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Individual Paper

Examining the contribution of personal and conditional resources to psychological wellbeing among parents of children with autism

Melanie Bunfield & Andrew Holliman

Abstract

Few would dispute that caring for a child with autism can be a positive and rewarding experience. However, it is often the case that parents (or guardians) of children with autism also experience lower psychological wellbeing and heightened psychological distress. In the present study, we harness Conservation of Resources theory, to examine the relative contribution of personal resources (parental self-efficacy and resilient coping) and conditional resources (perceived social support and family communication). A sample of 90 parents of children with autism were surveyed for their personal and conditional resources as well as their psychological wellbeing using measures of life satisfaction and psychological distress. Multiple regression analyses revealed that family communication and perceived social support were significant predictors of life satisfaction, while perceived social support and parental self-efficacy (unexpected direction) were significant predictors of psychological distress. The findings underscore the importance of conditional resources (and perceived social support in particular), for parents of children with autism and it is argued that interventions might focus more on socially supporting families to help promote their psychological wellbeing and reduce psychological distress.

Keywords: *Autism; Conservation of Resources Theory; Psychological Wellbeing; Parent/Guardian; Life Satisfaction; Psychological Distress.*

Introduction

Autism, also referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in medical settings, is a neurodevelopmental condition which can result in repetitive and restrictive behaviours or social communication difficulties (Hirota & King, 2023). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023), an estimated 1 in 100 children have a diagnosis and the number of diagnoses are reportedly growing (see Russell et al., 2021). Parenting a child with autism can, of course, be a positive and rewarding experience, but it can also be uniquely challenging. As the complex symptoms associated with autism can negatively impact on development, communication, and behaviour (Chau & Furness, 2023), balancing the multi-dimensional needs of a neurodivergent child and meeting their care demands requires numerous personal qualities (Tathgur & Kang, 2021). Parents also require support and adequate resources, with Ali et al. (2023) reporting that parents often feel isolated by their family and friends and experience embarrassment from the negative labelling and stigma which often accompanies an autism diagnosis (see also Rafferty et al., 2020). There can also be quite limited support from schools: this leaves parents feeling frustrated with the poor communication they receive as they fight to access the support they are entitled to (see Crane et al., 2018; Galpin et al., 2018). Whilst the Department of Health (DoH, 2021) have increased their voluntary sector funding to support parent mental health and wellbeing, significant differences are seen between the quality of life of parents with neurotypical and neurodivergent children (Raju et al., 2023). Therefore, the present study sought to examine the factors that might contribute to psychological wellbeing (e.g., life satisfaction and psychological distress) among parents of children with autism, harnessing Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

Conservation of Resources Theory

According to COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), individuals strive towards protecting valuable resources and obtaining new resources, meaning those who are lacking, losing, or are threatened with a loss of resources, are more likely to experience higher levels of stress and burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Although strongly embedded within organisational psychology and theories of motivation, the theory is also relevant to stressful periods within an individual's personal life, such as the challenges likely faced by parents or guardians of children with autism (Hobfoll, 2011).

Personal Resources

Personal resources are essential to the first principle of COR Theory which outlines that the concept of losing resources is more impactful than gaining resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). They are personal traits and key skills which includes Bandura's (1978) concept of self-efficacy; a person's belief in their own abilities to control situations or succeed in a task (Hobfoll, 2011). Self-efficacy can act as a buffer between stressful experiences and their negative effects as higher levels of self-efficacy can allow one to feel in greater control of a situation, safeguarding against negative stress (Bandura, 1978; Meyer et al., 2022). Extending Bandura's (1978) primary concept, parenting self-efficacy refers to the internalised perceived abilities of performing parenting tasks (Strauss et al., 2024). For parents of children with autism, low parenting self-efficacy can lead to negative emotions of anxiety and tension, whereas parents with high parenting self-efficacy can consume this as a personal resource which results in positive emotions of happiness and pride, overall reducing the amount of stress experienced (Chen et al., 2022).

Similar to the benefits of self-efficacy, resilient coping mechanisms are a personal resource which allow for effective navigation of stressful situations (Taylor & Carr, 2021).

Parents who can cope with stress adaptively using techniques such as positive reappraisal coping report higher quality of life and lower parental stress (Ni'matuzahroh et al., 2021). Salas et al. (2017) combined both personal resources of parental self-efficacy and resilient coping strategies to predict the life satisfaction of parents of children with autism. They concluded that higher levels of parental self-efficacy as well as greater coping strategies improved life satisfaction. Furthermore, Demšar and Bakracevic (2023) also found that sufficient coping strategies have a positive influence on overall life satisfaction among parents of children with autism, but discovered that this is further influenced by levels of perceived social support.

Conditional Resources

Conditional resources are external and intangible, encompassing the social circumstances surrounding the individual (Hobfoll, 2001). Perceived social support is a conditional resource which refers to the way in which family, friends, and colleagues are perceived to offer functional support when needed (Ioannou et al., 2019). It is positively associated with self-compassion, psychological wellbeing, and subjective happiness, whilst lowering the probability of depression and anxiety (Wilson et al., 2020). For parents of children with autism, there remains to be minimal support from health bodies and educational facilities (DoH, 2021; Hasson et al., 2024), therefore finding another form of support is crucial (Shepherd et al., 2020). Perceived social support from friends (Drogomyretska et al., 2020), or a large accessible network (Bi et al., 2022), have an even greater influence on protecting against stress. Furthermore, as Lu et al. (2021) discovered, perceived social support has a significant positive effect on life satisfaction in relation to parents of children with autism.

Positive communication within the family network is also essential as it allows for cohesion and trust to be built (Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022). It can act as a protective factor which

aids against negative mental health including anxiety and depression (Huang et al., 2023), whilst also improving overall quality of life (Chow et al., 2022). Parents who have a child with autism face frequent challenges which may disturb routines and require direct support from family members (Papadopoulos, 2021). Therefore, positive and reliable family communication is crucial as it improves family cohesion and flexibility, allowing families to work together and adapt to meet the needs of the child whilst alleviating caregiver's stress (Walton, 2019).

The Present Study

It is clear then, that parents of children with autism often experience lower psychological wellbeing and heightened psychological distress. However, further research is warranted to investigate the factors that might influence these important outcomes. The present study builds on other existing work in this area that utilised COR Theory (see Ng & Yeung, 2024), to investigate whether, and to what extent, personal resources (parental self-efficacy and resilient coping) and conditional resources (perceived social support and family communication), impact upon the psychological wellbeing of parents of children with autism. Its focus on an English sample of parents, of children with autism specifically, and the inclusion of 'perceived social support' (deemed a protective factor which helps to reduce levels of parental stress: Cheng & Lai, 2023), and a non-clinical measure of psychological wellbeing, are some of the unique features of this work.

Method

Design

This study employed a concurrent, correlational design using a survey. There were four predictor variables including two personal resources (parental self-efficacy and resilient coping) and two conditional resources (family communication and perceived social support). There were

also two criterion (outcome) variables measuring psychological wellbeing (life satisfaction and psychological distress).

Sample and Procedure

A sample of 90 parents of children with autism were recruited for this study of which 87% identified as female. Of those sampled, approximately two-thirds (70%) were living with a partner; just over half (52%) had two children (most others had one or three children); and over three-quarters (83%) had one child with autism (some had two or three children with autism). To evaluate whether the sample size created an appropriate effect size, a sensitivity power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). With a significance criterion of $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, and sample $n = 90$, the effect size was measured at $f^2 = .14$ (Cohen, 1988), which determined a medium effect size.

Participants were recruited via a combination of convenience, self-selection, and snowball sampling. An advert for the study was posted on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and was also disseminated via university forums. Those who were interested in participating were taken to an online survey, where they read a participant information sheet and declared their willingness to participate via a consent form. Participants were then presented with demographic questions along with six questionnaires to measure each substantive construct. Once all questionnaires were complete, participants received a debriefing. This research gained ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee and adhered with the British Psychological Society's code of human research ethics and their guidelines for internet-mediated research.

Measures

There were six questionnaires (scales) to measure each substantive construct. These were chosen for their reported validity and suitability for the sample.

Personal Resources

Parental Self-Efficacy

Parental self-efficacy was measured using the five-item Brief Parental Self Efficacy Scale (BPSES; CORC, n.d). On a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, participants rated their level of agreement with statements such as, “I can make an important difference to my child.” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .86$.

Resilient Coping

Resilient coping was measured using the four-item Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS; Sinclair & Wallston, 2004). On a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “does not describe me at all” to “describes me very well”, participants rated their level of agreement with statements such as, “I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations.” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .73$.

Conditional Resources

Family Communication

Family communication was measured using the 10-item Family Communication Scale (FCS; Barnes & Olson, 1982). On a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, participants rated their level of agreement with statements about their family which included “We enjoy spending time together.” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .92$.

Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support was measured using the four-item Social Support Scale (SSS; Peeters et al., 1995). On a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, participants rated their level of agreement with statements such as, “There are people in my life who appreciate what I do.” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .92$.

Psychological Wellbeing

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS; Diener et al., 1985). On a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, participants rated their level of agreement with statements such as, “I am satisfied with my life.” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .92$.

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress was measured using the six-item Psychological Distress Scale (K6; Kessler et al., 2002). On a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “none of the time” to “all of the time”, participants responded based on their feelings over the past 30 days to questions such as, “How often did you feel hopeless?” Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was $\alpha = .88$.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among substantive variables are presented in Table 1.¹

Table 1

Means (totals), standard deviations, and correlations between substantive variables (N = 90).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
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¹ It is important to note number of children, number of children with autism, and partner status yielded non-significant relations with substantive constructs and thus were not represented nor included in any subsequent analyses.

1. Parental Self-Efficacy						
2. Resilient Coping	.29**					
3. Family Communication	.38**	.41**				
4. Perceived Social Support	.14	.35**	.54**			
5. Life Satisfaction	.12	.37**	.56**	.57**		
6. Psychological Distress	.13	-.14	-.21*	-.42**	-.36**	
Mean	20.49	14.89	38.08	15.23	20.88	17.82
SD	3.42	2.85	8.16	4.21	7.74	5.67

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

It can be seen from Table 1, that the average score for parental self-efficacy ($M = 20.49$, $SD = 3.42$) was within the top 20% of the scale, indicating high levels of this construct. Resilient coping scores ($M = 14.89$, $SD = 2.85$) were in the middle-range relative to the population (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004), whilst family communication scores ($M = 38.08$, $SD = 8.16$), and perceived social support scores ($M = 15.23$, $SD = 4.21$) were both in the top 25% of the scale representing greater levels of each construct. Finally, life satisfaction scores ($M = 20.88$, $SD = 7.74$) were of a neutral level (Diener et al., 1985) and psychological distress scores ($M = 17.82$, $SD = 5.67$) implied average levels.

It can also be seen from Table 1 that there was a moderate positive relationship between resilient coping and life satisfaction, $r(88) = .369$, $p < .001$ and a strong positive relationship between family communication and life satisfaction, $r(88) = .557$, $p < .001$ and perceived social support and life satisfaction, $r(88) = .568$, $p < .001$. Further, there was a weak negative relationship between family communication and psychological distress, $r(88) = -.207$, $p = .05$, as

well as a moderate negative relationship between perceived social support and psychological distress, $r(88) = -.424, p < .001$.

To examine the independent contribution of each predictor variable to life satisfaction and psychological distress, two standard multiple regression analyses were conducted. For each, data were inspected to ensure they met the assumptions for a multiple regression analysis. Linearity, normality of residuals, and homoscedasticity were confirmed, and data met the assumption of independent errors.

For life satisfaction, the predictor variables (in combination) were able to make a significant contribution, $F(4, 85) = 16.030, p < .001, R^2 = .430$, accounting for 43% of the variance. The individual predictors were examined further, indicating that family communication ($\beta = .353, p = .001$) and perceived social support ($\beta = .344, p = .001$) made a significant independent contribution, but parental self-efficacy and resilient coping did not. For psychological distress, the predictor variables (in combination) were able to make a significant contribution, $F(4, 85) = 5.903, p < .001, R^2 = .217$, accounting for 21.7% of the variance. The individual predictors were examined further, indicating that parental self-efficacy ($\beta = .213, p = .047$) and perceived social support ($\beta = -.414, p = .001$) made a significant independent contribution (the former in an unexpected direction), but resilient coping and family communication did not.

Discussion

This study set out to examine whether and to what extent personal and conditional resources impact upon the psychological wellbeing of parents of children with autism. We found that family communication and perceived social support, both conditional resources, were the best predictors of life satisfaction. Further, we found that perceived social support was the best

predictor of psychological distress followed by parental self-efficacy; although, the latter was in an unexpected direction suggesting higher self-efficacy is associated with higher psychological distress.

Personal Resources, Conditional Resources, and Psychological Wellbeing

For this study, the personal resources of parental self-efficacy and resilient coping were chosen to evaluate how these impact upon the psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction of parents of children with autism. Resilient coping was unable to account for significant, unique variance in either measure of psychological wellbeing. This contrasts with Ni'matuzahroh et al. (2021) who discovered that greater coping strategies increase adaptability and mediate stress levels. Parental self-efficacy was able account for unique variance in psychological distress; however, this was in an unexpected direction. This was in stark contrast to studies such as Chen et al.'s (2022), which found that parenting competence negatively predicted stress, tension, and anxiety (see also Almendingen & Pilkington, 2024). Perhaps it could be the case, that if someone believes they are a good parent (higher self-efficacy), yet despite this they are unable to overcome the trials and tribulations they are faced with, this could cause low self-esteem (Lu et al., 2015) and drive feelings of failure, guilt, and shame (Heiman, 2021; Marcinechová et al., 2024). If unresolved, these feelings could escalate and when experienced for a prolonged period of time can result in anxiety, stress, and depression, the clinical symptoms underpinning psychological distress. This might explain why an increase in parenting self-efficacy has resulted in increased levels of psychological distress in the present study, although more research is required to inform this novel and unexpected empirical finding.

Turning to those conditional resources, family communication and perceived social support were measured to understand their impact on the life satisfaction and psychological

distress of parents of children with autism. These intangible, outward resources surround the parents and are not internalised like personal resources (Hobfoll, 2001). The findings were in line with other studies suggesting that parents with higher perceived social support are typically higher in life satisfaction (Lu et al., 2021) and lower in psychological distress (Drogomyretska et al., 2020). Moreover, despite the lack of research investigating the relationship between family communication and life satisfaction or psychological distress among parents of children with autism, the findings were generally in line with the available evidence (e.g., Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022; Walton, 2019) suggesting that family communication is important for families with children with autism as it allows for flexibility and cohesion. Huang et al. (2023) further developed these ideas explaining that family communication can be used as a protective tool against poor mental health. Whilst their study did not focus on parents of children with autism, or even parents, they did find a significant negative correlation between family communication and depression and anxiety. Further, Chow et al.'s (2022) study on family communication and connectedness discovered that these factors were significantly positively correlated with quality of life.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had some limitations that will now be acknowledged. Firstly, whilst the sample size was deemed to create a medium effect size (Cohen, 1988), 86.7% of participants identified as female. This trend is seen across the research topic with many studies focusing solely on mothers (Chen et al., 2022; Papadopoulos, 2021), or also finding that most volunteers are female (Demšar & Bakracevic, 2023; Ng & Yeung, 2024). However, this could lower the generalisability of the results if using it to account for fathers' experiences too. Secondly, the design was cross-sectional and correlational: this is insufficient for addressing issues of

directionality or causality (experimental and longitudinal work required) and may also be limited in its capacity to understand the nuances of how, when, and why personal and conditional resources might influence psychological wellbeing. For this, qualitative work would be beneficial. Thirdly, other measures of personal and conditional resources, as well as psychological wellbeing, might have revealed different findings. Finally, although participating parents had at least one child with autism, it was not known ‘how’ or ‘when’ parents were informed about this diagnosis; therefore, this could have been communicated and managed through a lens of Asperger’s, ASD, or through the more recent neurodiversity movement. Future work might therefore consider whether the framing of the autism diagnoses itself affects the emotional perceptions of parents.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine whether and to what extent personal and conditional resources impact upon the psychological wellbeing of parents of children with autism. It was found that family communication and perceived social support were the best predictors of life satisfaction, with perceived social support also the best predictor of psychological distress, thus highlighting the importance of conditional resources. Whilst peer and family support is crucial to improve parental wellbeing (Bi et al., 2022; Drogomyretska et al., 2020), professional support is reportedly the most beneficial, especially for those newly navigating a diagnosis (McIntyre & Brown, 2018). Although there are some charity support groups available for parents and carers (Autism Central, n.d.), most parents are now turning to social media to find other parents who are going through similar situations (Yen & Valentine, 2023). Instead, it is hoped that by drawing attention to the importance of social support, which is implied by the study’s results, not only will further research be conducted in the field, but

professional social support will be provided to improve the psychological wellbeing of parents and guardians who care for a child with autism.

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The Authors

Melanie Bunfield

Department of Psychology, Arden University, Arden House, Middlemarch Park, Coventry, CV3 4FJ, UNITED KINGDOM.

Andrew Holliman

Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UNITED KINGDOM.

Correspondence

Andrew Holliman

Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UNITED KINGDOM. E-Mail:

a.holliman@ucl.ac.uk. Tel: +44 (0) 20 3108 9761.

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