Title: Factors Associated with Martial Adjustment in Caregivers of Individuals with ASD in Transition to Adulthood

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Introduction: Caregivers of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) report various negative psychosocial outcomes including greater stress and lower levels of marital adjustment. Poor marital adjustment in turn has been related to maternal depression and decreased well-being (Benson & Kersh, 2011). Previous studies have been largely restricted to the examination of marital adjustment in parents of preschool and elementary children with developmental delay (Baker et al., 2005). Few studies have examined marital adjustment or factors that impact it, in caregivers of individuals with ASD during adolescence and early adulthood, such as, during the critical adulthood transition period. In addition, we are aware of no research examining the potential impact of personality traits on marital adjustment in ASD caregivers. The current study used the Double ABCX model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) as a framework to explore child-related (e.g., problem behaviors) and caregiver-related internal (e.g., personality traits) and external factors (e.g., social support) related to marital adjustment in caregivers of individuals with ASD transitioning to adulthood.

Method: A total of 81 caregivers (n_male = 47, n_female = 34) of individuals with ASD transitioning to adulthood were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk and other methods (e.g., parent support group, listervs). Caregivers completed questionnaires online. Questionnaires assessed caregiver burden, child-related stressors (i.e., symptom severity, problem behaviors), general stressors (i.e., pile up demands, transition-related stress), “big 5” personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness), general and autism-specific social support, threat and challenge appraisal styles, and problem-focused, emotional approach, and passive avoidance coping strategies.

Results: Two autism-related factors were related to poorer marital adjustment: greater caregiver burden (r = -.36, p <.001) and decreased autism-related support (r = .31, p < .001). Several general factors also were related to marital adjustment. Specifically, better marital adjustment was related to lower levels of neuroticism (r = -.43, p <.001) and higher levels of extraversion (r = .34, p <.001), conscientiousness (r = .62, p <.001), and agreeableness (r = .48, p <.001). Better marital adjustment also was related to increased social support from family and friends (r = .41, p < .001) and increased use of challenge appraisals (r = .28, p = .01), problem-focused coping (r = .35, p <.001), and emotional approach coping (r = .30, p = .01). Finally, greater use of passive-avoidance coping was related to poorer marital adjustment (r = -.38, p <.001). Multivariately, conscientiousness (beta = .57, p <.001) and caregiver burden (beta = -.23, p = .009) were independent predictors of marital adjustment, R^2 = .44, F (2, 78) = 30.12, p <.001. When correlations were examined separately by gender, all five personality traits were predictive of marital adjustment in female caregivers, whereas extraversion and openness were non-significant predictors in male caregivers. Also, social support from the autism community, challenge appraisals, and problem-focused coping were predictive of marital adjustment only for male caregivers.

Discussion: Results indicate that both general and autism-specific factors predict marital adjustment. General factors were the most predictive of marital adjustment. Autism-related factors although also predictive, tended to be weaker overall and tended to reflect subjective rather than objective measures (e.g., caregiver burden vs. ASD symptoms). Variability in the predictors of adjustment highlight the need for studies with samples sizes sufficient to examine gender differences.

References/Citations: