The Factors Predicting Stress, Anxiety and Depression in the Parents of Children with Autism

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology (Clinical)

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November 2012
Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain material from published sources without proper acknowledgement, nor does it contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma at any university, nor does it contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Statement of Ethical Conduct

The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation and the guidelines by the Australian Government’s Office of the National Health and Medical Research Council *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).* Approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

_________________________                                    Date ___________________

Nick Falk

June, 2012
Acknowledgements

With thanks to the ongoing support and patience of my supervisor, Dr. Kimberley Norris and to Prof. Rapson Gomez for his timely advice on Structural Equation Modelling. Thanks also to Dr. Raimondo Bruno of the University of Tasmania and Dr. Cheryl Dissayanake of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre at LaTrobe University.

This project could not have been completed without the invaluable support of the following organisations:

- Autism Tasmania
- Autism Victoria
- The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre
- The National Autistic Society, UK
- The National Autism Association, USA
- The Autism File Magazine
- Carers UK
- Siblings Australia
- Autisable.com
- Parenting Autism.com
- Positively Autism.com

Thanks also to the study participants, without whom this research could not have been undertaken.
Abstract

The parents of children with autism have been demonstrated to report significantly higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression than the parents of developmentally normal children. However, the factors predicting stress, anxiety and depression in this parental group remains poorly understood. The present study examined the variables predicting stress, anxiety and depression in the mothers and fathers of children with autism, and tested the validity of a path model describing the relationship between these variables. Three separate studies were carried out, the first focused on mothers of children with autism, the second focused on fathers of children with autism, and the third assessing model fit.

Mothers (N=250) and fathers (N=229) of children with autism aged 4 to 17 years 11 months completed an on-line questionnaire measuring social and economic support, psychological distress, perceived parent-child attachment, parental locus of control, autism symptom severity and child externalizing behaviours. Stepwise regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between independent and dependent variables. The results of Study one, which focused on the mothers of children with autism, suggested a different pattern of predictive variables for stress, anxiety and depression in this maternal group. Aggressive Behaviour, Social Support and Parental Locus of Control significantly predicted maternal depression; whereas Mother’s Age, Autism Symptom Severity and Perceived Limit Setting Ability significantly predicted maternal anxiety. The predictive model for maternal stress was a combination of the predictive models for maternal anxiety and depression. In contrast, the predictive model for fathers of children with autism, as investigated in Study two, was consistent across dependent variables. Social Support and Perceived Limit Setting Ability were the primary predictors for paternal stress, anxiety and
depression. Conduct Problems, a variable identified in the existing literature as predictive of stress, anxiety and depression in the parents of children with autism, was not a significant predictor in any of the six stepwise regression models. The results indicated that the relationship between ‘child-centric variables’ (i.e. externalizing behaviours and autism symptom severity) and parental mental health problems may be mediated by other variables.

The results of the stepwise regression analyses formed the rationale for a pathway model describing the relationship between the variables, which was assessed for statistical fit with the observed data in Study three. The model positioned parental cognitions and socio-economic support as a mediator of the relationship between ‘child-centric variables’ and parental distress. Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used to assess the fit of the model with the observed data. The model was shown to be a good fit with the data for both mothers and fathers. Invariance testing, using the Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test, demonstrated support for metric invariance for the model across gender.

The results of the study were used to propose changes to the existing support services offered to parents of children with autism, and the consideration of a more holistic approach, combining psychotherapeutic support for the parent with behavioural management programs related to the child.
Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality ........................................................................................................ 2
Statement of Ethical Conduct ................................................................................................. 4
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 5
Abstract .................................................................................................................................. 6
Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................... 8
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................... 11
List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... 13
Study Overview ........................................................................................................................ 14
Chapter 1 – Defining the Problem ......................................................................................... 16
Chapter 2 - Genetic and Environmental Factors Predicting Mental Health Problems in the Parents of Children with Autism ..................................................................... 22
Chapter 3 - Guiding Clinical Interventions .......................................................................... 30
  The Different Experience of Mothers and Fathers .............................................................. 31
Chapter 4 – Aims and Rationale for the Current Study ......................................................... 35
Chapter 5 - Study One – The Factors Predicting Stress, Anxiety and Depression in the Mothers of Children with Autism ................................................................. 38
  Section 5.1 – Study One – Method ....................................................................................... 41
  Participants ........................................................................................................................... 41
  Materials ............................................................................................................................... 42
  Procedure .............................................................................................................................. 52
  Section 5.2 – Study One – Results ....................................................................................... 53
  Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 54
  Correlations ......................................................................................................................... 56
  Initial Models for Depression .............................................................................................. 57
  Initial Models for Anxiety ..................................................................................................... 58
  Initial Models for Stress ....................................................................................................... 60
  Stepwise Models for Depression ...................................................................................... 61
Section 8.3 – Thesis Conclusions - Study Two Results ............................................. 124
Section 8.4 – Thesis Conclusions - Study Three Results ....................................... 129
Section 8.5 - Final Conclusions .............................................................................. 132
References .............................................................................................................. 134
Appendix A – Study One Questionnaire ............................................................... 146
Appendix B – Study Two Questionnaire ............................................................... 162
Appendix C ............................................................................................................ 178
  Correlation Statistics ......................................................................................... 178