

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