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Self-esteem, social support, and life satisfaction in Chinese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current study examined self-esteem, social support, and life satisfaction in Chinese parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and observed the mediation effects of social support on the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Methods: We compared 118 Chinese parents of children with ASD to 122 demographic-matched parents of typically developing children on measures of self-esteem, social support, and life satisfaction using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), respectively.

Results: Parents of children with ASD scored significantly lower on self-esteem, social support, and life satisfaction than the controls ($ps < 0.01$), and social support partly mediated the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction in both groups. Hierarchical regressions indicated that after controlling for demographic variables, social support and self-esteem were significant predictors of life satisfaction in both groups but explained more variance in life satisfaction for the parents of children with ASD.

Conclusions: Social support and self-esteem play a more important role in life satisfaction for parents of children with ASD than those of typically developing children. Life satisfaction is positively related to higher household income, higher self-esteem, and stronger social support for parents. Self-esteem is likely to be associated with greater life satisfaction by means of greater social support. Future research and interventions should focus on fostering a more positive climate of social support for ASD families in China.

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1. Introduction

The reported prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has increased significantly around the world over the past few decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Specially, there are an estimated 1.8 million children with ASD living in China (Autism-World, 2008). Children with ASD often experience severe impairment in mental and physical health leading to deficits in daily functioning. Consequently, caregivers and family members of children with ASD, specifically parents, experience a number of negative outcomes. Compared to parents of typically developing children, parents of children with ASD tend to report a higher prevalence of anxiety, depression, and frustration, along with lower self-esteem, matrimonial contentment, and personal satisfaction (Duarte, Bordin, Yazigi, & Mooney, 2005). Key players in autism advocacy such as policy makers, researchers, and service providers particularly underscore the importance of improving quality of life for families of children with ASD (Werner & Shulman, 2013). Quality of life is therefore a key variable to consider in the evaluation of parents' adaptation to their child's disability. The integrative definition of quality of life incorporates the individual's physical health, psychological state, social relationships, financial well-being, spiritual and cultural beliefs, and their interactions with salient features of the environment (Dardas & Ahmad, 2014). In this regard, it is essential to comprehensively assess the condition of parents, such as life satisfaction, social status, in order to equip them to best care for their children with ASD. As Chinese parents experience different social, spiritual, cultural, physical, and personal contexts from their western counterparts, it is particularly important to study this population of parents individually in order to determine specific interventions to improve their overall health. However, limited research on quality of life and its predictors among caregivers of children with ASD exists in China. Understanding more about the causality of these relationships will help determine which interventions might be most helpful.

1.1. Life satisfaction

Quality of life is a broad concept which can be measured by either objective or subjective methods. Objective measurement includes, for example, living conditions, number of friends and severity of disability whereas the subjective dimension, which has been referred to as subjective well-being, includes, for example, the degree of perceived happiness or satisfaction. Theorists and researchers recommend focusing on the subjective aspect of quality of life mainly because it allows for a global and comprehensive comparison (McGillivray, Lau, Cummins, & Davey, 2009). Life satisfaction, or self-perceived well-being, reflects an individual's evaluation of his or her life as a whole and has been associated with quality of life (Diener & Diener, 1995). Life satisfaction is also an important indicator of mental health (Pilar Matud, Bethencourt, & Ibáñez, 2014). It is imperative to study life satisfaction in special populations such as parents of ASD children in order to determine the situations which contribute to low life satisfaction and develop appropriate treatments. However, in Chinese mainland, few studies have examined variables associated with life satisfaction for parents of children with ASD.

1.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem is one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction besides demographic characteristics, social relationships, personality, and coping mechanisms (Zhang & Leung, 2002; Zhao, Wang, & Kong, 2014). Self-esteem refers to an individual's own sense of self-respect, worthiness, and adequacy and is conceptualized as an intra-psychic trait that is associated with optimism (Rosenberg, 1979; Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003). Studies in populations with disabilities have shown that decreased self-esteem is associated with a diminished sense of well-being characterized by internalizing stigma, exclusion, and perceived discrimination imposed by society (Nosek, Hugues, Swedlund, Taylor, & Swank, 2003), while higher levels of self-esteem are associated with better family functioning (Trute, Hiebert-Murphy, & Levine, 2007).

Although there is evidence that self-esteem is an important predictor of life satisfaction, whether the extent of this association differs among countries or among populations in the same culture remains unclear. Chinese parents of children with disabilities tend to experience higher levels of social discrimination, and may view their child's disability as a source of shame and failure based on cultural expectations (Sun et al., 2013). Previous studies have found that Chinese parents of children with disabilities are more likely to self-stigmatize because they focus more on their social identity and value (Fung et al., 2007). Once they are stigmatized by society, they internalize stigma more easily. Thus, raising a child with autism may be particularly stressful for Chinese parents (Mak & Kwok, 2010). These parents are more likely to report negative self-evaluation and emotion, as well as behavioral withdrawal (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). For these reasons, Chinese parents of children with ASD, in particular, may experience lower self-esteem than their western counterparts due to higher parenting stress and stigma.

1.3. Social support

Previous studies have found that raising a child with ASD has a greater impact on families and caregivers in developing countries, such as China, than for those in developed countries, partly due to a lack of social support systems (Xiong et al., 2010). Social support is defined as the provision of physical, emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance that an individual receives from their social network (Dunst, Trivette, & Cross, 1986). Social support is one of many factors that influence caregiver life satisfaction. Among parents of children with autism, perceived social support was found to be

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