

Associations Between Autism Symptom Severity and Parent Relationship Quality in Parents of Autistic Children



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Introduction

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities and differences in reciprocal social communication abilities (APA, 2013; CDC, 2023).
- Autistic children's externalizing behaviors have been identified as a robust predictor of poorer relationship satisfaction in parents (Sim et al., 2016).
- Mothers and fathers of autistic children have reported more frequent and severe couple conflicts compared to parents of non-autistic children (Hartley et al., 2017).
- Past research in the general population has indicated that power dynamics of couples has been associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction (Lennon et al., 2013); however, there is no research to date examining power dynamics in parents of autistic children.
- The current study examined the associations between autism symptom severity and romantic relationship quality (i.e., relationship satisfaction, couple conflict, and power dynamics) in parents of autistic children.
- An additional aim of the study was to examine whether differences in relationship quality between mothers and fathers occur.

Method

Procedure

- Participants included 111 parents of autistic children who completed a Zoom study examining couple interactions.
- Couples were recruited through social media outreach and research databases and were both contacted by a research assistant to confirm eligibility.
- Couples were instructed to answer a series of questionnaires related to their child's autism symptoms, relationship satisfaction, couple conflict, and power dynamics.

Measures

- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino, 2021)
- Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007)
- Conflict and Problem-Solving Scale (CPS; Kerig, 1996)
- Relationship Power Inventory (RPI; Farrell et al., 2015)

Results

Descriptive Statistics for Linear Regression Models Examining Autism Symptom Severity and Relationship Quality

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Autism Symptom Severity	16.24	12.17	16.24	12.17
Relationship Satisfaction	60.98	16.88	63.39	14.71
Couple Conflict				
Collaboration	7.95	1.25	7.75	1.47
Frequency/Severity	8.76	3.49	7.93	3.44
Verbal Aggression	2.95	2.24	2.42	2.27
Power Dynamics	4.48	.82	3.69	.75

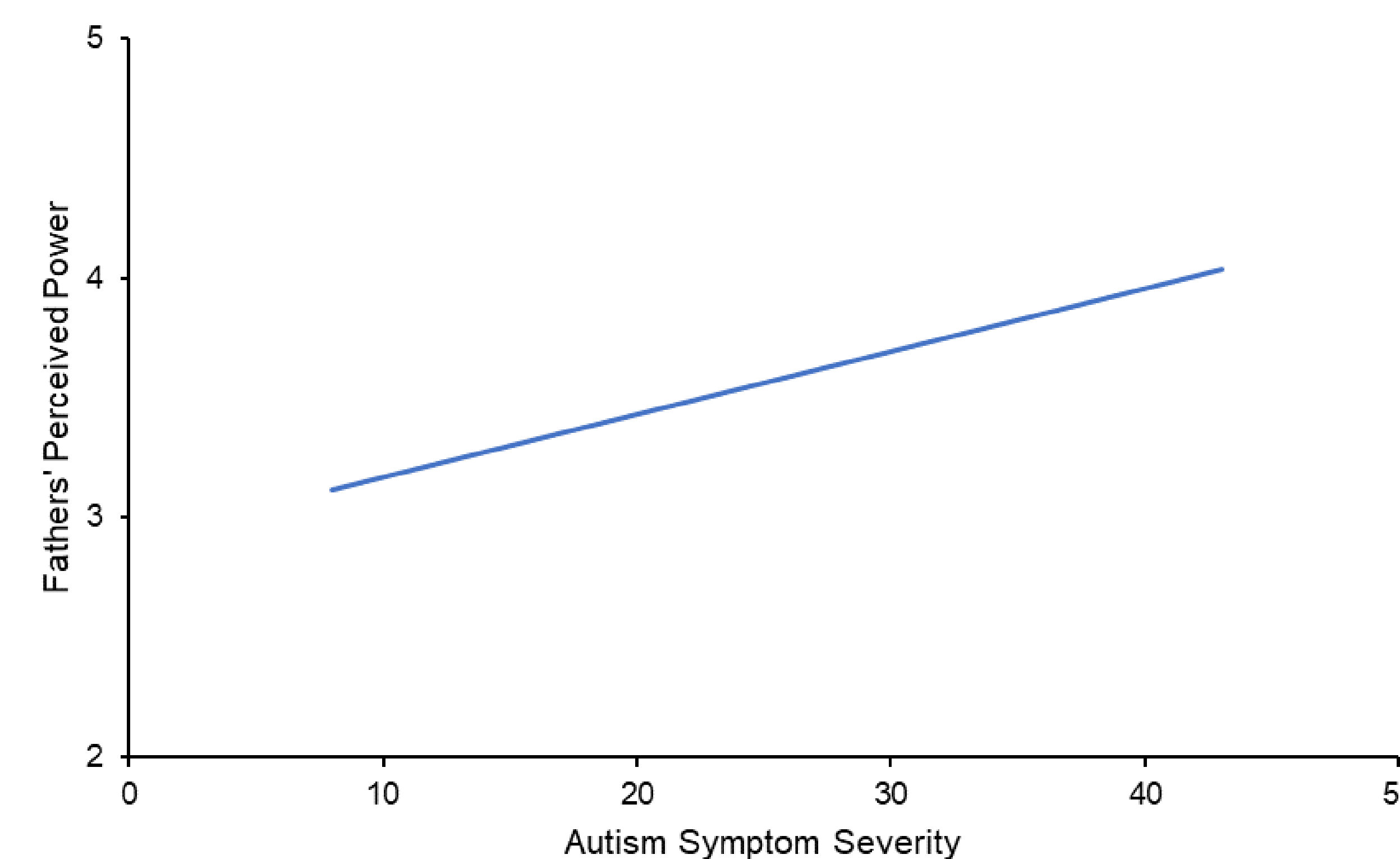
Note. SD = Standard Deviation

Inferential Statistics for Linear Regression Models Examining Autism Symptom Severity and Dimensions of Relationship Quality

	Mothers			Fathers		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
Relationship Satisfaction	.04	.20	.852	.00	.19	.984
Couple Conflict						
Collaboration	.01	.01	.356	-.03	.02	.066
Frequency/Severity	-.02	.04	.567	.01	.04	.833
Verbal Aggression	-.01	.03	.844	-.01	.03	.825
Power Dynamics	-.01	.01	.245	.03	.01	.005**

Note. b = unstandardized coefficient. SE = Standard Error. **p < .01.

Autism Symptom Severity as a Predictor of Fathers' Perceived Power



Discussion

- A series of linear regression models were conducted to examine whether autism symptom severity predicts relationship quality in parents of autistic children (i.e., relationship satisfaction, couple conflict, and power dynamics). Separate models were conducted for each parent.
- Results revealed a significant positive association between autism symptom severity and father's perceived power. All other results for mothers and fathers were non-significant.
- Findings suggest that autistic children's symptom severity seems to directly impact the romantic relationship for fathers while mothers are unaffected.
- Fathers may feel responsible for being the head of the household. Thus, they may feel a sense of power related to being responsible for their child.
- Mothers may not experience changes in their relationship quality since they are often considered primary caretakers of the family and thus endure varying levels of autism symptom severity more frequently than fathers.
- Strengths of this study include responses from both mothers and fathers and participant diversity in geographic location, age, and ethnicity.
- A limitation of this study is the use of self-reported measures which could lead to response bias.
- Clinicians working with parents of autistic children can use the study findings to create tailored interventions aimed at addressing potential differing power dynamics between partners for fathers, and educating mothers on how they can provide support for their partner.

References

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