OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES IN ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A 6-YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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Background

- Lower rates of employment and independent living in autistic adults 1,2
- Lower subjective wellbeing 3,4
- Around 50% has a poor overall outcome 5
- But: large individual differences in outcomes
- Most studies are cross-sectional, mostly based on male and small samples

Examine level, change and predictors of objective and subjective functioning in autistic adults (18 to 65 years) across 6 years

Hypotheses

1. Improvement in objective and subjective functioning over time
2. Positive associations between objective and subjective functioning
3. Higher IQ predicts higher level of and greater improvement in objective functioning over time
4. Absence of co-occurring psychiatric conditions predicts higher subjective wellbeing

Sample

- Sample: 917 adults (492 women) (M age = 43.5 yrs; M age ASD diagnosis = 33.8 yrs), 62% with estimated IQ > 115
- Design: 6-year study with 5 waves of data (T0 to T4)
- Data collected via the Netherlands Autism Register (NAR): https://www.nederlandsautismergister.nl/english/

Measures

Data collected via online surveys

- Objective functioning: employment, independent living and friendships; range from very poor (0) to very good (8)
- Subjective wellbeing: range from ‘(almost) always unhappy’ (1) to ‘(almost) always happy’ (5)

Predictors:
- Age, gender, autism traits (AQ-Short), intellectual ability (7 IQ categories), age of ASD diagnosis, parental educational level, presence of co-occurring psychiatric conditions (yes=1; no=0)

Statistical analysis

- Latent growth curve models (LGM)

Results

- M objective functioning (across 5 waves) = 33% of autistic adults showed a (very) good outcome, 53% a fair outcome, 14% a (very) poor outcome
- M subjective wellbeing = 3, i.e. equally happy and unhappy

Findings support the 4 hypotheses

- Growth in obj. functioning from T2 to T4 (B = 0.105, SE = 0.026, p < .001), but no sign growth from T0 to T2
- Growth in subj. wellbeing from T0 to T4 (B = 0.055, SE = 0.009, p < .001)
- Positive associations between initial levels (r = .263; B = 0.455, SE = 0.086, p < .001) and change from T0 to T2 (r = .200; B = 0.010, SE = 0.005, p = .032) of obj. and subj. functioning

Discussion

- A majority of autistic adults showed a fair to good level of overall objective functioning, which may be related to the sample’s late ASD diagnosis and high intellectual ability
- Those with better objective outcomes also had a higher wellbeing; societal success may promote happiness and vice versa
- Older age, higher intellectual ability, fewer autism traits and absent co-occurring psychiatric conditions were predictors of a higher level of objective and/or subjective functioning
- After controlling for other factors, our findings suggest that autistic men and women are quite similar in their objective functioning and subjective wellbeing

- Study limitations: conclusions may not apply to samples with low IQ’s or early ASD diagnoses; data are mostly based on self-report, lack of objective tests

References