

Emotional Responses of the parent to the Angry and Happiness of An Autistic Child

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Abstract: The study aimed at studying the family's emotional responses to the emotional actions of the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), as compared with the responses of a family with no autistic child.

From a functionalist perspective, emotions become, as a result of the socialization strategies applied by parents, constructs consolidated in time, strengthened by experience and internalized as part of the self (Bariola, Hughes, & Gullone, 2012; Zeman, Perry-Parish, & Cassano, 2010). More than that, emotions socialization parental strategies project their influence till adulthood. The significant correlations between the negative emotions socialization styles and the internalization matters are a constant of many researches (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010; Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002; Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007; Silk et al., 2011).

Based on these arguments, we studied the parent's emotional reactions to the child's emotions, according to the Malatesta – Magai Model (1991) which operationalizes five styles: reward, avoidance, punishment, neglect and amplifying. I chose two externalization emotions (angry and happiness) which we analysed in 40 families (20 families with an autism diagnosed child, 20 families with a non-autistic child). In order to highlight gender differences, visible at the level of emotion socialization practices (Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2010; Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010), the instruments were separately filled in by the mother and father.

According to the data, it can be asserted that the family type, respectively the parent's gender influences the emotions socialization practices in specific ways; mothers are more emotionally involved, as compared to the fathers and use facilitating emotional responses for the emotional expression related to the children emotions.

Keywords: *emotion socialisation; autism; happiness; angry.*

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1. Introduction

Family is one of the most important contexts in which experiences relevant to a person are built (Fosco & Grych, 2012). Parent's adequate attitude towards the children emotions fundamentals the social and emotional adjustment skills (Baker et al., 2010; Garside, 2003; Jaffe, Gullone, & Hughes, 2010; Mirabile, Scaramella, Sohr-Preston, & Robinson, 2009).

For most of the normally developed children, toddler period and the pre-school one is often considered the period with the most self-control abilities development, these emotional regulation abilities having strong implications in the children social functioning (Baurain & Nader-Grosbois, 2012). For a change, at the autistic spectrum disorder child (ASD), the social perceptive side (*Theory of mind*) influences a lot the way in which they analyse and assess the social indicators, including the parents' emotional answers and reactions (Bruin, 2015). Autistic persons do not have the ability to analyse or assess the mental states based on information coming from the social indicators (voices, faces). These deficits have a strong connexion with the fact that ASD persons do not consider the others behaviour as being intentional and they find themselves in the impossibility of "putting themselves in the others shoes" and analyse its intentions (Secară, 2007).

Family, as an environment where first emotional experiences are built and developed, represent a central factor in emotions socialization process. Parents are the ones giving sense and guiding the children emotions, define them, regulate and transform them into social skills. For a change, parents which are given the news that they have a disabled child pass through a series of reactions with a strong emotional baggage interfering with the family's socio-emotional development process. Fosco & Grych (2012) identified a series of common behaviours, as: pain reactions similar to the individuals losing someone dear (shock, denial, and numbness), guilt or shame, fury towards the doctors and professionals involved, affecting the self-esteem, tensioning the family and conjugal relationships.

2. Definitions and theoretical models

Emotions socialization parental style supposes direct practices (coaching, discussions) or indirect (modelling, social referential) used by the parents (both during childhood and adolescence) in order to shape the children emotional life in accordance to the social standards (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010)

Emotions socialization involved a set of interactional strategies used by parents as a result of which the children emotional states become more and more enhanced in experiences and internalized as parts of the self, turning in time into personality constructs (Malatesta- Magai, 1991; Silk et al., 2011).

The Malatesta-Magai (Magai, Consedine, Gillespie, O’Neal, & Vilker, 2004) Model extends the model suggested by Tomkins and exploits the functionalist perspective on personality and discreet emotions delineating five strategies currently used by parents for direct socialization of the discreet negative emotions: *reward, punishment, avoidance, neglect and amplification*. The parental responses which facilitate the adequate emotional expression involve reward and amplifying, while punishment, neglect and avoidance are emotionally inhibitory strategies. Amplifying operates as a punitive strategy for fury but not for the internalization and positive emotions (Silk et al., 2011).

3. Empirical evidences regarding the emotions dynamics within family

Family is one of the first environments in which the child learns to decrypt and answer to some emotions. The way in which the parent structures its emotional response in the interaction with its child becomes a predictor for the child’s emotional conduct.

The studied emotions (angry, joy) are the *emotional core* relevant for the development of the internalization matters common forms (fear, sadness) and externalization (angry) (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007; Zeman et al., 2010).

Child’s fear, angry, sadness activates the emotions socialization parental style. Inside this “emotional lab”, there are a variety of variables which interfere in configuring the emotional response: the child’s gender (Garside, 2003; Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007), its age (Cassano, Perry-Parrish, & Zeman, 2007), the parent’s gender (Baker et al., 2010; Denham et al., 2010).

Mothers are more involved than fathers, have more obvious supportive attitudes and reactions, and are more active in the development of the coping abilities (Baker t al., 2010; Bariola et al., 2012; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000).

Through confrontation with actual emotions, mothers and fathers develop different responses. Fury is an emotion accompanied by a wide

range of responses from the mother: reward, punishment, avoidance and amplifying. Fathers have the tendency to neglect fury more than mothers do.

Both fathers and mothers amplify their sons' angry expressing more than the one of their daughters. Happiness is more rewarded than amplified by mothers, while fathers frequently use avoidance and neglect. In the case of expressing happiness too, boys indicated more inhibitory reactions (punishment, avoidance) from both parents, as compared to girls (Cassano et al., 2007; Denham et al., 2010; Garside, 2003).

In the literature there is a limited number of studies regarding the relation between the children's problematic behaviour, mother's stress and family conflicts in the families of a child suffering from ASD. We know that in these families are very high levels of negative emotions which can influence the social and emotional functioning of its members (Mazefsky, 2015).

ASD children tend to use wrong emotional regulatory strategies in difficult contexts, as compared to the normally developed ones (Konstantareas & Stewart, 2006). The studies done on the emotional dynamic evolution in teenage period prove that both the normally developed ones and the ones diagnosed with autism, have similar adjustment methods, only that the ASD ones presented higher levels of wrong adjustment to the given context (rumination, negative thoughts, physiological and emotional excitement, mental blockages). The use of these inadequate solutions of environment adjustment generates the appearance of anxiety and long term depression in autistic children (Mazefsky, 2015).

4. Applicative research

4.1. Research aim/research questions

Research aim/research questions is analysing the differences regarding mother's emotional response strategies, respectively the fathers', to the concrete emotions (angry, happiness) of a child with/without ASD.

4.2. The subjects sample

There were analysed the responses of 80 subjects (40 mothers, 40 fathers) representing 20 families with one ASD child, 20 families with no ASD child.

The first sample was recruited from the families that have an autistic child, with ages between 10 and 14 and who benefit from the Blijdorf Therapeutic Complex in Suceava, Romania. The comparison sample was recruited from the parents of children with no ASD, with ages between 10

and 14 years old. The parents taking part in the study have an age average of 47.99 ± 3.00 . As an education level, the participants to the study graduated gymnasium (2 subjects), high school (32 subjects), post-secondary studies (7 subjects) and higher education (39 subjects).

In order to control *family origin type variable*, we chose families in which the two partners are married and are the biological parents of the child. In order to control the *baby's gender* variable we chose only families that have a boy *with / without autism*.

4.3. Used Instrument

Emotions socialization parental styles are measured through *The Childhood Emotions Self-reporting Scale* (EAC) (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007). EAC (version 2) measures the children, teenagers or adults' perception towards their parents reaction (mother's and father's separately) when confronted with emotions as fear, sadness and happiness of the children. The internal consistency of the translated scales register similar coefficients to the original instrument: the reward scale (0.63), punishment scale (0.69), avoidance scale (0.69), neglect scale (0.70), amplifying scale (0.89).

4.4. Results

Are there differences between the families with an ASD child and the ones without an ASD child regarding the emotions of angry and happiness socialization strategies?

a. Implications of the family type for the fury emotion:

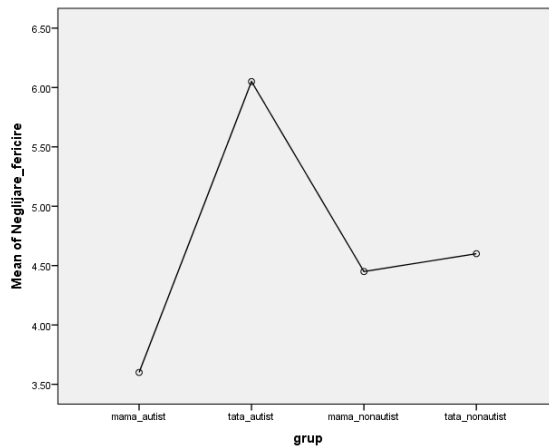
We do not have a significant difference from a statistical point of view between the response strategies to the emotion of angry according to the family type (autistic child family, non-autistic child family), $p(\text{neglect angry}) = 0.47 > 0.05$; $p(\text{punishment angry}) = 0.55 > 0.05$; $p(\text{reward angry}) = 0.81 > 0.05$; $p(\text{avoidance angry}) = 0.20 > 0.05$; $p(\text{amplifying angry}) = 0.48 > 0.05$

b. Implications of the family type for happiness emotion:

There are significant statistical differences for the five measured strategies: *neglect* and *amplifying happiness*.

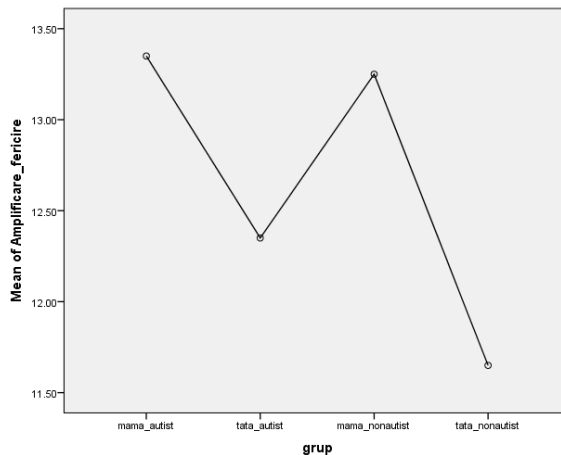
In the family of an autist parents tend to use more frequently *neglect* as a response style for happiness (mean = 5.97), as compared to the family of a non-autist (mean = 5.05), Test $t(78) = 1.65$ for $p < 0.05$ (Graphic 1).

Graphic 1. Neglect, as a response to the happiness emotion



In the family of the autistic, *amplifying*, as a response style for the happiness emotion is used more frequently (mean = 12.85), as compared to the non-autistic family (media = 12.45), Test t (78) = 0.86 for $p < 0.05$ (Graphic 2).

Graphic 2. Amplifying, as a response to the emotion of happiness



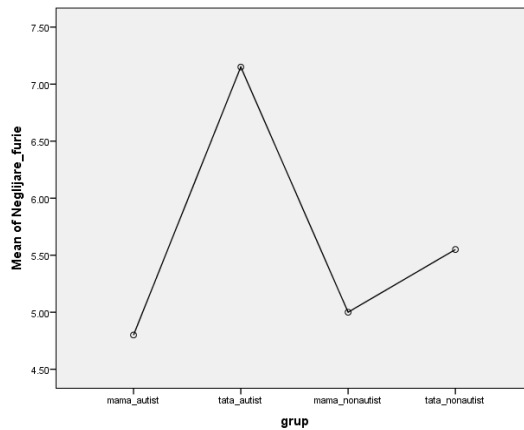
We do not have a significant difference for three types of response strategies: *punishment*, *reward*, *avoidance*, to the happiness emotion, according to the family type (autistic_family, non-autistic_family), $p(\text{punishment_happiness}) = 0.32 > 0.05$; $p(\text{reward_happiness}) = 0.57 > 0.05$; $p(\text{avoidance_happiness}) = 0.06 > 0.05$.

c. Implications of the parent's gender

According to ANOVA Univariate procedure there are differences from a statistical point of view for one strategy of the five measured: *neglect* (angry, happiness).

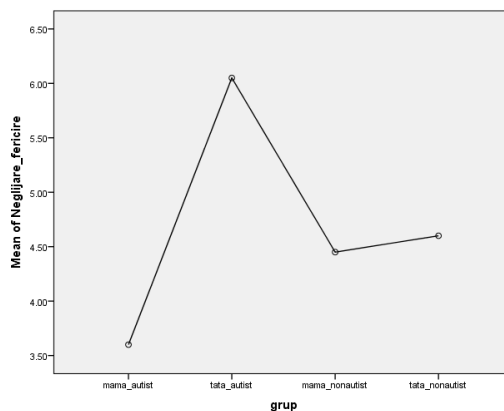
The fathers of the autistic children neglect significantly more the angry reactions, as compared to the mothers of the autistic children – $F(3.775)$, ($p = .01$) (Graphic 3).

Graphic 3. Neglect angry (comparison mother/father)



The fathers of the autistic children significantly neglect the happiness manifestations, as compared to the mothers – $F(4.82)$, ($p = .004$) (Graphic 4).

Graphic 4. Neglect happiness (comparisons mother/father)



5. Conclusions and future guidelines

According to the resulted data, family type (ASD child/no ASD child), respectively the parent's gender (mother/father) influences the emotions of angry and happiness socialization practices, in specific ways.

Angry is not accompanied by different emotional responses in the family with an autistic child than in the family with no such diagnosis. Parents show approximately the same response strategies to the child's angry, no matter if it has ASD or not.

Happiness is for a change an emotion accompanied by significantly different behaviours between the two types of analysed families. In the family with an ASD child this emotion is significantly neglected but also amplified.

In our research there were studied only the boys, Bariola, Hughes, and Gullone (2012) and Baker, Fenning, and Crnic (2010) studies reveal to us the fact that boys emotions are frequently more punished, avoided or neglected, as compared to the girls emotional manifestations (Bujor & Turliuc, 2014). A future research would aim at studying the emotions socializations strategies type which parents of boys develop as compared to the parents of girls, both in the case of ASD and non ASD child families.

The gender of the parent brings more clarifications to us about the way the emotional response is modelled; fathers significantly neglect more both autistic child's angry and happiness as compared to the mothers. The mothers of the children diagnosed with autism, in most of the cases, spend more time (sometimes all their time) with them. Many times this involvement is negatively counterbalanced by a giving – up with negative implications on the self-esteem. In the literature is advanced the idea that there is gender difference in the case of the autistic children parents regarding self-esteem, women registering lower scores on the Rosenberg Scale of self-esteem than men (Bawalsah, 2015).

A longitudinal type investigation could give us data regarding the dynamic of these strategies along time (annually for example) or as a result of some therapeutic intervention programs on parents (belonging to a support group) or on the children (specific therapeutic programs or personal development groups).

An analysis of the young adults' responses who were diagnosed with autistic elements during childhood, but with a good recovery rate could identify significant variables in choosing the emotions socialization strategy type.

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