

How Couples Raising Children on the Autism Spectrum Negotiate Intimacy: A Process Model

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BACKGROUND

The most recent figures from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) affect 1 out of every 68 children, and 1 out of every 42 boys, in America (CDC, 2012). Given such a high prevalence of ASDs among US children, more researchers have begun to focus studies on the ramifications of ASDs for other members of and subsystems within the family system.

Interestingly, extant research on how couples, as dyadic units, experience and are affected by raising children with ASDs provides conflicting data on the outcomes for these couples. For example, some studies suggest that couples raising children with ASDs are susceptible to more negative relationship outcomes, including less closeness with and commitment toward one another, than couples raising typically-abled children (Fisman, Wolf, & Noh, 1989; Gau et al., 2012; Hartley et al., 2010; Myers, Mackintosh, & Goin-Kochel, 2009). For these couples, such outcomes have been found to relate to the unique strains on their relationships that accompany caring for children with ASDs (e.g., ambiguous loss, behavioral issues, financial concerns, lack of couple time; Gray, 2002; Higgins et al., 2005; O'Brien, 2007), which other couples do not experience.

However, other studies have indicated no significant difference in commitment and closeness among these couples (as compared to couples raising typically-abled children; Freedman et al., 2012) and that these couples may, in fact, experience more closeness and commitment toward one another despite the unique stressors related to raising children on the autism spectrum (Bayat, 2007; Cowan, 2010; Hock, Timm, & Ramisch, 2012; Myers et al., 2009).

Given these differing results, it becomes important to explore why some couples raising children with ASDs experience more commitment and closeness (i.e., "intimacy") in their relationships than others. A key factor to making sense of these divergent outcomes would be to investigate the ways through which couples raising children with ASDs come to experience more or less intimacy in their relationships, including what, if any, outside factors come to bear on these processes.

Study references are available upon request. Contact jake.johnson@wheaton.edu for more information.

METHODOLOGY

Constructivist Grounded Theory

In order to develop a theory of the process of intimacy negotiation among couples raising children with ASDs, a methodology informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was employed.

Research Questions

- How do couples raising children on the autism spectrum negotiate intimacy?
- What outside variables influence these negotiations?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected via conjoint, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 couples raising children with ASDs. Data analysis involved use of the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and a qualitative coding scheme of open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2007; LaRossa, 2005).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor for the study was ensured through the use of multiple coders (Patton, 2002), member checks (Shenton, 2004), achieving theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and leaving an audit trail of the various methodological decision-making processes (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993).

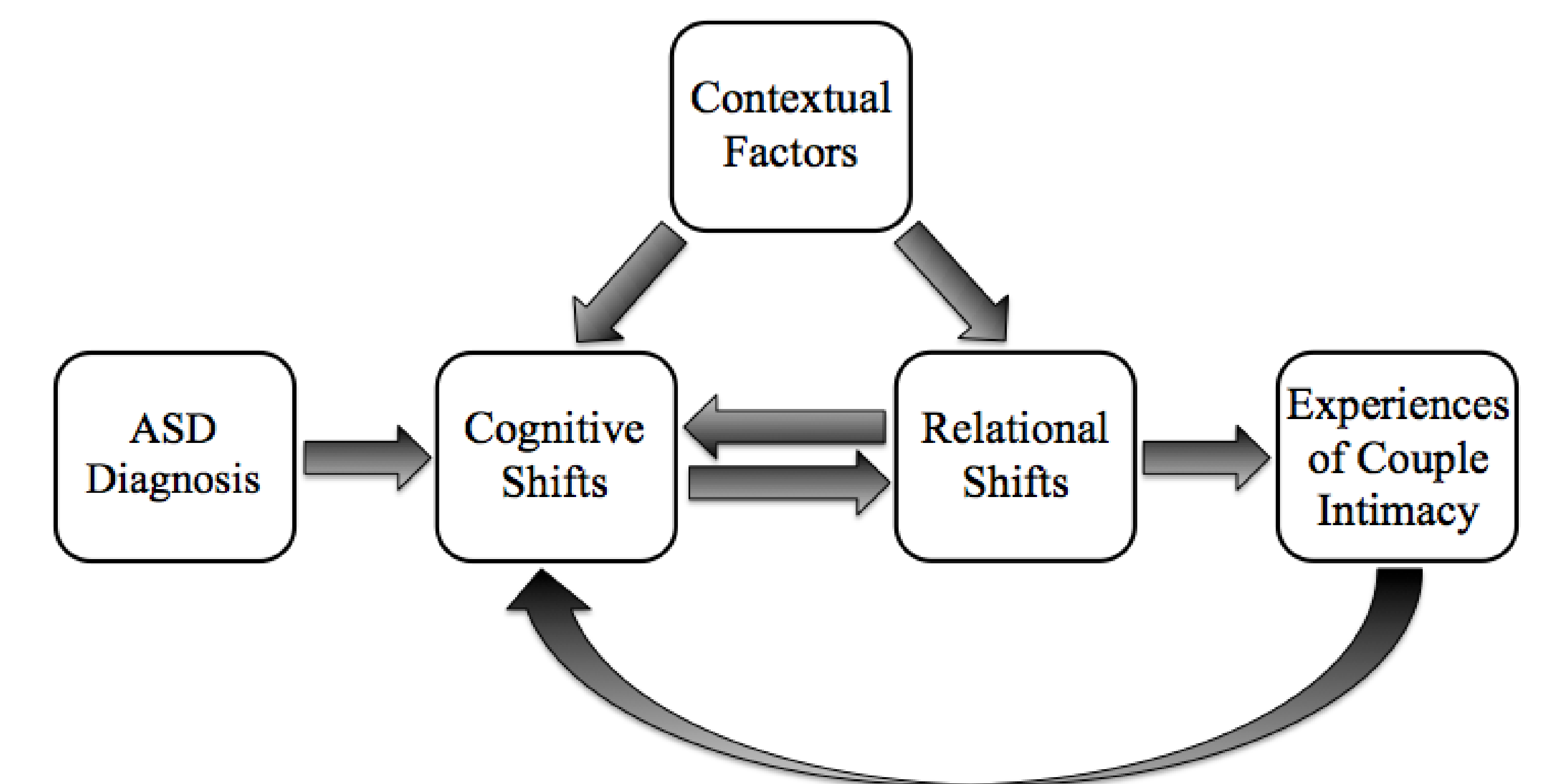
FINDINGS

This study found five core categories, and 13 sub-categories, related to how couples raising children on the autism spectrum negotiate intimacy:

Major Finding	Interview Data Source											
	001	002	003	004	005	006	007	008	009	010	011	012
Category 1: Making necessary cognitive shifts together												
Time together as a couple	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X
Child's impact on the couple relationship		X	X		X	X	X	X		X		
Childcare challenges	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Category 2: Consciously working as a team												
Sharing childcare workload	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Taking "me time"	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
ASD education and advocacy		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Category 3: Practicing enhanced communication												
Hearing and being heard	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Finding ways to effectively communicate with partner	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Resolving conflict together	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Category 4: Overcoming unique barriers to couple time												
Creatively carving out time together	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Locating quality childcare help	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Category 5: Demonstrating heightened sensibility toward partner												
Empathizing with partner's experiences	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Appreciating partner's contributions	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X

PROCESS MODEL

From these categories, the following process theory emerged regarding couples' negotiations of intimacy:



DISCUSSION

Cognitive Shifts (Category 1)

The first step in being able to successfully negotiate intimacy involves shifting expectations for what life as a couple will look like. Both partners need to be able to make these shifts to work toward the subsequent relational shifts necessary in experiencing intimacy.

Relational Shifts (Categories 2 – 5)

The more couples are able to engage in these "interactional" tasks, the more they will be able to experience their relationships as intimate. No one category of relational shifts was found to be more important than any other, nor were any of these categories found to precede or follow from any other. Also, the way couples were able to make relational shifts was found to impact the ways they made cognitive shifts, which in turn influenced their ability to make relational shifts, etc.

Contextual Factors

Couples' abilities to make the aforementioned shifts was found to be either aided or inhibited by a variety of outside influences, including levels of social support, having a foundational commitment to one's partner, and other interpersonal and institutional considerations.

Experiences of Couple Intimacy

The result of the degree to which couples navigate these cognitive and relational shifts, taking into account the influence of any contextual/outside factors on these processes, is a couple's experience of intimacy—which in itself is a process to be worked at and maintained, rather than simply a static point at which to arrive.