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Brief Report: Influence of gender and age on parent reported subjective well-being in children with and without autism

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ABSTRACT

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are associated with reduced Subjective well-being (SWB). To examine the influence of gender and age on well-being we collected parent reported SWB in children with or without ASD (total $n = 1030$), aged 8–14 years. Parents reported lower SWB for children with ASD compared to TD children. Gender did not influence SWB, in both ASD and TD groups. Age had no main effect on SWB, but in typically developing children SWB decreased with age while it increased with age in children with ASD. Thus, the difference in SWB between ASD and TD children became smaller throughout development. These findings may reflect different social developmental processes in TD and ASD during early adolescence.

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1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by qualitative impairments in social interaction, communication, and repetitive, stereotyped behavior (APA, 2013). Research progress has been made in understanding the prevalence, etiology, symptom expressions, and other psychopathological domains of ASD. However, the subjective well-being (SWB) of individuals with ASD has been studied less frequently and the findings are often inconsistent. We aim to investigate general predictors of SWB in two large samples of children with and without ASD.

SWB can be used to define an individual's health status that is not merely the absence of disease (Waters et al., 2009). People with high SWB are more successful in their work, social relationships, and health (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). SWB is highly valued in daily life: a cross-national survey ranked SWB first in terms of importance among 20 given values (e.g., love, wealth, health) (Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005).

For typically developing children, general demographic factors, such as gender and age have been shown to have little influence on SWB (Huebner, 1991; McCullough et al., 2000; Proctor et al., 2009). The relative stability of SWB across age cohorts might be due to an individual's ability to adapt to their life conditions as they get older (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 2013). Modest gender differences are attributed to females being more likely to report higher levels of both pleasant and

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unpleasant affect compared to males (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991; Lucas & Gohm, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Thus, gender differences might exist in the variance, but not in mean SWB scores.

Research on ASD primarily focuses on Quality of life (QoL) rather than SWB. QoL is a multidimensional concept, which shares the emotional well-being component with SWB, but also incorporates an individual's social, material well-being, and development and activity (Felce & Perry, 1995). Age was shown to be negatively correlated to QoL in children with ASD based on parental reports (Kuhlthau et al., 2010). However, it is noted that parents usually significantly underestimate their children's QoL compared to children's self-report (Sheldrick, Neger, Shipman, & Perrin, 2012; Shipman, Sheldrick, & Perrin, 2011; Tavernor & Barron, 2013).

Gender differences in SWB found for people with ASD were contradictory, with one study showing that males have better psychological health and social relationships related QoL than females (Kamio, Inada, & Koyama, 2013), while other studies addressing broader QoL domains reported no gender difference (Kuhlthau et al., 2010; Renty & Roeyers, 2006). In children with ASD (Kamp-Becker & Schröder, 2011; Kuhlthau et al., 2010).

While children with ASD tend to have lower QoL than typically developing children (Van Heijst & Geurts, 2015) there is little direct evidence showing differences in SWB between these two groups. The existing literature on ASD is limited due to small sample sizes with imbalanced gender proportions, a focus on QoL or health related QoL, highlighting general functioning rather than well-being (Kamp-Becker & Schröder, 2011; Shipman et al., 2011; Tavernor & Barron, 2013; Waters et al., 2009), and an absence of studies on the effects of general demographic factors such as gender and age.

The first purpose of this study was to estimate SWB in two large samples of children, one with ASD and one with typical development. We expected SWB to be lower in children with ASD compared to typically developing children. The second aim was to determine to what extent the factors gender and age are associated with SWB in both children with and without ASD. We hypothesized that SWB would not differ by either age or gender in either of the two groups of children and explored the interaction effect between age and gender. SWB was measured with a straight forward question about the happiness of children. In our earlier work (Bartels & Boomsma, 2009) we have shown that all aspects of SWB correlate highly and that they all load on one underlying common factor. Meta-analytic analyses also show that happiness is part of the wellbeing construct (Bartels, 2015) and the first genetic variants have recently been detected using a mix of measures (Okbay et al., 2016).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

In this study two large samples of children (ages 8–14 years old), one with and one without ASD, were used to investigate the SWB based on parental reports. The participants were 515 typically developing children (367 boys and 148 girls) and 515 children with ASD (368 boys and 147 girls). Data on typically developing children were derived from the Netherlands Twin Register (NTR), established by the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (Bartels et al., 2007; Boomsma et al., 2006; van Beijsterveldt et al., 2013). Data on children with ASD were derived from the Netherlands Autism Register (NAR). The Netherlands Autism Register (NAR) is a longitudinal register, including approximately 2000 individuals with autism. The NAR was established by the Dutch Association for Autism (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme; NVA) in collaboration with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), and aims to follow the course of development of individuals with autism over time, providing data for scientific research but also helping people with autism to protect their interests and improve their quality of life. All participants with ASD have a clinical diagnosis of ASD provided by a qualified clinician, independently from this study (Wierda, Begeer, Martijn & Wijnker-Holmes, 2015), and were selected based on availability. Children in the typically developing group were registered with NTR at birth. We randomly selected one child per family, amounting to 1995 children, who were matching as closely as possible on age (8–14 years) and gender to the 515 children in the ASD group. As shown in Table 1, there was no difference between the TD and ASD groups in Age, $F(1226) = 0.4$, ns, or Gender, $\chi^2 = 9.5$, ns. The protocol of this study was approved by the ethics committee of the VU University Medical Center (2013/15). Written informed consent to participate in our study was obtained from a parent or a guardian, and participants where possible.

The cognitive ability in typically developmental children was presented by CITO-elementary test (Eindtoets Basisonderwijs, 2002, www.cito.nl), a standardized Dutch educational achievement test. This test is usually carried out among children in their final class of elementary school (approximately 12 years old). The CITO scores are moderately to highly correlated with IQ performance (Bartels, Rietveld, Van Baal, & Boomsma, 2002). The cognitive functioning in children with ASD was collected by parental estimations. In the ASD sample, parents reported normal IQ scores (>70) in 90% of the cases. The TD sample was recruited among children in mainstream schools. Education levels of both fathers and mothers was higher in the ASD compared to the TD group.

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Subjective well-being (SWB)

In both groups, SWB was measured as part of larger projects, including longitudinal surveys on a range of topics (More information on both registers: Netherlands Autism Register: <https://www.nederlandsautismeregister.nl/english/>, Netherlands Twin Register: <http://www.tweelingenregister.org/en/>). SWB was measured with parental proxy-reports by responding to a question, 'Which statement describes your child best?' According to their children's experience, parents

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