Title: Classes of Family Emotional Quality in the Context of Child Autism

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Introduction: Research on the general population and neurodevelopmental disability population has used the Five Minute Speech Sample (FMSS; Magaña et al., 1986) to examine the emotional quality of the mother-child relationship. Little research has used the FMSS to assess the emotional quality of other family dyads – such as the father-child and parent couple relationship – and virtually nothing is known about the extent to which emotional quality across family subsystems combine to create family classes, particularly in the context of having a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The goal of the current study was to determine how emotional quality across family subsystems (mother-child, father-child, and parent couple), within families of children with ASD combine, to create various classes of family emotional climate and to identify predictors of class membership.

Method: In total, 148 families of children, aged 6-17 (85.81% male), with ASD were included in analyses. Latent class analysis was used to identify classes of family emotional quality based on expressed warmth (high vs. low) and criticism (high vs. low) in 2 separate Five Minute Speech Samples from mothers and fathers – one about their child and one about their spouse. Associations between family class membership and family characteristics – ASD symptoms (Social Responsiveness Scale, Second Edition; Constantino & Gruber, 2012) and behavior problems (Child Behavior Checklist; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) of the child with ASD, parent level of broader autism phenotype (BAP; via the BAPQ; Hurley, Losh, Parlier, Reznick, & Piven, 2007), having an additional child with ASD or other neurodevelopmental disability or psychological disorder – were investigated using one-way repeated measure analysis of co-variance (MANCOVA) along with follow-up Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons.

Result: In our sample, mothers were more likely to express high criticism in the parent-child relationship ($\chi^2 = 5.28, p = .022$) and in the parent couple relationship ($\chi^2 = 5.63, p = .018$) than fathers, within couples. Five classes of family emotional quality were found: 1) Family Resilient (n = 63 [42.57%]); 2) Couple Distressed (n = 20 [13.51%]); 3) Mother Distressed with Partner (n = 12 [8.11%]); 4) Family Distressed (n = 18 [12.16%]); and 5) Mother Low Warmth – Father Low Criticism (n = 35 [23.65%]). MANCOVAs indicated that severity of child behavior problems and parent level of BAP (with some mother-father differences) were associated with class membership. Specifically, families of children with more severe behavior problems or parents with higher BAP were less likely to be the Family Resilient class and more likely to be in certain other classes.

Discussion: The largest family emotional quality class (n = 63; 42.60%) was Resilient Family, involving low criticism and high warmth across family relationships, suggesting that many families are able to overcome potential challenges related to raising a child with ASD and exhibit adaptive emotional quality across family relationships. Findings that child behavior problems and parent BAP were associated with class membership are consistent with evidence from previous work that child behavior problems are more stressful for parents than core ASD symptoms and suggest that the effect of father BAP may take a toll on overall family emotional quality, whereas the effect of mother BAP is localized, only impacting mother’s experienced family relationships, perhaps due to the different presentation of BAP traits in mothers versus fathers. Implications for family-wide interventions are discussed.

References/Citations: