Title: The Role of Birth Order in Latino Parent’s Scientific Knowledge about ASD

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Introduction: Latino children are diagnosed with autism, on average, 2.5 years later than Anglo children (Zuckerman et al., 2013). Much needs to be learned about the role culture, religion, and parenting experience in the identification of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parents of first-born children may lack the experience in developmental patterns of growth, choosing to rely on others (e.g., family, doctors, pastors) for advice when questioning their child’s odd behaviors (Ijalba, 2016). Our research question explored whether the amount of scientific knowledge parents knew about ASD was influenced by culture and birth order of the child being evaluated.

Method: 117 parents and their children were included in this study; parents were Latino (N = 66) and Anglo (N = 51). Located in the center of a predominately Latino geographic area, the UCR SEARCH Center provides free autism screening services to the community, which includes a large proportion of low income Spanish speaking families.

At the time of screening, parents completed a demographic measure and various questionnaires. This study focused on the measure, Beliefs About Disability, BAD, which measures parents’ scientific knowledge about autism. The scale contains 6 statements about autism, which parents rate according to how much they agree or disagree with the statement, recoded by scientific correctness and combined into a total scale of scientific knowledge about autism. For this study, we focused on three basic items: “autism runs in families (true); autism is God’s will (false); parents cause autism (false). Each item was scored as 0 or 1, with 0 = incorrect/no answer and 1 = correct answer. Parents’ total score on the scientific knowledge scale thus ranged from 0-3.

Results: There were no significant differences in the total BAD score between Anglo and Latino families. However, within-Latino sample analyses (based on primary language, English or Spanish) indicated that Spanish speaking Latino mothers were significantly more likely to attribute their child’s diagnosis to “God’s will” or that it was “caused by parents.” Although total scientific knowledge between Anglos and Latinos did not contain any statistically significant differences, when looking at the Latino group separately, there were significant differences between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Latinos. Specifically, Spanish-speaking Latina mothers having their first-born child assessed for autism had significantly lower levels of scientific knowledge (p=.002) than Spanish-speaking Latina mothers bringing in later born children or English-speaking Latina mothers bringing in first or later born children.

Discussion: It appears that Spanish speaking Latina mothers had significantly greater knowledge about autism when their child was not first-born; scientific knowledge did not differ for English-speaking Latina mothers regardless of the birth order of the child with ASD. This supports theoretical foundations about cultural assimilation and lack of access to quality medical providers who can properly educate first time Spanish-speaking parents on appropriate developmental patterns of growth. Findings of this study give credence to the importance of developmental screenings during routine check-ups with pediatricians in an effort to reduce the 2.5 year disparity between identification of ASD in Latino vs. Anglo children.

References/Citations:

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