ABSTRACT
APPLYING THE VULNERABILITY STRESS ADAPTATION MODEL TO ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF COUPLES RAISING A CHILD WITH ASD

Hillary K. Schiltz, M.S.

Marquette University, 2021

Cross-sectional evidence indicates that raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with strain on caregivers’ romantic couple relationship, yet many couple relationships thrive (Hock et al., 2012; Markoulakis et al., 2012). Research on general population samples highlights changes in couple romantic relationships across short and longer periods of time (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997); little is known, however, about how the relationships of couples raising a child with ASD unfold and which couples are at greater risk for deterioration than others. According to the Vulnerability Stress Adaptation (VSA) Model, couple romantic relationships are directly shaped by how couples work together to solve problems (i.e., adaptive processes); vulnerabilities brought into the relationship and stressors faced by each partner impact adaptive processes. In the present study, longitudinal growth curve models examined changes (four time points across three years) in observed problem-solving interactions among 189 couples (378 parents) raising a child (aged 5-12) with ASD. Each partner completed questionnaires assessing the broader autism phenotype (BAP; vulnerability) as well as their own parenting stress and their child’s ASD symptoms and emotional and behavioral problems (i.e., stressors) at the first time point. Results revealed declines, on average, in the responsiveness of partners (Sensitivity), ability to work together (Cooperation) to come to a satisfying resolution (Conflict Resolution), and positivity (Enjoyment). Composite scores (Solution Focused Reciprocity and Positive Togetherness) also demonstrated declines across time. The sharing of the interaction (Balance), partner-directed behaviors (Engagement), and hostility (Irritation) remained stable. Growth mixture modeling revealed no unique subgroups of couples. Stressors were not significant predictors of the intercept or slope of Solution Focused Reciprocity and Positive Togetherness. Couples with higher Father BAP demonstrated steeper declines in couple adaptive processes over time, especially in the context of low initial levels of mother-reported stress. Mother BAP, however, appeared to be protective against declines in Positive Teamwork in the context of a high initial level of father-reported stress. Findings highlight areas of strength and weaknesses that can be leveraged or supported to promote healthy and long-lasting couple relationships, and in turn, well-adjusted families.