

DO THE CHILD-RELATED CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH ASD PUT THE POARENTAL COUPLE AT RISK FOR COUPLE CONFLICTS? A LITERATURE REVIEW PAPER

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Abstract: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the most widespread child psychopathologies. The impact of the diagnosis is well known in the literature as a considerable increase in marital distress. Hence, we understand very little about the exact impact of ASD upon the family dynamics, especially parents’ marital relationship. In this context and considering that couple conflict is considered one robust indicator of marital quality, we aim to approach the themes of conflict parents of ASD children face. We aim to explore some answers referring to the child-related challenges and the risks of conflicts and consider whether these conflicts are real or just the peak of the iceberg. A number of 20 studies were identified as exploring the subject, out of which only six were eligible for further analysis. The reported results revealed some of the topics of conflict and their impact on the family. The review highlights the further need of studies exploring these conflicts in ASD

families and mentions practical implications of the current analysis.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, couple therapy, family therapy, conflicts, parents, parent-child relationship, couple, marital

Introduction

Autism is known as one of the most widespread child psychopathologies. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder and represents a complex of neurological and developmental deficits characterized by a lack of social interaction and communication together with a series of restrictive, repetitive behaviors and stereotypes (APA, 2013). The prevalence of ASD is presented to be on the rise in recent years. Consequently, literature has given considerable interest in the topic. It is well known that facing ASD represents facing a variety of chronic symptoms that affect the family functioning and their quality of life (Solomon and Chung, 2012).

A high number of studies have shown that parents of children with ASD are prone to experience concerning levels of stress in comparison to parents that have children diagnosed with other developmental disabilities (Al-Khalaf, Dempsey and Dally, 2014). Also, studies have highlighted a wide range of effects of the diagnosis in the families of children with ASD. For example, in these families, the risk of developing anxious or depressive symptoms is higher compared to other families together with higher levels of stress (Lecavalier, Leone and Wiltz, 2006; Karst and Van Hecke, 2012). Evidence suggests that families of children with ASD are prone to develop concerning levels of psychopathology compared to families of typically developed children (Gau et al. 2012). Moreover, it is well known that mothers are even more affected by depressive, anxious and obsessive symptoms. Additionally, these cases are characterized by different couple difficulties and a growing rate of divorce (Karst and Van Hecke, 2012; Hartley et al., 2010; Freedman et al., 2012). Even if we know that these couples face difficulties, we understand very little about the exact impact of ASD upon the family dynamics, especially parents' marital relationship (Hartley et al., 2017). In other words, we miss essential information that could help us understand these families and how to help them. The level of information we have regarding this impact refers to stress related to the cognitive difficulties of the child, anxiety related to the child's communication, motor and social skills; low parental self-efficacy; mood swings of the child, lack of autonomy hyperactivity, learning difficulties; low family functioning; fatigue; family conflicts; low marriage satisfaction; low quality of life and as

mentioned before, high rate of divorce (Higgins, Bailey and Pearce, 2005; Smith et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2008; Hartley et al., 2011; Brobst, Clopton and Hendrick, 2009; Gau et al., 2011; Karst and Van Hecke, 2012).

The above-mentioned impact of child-related challenges on the parents' marital relationship could offer essential information about the particularities of these couples and the dynamics of these families. More precisely we refer to one principle of systemic and marital therapy which refers to the fact that any stressor of one family subsystem influences the functioning of other subsystems (Cox, Paley and Harter, 2001). This means that challenges within the parental subsystem related to the child's diagnosis challenges may lead to high couple conflict within the marital subsystem. Couple conflict is considered one robust indicator of marital quality. Most longitudinal studies indicate that couple conflicts can predict changes in marital satisfaction across time together with the likelihood of divorce (Gottman, 2013; Park and Unützer, 2014). A growing number of studies highlight that an increased level of couple conflicts impacts the child functioning and behavior problems and vice versa, that child-related challenges put the couple at risk (Stroud et al., 2015; Hartley et al., 2017; Fond-Harmant & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2016). For example, in the case of ADHD, it is highlighted that child-related challenges have been shown to contribute to parental stress and psychopathology which are known as risk factors for couple conflicts (Theule et al., 2013; Krannitz et al., 2015; Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2010). Hence, in the case of ASD we lack information about conflicts in couples of parents who have a child with ASD. We still miss an answer to the question: do the child-related challenges associated with ASD put the parental couple at risk for couple conflicts? Until now the only evidence we have refers to marital stability or self-reported global marital satisfaction or marital adjustment (Hartley et al. 2017). In their study, Hartley and the colleagues (2017) compared couple conflicts of parents of children on the spectrum to a comparison group of parents of typically developed children. Their research implied 178 couples of parents of children with ASD and 174 of parents of typically developed children. Their findings suggest that parents of ASD children experience more frequent and unresolved couple problems in comparison to the other group. Yet, authors suggest that we still lack evidence regarding the types and particularities of the conflicts these parents face.

Considering these facts, the paper aims to review the existing literature referring to the impact of the child-related challenges upon the couple, especially referring to the types of conflicts these couples experience. We aim to provide an up to date image of the literature intending to meet the above-mentioned gap. We begin by highlighting the methods we used and continue by exploring the main findings revealed by the systematic search in the current

literature. The paper concludes by reinforcing the importance and the impact of couple connection and by featuring future research directions.

Methods

A scientific literature search was performed within Ebsco, Proquest and Science Direct database and ultimately in the non-official source of Google Academic. The following research keywords were used in the search strategy *Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Children with Disabilities, conflicts, parent-child relationship, couple, marital*. The considered criteria for the articles referred to any quantitative research exploring the difficulties faced by the couples of parents of children with ASD compared to parents of typically developed children or to children with disabilities. Also, articles should be peer-reviewed studies written in English.

Throughout the process, 4 important steps were accomplished: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the first step, we identified 20 possible eligible literature. The following phase was to screen the studies and to exclude all the duplicate studies. This meant that from 20 articles, 2 were excluded. Out of the 18 remaining studies, we identified 7 studies referring to wellbeing and marital satisfaction, 2 studies referring to the siblings of ASD children, one did not involve families of children with ASD and one study referred to psychodynamic counseling. On the other hand, 6 studies were identified as eligible and were included in the current qualitative paper.

Results

A total of 6 studies were reviewed on the topic of conflicts in families of children with ASD. These scientific articles were conducted in 2004 (Knapp, 2004), 2011 (Weber, 2011), 2013 (Walsh and O'Leary, 2013); 2015 (Saini et al 2015); 2016 (Hartley et al. 2016); and 2017 (Hartley et al. 2017). The review presents the following data: study characteristics (Table 1), the methodology of identified studies and reported results.

Overview of studies related to the impact of the diagnosis

Hartley, DaWalt and Schultz (2017) examined the experiences of 174 couples who had a child on the spectrum to 179 couples who had a child without disabilities regarding their couple interactions. Parents were asked to complete a daily diary for 14 days in which they had to report the amount of time they spent with the partner, the amount of partner support and partner closeness, types of positive and negative couple interactions and the level of positive and negative affect. Findings suggest that parents of children on the spectrum reported less time with the partner, lower partner closeness, and fewer positive couple interactions than the comparison group. In their scoping

research, Saini and the team (2015) explored the amount of risk of couple breakdown in families of children with ASD. Their review included quantitative (n = 39), qualitative (n = 15), and mixed (n = 5) studies and their findings highlight some themes related to divorce rates, relationship satisfaction, conflict, demographic and socio-demographic variables. Results referring to conflicts reported by the authors suggest that marital adjustment which was either lower or with no significant differences in comparison to parents of typically developed children. They note that a poor amount of studies examined the type of conflict in couple relationships in parents of children with ASD and the one that did report mixed findings.

Moreover, Hickey, Nix, and Hartley (2019) examined the family emotional climate in the context of ASD, more precisely they aimed to determine how the parent-child and parent-couple relationships combine and which are the classes of emotional climate in these families. Their study included 148 families and their statistical analysis implied the latent class analysis. Their findings suggest that the climate varies from warmth to criticism as follows: in 12% of the cases the sample was represented by high criticism and low warmth and in 43% the sample was characterized by low levels of criticism and high levels of warmth in both parent-child and parent couple relationships.

Articles referring to themes of conflicts in ASD families

Even if the following three studies did not meet the criteria referring to the peer-review process, we will present them, as there is a poor amount of studies related to the topic. Therefore, in his dissertation Knapp (2004) examined the relationship between raising a child with autistic disorder and marital satisfaction and reported results referring to themes of conflicts. The study implied 127 (75 parents having a child with autism and 52 parents having a child without a disability). Findings suggest that parents of children on the spectrum besides reporting higher global distress and scoring higher in marital dissatisfaction, had periodic conflicts over child-rearing, time spent together, and sexual satisfaction. In other words, some fist conflict themes emerge in the literature.

Another study, conducted by Weber (2011) and representing his doctoral thesis, aimed to explore the stressor that parents with a child that has been diagnosed with a Pervasive Developmental Disorder face and explore how these stressors impact parental and marital satisfaction, within an online mixed methods study. Results revealed the existence of a relationship between parenting stress and parent level of education, age and gender of parent and child, the type of professional who made the diagnosis, the diagnosis itself, and relationship status. Also, besides the main purpose of the study the author

suggests that the participant parents face periodic conflicts related to child-rearing. In another doctoral thesis Smith (2013) examined the impact of raising a young ASD child on married parents. He used a cross-sectional design and used the ABCX/double ABCX model of family stress theory to determine. His results provide an understanding of the factors that are perceived as negative and positive to parents within the realm of the spousal relationship. More precisely the results suggested that fathers perceived a higher level of controlling behaviors that their wives which may lead to conflict.

Hartley et al. (2016) conducted a study in order to examine the impact of daily fluctuations in the symptoms and behavior problems of ASD children on parents 'couple of problem-solving interactions. In a 14-day daily diary, parents reported their most common topic of problem-solving interactions. Results revealed that the most frequent topic of problem-solving interactions was the child with ASD (25% of the cases). Also, it is highlighted that couple disagreements about child issues can be frequent and that parents' couple interactions could be affected by stress generated from parenting. In another study, Hartley and the team (2017) compared the conflicts of parents of children on the spectrum to a group of parents of children without disabilities. A total of 178 couples of children with ASD and 174 of couples of typically developed children were examined using self-reported and observational measures. Findings suggest that parents of children with ASD face more frequent couple problems than the comparison group. These parents were observed and proved more positive affect and sensitivity towards one another, than parents in the comparison group, yet were less engaged, balanced, and cooperative in conflict interactions. Group differences of the named results had small effect sizes.

Study	N	Design	Dependent variable	Measurement
Walsh and O'Leary (2013)	174 couples	Longitudinal	couple interactions	Social Responsiveness Scale – Second Edition

Saini and the team (2015)	quantitative (n = 39), qualitative (n = 15), and mixed (n = 5) studies	Review	risk of couple breakdown	-
Knapp (2004)	127 (75 parents having a child with autism and 52 parents having a child without a disability)	Non-experimental Dissertation	marital satisfaction	The Marital Satisfaction Inventory; Family Assessment Measure
Weber (2011)	72 parents	Mixed	parental and marital satisfaction	Parenting Stress Index-Third Edition Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised
Hartley et al. (2016)	176 families	Longitudinal	the impact of daily fluctuations in the symptoms and behavior problems of ASD children on parents' couple problem-solving interactions	Social Communication Questionnaire

Hartley and the team (2017)	178 couples of children with ASD and 174 of couples of typically developed children	Longitudinal	conflicts of parents of children on the spectrum	The Conflict and Problem-Solving Scale 7-minute videotaped couple conflict interaction
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As far as the above results, we can observe more of a heterogeneity. In their first study Hartley et al. (2016) report significant difference referring to the frequency of topics ($F(13, 324) = 1343.41, p < .01$). The sample-test reported indicate that most often interactions occurred about habits, leisure, money, personality, other children, relatives, friends, work, intimacy, commitment, communication, chores. In their second study also Hartley et al. (2017) report that groups and topics were independent of one another ($\chi^2(9) = 13.55, p = .14, \Phi = .20$). The most often interactions, in this case, were habits/personality; intimacy/commitment; work; target child; other parenting relatives; leisure/friends; communication; money; chores.

Discussion

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is still on the rise according to recent surveys. The impact of the diagnosis is well known. One of the severest consequences of the named impact is the high rate of divorce among couples of children with ASD. Hence, the exact impact upon the parental subsystem is not fully understood especially when it comes to the nature of the conflict parents of ASD children face. The goal of the present literature review was to review the existing literature referring to the impact of the child-related challenges upon the couple, especially referring to the types of conflicts this couples experience in order to provide an up to date image of the literature intending to meet the above-mentioned gap.

A scientific literature search was performed, and 20 studies were identified. After a more detailed process of screening, only 6 studies were identified as exploring topics related to the impact upon the parental subsystem and the types of conflicts emerged in these families. Hartley, DaWalt and Schultz (2017) examined the experiences of 174 couples who had a child on the spectrum to 179 couples who had a child without disabilities and concluded that parents of children on the spectrum reported less time with the partner, lower

partner closeness, and fewer positive couple interactions than the comparison group. Saini and the team (2015) in a review exploring the amount of risk of couple breakdown revealed that marital adjustment was either lower or with no significant differences in comparison to parents of typically developed children and noted a poor amount of studies examined the type of conflict in couple relationships. Hickey, Nix and Hartley (2019) examined the family emotional climate in the case of ASD and concluded that the sample was characterized by low levels of criticism and high levels of warmth in both the parent-child and parent couple relationships. Studies referring to conflicts revealed that the main topics were child-rearing, time spent together, and sexual satisfaction (Knapp, 2004; Weber, 2011), child issues, habits/personality; work; target child; other parenting; intimacy/commitment; relatives; leisure/friends; communication; money; chores and other (Hartley et al. 2016; Hartley et al. 2017). The analysis of the studies revealed firstly the currently existing gap and offered some ideas related to the possible topics of conflicts that parents of ASD children face. These conflicts are of interest because one stressor of one subsystem affects the other subsystems, which means that parent conflicts can affect ASD children. Also, besides the interest referring to the themes of conflicts still remains the question whether these conflicts are real either just the surface of other more profound problems like perhaps an emotional rupture between the partners.

Conclusions

The first issue to be noted as mentioned before is that the literature regarding conflicts in couples facing ASD is currently insufficient. Through the review, we were able to identify that only two studies that directly explored the topic and some possible conflict themes like child-rearing, communication, intimacy, chores, etc. Some possible practical approaches emerge from the review:

- Findings are relevant for marital therapist and marital educational programs for parents as they highlight the importance of couple therapy in these cases. Couples may benefit from interventions targeting a decrease in marital distress. Consequently, organizations and institutions that offer therapy programs for ASD could consider offering short programs focusing on the marital relationship and monitor the effectiveness. Also, education opportunities for families could increase the chance for integration (Goian, 2013). A multifaced treatment plan is essential in these cases. Organizations and institutions could also consider offering therapy programs for

ASD could consider adapting their services to the value of this conclusion (Gavrilă, 2008).

- We could consider learning couples effective problem-solving strategies in order to improve their interactions. It has been demonstrated that social support can improve the capacity to face overwhelming events, becoming a protective factor for these situations (Tudorel & Vintila, 2018).

- All specialist in mental health could consider talking about and validate all the struggle of a family facing the ASD challenges. Recommendations for couple therapy could be also considered. Specialists should use specialized language with caution, as this can create a barrier between the professional and the client, sharing or receiving meaningless messages (Goian, 2004; Goian, 2010).

To sum up, the present paper reviewed the existing literature referring to the impact of the child-related challenges upon the couple, especially referring to the types of conflicts this couples experience. Couple interactions especially conflict influence the wellbeing, development, and function of the child. Thus, it is important that furthered research examines these dynamic relations. Moreover, in order to obtain valid and robust results, future studies should also take into consideration to use a culturally adapted scales (Tudorel et al., 2018; Vintila et al., 2018).

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