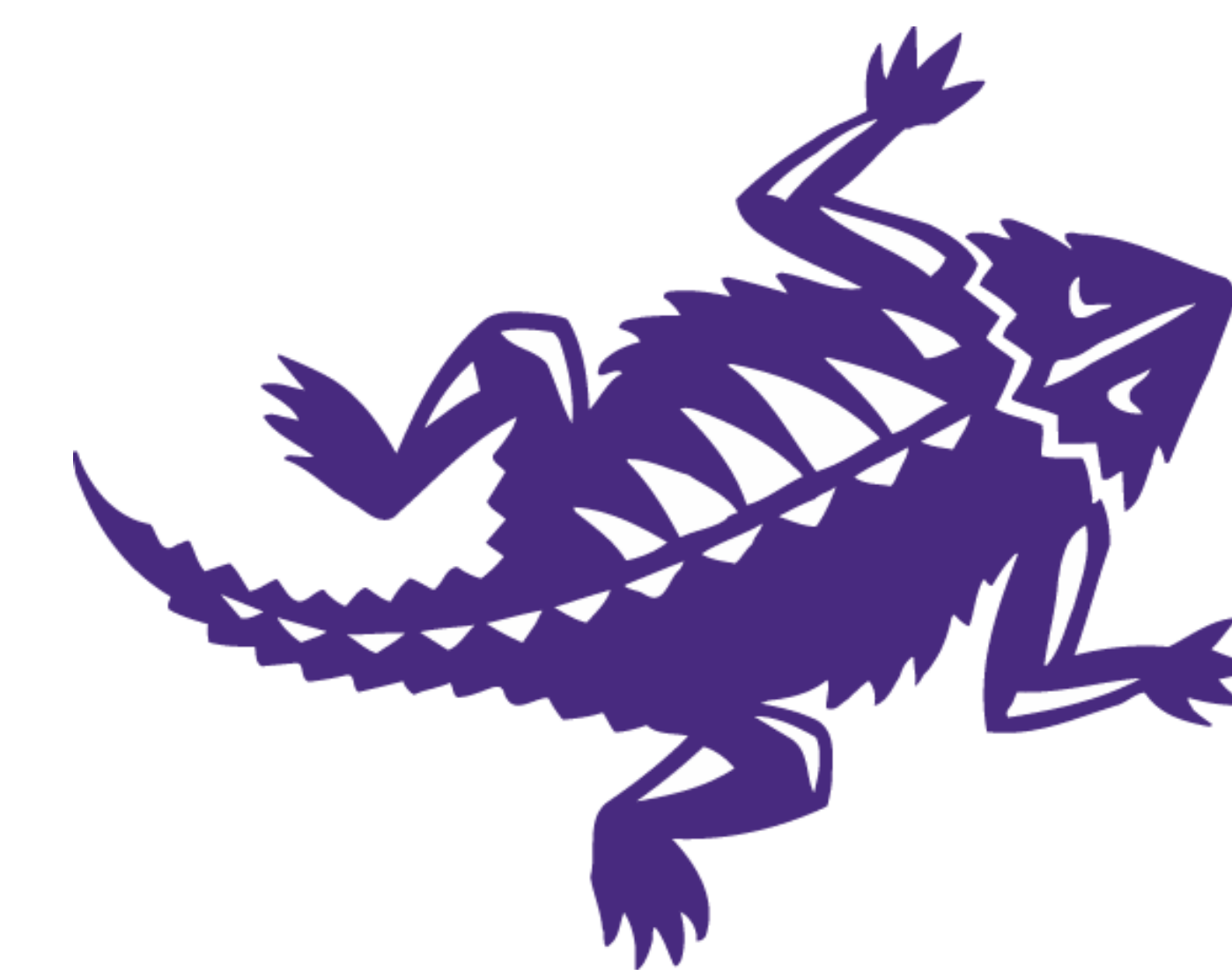




MEMO-ASAP: Mealtime Effects on Maternal Outcomes-Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum Amongst the COVID Pandemic



Author: Kate Lindig¹, Naomi Ekas¹, & Chrystyna Kouros²

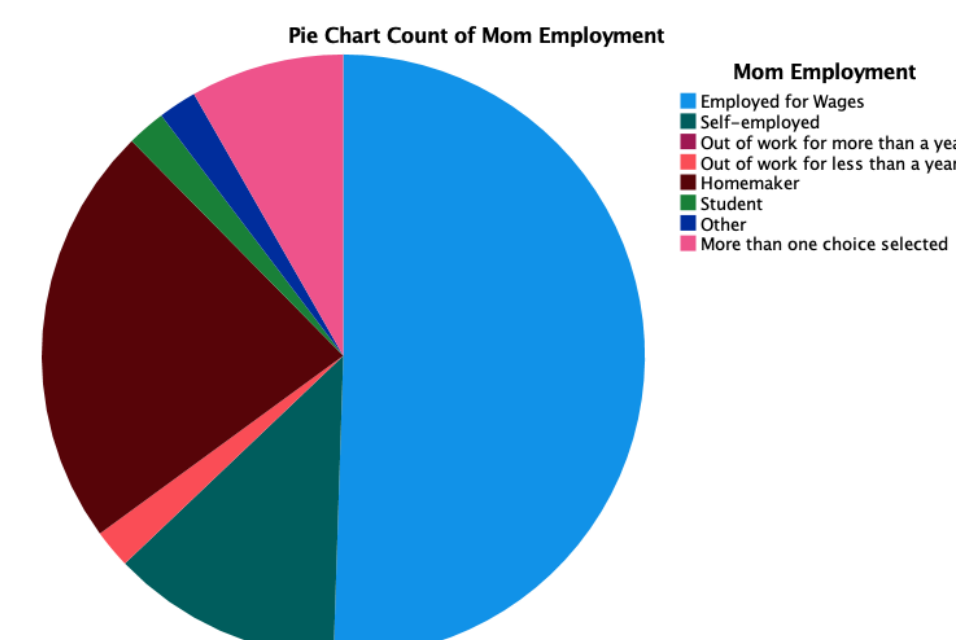
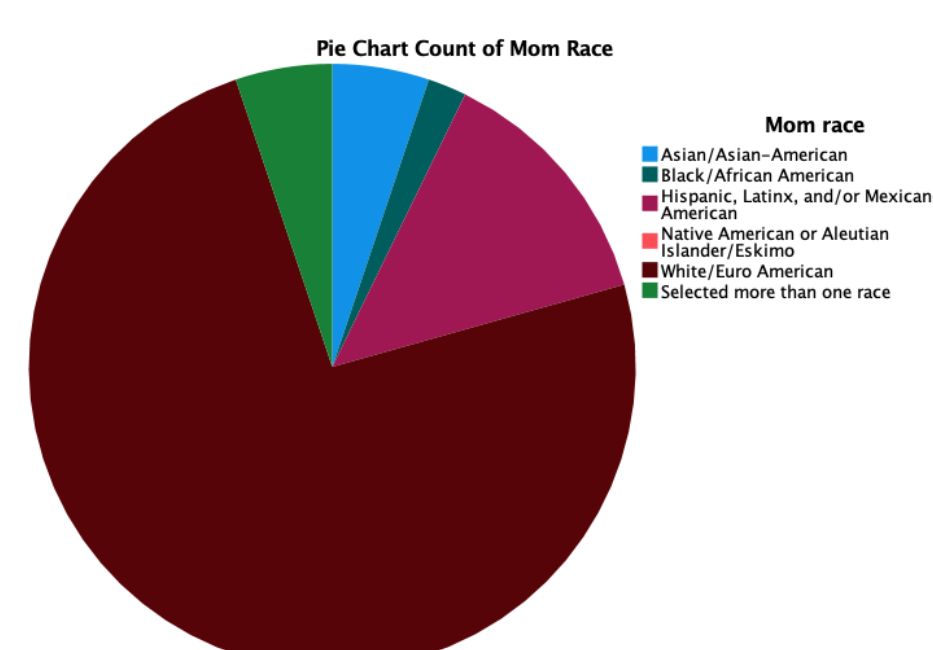
Texas Christian University¹ & Southern Methodist University²

Introduction

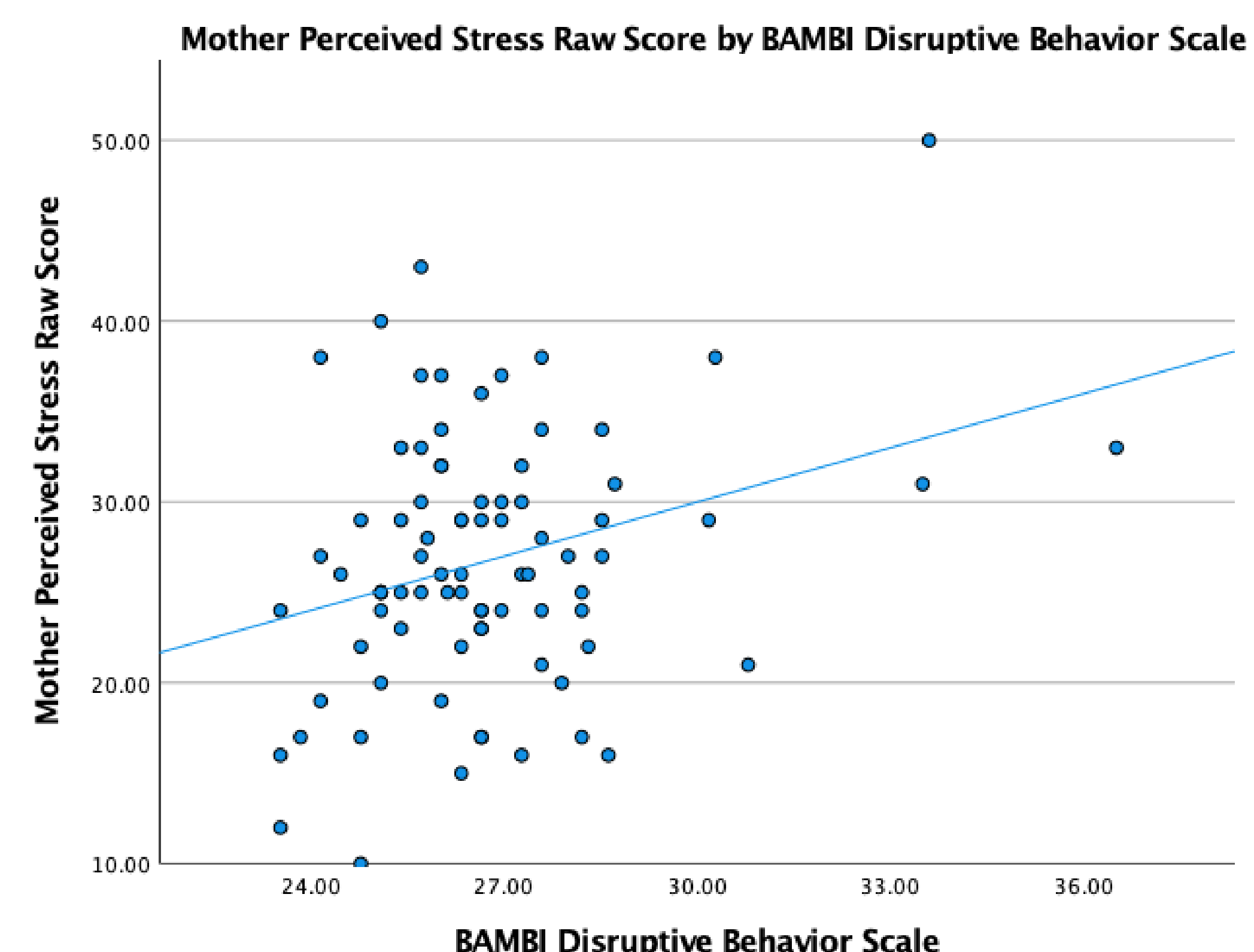
- Mental health of mothers of children on the autism spectrum has been extensively studied (e.g., Sawyer et al., 2009).
- Mealtimes for children on the autism spectrum often create stress for mothers (Ausderau & Juarez, 2013).
- Children on the autism spectrum experience difficulties with feeding and mealtime behaviors, such as limited food variety (Curtin et al., 2015), food neophobia (Kuschner et al., 2015), high rates of food refusal, and more restricted food repertoire compared to neurotypical children (Bandini et al., 2019), as well as increased disruptive behaviors around mealtimes (Curtin et al., 2015).
- While little research has examined how feeding behaviors in autistic children impact mothers' mental health (e.g., Ausderau & Juarez, 2013), it is possible that these behaviors may exacerbate negative mental health outcomes. Mothers may spend hours attempting to help their children eat with little fruition, which may cause feelings of stress and anxiety.
- This study aimed to examine how food restrictiveness and disruptive behavior during mealtimes for children on the autism spectrum was associated with maternal mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has the potential to elevate stress-levels and other negative mental health outcomes for mothers.
- I hypothesized that reports of more problems around mealtimes would be associated with poor mental health outcomes in mothers.

Method

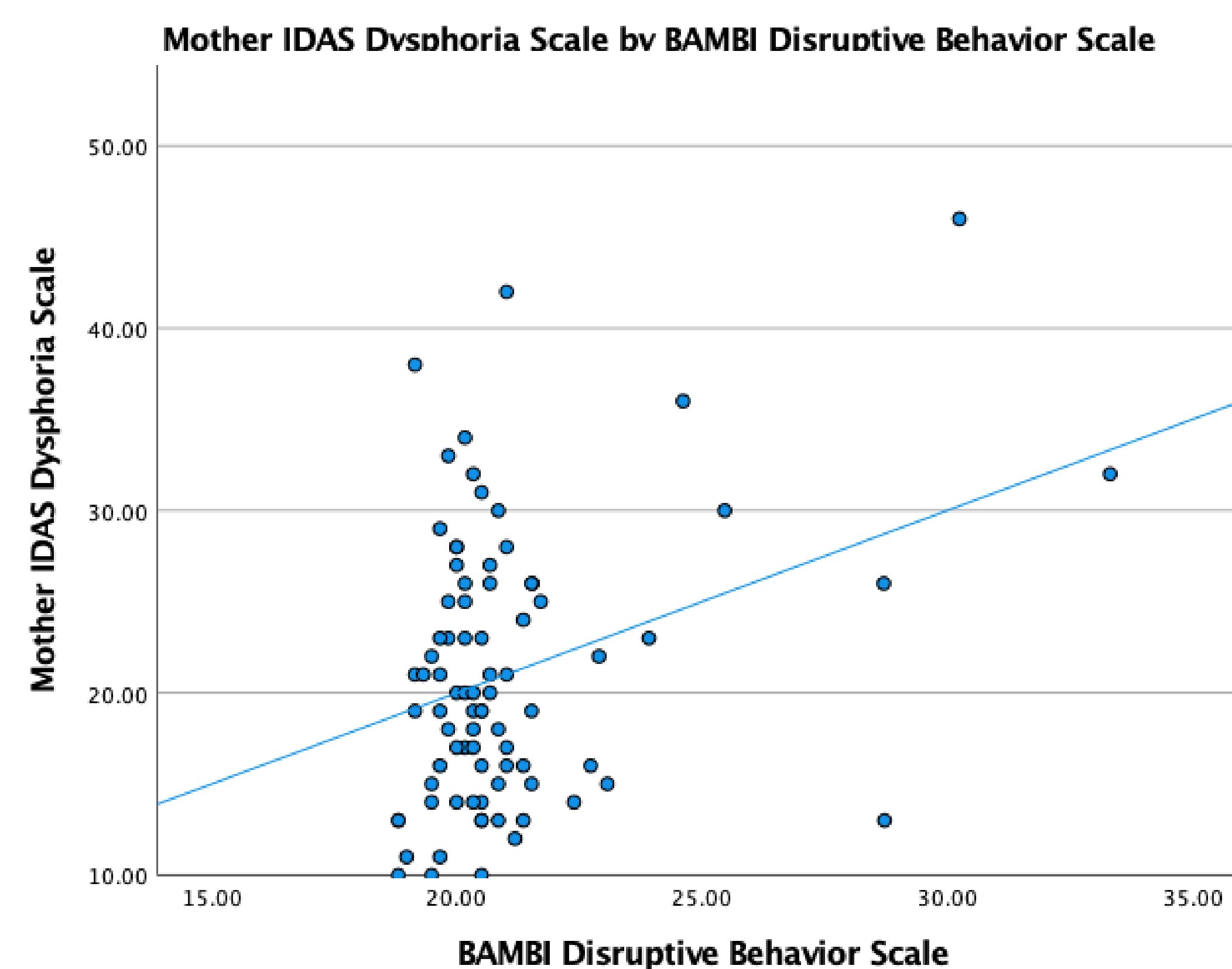
- Ninety-seven mothers with a child on the autism spectrum served as participants for this study.
- Mothers answered surveys about their children's mealtime behaviors (BAMBI) and their own mental health (IDAS, NIH PROMIS).



Results



Mothers who reported higher amounts of child disruptive behaviors during mealtimes exhibited higher levels of self-reported stress.



Mothers who reported higher amounts of child disruptive behaviors during mealtimes exhibited higher levels of self-reported dysphoria.

Discussion

- Autistic children's disruptive mealtime behaviors were associated with poor maternal mental health outcomes, specifically higher dysphoria symptoms and greater stress.
- Finding ways to lower disruptive mealtime behaviors is extremely important in order to protect some dimensions of maternal mental health.
- A limitation in this study was the surveys' online format, which allows for less control of setting by researchers than traditional lab settings do.
- Future research should test various mealtime intervention programs to find the most effective ways for parents to minimize their autistic children's disruptive mealtime behaviors.
- Additionally, future research should explore the effects of mealtime behaviors on fathers' mental health outcomes, since they are often present during their autistic children's mealtimes but are not often included in research.
- Finally, future research should examine how children on the autism spectrum's mealtime behaviors at the current time compare to those during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the present study's data was collected.

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