Title: Examining the Relationship between Social Awareness and Family Loneliness among Young Adults with ASD and other Social Impairments

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Introduction: Prior research suggests that impairments in social awareness among young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other social challenges may interfere with the ability to establish quality relationships with peers (Laugeson et al. 2015). Research also indicates that deficits in social awareness may contribute to greater feelings of social loneliness among this population (Jobe & White 2006). While research supports a relationship between low levels of social awareness and social loneliness, little research has examined the relationship between low levels of social awareness and loneliness within one’s family among young adults. Understanding the relationship between these two variables may be useful to help clinicians understand factors contributing to poor familial relations, resulting in greater feelings of isolation within the family system. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social awareness and family loneliness among young adults with ASD and other social difficulties.

Method: Participants included 149 young adults (72.5% males; mean age=22.22, SD=3.66) with ASD and other social impairments presenting for social skills treatment at the UCLA PEERS® Clinic, an evidence-based, caregiver-assisted social skills intervention program (Laugeson et al. 2015). In order to assess social awareness prior to treatment, young adults completed the Social Responsiveness Scale—Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino & Gruber 2012), which identifies the presence and severity of autism symptoms related to social responsiveness. Scores on the Social Awareness subscale of the SRS-2 were collected at baseline, with higher scores indicating greater impairment. Family isolation was assessed at baseline using young adult self-reports on the Family Isolation subscale of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso 1993), which measures different aspects of social and emotional loneliness within the family system. Higher scores on the SELSA indicate greater loneliness and isolation. Data was analyzed using Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients.

Results: Pearson correlations revealed a significant positive relationship between scores on the Social Awareness subscale of the SRS-2 and scores on the Family Isolation subscale of the SELSA (r=.193; p<.05), suggesting that young adults with greater impairments in social awareness may experience greater loneliness within their own immediate family.

Discussion: Results indicate that poorer social awareness is correlated with greater feelings of family loneliness among young adults with ASD and other social challenges. Given that the Family Isolation subscale of the SELSA reflects an absence or loss of a close attachment relationship, these findings suggest that social awareness may play an important role in forming close relationships within the family. These results extend and are in accordance with previous research suggesting a relationship between social awareness and social loneliness (Jobe & White 2006). Future research might examine if improvement in social responsiveness following social skills treatment decreases familial loneliness.

References/Citations: