels of emotion-focused coping.

Methods: Forty-five Latina caregivers were administered a questionnaire on their experiences with their child’s diagnosis and service use. Children were between 3 and 21 years of age ($\mu$=9.6; SD=4.5) at the time of the study. Optimism was measured with the Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Problem focused coping was measured using the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Spanish versions of both measures were used as needed with the participants.

Results: Linear regression was used to test if optimism significantly predicted problem-focused coping. It was found that optimism explained a significant amount of the variance in problem focused coping scores ($F(2, 17) = 16.15, p < .001, R^2 = .28, R^2 Adjusted = .27, \beta = .99, t(41) = 4.02, p < .001$). A second linear regression tested if optimism significantly predicted emotion-focused coping. Optimism did not significantly predict emotion focused coping scores.
**Discussion:** Analyses indicate that optimism influences Latina mothers use of problem focused coping. Specifically, higher levels of optimism predicted higher levels of problem focused coping. By understanding the relationship between optimism and coping strategies among Latina mothers of children with ASD, we can more efficiently develop strengths-based parent education programs to enhance their mental and physical health.

**References/Citations:**


1 Arizona State University 2 University of Illinois at Chicago

Paper Title: Predicting Positive Adaptation in Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: The Role of Religion and Spirituality

Authors: Naomi V. Ekas

**Introduction:** Mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face unique challenges that may negatively impact their psychological well-being (Olsson & Hwang, 2001). Research has identified factors, such as social support, that may ameliorate these negative outcomes (Boyd, 2002); however, there is less research examining factors that promote positive outcomes. Focusing on positive adaptation is important because the absence of negative outcomes does not directly translate to increased positive outcomes. One factor associated with positive outcomes in mothers of children with ASD is religion/spirituality (Ekas, Whitman, & Shivers, 2009). Ekas and colleagues (2009) found that spirituality was associated with increased life satisfaction and positive affect, whereas religious activities were associated with negative outcomes. The purpose of the current study was to expand the existing research to include multiple dimensions of religion/spirituality and examine their impact on positive characteristics of mothers of children with ASD.

**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. Well-validated measures of religious coping, spirituality, involvement in organized religion, engagement in private religious practices, and perceptions of support from the religious community were used to assess religion/spirituality. Outcome measures included assessments of benefit finding and perceptions about the positive contributions of their child with ASD (individual subscales included were: source of happiness, source of family closeness, source of understanding life’s purpose, and source of personal growth).

**Results:** Significant, positive correlations were found between each dimension of religion/spirituality and maternal benefit finding. However, only spirituality was significantly, and positively, associated with perceptions about the positive contributions of their child with ASD. Separate multiple linear regressions were conducted for each outcome measure. After entering each dimension of religion/spirituality, only spirituality was a significant predictor of maternal benefit finding ($B = 5.32, p = .001$) and perceptions about the positive contributions of their child with ASD ($B = 3.11, p = .036$). When examining the individual subscales of the positive contributions measure, spirituality was only a significant predictor of the family closeness subscale ($B = .18, p = .035$).

**Discussion:** After accounting for other dimensions of religion, maternal spirituality was associated with increased beliefs that their child’s ASD diagnosis was associated with positive changes (i.e., benefit finding) and that their child made a positive contribution to their family. Spirituality refers to feelings of closeness and harmony with “God” and creation and does not require formal participation in organized activities. Mothers may find this particularly beneficial given the time demands associated with raising a child with ASD.
References:


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