Symposium Title: Couple Relationships in Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Insight into Risk, Variability, and Partner Coping using Multilevel Modeling

Chair: Sigan Hartley

Discussant: Leann Smith

Overview: Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) report abundant joyful parenting experiences, but also high child-related challenges. There is evidence that these child-related challenges can toll on the couple relationship of some parents of children with ASD. Insight into the potential group-level risk for poor couple relationship quality in parents of children with ASD, within-group variability, and partner effects has critical implications for the functioning of the entire family system. The current symposium uses sophisticated methodology (large samples, comparison groups, self-reported and observed measures) and advanced statistics (multilevel modeling and actor-partner independence models) to understand the couple relationship and its importance in parents who have a child with ASD. The first presentation elucidates couple processes that go awry in the context of high child-related challenges by identifying differences in couple conflict (i.e., parent disagreement or problem-solving) in parents of children with ASD relative to parents of children without disabilities using self-reported and observed measures. The second presentation provides insight into why some parents of children with ASD experience satisfying and healthy couple relationships while others do not by examining mother-father, individual, and family-level factors associated with variability in self-reported couple relationship satisfaction. The third presentation examines coping through a dyadic lens, by investigating how the coping of one parent is linked to the views of family functioning held by the other parent within couples of children with ASD. Each presentation reflects a novel and important contribution to the field. The implications of findings for both theory and family supports are discussed.

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Paper Title: Couple Conflict in Parents of Children with Versus Without Autism: Self-Reported and Observed Findings

Authors: Emily J. Hickey, Sigan L. Hartley, Lauren M. Papp, Iulia Mihaila, Paige M. Bussanich, Greta L. Goetz

Introduction: Parents of children with ASD are at risk for low marital satisfaction and relationship separation/divorce; however, the specific processes through which stressful parenting may be linked to these broad poor marital outcomes is unknown. In the general population, the most robust predictor of marital quality is couple conflict (i.e., how often and how couples argue). Virtually nothing is known about whether parents of children with ASD are at heightened risk for couple conflict. The goal of the current study was to compare the couple conflict of parents of children with ASD to a comparison group of parents of children without disabilities.

Methods: Analyses were based on both self-reported and observational measures of couple conflict in 178 couples who had a child with ASD (aged 5-12 years) and 174 couples who had children without disabilities. The Conflict and Problem-Solving Scale (CPS; Kerin, 1996), which measures multiple dimensions of couple conflict and resolution strategies, was independently completed by parents. Couples engaged in an observed couple conflict interaction in which they discussed a topic of disagreement (i.e., current, unresolved issue that they didn’t see eye-to-eye on). Interactions were coded using well-established criteria (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 1998; 2000). There were no significant group (parents of children with ASD vs. comparison group) differences in parent age or race/ethnicity, paternal education, family size, or couple relationship length. Parents of children with ASD had a significantly lower household income and a trend for lower maternal education level than the comparison group; these variables were controlled for in analyses.

Results: Group differences in self-reported couple conflict were analyzed in multi-level models using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) software. There was a significant within-couple, mother-father, positive association between the CPS Frequency, Severity, Efficacy, and Resolution dimensions in the ASD group ($r = .21$ to $.50$, $p<.01$) and the comparison group ($r = .24$ to $.57$, $p<.01$).
Fathers of children with ASD reported a significantly higher frequency of couple conflicts and a significantly higher use of Stalemate than comparison group fathers. Mothers of children with ASD reported having more unresolved couple problems than comparison group mothers.

Group differences in observed couple conflict were analyzed through a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance. There was a significant group difference in the coded ratings ($F(1,328) = 6.66, p<.01$). Couples of children with ASD exhibited a significantly higher level of Maternal Positive Affect ($F(1,328) = 10.36, p<.01$), Paternal Positive Affect ($F(1,328) = 9.89, p<.01$), and Sensitivity ($F(1,328) = 5.89, p=.02$) than the comparison group. Couples who had a child with ASD exhibited a significantly lower level of Engagement ($F(1,328) = 8.19, p<.01$), Balance ($F(1,331) = 4.71, p=.04$), and Cooperation ($F(1,328) = 5.73, p=.02$) than the comparison group.

**Discussion:** Parents of children with ASD reported more frequent, severe, and unresolved couple problems than parents of children without disabilities. Parents who had a child with ASD were observed to have less engaged, balanced, and cooperative couple conflict interactions, but demonstrated more positive affect and sensitivity than parents in the comparison group. Group differences had small effect sizes. Findings have implications for marital therapy and relationship education programs.

**References:**
short form of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; DAS-7), their individual depression levels (on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale; HADS), and on the behavioural and emotional outcomes of the child with autism and a sibling in the family (on the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire; SDQ). We were interested in exploring whether mothers and fathers reported different levels of relationship satisfaction, and whether parental relationship satisfaction was associated with parental depression and the behavioural and emotional problems of a child with autism and a sibling, even after controlling for other family factors (socioeconomic position, number of children in the family). Multilevel linear modeling (MLM) was used to analyse the data. Given the nested structure of family data and a lack of studies using MLM in this area, there was a significant need to adopt such an analysis approach.

**Results:** Results indicated that there were no significant differences in relationship satisfaction according to gender, with mothers and fathers reporting similar levels of satisfaction. Overall relationship satisfaction was classified within the adjusted range (55.4%). At Level 1, parental depression was significantly and negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ($p=0.007$), with elevated levels of depression related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction, however this association was not moderated by parent gender. The majority of scores on the seven depression items of the HADS fell into the normal category (57%). At Level 2 the behaviour and emotional problems of the child with autism were significantly related to relationship satisfaction ($p=0.046$) with relationship satisfaction decreasing as the level of child behaviour and emotional problems increased. The majority of SDQ scores for the child with autism were categorized into the abnormal range (81%), with the majority of sibling scores categorized into the normal category (77.9%). Relationship satisfaction was not related to the behaviour problems of a sibling, the number of children in the household, or the socioeconomic status of families.

**Discussion:** The study has furthered our understanding of relationship satisfaction in parents of children with autism, providing an initial insight into some of the factors associated with relationship satisfaction. Further longitudinal research is needed to expand upon the range of parent, child and family factors measured in the current study to build a theoretical understanding of relationship satisfaction in families of children with autism. Our evidence suggests that early intervention routes targeting either child behaviour problems, parental mental health or couple relationship have the potential to benefit inter- connected subsystems within the broader family system.

**References/Citations:**


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Paper 3 of 3

Paper Title: The Actor and Partner Effects of Coping Strategies on Family Cohesion for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Authors: Lisa Timmons1, Megan Pruitt1, Naomi V. Ekas1

Introduction: Coping strategies individuals use when faced with stressors may contribute to adaptation at the individual, dyadic, and family level. Previous research suggests, for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), utilization of maladaptive, avoidant coping strategies, such as behavioral disengagement, was associated with greater depression and anxiety (Hastings et al., 2005). In contrast, adaptive strategies, including positive reframing, were related to less depression. At the dyadic level, use of emotional support coping predicted increased relationship satisfaction for both an individual and their partner (Ekas et al., 2015). More broadly, adaptive family coping was related to classification as a more cohesive family, rather than a disengaged one (Altiere & von Kluge, 2009). Previous research associated individuals' coping strategy use with mental health and dyadic functioning. However, no known research has examined individual coping strategies in relation to perceived family functioning within romantic dyads. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to investigate the effects of parents’ coping strategies on their own and their partners’ reports of family cohesion.

Methods: Participants were 67 cohabiting couples of children with ASD. Parents completed the Brief COPE and Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, well-validated measures of coping strategies and family cohesion. Actor-partner interdependence models (APIMs) were used for analyses in hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) software.

Results: When controlling for gender, use of denial coping was related to decreases in an individual, b = -1.278 (SE = .395), p = .002 and their partner’s, b = -1.074 (SE = .395), p = .008, perceived levels of family cohesion. Increased disengagement coping was also related to decreases in family cohesion for individuals, b = -1.531 (SE = .360), p = .000 and their partners, b = -1.122 (SE = .360), p = .003. Use of emotional support was associated with increased family cohesion for an individual, b = .887 (SE = .258), p = .001, and their partner, b = .607 (SE = .258), p = .022. However, an individual’s positive reframing coping, b = .643 (SE = .247), p = .012, was only related to their own report of greater family cohesion, with a marginal partner effect, b = .440 (SE = .247), p = .080. Greater instrumental support coping, b = .523 (SE = .235), p = .029, was related to an individual’s own increased family cohesion.

Discussion: Results suggest various coping strategies of the individual are associated with family cohesion, as reported by the individual and their partner. Therefore, teaching parents adaptive coping strategies may improve family functioning for families of children with ASD. Parent-focused interventions to increase well-being have been successful at promoting use of problem-focused coping strategies by parents of children with ASD (Samadi, McConkey, & Kelly, 2012). Additionally, findings are consistent with family systems theory, which postulates that individuals operate within multiple subsystems (e.g., the parents’ relationship) with bidirectional influences on the overall family system. This is one of few studies to utilize an APIM to examine dyadic influence in the context of the broader family system.

References/Citations:


1 Texas Christian University