ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN POWER DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN COUPLES RAISING AUTISTIC CHILDREN

by

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RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN COUPLES
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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to examine the associations of marital satisfaction and power dynamics in couples raising autistic children compared to couples raising non-autistic children. Marital satisfaction is important to the longevity of a marriage, and the quality of a marriage can affect children's outcomes as well. Although prior research has established associations between power imbalances and low levels of marital satisfaction, there is no research examining these associations among parents raising children on the autism spectrum . To examine this question, couples with and without autistic children completed surveys and engaged in video recorded conflict discussions. The results indicated that wives raising autistic children reported significantly higher power than wives with non-autistic children at low and mean levels of satisfaction. Furthermore, levels of power observed during the conflict discussions were significantly associated with marital satisfaction. Using these results, it is important for clinicians to use therapeutic techniques that specifically target power imbalances in these couples and work to diminish them.

Associations Between Power Dynamics and Relationship Satisfaction in Couples Raising Autistic Children

Research studies have consistently demonstrated that marital conflict leads to lower marital satisfaction and, ultimately, divorce (Birditt et. al., 2010). Couples raising an autistic child have been found to have higher rates of divorce compared to families where children do not have a disability (Hartley et. al., 2010). Since marital conflict can have negative consequences for the entire family, it is important to identify whether certain aspects of marital conflict are associated with marital satisfaction. This is critical, as it provides a direct target for intervention that could prevent divorce. This is especially true for families that have an autistic child, which is an underrepresented group in psychological research and may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing heightened levels of marital conflict. This study seeks to investigate the associations between power dynamics during a conflict discussion and ratings of marital satisfaction, and to determine whether these associations differ for couples raising an autistic child versus those raising a non-autistic child.

Marital Satisfaction

It has often been found that married people are happier and find more satisfaction in their relationship than non-married people (Vanassche et. al., 2013). It has also been established that those who are not in well-functioning, happy, marital relationships have lower life-expectancies and more medical issues (Lawrence et. al., 2019). Thus, it is important to decipher how one can thrive in a marriage, and which couples are most at risk for an unhappy marriage.

Marital satisfaction is an evaluation of one's feelings towards their marriage, and it is a common way to measure marital relationship functioning and a couple's overall level of marital stability and happiness (Abreu-Afonso et. al., 2022). Marital satisfaction is one of the factors that

contributes to marital sustainability and the stability of the larger family system (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017). Studies show high rates of divorce associated with low levels of satisfaction across many populations of couples, showing that satisfaction is important to the longevity of a marriage (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Although individuals look for different qualities in relationships, there are some relatively consistent needs across couples that, if met, can positively influence one's marital satisfaction. Two of these needs are autonomy and connectedness, which both contribute to how emotionally close members of a couple feel toward one another (Finn et. al., 2020). When studying the relationship between these variables, connectedness, autonomy and satisfaction all had positive associations with one another (Finn et. al., 2020). These relational qualities lay the foundation for other important needs, and, if they are met on a consistent basis, they can help one feel satisfied in their relationship.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2021, 37% of married couples have children, and the quality of the marital relationship is an important factor in children's outcomes (Brauner-Otto et. al., 2020). The research on marital satisfaction among parents is somewhat mixed, but consistent in finding that there is a decline in satisfaction in the period immediately following childbirth (Mitnick et. al., 2009; Twenge et. al., 2003). However, some research found this to be a small decline, and one that occurs at a similar period of marital satisfaction decline for non-parents (Mitnick et. al., 2009). There is also evidence showing a moderate decline in marital satisfaction in parents compared to non-parents, and this decrease is more pronounced with a higher number of children (Twenge, 2003). In both cases, the research supports that there is less marital satisfaction, at least in some life periods, for parents than non-parents. Thus, the current study focuses on the marital relationship of parents.

Power Dynamics in Marriage

Power is an important aspect in romantic relationships (Dunbar, 2004). One definition of power in relationships is the level of influence over others (Leonhardt et. al., 2020). However, Interdependence Theory defines power as inverse dependence, meaning whichever partner is less reliant, or dependent, on the other person has more power (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult et. al., 2011; Thibaut 1959, as cited in Lennon et. al., 2013). Power has often been measured using self-report measures (Zimbler, 2012). These require couples to report on behavioral and affect aspects of their relationships (Lee et. al., 2010). Although this provides information on one's subjective experience, some studies have recognized the limits of this type of data collection and have taken it further by looking at other outcome variables such as physiological responses (Zimbler, 2012). Furthermore, some studies have examined power in terms of observational data, which is usually measured within the context of a conflict resolution scenario (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). These usually examine distribution of house tasks and who talks more, which do not always indicate who has more relational power (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). This suggests the need for other data collection methods in terms of power, which the current study is addressing by using a novel power coding system in research.

The majority of individuals report inequality of power within their relationship (Bruhin, 2003). Furthermore, in a study with relationship therapists, power issues was the second most common topic that therapists discussed with their clients (Whisman et. al., 1997, as cited in Miller et. al., 2022). This could be because modern research on power dynamics recognizes that men and women enter a relationship with a certain level of power due to societal norms and perceptions, and do not start at an equal place (Lennon et. al., 2013). Specifically, in most societies, men start off with a higher base level of power, due to the perception of women in

society, particularly with norms about the emotions associated with women (Lennon et. al., 2013; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Women, on the other hand, are seen as motherly by society, which gives them a lower starting point level of power within the relationship and creates an imbalance as the relationship progresses (Lennon et. al., 2013).

It is important to study romantic relationship power dynamics because an imbalance of power has been associated with many negative outcomes. Power imbalances are often an underlying issue for couples that are seeking therapy (Miller et. al., 2022), and are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction and relationship satisfaction (Lennon et. al., 2013; Zimbler, 2012). Relationship power imbalance has been shown to be a predictor of greater intimate partner violence (Martín-Lanas, 2021). Relationship power imbalance can also negatively impact individual members of the couple, as evidenced by greater levels of depression (Filson et. al., 2010). Although there are studies establishing links between power dynamics and relationship satisfaction, there is little evidence on how the association might be different in families that have a child with special needs.

Couples with Autistic Children

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder associated with social communication deficits, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests (Lord et. al., 2018). Parents of an autistic child face various unique challenges in their daily lives (Hartley & Schultz, 2015). Some of these include difficulties receiving diagnoses for their child, general stigma, and their child being very dependent on the primary caregiver for daily activities (Lord et. al., 2018; Mitter, et. al., 2019). This leaves this population vulnerable to other problems within the family, as parents have reported that their marriage feels strained due to their child's diagnosis (Fletcher, et. al., 2012).

Research on the outcomes of relationships where couples have an autistic child is mixed. Some studies demonstrate that these couples have higher rates of divorce compared to families where children have no disability (Hartley et. al., 2010). However, some research finds higher rates of divorce in families of autistic children to be a myth, and find the rates of divorce in this population to be similar to families of non-autistic children (Freedman, et. al., 2012). The variability in these results emphasizes the importance of examining specific aspects of the marital relationship.

The data that shows higher rates of divorce could be due to increased relational conflict in this population, as couples with an autistic child demonstrated more frequent, severe, and unresolved relationship conflict compared to couples ith a non-autistic child (Hartley et. al., 2017). In addition, couples with autistic children also had less engaged, cooperative, and balanced conflict interactions (Hartley et. al., 2017). More research suggested that couples with an autistic child did not report more negative problem solving interactions with their partner when their child was exhibiting problem behaviors (Hartley et. al., 2016), indicating that they do not necessarily experience more conflict than parents of non-autistic children. However, household income, parental broader autism phenotype, and the presence of another child with special care requirements moderated the impact of negative couple problem-solving interactions in this same study (Hartley et. al., 2016).

This increased marital conflict is likely related to parenting stress, as couples reported more negative marital interactions and fewer positive marital interactions following a day of higher parenting stress (Hartley et. al., 2018). Furthermore, the most common topic of problem solving interactions was the autistic child (Hartley et. al., 2018), suggesting that having an autistic child may lead to more parenting stress and more marital conflict. It was also found that

lower marital satisfaction was associated with higher levels of child externalizing symptoms (Greenlee et. al., 2022). Mothers are typically the primary caregiver for autistic individuals (Samadi & Samadi, 2020). Given that society's perception of women as motherly leads her to have less power in her marital relationship, it is possible that the additional demands of this role in autistic families might exacerbate this imbalance (Lennon et. al., 2013).

Aside from increased conflict due to parenting stress, couples with autistic children also feel a higher level of marital dissatisfaction compared to parents of non-autistic children (Brobst et. al., 2009). Research also suggests that this continues throughout the child's development, as mother's marital satisfaction decreased across a seven-year period from adolescence to adulthood (Hartley et. al., 2012). Hartley et. al. (2017) found that this decrease in marital satisfaction may be due to maladaptive patterns of couple conflict, as observed during a video recorded conflict discussion. Although this observation-based study examined outcomes of marital satisfaction, it did not account for how differing power dynamics may affect this population.

The Current Study

To date, no known study has examined the relationship between power dynamics and marital satisfaction in parents of autistic children compared to parents of non-autistic children. The current study was designed to examine these variables and had three research aims: (1) Determine whether the quality of marital functioning differed between couples that have autistic and non-autistic children. Specifically, we examined power dynamics and marital satisfaction; (2) To examine the associations between power dynamics and marital satisfaction using observational and self-report data;(3) To investigate whether the strength and direction of the association between power and marital satisfaction differed based on raising an autistic or non-

autistic child. I hypothesized that couples with a greater imbalance of power in their conflict discussion will report less marital satisfaction. In addition, it was expected that couples raising an autistic child would have a greater imbalance of power and lower marital satisfaction compared to couples raising a non-autistic child. Given the lack of research, there were no specific hypotheses regarding the third aim. It was possible that the associations between power and marital satisfaction are similar in both groups; however, it was also possible that the association is stronger in autistic couples because of the additional demands that these couples face.

Methods

Participants

A total of 114 couples (58 with autistic children; 56 with non-autistic children) completed the study. Both groups indicated a range of races, with a majority indicating White or European American (non-autistic: 70.3%; autistic: 79.1%). Participants also indicated a wide range of education levels, with the largest percentage indicating they have earned some college degree (non-autistic: 42.6%; autistic: 43.9%). On average, couples had lived together for over 10 years (non-autistic: M=11.73*; SD*=6.28; autistic: M=14.22*; SD*=7.24). When asked to indicate how many children live in their home, the common number was 2 (non-autistic: 45.8%; autistic: 39.8%). The majority of participants were married (non-autistic: 96; autistic: 98), with a small group cohabiting but not married (non-autistic: 10; autistic: 11). For full demographic information, see Table 1.

The present study recruited participants with non-autistic children through social media using Facebook advertisements. Families with autistic children were recruited through Simons Powering Autism Research (SPARK), which is an autism research database. Inclusion and exclusion criteria required participants to be living together for at least 1 year, have a child

(either autistic or not), and live in the USA. In exchange for participating in the study, all participants were compensated with a $75 Amazon gift card that was emailed to them after the study.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Demographic	**Autistic Children**	**Non-Autistic Children**
Household Income		
$0-$40,000	18	42
$40,000-$100,000	42	57
$100,000 and higher	47	35
Wife Education		
Not College Educated	32	22
College Educated	75	86
Husband Education		
Not College Educated	51	36
College Educated	56	72
Wife Age	*M*=40.70*; SD*=7.27	*M*=37.46*; SD*=7.00
Husband Age	*M*=42.54*; SD*=8.14	*M*=39.83*; SD*=8.31
Wife Ethnicity/ Race**		
Asian/ Asian American	1.9%	8.3%
Black/ African American	11.2%	15.7%
Hispanic/ Latino/ Spanish	14.0%	9.3%
Native American/ Alaskan	0.9%	1.9%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%
White or European	78.5%	70.5%

Husband Ethnicity/ Race**		
Asian/ Asian American	1.9%	7.4%
Black/ African American	12.1%	20.4%
Hispanic/ Latino/ Spanish	10.3%	12.0%
Native American/ Alaskan	1.9%	2.8%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.9%
White or European	81.3%	62.0%
Length of Cohabitation in Years	*M*=14.22*; SD*=7.24	*M*=11.73*; SD*=6.28
Number of Children		
1	24	28
2	49	43
>2	34	37
Gender of Child		
Male	82	49
Female	24	59
Age of Child	*M*=9.77*; SD*=3.89	*M*=6.95*; SD*=4.10

** *Participants were allowed to select multiple options for their race*

Design and Procedure

To determine couple eligibility, a trained research assistant conducted an initial phone screening. Couples who passed the initial phone screening were then scheduled for a Zoom session that required both members of the couple to be in the same location and attend together. Before this meeting, participants individually completed online surveys assessing demographic information, relationship satisfaction, and relationship power. This survey also requested that participants indicate topics that can create conflict in their relationship that they frequently argue about. Participants had a range of topics to choose from, as well as the option to create their own.

Upon arrival at the scheduled Zoom session, participants were greeted by trained research assistants who displayed a Powerpoint presentation to the couples. After confirming names and contact information, the participants' names were changed to their pre-assigned ID number on the screen to maintain confidentiality, and then the Zoom session was recorded. Researchers informed the participants that they would be engaging in three separate 8 minute discussions throughout the study: two conflict discussions and one “happy times” discussion at the end. Participants were instructed to try and speak for the entire 8 minutes and to come up with a solution during this time. If participants reached a solution, they were instructed to talk about why it is a good solution or how they could improve it. Then the topics that one of the individuals had previously indicated on the survey were displayed on the screen, and that participant was asked to choose one of these to discuss for the first 8 minute discussion. They were allowed to choose a different topic not provided if they wished. After deciding, the participant was asked to repeat back the instructions to ensure comprehension. After researchers turned off their screens and muted their sound, the participants were instructed to begin their discussion and were timed for 8 minutes. After completing the discussion, participants were texted individual surveys about their discussion. This procedure was then repeated for the other member of the couple, who chose the topic they wanted to discuss. To minimize potentially negative effects of engaging in verbal conflict during the study, the couple was instructed to engage in one final discussion about happy times to end on a positive note. To further ensure minimal negative consequences, researchers then provided participants with information on coping strategies for relationship conflict.

Measures

Marital Satisfaction. The Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI-16) is a 16 item questionnaire to measure one's relationship satisfaction (Funke & Rogge, 2007). There are a variety of questions and types of responses using a 6-point Likert scale. While some items were questions, others were statements where participants marked agreement. A question used in the survey was "how many times a month do you enjoy your partner's company?" Several items were reverse coded and then a total score was calculated. Internal consistency in the current study was good (Husband $\alpha = .98$; Wife $\alpha = .97$).

Observed Power Dynamics. The Lewis Foundation Couple and Family Evaluation Scales (Gosset et. al, 2018) were used to assess couple behavior during conflict discussion tasks. For the purpose of the current study, only the Overt Power scale was used. This is a 5-point observational coding scale designed to measure differing observed power dynamics in romantic relationships. The first level (1) is divided into three categories: "chaotic," "alienated," or "psychotic." A couple was labeled "chaotic" if there was no effective leadership or structure and was a very disorganized discussion. The topic might change so often with these couples that it was incoherent. An "alienated" couple displays no emotional connection. A "psychotic" couple was one where one or more members are psychotic and the discussion content is delusional. The second level (2), was labeled "conflicted" and occurred when participants sought control or authority, but neither participant had enough personal authority to actually have power in the relationship. The third level (3) was labeled "led with resistance." A couple was at this level when one member had more personal authority to have power, but the other member resisted this leadership either aggressively or passively. This level might manifest in a manner that is similar to a parent-child relationship. The fourth level (4), "led with complementarity," occurred when one participant had more personal authority to lead, but the other accepted this and enjoyed the

benefits that come with this type of arrangement. It is important to note that both members at this level could make decisions and provide relevant information to the discussion, but only one person took on more of the leadership role due to their greater level of personal authority. The final level ,(5), "shared," occurred when personal authority and leadership was shared among members of the couple. One person might have taken more of a leadership role in certain tasks due to their skill set, but both members had the ability and willingness to lead. To become reliable coders, the coding team first became reliable with the developer of the scale. Then, the coders became reliable within themselves. After this was achieved, the coders continued to overlap with 20% of the videos they were coding to maintain reliability (ICC = .78).

Self-Reported Power Dynamics. The Relationship Power Inventory: Overall Version (RPI; Farrell, Simpson, & Rothma, 2015) is a 20-item questionnaire designed to measure power dynamics in a romantic relationship (Farrell, Simpson, & Rothma, 2015). The RPI uses a 7-point Likert scale where participants rate how true something is (1= never, 7= always) of their relationship. A question on the questionnaire was "My partner has more say than I do when we make decisions in our relationship." Several items were reverse coded and then items were summed. A higher score indicated that the participant had more power in the relationship. Internal consistency in the study was good (Husband $\alpha = .89$; Wife $\alpha = .84$).

Results

Group and Gender Differences in Marital Functioning

To examine the first research question pertaining to differences in marital functioning, a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether wives with autistic children and wives with non-autistic children differed in their marital satisfaction scores. There were no significant differences on marital satisfaction scores between wives with autistic

children (M = 61.22, SD = 16.39) and wives with non-autistic children (M = 60.63, SD = 17.45; Table 2). A similar analysis was conducted with the self-reported power dynamics variable. Results showed that there was a significant difference between groups $F(1,215) = 5.12$, $p = .03$, with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .02$). Wives with autistic children (M = 4.61, SD = .77) had significantly higher self-reported power than the wives with non-autistic children (M = 4.36, SD = .87;Table 2).

Similarly, a one way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether husbands with autistic children and husbands with non-autistic children differed in their marital satisfaction scores. Results show that there were no significant differences on marital satisfaction scores between husbands with autistic children (M = 63.24, SD = 15.58) and husbands with non-autistic children (M = 63.69, SD = 14.03; Table 2). A one way ANOVA was also conducted to test whether husbands with autistic children and husbands with non-autistic children differed in their self-reported power dynamics scores. Results showed no significant differences between husbands with autistic children (M = 3.60, SD = 0.81) and husbands with non-autistic children (M = 3.78, SD = 0.69; Table 2).

A one way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether couples raising autistic children and couples raising non-autistic children differed in their observed power. Results showed that there were no significant differences on observed power scores between couples with autistic children (M = 3.73, SD = 1.03) and couples with non-autistic children (M = 3.41, SD = 1.04).

Table 2

One-Way ANOVA Results of Difference in Self-Reported Power Dynamics and Self-Reported Marital Satisfaction in Parents with Autistic vs. Non-Autistic Children

	ASD		Non-ASD				
					F(df)	*p*	*Partial* η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Wife Power Dynamics	4.61	0.77	4.36	0.87	5.12 (1,215)	.03	.02
Wife Marital Satisfaction	61.22	16.39	60.63	17.45	0.13 (1,215)	.72	.00
Husband Power Dynamics	3.60	0.81	3.78	0.69	2.32 (1, 211)	0.13	.01
Husband Marital Satisfaction	63.24	15.58	63.69	14.03	0.02 (1,212)	.88	.00

Next, one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to determine whether husbands and wives differed in their ratings of marital functioning. For marital satisfaction, results showed no significant differences between husbands (M = 63.47, SD = 14.79) and wives (M = 60.93, SD = 16.89; Table 3). However, for self-reported power dynamics, there was a significant difference between husbands and wives $F(1,429) = 108.31$, $p < .001$, with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .20$). Results showed that wives (M = 4.49, SD = 0.83) reported significantly higher levels of power than husbands (M = 3.69, SD = 0.75; Table 3).

Table 3

One-Way ANOVA Results of Difference in Husbands and Wives Self-Reported Power Dynamics and Self-Reported Marital Satisfaction

	Wives		Husband		*F*(df)	*p*	*Partial* η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Power Dynamics	4.49	0.83	3.69	0.75	108.31 (1, 429)	.00	.20
Marital Satisfaction	60.93	16.89	63.47	14.79	2.75 (1,430)	.10	.01

A mixed ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of parent gender (wife vs husband) and child autism status (autistic vs non-autistic) on parents' self-reported power dynamics. The results indicated a significant main effect for parent gender ($F(1,211) = 7.59$, $p < .01$) with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .04$), showing that the wives ($M = 4.48$, $SE = 0.06$) had higher levels of self-reported power than the husbands ($M = 3.69$, $SE = 0.05$). The main effect of child autism status was not significant. ($F(1,211) = 0.56$, $p > .05$), showing that there was no difference between autistic ($M = 4.10$, $SE = 0.04$) and non-autistic ($M = 4.06$, $SE = 0.04$) groups in their self-reported power dynamics. The interaction between parent gender and child autism diagnosis was also significant ($F(1,211) = 4.33$, $p = .02$), with a small effect size ($\eta^2 = .02$).

To follow-up the significant interaction, a simple main effect analysis showed there was no difference in the level of self-reported power for husbands with autistic children versus those with non-autistic children ($Mdiff = 0.16$, $SE = 0.11$, $p > .05$). However, there was a difference for self-reported power for the wives ($Mdiff = -0.25.$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .04$), such that wives with an

autistic child (M = 4.60, SE=0.08) reported higher levels of power than wives with non-autistic children (M = 4.35, SE = 0.08). Examined differently, both wives of autistic children (M = 0.99, SE = 0.14, $p < .001$) and non-autistic children (M = 0.58., SE = 0.14, $p < .001$) had significantly higher self-reported power than their husbands.

A mixed ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of parent gender (wife vs husband) and child autism status (autistic vs non-autistic) on their self-reported marital satisfaction. The results indicated that the main effect of child autism status was not significant, (F(1,212) = 0.03, $p > .05$), showing that there was no difference between autistic (M = 62.41, SE = 1.42) and non-autistic (M = 62.07, SE = 1.41) groups in their self-reported relationship satisfaction. The main effect of parent gender was also not significant. (F(1,212) = 1.07, $p > .05$), showing that there was no difference between husbands (M = 63.47, SE = 14.79) and wives (M = 61.00, SE = 16.90) self-reported relationship satisfaction. Finally, the interaction between parent gender and child ASD status was not significant (F(1,212) = 0.43, $p > .05$).

Associations between Power Dynamics and Marital Satisfaction

A correlation analysis was conducted to test the relationship between the observational power dynamics, the wife's self-reported power, the husband's self-reported power, the wives' satisfaction, and the husband's satisfaction (see Table 4). The correlation between wives' self reported power and observed power was not significant. A similar finding emerged for husbands. However, the correlation between husbands' self–reported power and wives' self-reported power was significant (r = -0.58). There was also a significant positive correlation between observed power and wives' satisfaction (r = .31), as well as a significant positive correlation between observed power and husbands' satisfaction (r = .22).

Table 4

Correlations for Observed Power, Self-Reported Power, and Self-Reported Satisfaction

Variable	*n*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Observed Power	198	—				
2. Wife Self-Report Power	198	.02	—			
3. Husband Self-Report Power	197	-.00	-.58**	—		
4. Wife Self-Report Satisfaction	215	.31**	.07	—	—	
5. Husband Self-Report Satisfaction	215	.22**	—	.04	.61**	—

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A multiple linear regression was conducted to evaluate the prediction of wife satisfaction scores from observed power. Results indicated that observed power significantly positively predicts wives' self-reported satisfaction, $b = 4.74$, ($SE = 1.01$) $t = 4.69$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.10$. A multiple linear regression was conducted to evaluate the prediction of husband satisfaction scores from observed power. Results indicated that observed power significantly positively predicts husbands' self-reported satisfaction, $b=3.09$, ($SE=0.97$) $t= 3.17$, $p <.001$, $R^2 = 0.05$. Moderation analysis was conducted using SPSS's PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the

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relationship between wives' self-reported power and satisfaction differed as a function of their child's autism status. There was a significant main effect of group status (b = 0.26, SE = 0.12, t =2.22, p = .03). There was no main effect of wife satisfaction (b =0.00, SE = 0.00, t =0.72, p > .05). The interaction between self-reported satisfaction and child autism status (0=autistic, 1=non-autistic) was significant (b =- 0.01, SE = 0.01, t = -2.25, p = .03), indicating that the relationship between wives' self-reported power and marital satisfaction was moderated by child autism status. The simple slope analysis showed no significant association between satisfaction and self-reported power for the non-autistic group (b = 0.00, SE = 0.00, t = 0.72, p > .05). However, there was a significant, negative association between satisfaction and self-reported power for the wives with autistic children (b = -0.01, SE = 0.00, t = -2.44, p = .02). Regions of significant tests were used to examine whether wives with autistic children had different levels of self-reported power at low, average, and high marital satisfaction. Results showed a significant difference in self-reported power at low levels (b = 0.51., SE = 0.16, t = 3.23, $p \leq .00$) and average levels (b = 0.26., SE = 0.12, t = 2.22, p =.03) of self-reported satisfaction. There was no significant difference in self-reported power at high levels of satisfaction (b = 0.01., SE = 0.16, t = 0.04, p >.05) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Wife Self-Report Power and Satisfaction Moderated by Child ASD Status

Moderation analysis was conducted using SPSS's PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the relationship between husbands' self-reported satisfaction and self-reported power differed as a function of their child's autism status. There was not a significant main effect of group status (b = -0.16, SE = 0.11, t = -1.50, p >.05). There was no main effect of husband satisfaction (b = 0.00, SE = 0.01, t = -0.45, p > .05). The interaction between self-reported satisfaction and child ASD status (0 = ASD, 1 = non-ASD) was also not significant (b = - 0.01, SE = 0.01, t = 1.24, p > .05), indicating that the relationship between husbands' self-reported power and marital satisfaction was not moderated by child autism status.

Moderation analysis was conducted using SPSS's PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the relationship between wives' self-reported satisfaction and observed power differed

as a function of their child's autism status. There was a significant main effect of observed power (b = 4.30, SE = 1.44, t = 2.99, p = .003). There was not a significant main effect of group status (0 = ASD, 1 = non-ASD) (b = -1.83, SE = 2.24, t = -0.82, p >.05). The interaction between self-reported satisfaction and child ASD status (0=ASD, 1=non-ASD) was also not significant (b = 1.12, SE = 2.05, t = 0.55, p > .05), indicating that the relationship between wives' observed power and marital satisfaction was not moderated by child autism status.

Moderation analysis was conducted using SPSS's PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to test whether the relationship between husbands' self-reported satisfaction and observed power differed as a function of their child's autism status. There was a significant main effect of observed power (b = 3.42, SE = 1.39, t = 2.46, p = .01). There was not a significant main effect of group status (0 = ASD, 1 = non-ASD) (b = -0.63, SE = 2.16, t = -0.29, p >.05). The interaction between self-reported satisfaction and child ASD status (0 = ASD, 1 = non-ASD) was also not significant (b = -0.58, SE = 1.97, t = -0.30, p > .05), indicating that the relationship between husbands' observed power and marital satisfaction was not moderated by child autism status.

Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to examine the associations between power dynamics and marital satisfaction in couples with and without autistic children. Specifically, I aimed to examine these associations using both self-report and observational data. The findings provided partial support for my hypotheses; however, there were also several findings that were non-significant. Overall, the results indicated that wives had significantly higher levels of self-reported power than husbands. Among the wives, those with autistic children had higher levels of self-reported power than wives with non-autistic children. There were no significant

differences in marital satisfaction between the groups. There were, however, significant associations between power and marital satisfaction; however, these associations differed for wives of autistic versus non-autistic children. Specifically, wives with autistic children had significantly higher levels of power than wives of non-autistic children at low and mean levels of relationship satisfaction, but not at high levels of relationship satisfaction. The results are discussed in detail below and implications for future research and clinical practice are also discussed.

I predicted that couples raising an autistic child would have a greater imbalance of power and lower marital satisfaction than couples raising a non-autistic child. With respect to power dynamics, there was a greater imbalance of power in the couples with autistic children, such that the wives had significantly higher power than their husbands. There are a couple of possible reasons that this might have manifested in this study. In families with an autistic child, the mother is often the primary caregiver (Samadi & Samadi, 2020). This gives her more knowledge and control regarding the children. It is possible that this role gives her more power over childcare decisions, which might reflect more power in her relationship as well. However, since we did not find this difference in the observational data, it is possible that wives just perceive they have more relationship power, but they actually do not. Indeed, in the current study there were no associations between observed and self-reported power. Further research is needed to disentangle these discrepancies.

In the current study, there were no significant differences in marital satisfaction in couples raising autistic versus non-autistic children. This is inconsistent with previous research, which showed that couples with autistic children report a higher level of marital dissatisfaction compared to parents of non-autistic children, possibly due to higher levels of maladaptive

patterns of couple conflict (Brobst et. al., 2009; Hartley et. al, 2017). It is possible that the children in the present study had less externalizing symptoms preceding the study, as higher levels of dissatisfaction were found following a day of children's high externalizing symptoms (Greenlee et. al., 2022). Also, prior studies utilized samples with a more restricted range of child age compared to the current study, which could create a difference as well. Furthermore, research on the quality of couples raising autistic children's marital satisfaction is largely mixed, so it is not too unexpected that we would not find a difference in marital satisfaction between groups (Freedman, et. al., 2012).

I hypothesized that couples that had a greater imbalance of power in their conflict discussion would have less marital satisfaction. Results supported this prediction, showing that observed power positively predicts marital satisfaction for both genders. This is consistent with previous research, which found links between power and marital satisfaction (Lennon et. al., 2013; Zimbler, 2012). This supports the validity of using the Lewis Foundation Couple and Family Evaluation Scales in research settings.

I made no specific hypotheses on the third aim examining the strength and direction of the differences in associations between power and marital satisfaction between groups due to the lack of research on this topic. There were significant differences in the associations, such that wives raising autistic children reported significantly higher levels of power at low and mean levels of satisfaction than wives raising non-autistic children. However, when they reported high levels of satisfaction, there were no significant differences in power between groups. This is consistent with prior research, which shows that lower levels of marital and relationship satisfaction are associated with greater power imbalances (Lennon et. al., 2013; Zimbler, 2012).

Furthermore, prior research has found that perceptions of fairness in the division of household tasks acts as a mediator in the association of power and satisfaction in wives, but not in husbands (Zimbler, 2012). This finding could further explain why power affects satisfaction levels for the wives, but not the husbands in the scenario. Due to their role as the primary caregiver to a population that has higher levels of needs, they may find this role as unfair, which affects their satisfaction levels. However, this was not a finding for the husbands, which could explain why they are not affected.

The findings of this study have implications for clinicians who are working with couples and families that have autistic children. The results provide significant insights into the unique power dynamics that a family of this population might have. Specifically, knowing that the wife reports higher relationship power and that power imbalances are associated with negative outcomes, would be an important finding for clinicians working with these couples. However, therapists report that power imbalances on the basis of gender can be difficult to identify (Knudson-Martin, 2013). It is important for therapists to take an active role in looking for imbalances and not be neutral in working with these couples (Knudson-Martin, 2013). One therapeutic approach that specifically targets power imbalances is the socio-emotional approach, which invites the more powerful partner to take more responsibility in solving relationship issues (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Mental health professionals that utilize this technique can work to balance out the power dynamics in romantic relationships. Helping parents identify this power imbalance can contribute to their satisfaction and marital health (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Furthermore, knowing that the relationship quality affects children (Brauner-Otto et. al., 2020), improving this aspect can influence child outcomes as well.

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that warrant discussion. Our study sample had a wide range of child ability and age, which can cause unique parenting challenges. Previous research shows that parenting a child with more severe symptoms of autism, such as harming the self or others, can lead to higher stress levels among family members (Gorlin et. al., 2016). Some of this stress includes lack of sleep, isolation, and managing finances (Gorlin et. al., 2016). Since the current study had a wide variety of ability levels, it is possible that some families experience a different level of dysfunction due to their child's stronger symptoms. This could skew our data if the child ability level is not evenly distributed.

Additionally, we were able to recruit a more diverse range of participants since the study took place on Zoom and did not require participants to travel. However, as noted earlier, the participants were majority White, which is not representative of the general population in the USA. Specifically, one potential issue was that our group raising autistic children had a very small percentage of Asian-Americans. This is important to note because Asian populations typically have more collectivist families, promoting interdependence and high achievement (Kim & Wong, 2002). This creates a unique family dynamic that has potential to skew the data in terms of both power and satisfaction when compared to the group raising non-autistic children.

Another potential limitation of this study is that the study did not investigate what the power struggles within each relationship are about. This means that there might be other underlying issues that are common among this population causing their power struggles, unrelated to their children. This could be an important finding that informs researchers and clinicians about this population. Further research is needed to examine this topic. That being said, our results differed for observational and self-report power. It is important for future

researchers to continue to utilize both methods to uncover implications that may manifest with each type of data collection method.

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