Title: Examining the Relationship Between Cognitive Empathy and Social Loneliness Among Young Adults with ASD and Other Social Impairments

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Introduction: Cognitive empathy is the ability to predict and/or imagine another’s mental state (Smith 2009). Young adults with ASD often struggle to understand what others may be thinking and/or feeling during social interactions (Gleichgerrcht et al. 2013). Research suggests that this deficit in cognitive empathy may interfere with the ability to establish quality relationships with peers (Russ, Kovshoff, Brown, Abbott, & Hadwin 2018). Research also indicates that poor friendship quality correlates with greater feelings of social loneliness (Jobe & White 2006). However, little research has examined the relationship between cognitive empathy and social loneliness among adults with ASD. Understanding the relationship between these two variables may contribute to the development of more targeted interventions to decrease loneliness and improve socialization among those with ASD. The present study examines the relationship between cognitive empathy and social loneliness among young adults with ASD. We hypothesized that young adults with ASD reporting lower levels of cognitive empathy would experience greater feelings of social loneliness.

Method: Participants included 152 young adults (77% males; M=22.21, SD=3.67) 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 cognitive empathy prior to treatment, young adults completed the Empathy Quotient (EQ; Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright 2004). Scores on the Cognitive Empathy subscale of the EQ were collected at baseline, with lower scores indicating greater impairment. Social isolation was assessed at baseline using young adult self-reports on the Social Isolation subscale of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso 1993). Higher scores on the SELSA indicate greater loneliness and isolation. Data was analyzed using Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients.

Results: Pearson correlations revealed a significant negative relationship between scores on the Cognitive Empathy subscale of the EQ and scores on the Social Isolation subscale of the SELSA [r(152)=-.327; p<.001], suggesting that young adults with greater impairments in cognitive empathy may experience greater loneliness within their social worlds.

Discussion: Results indicate that lower cognitive empathy is correlated with greater feelings of social loneliness among young adults with ASD and other social challenges. This finding emphasizes the need for more targeted interventions to increase young adults’ capacity to imagine and understand others’ mental states. Increasing cognitive empathy may improve social interactions, subsequently reducing feelings of social loneliness. Given the established negative correlation between deficient cognitive empathy and social loneliness, future studies might examine how this relationship changes following effective social skills intervention, particularly when these deficits in social interaction are targeted in treatment.

References:
