Title: Korean Americans’ Perspectives on Causes of Autism

Authors: Hyon Soo Lee, Connie Kasari

Introduction: Studies have shown that autism knowledge and attitudes are closely linked with individuals’ cultural backgrounds (Dillenburger et al., 2013; Papadopoulos, Foster, & Caldwell, 2013). Korean American mothers of children with disabilities feel that the U.S. public is much more knowledgeable about and more accepting of individuals with disabilities than people in Korea (Cho, Singer, & Brenner, 2003). Because the majority of Koreans in the U.S. are first-generation immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), many Korean Americans may hold similar beliefs about disabilities as those in Korea. In fact, a recent interview study revealed that Korean Americans stigmatized individuals with autism and these individuals’ parents, and incorrectly believed that parenting caused autism (Grinker et al., 2015). It is crucial to examine how Korean Americans perceive autism, as public attitudes impact how families access services and social support (Papadopoulos, Foster, & Caldwell, 2013). The current study investigated the relationship between Korean Americans’ age at immigration and the likelihood of attributing the cause of autism to parenting.

Method: Surveys were administered to 159 Korean adults recruited at Korean community organizations in Los Angeles, CA. Participants were asked to write down their opinions to the following question (adapted from Grinker et al., 2015): What causes autism? Causes mentioned by participants were coded into categories. Translation of results occurred at the final stages in order to minimize the loss of meaning through translation.

Results: Four themes were identified from inductive coding of participants’ perceived causes of autism: 1) biological/prenatal factors, 2) parenting, 3) postnatal factors including parenting, and 4) unsure. A logistic regression was performed to examine the relationship between participants’ age at immigration and the likelihood of mentioning parenting as a cause of autism, controlling for demographic variables. The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(6) = 16.919, p=.010$). Individuals who immigrated to the U.S. at an older age were more likely to attribute parenting as a cause of autism (odds ratio = 1.079, p = .017). Examples of participants’ responses included “parents’ drug addiction”, “parents’ lack of love”, and “not taking care of their child”. Other environmental factors mentioned by participants included “bad home environment”, “poor diet”, and “vaccines”.

Discussion: Korean Americans who immigrated later in life may be more likely to incorrectly believe that parenting causes ASD. There needs to be more educational resources in Korean in order to increase autism knowledge and reduce stigma in the Korean American community. Future studies should examine how English proficiency, information sources used by individuals, and other cultural factors influence autism knowledge.

References/Citations:


