Title: Differences Between Self-Reports and Caregiver-Reports in Assessing Psychosocial Functioning Among Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Challenges

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Introduction: Prior research suggests differences in symptom reporting between parents and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parents of youth with ASD commonly under-report their children’s empathy (Johnson, Filliter & Murphy, 2009) and internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety (Mesman & Coots, 2000), while slightly over-report behavioral symptoms and social impairment consistent with ASD (Johnson et al., 2009; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). However, the relationship between how these discrepancies contribute to a larger symptom profile for young adults with ASD and other social challenges has yet to be examined. The purpose of this study was to: (1) examine differences between young adult self-reports and parent/caregiver-reports of young adult social impairment, social anxiety, and empathy; and (2) investigate the relationship between discrepancies in perceptions of young adult social impairment in relation to discrepancies in perceived social anxiety and empathy.

Methods: Participants included 126 young adults (74.6% male; mean age=22.48, $SD=3.863$) and their parents presenting for treatment through the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), an evidence-based, caregiver-assisted social skills program for young adults with ASD and other social challenges. Severity of social impairment was determined by the Social Responsiveness Scale – Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino, 2012), and empathic abilities were measured using the Empathy Quotient (EQ; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Young adult anxiety was also measured using the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1999). All assessments were conducted at baseline prior to treatment and were reported by both the young adults and their parents/caregivers.

Results: Paired sample T-tests were conducted to examine the differences in perceptions of young adult functioning across parent and young adult self-report at baseline. Results revealed that parents/caregivers reported significantly more social impairment on the SRS ($p<0.01$, mean difference $= 5.43$), greater social anxiety on the SAS ($p<0.05$, mean difference $= 2.9$), and significantly lower empathy on the EQ ($p<0.01$, mean difference $= -10.02$) in comparison to their young adults’ self-ratings. Pearson correlations coefficients were also calculated to examine the relationship between the magnitude of differences in young adult and parent/caregiver reported scores on the SRS and SAS, as well as the SRS and EQ. Findings reveal a significant negative correlation between discrepant perceptions of social impairment on the SRS and disparate perceptions of empathy on the EQ ($p<0.01$). Moreover, a significant positive correlation was observed between discrepant perceptions of social impairment on the SRS and disparate perceptions of anxiety on the SAS ($p<0.01$).

Discussion: Similar to prior research, parents/caregivers reported significantly greater severity of young adult social impairment and empathy compared to the young adults themselves. Contrary to previous findings reported by Mesman & Coots (2000), parents/caregivers in the current study reported significantly greater levels of young adult social anxiety compared to young adult self-report. Furthermore, caregivers who reported higher levels of social impairment in their young adults also reported lower levels of empathy and higher levels of anxiety, in comparison to their young adults. These findings suggest that reports by multiple informants, especially a third-party informant, may be necessary for a more accurate depiction of psychosocial functioning in young adults with ASD and other social challenges. Additionally, given the consistent pattern of parents reporting greater difficulties, the differences in perceptions of symptoms suggest the need for further research in determining other variables that may be contributing to these discrepancies.

References:
