

Abstract

Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are discriminated against their child's aggressive and maladaptive behavior that leads to different challenges such as parental stress and lower marital quality. The current PhD research was executed in two parts and comprised four studies. Study 1 was qualitative in nature, designed to explore the experiences of parents, raising a child with ASD in Pakistan. Sample of the study comprised 15 mothers and 13 fathers of children with ASD, of age between 4 to 12 years. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and five stages of stress and six major themes (Child management & diagnosis, Treatment and financial challenges, Social suffering, Emotional and psychological pain, Marital discord, and Coping mechanisms) emerged out of the data. In study 2, items were generated from the qualitative data, which was collected in study 1, to develop and validate the scale of Perceived Autism related Stigma by Association for parents of children with ASD. After an exploratory factor analysis ($N=359$ parents), and a confirmatory factor analysis ($N=500$ parents), finally, 21 items were retained with well-defined three factor structure of the scale (viz., Attitude of community, Behavior of community and Emotional burden of parents). The alpha coefficients of the subscales ranged from .69 to .83. Convergent and discriminant validity of the scale was also determined. In study 3 ($N= 350$ parents), scales to be used in study 4 for data collection were translated and validated. In study 4, hypotheses testing was carried out to investigate the risk and protective factors of parental stress and marital quality among parents having children with ASD. This study was designed to test the relative strength of child characteristics, parents' sense of coherence, social support, stigma by association, defense mechanism, and demographic variables to predict parental stress and marital quality. The sample consisted of parents of children with ASD, between the age of 4 to 12 years, including 300 mothers and 300 fathers. Initially zero order correlation was run to see the inter-relationships among study variables. In order to see the predictive strength of study variables, two stepwise regression analyses were run. Gender and stigma by association appeared as the significant predictors of parental stress ($R^2= .19$) and gender, stigma by association and social support appeared as the significant predictors of marital quality ($R^2=.16$). Results showed that social support had an indirect effect on marital quality and parental stress via sense of coherence and stigma by association, in addition to its direct effect. Group differences on study variables were calculated via MANOVA in term of gender, income, and education and significant difference appeared. This research project has wide implications in the fields of counseling psychology, educational psychology, and mental health.

Keywords: parental stress, marital quality, stigma by association, defense mechanism, social support, sense of coherence.