



The role of family cohesion in the psychological adjustment of non-Hispanic White and Hispanic mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder



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ABSTRACT

The current study utilizes a process-oriented approach to understand both personal and family factors influencing the development of depressive symptoms among non-Hispanic White and Hispanic mothers of children with ASD. Family cohesion was hypothesized to mediate the associations between the personal factors (optimism, benefit finding, social support) and depressive symptoms. Mothers of 117 children with ASD (Hispanic $n = 73$; non-Hispanic White $n = 44$) completed measures of depressive symptoms, family cohesion, social support, optimism, and benefit finding. Results from this study indicate that optimism, benefit finding, and social support are important predictors of positive maternal adjustment. Furthermore, these factors contribute to better family functioning, namely family cohesion. The mediation models containing optimism, benefit finding, partner and family support were significant for both Hispanic and non-Hispanic White mothers, suggesting a similar mediation process for both racial/ethnic groups. However, family cohesion was a significant mediator of the relationship between friend support and depressive symptoms for Hispanic mothers only. The results of this study complement and extend previous research examining family functioning among mothers of children with ASD and have implications for the development of interventions aimed at increasing maternal well-being.

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1. Introduction

Currently, the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is 1 in 68 school-aged children (CDC, 2014). The rise in prevalence rates also implies that an increasing number of parents are being faced with the challenges that accompany the diagnosis of ASD. Indeed, mothers of children with ASD exhibit elevated levels of psychological distress (Estes et al., 2009); however, factors such as social support (Ekas, Lickenbrock, & Whitman, 2010), family functioning (Baker, Seltzer, & Greenberg, 2011), and benefit finding (Samios, Pakenham, & Sofronoff, 2011) help mothers cope with these challenges. Although there is limited research exploring the impact of having a child with ASD among Hispanic mothers, studies suggest

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that there are unique differences in this population (e.g., [Magana & Smith, 2006](#)), including the ways that Hispanic mothers ameliorate distress. The current study utilizes a process-oriented approach to understand both personal (e.g., optimism, benefit finding) and family (e.g., family cohesion) factors influencing depressive symptoms among non-Hispanic White and Hispanic mothers of children with ASD.

The number of Hispanic children being diagnosed with ASD has increased in recent years ([Pedersen et al., 2012](#)). [Mandell et al. \(2009\)](#) reported significant racial/ethnic disparities in the identification of children with ASD. Hispanic children were being diagnosed at a lower rate compared to non-Hispanic White children. Fortunately, this gap in diagnosis is decreasing, as the prevalence of ASD in Hispanics has almost tripled, from 2.7 per 1000 in 2000 to 7.9 per 1000 in 2006 compared to the prevalence of ASD in non-Hispanic Whites which increased from 8.8 per 1000 in 2000 to 15.0 per 1000 in 2006 ([Pedersen et al., 2012](#)). Despite the discrepancy, Hispanic children who are diagnosed with ASD show a similar symptom profile ([Chaidez, Hansen, & Hertz-Picciotto, 2012](#)). The increased numbers of Hispanic children being diagnosed highlights the need to consider that the experiences of Hispanic mothers may be different from non-Hispanic White mothers.

Mothers of children with ASD experience heightened stress and significant mental health problems (e.g., [Estes et al., 2012](#)), above and beyond those of mothers raising a child with other developmental disabilities. [Estes et al. \(2009\)](#) compared mothers of preschool children with ASD to mothers of children diagnosed with a developmental delay and found that mothers of children with ASD exhibited higher levels of parenting stress and general psychological distress. In another study, mothers of children with ASD were compared to a matched group of mothers of children with Down Syndrome and mothers of children with intellectual disabilities ([Griffith, Hastings, Nash, & Hill, 2010](#)). Results of the study indicated that mothers of children with ASD reported significantly higher levels of parenting stress than the comparison groups. In addition, levels of maternal depressive symptoms remained elevated over a period of two years ([Carter, Martínez-Pedraza, & Gray, 2009](#)). Finally, mothers of children with ASD also reported greater social anxiety compared to mothers of typically developing children ([Kuusikko-Gauffin et al., 2013](#)).

Hispanic mothers of children with ASD may be particularly at risk for experiencing psychological distress. In the general population, the rates of depression among Hispanic adults is elevated compared to non-Hispanic White adults, which has been attributed to a lack of access to resources (e.g., medical insurance) possibly due to a lower SES ([Dunlop, Song, Lyons, Manheim, & Chang, 2003](#)). Indeed, research examining the well-being of Latina mothers of children with developmental and intellectual disabilities has found elevated levels of depression ([Blacher, Shapiro, Lopez, Diaz, & Fusco, 1997](#)). Among Latina mothers of adults with an intellectual disability, rates of depression were also higher compared to non-Latina mothers ([Long, Kao, Plante, Seifer, & Lobato, 2015](#); [Magana, Seltzer, & Krauss, 2004](#)). On the other hand, [Magana and Smith \(2006\)](#) compared the depressive symptoms of Latina and non-Latina mothers of children with ASD and found no significant differences. Indeed, they found that Latina mothers reported less anger and fatigue compared to non-Latina mothers ([Magana & Smith, 2006](#)). Given these discrepant findings, there is a need for further research that includes the experiences and perspectives of Hispanic mothers of children with ASD. In addition, more research is needed to examine factors that promote more adaptive outcomes among mothers of children with ASD among both Hispanic and non-Hispanic White mothers.

In the past decade or two, researchers have increased their focus on the positive, adaptive functioning of mothers of children with developmental disabilities, including ASD (e.g., [Blacher & Baker, 2007](#); [Ekas et al., 2010](#); [Ekas, Timmons, Pruitt, Ghilain, & Alessandri, 2015](#); [Taunt & Hastings, 2002](#)). This increased interest corresponds to a general increase in studying positive adaptation generated by the field of positive psychology ([Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000](#)). The focus of the positive psychology perspective is to shift focus away from “fixing” negative outcomes to an emphasis on fostering positive adaptation. This growing body of research among mothers of children with ASD has examined a variety of positive constructs, conceptualized as either outcomes or predictors of positive adaptation, including relationship satisfaction (e.g., [Ekas et al., 2015](#)), benefit finding and sense making (e.g., [Samios, Pakenham, & Sofronoff, 2009](#)), optimism (e.g., [Ekas et al., 2010](#)), hope ([Faso, Neel-Beavers, & Carlson, 2013](#)), mindfulness and acceptance ([Jones, Hastings, Totsika, Keane, & Rhule, 2014](#)), and general positive contributions associated with raising their child ([King, Zwaigenbaum, Bates, Baxter, & Rosenbaum, 2012](#)).

With respect to the experiences of Hispanic mothers of children with ASD, there are several studies highlighting positive adaptation. For example, [Magana and Smith \(2006\)](#) showed that Latina mothers of children with ASD reported increased environmental mastery and better overall psychological well-being (consisting of the subscales of purpose in life, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance) compared to non-Latina mothers. Taken together, this research shows that, contrary to popular belief, mothers of children with ASD do experience positivity and can thrive in the face of the unique challenges associated with raising a child with ASD. Although there are a multitude of positive constructs worthy of study, the current study focuses on three dimensions of positive functioning: optimism, benefit finding, and social support.

2. External and internal characteristics affecting maternal adjustment

Several important factors have been identified for helping mothers cope with the stress of raising a child with ASD and generate positive outcomes. Social support is one factor that has received attention by researchers studying mothers of children with ASD (e.g., [Smith, Greenberg, & Seltzer, 2012](#)). Social support refers to the perceived or actual assistance that an individual receives from another person or institution and can be in the form of either physical and instrumental assistance or emotional and psychological support ([Boyd, 2002](#)). In the current study, we focused on social support received from informal sources (e.g., friends and family) as opposed to formal sources of support (e.g., agencies, community services).

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