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Why Do People Want to Get Married?  
Marriage Insights from Young LDS Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Difficulties with social communication and understanding relationships are prominent characteristics of youth with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). In autism assessment, inquiries are often made to determine the developmental levels of insights into typical social relationships, including marriage. Understanding how religious beliefs and culture may shape perceptions of marriage is important to understand the needs of the child. It can help to clarify assessment and can inform intervention to help individuals with autism participate in social relationships. Our study looked at the insights about marriage and other social relationships reported by children, adolescents, and young adults who have been exposed to the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). Data were collected as part of autism assessments using the Autism Diagnostic Observation System, Second Edition (ADOS-2). We compared scores on the ADOS item for Insight into Social Relationships between our small sample of 16 youth and a large national sample. Responses with uniquely LDS beliefs are described in terms of the level of insight illustrated.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, marriage, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule.

Typical development of social relationships begins at birth. Infants and caregivers develop social relationships that persist through the lifespan. Social circles expand to include family members and close friends, and then the individual encounters the wider social world as he enters church, community and school groups. Close friendships form, adolescents begin to develop relationships with romantic partners, and for many individuals, the ultimate social relationship is marriage. When social development is not typical, as is the case persons with autism spectrum disorder, all of these relationships are possible.
with support, but the relationships might not develop beyond immediate family relationships, depending upon the level of severity of autism symptoms. One of the fastest growing areas in autism research is in social skills interventions to help individuals achieve the highest quality of life possible, specifically including social relationships (Kasari, Shire, Factor, McCracken, 2014).

A separate issue from establishment of complex social relationships is the desire for such relationships. Social motivation (Dawson, Meltzoff, Osterling, Rinaldi, J., & Brown, 1998), social awareness, and social competency are all distinct constructs that affect an individual's ability to build social relationships, and all are typically lower in individuals with ASD. In individuals with low levels of social competency and awareness, there still may exist some desire to form such relationships, however, even when understanding of the complexities of relationships is limited (Stokes, Newton & Kaur, 2007).

Children's typical development of insight into social relationships includes not only an understanding of multiple social relationships but also includes an expression of the person's own role in a social relationship. For example, insight into marriage might include some mention of spouses living together, helping each other, and forming a family. Understanding of one's own role in a marriage relationship might include something about helping, supporting, or loving a marriage partner.

Social motivation or desires for social relationships, particularly marriage, may be inherent, may come from enjoyment of close family relationships, or may be part of a religious belief system. From a developmental perspective, by age 4 or 5 most children recognize differences between genders and their play begins to include family roles of spouses, parents, and children (CDC, 2009). An advanced developmental task is to understand the emotional complexities of why someone may want to get married and the advantages and disadvantages of being in a marriage relationship. This usually begins to happen when children are about 8½–10 years old (Mazur, 1993), but may be delayed indefinitely for some individuals, including individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

Environmental influences and experiences are pathways to understanding social relationships for all children regardless of their developmental trajectories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We focused on the environmental influence of religious beliefs, culture, and instruction about marriage and how children with autism spectrum disorder may interpret these teachings. Specifically, we examined how individuals with autism respond to questions about marriage as part of the “gold standard” diagnostic assessment for autism symptoms, the Autism Diagnostic Observation System (ADOS-2: Lord, Rutter, DiLavore, Risi, Gotham & Bishop, 2012). We have noticed in clinical and research autism assessments that responses from children, youth, and young adults who have participated in religious instruction in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS Church) tended to contain some unique content relative to LDS teachings.

**Marriage and Autism**

Although marriage among individuals with autism has not been studied much as a dedicated topic, a few studies have included marriage as one aspect of the study. Individuals with autism have a lower rate of being in married/committed relationships than their typical peers (Lin, 2014; Gotham, Marvin, Taylor, et al., 2015, Bruggink, Huisman, Vuijk, Kraaij & Garnefski, 2016), even when compared to peers with other mental health diagnoses (Barneveld, Swaab, Fagel, Van Engeland, De Sonneville, 2014). Many individuals with autism do attempt to form romantic relationships, however, and some get married (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, Rutter, 2004; Stokes, et al., 2007; Farley, McMahon, Fombonne, et al., 2009). With the social motivation deficits typically present in ASD, however, social learning is impaired regarding appropriate romantic behaviors. Because of the underlying social difficulties, individuals with autism engage in more inappropriate romantic relationship behaviors than their typical peers (Stokes et al. 2007). Assessment of an individual's understanding of typical relationships such as friendship, romantic relationships, and marriage is important not only in forming a diagnostic impression, but also in planning for intervention to help individuals find success in social relationships.
LDS Teachings About Marriage

LDS doctrine centers on a belief in marriage and family relationships that continue beyond death. Children are taught about these beliefs beginning as toddlers in Nursery classes (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2008). Lessons emphasize eternal marriage, performed in LDS temples, as a way for a family to be together forever. Lessons on eternal marriage continue through adolescence and young adulthood. Additional vocabulary such as “temple marriage,” “eternal marriage,” and “forever family” are introduced, explained and frequently repeated in songs, scriptures, activities, videos, and graphic arts. Children who attend weekly church meetings hear these messages often. Even if children with autism do not participate in religious class instruction because of receptive language disorders, difficult behaviors or sensory sensitivities, LDS families emphasize these messages at home through weekly lessons and activities in Family Home Evening, reading church magazines and materials, and in conversations.

Individuals with autism are likely to learn the concepts and vocabulary about eternal marriage through a variety of teaching methods that circumvent possible learning disabilities and receptive language difficulties (e.g., visual aids, music, stories, scripture verses and direct instruction as part of structured lessons). The concept of eternal families through temple marriage may particularly appeal to individuals whose most comfortable and comforting social relationships are within their immediate families.

The question at hand in this study is whether young individuals with autism spectrum disorder, exposed to LDS culture and teachings, tend to express understanding and desire for marriage relationships at a more typical level than a national comparison sample of individuals with ASD.

Method

Participants

A total of 16 participants were Caucasian, native English speakers ranging in age from 5 to 23 years. One participant was Hispanic. Parents gave consent for all assessments of participants under age 18, with children and adolescents giving informed assent. Individuals over age 18 gave consent for participation. All participants scored in the average range or higher on standardized measures of cognitive abilities administered by study clinicians. Although direct questions about religious affiliation were not part of any of the research protocols, all participants volunteered information about participation in LDS activities (i.e., Young Men’s, Young Women’s, combined activities, Primary, ward membership, or ward culture) during the course of assessment. Because all assessments were conducted at BYU, such voluntary disclosures are not unusual in the course of any research project.

Measures

The “gold standard” for in-person diagnostic assessment of autism is the Autism Diagnostic Observation System, Second Edition (ADOS-2: Lord et al., 2012). The ADOS-2 has several modules for administration, depending on the language level of the individual. For individuals with speech that has not yet developed to complex sentences, no questions about relationships are asked. For all other individuals, including children possibly as young as 4 years old, questions about marriage and friendship are included in the assessment (Lord et al., 2012).

Responses to questions about marriage are not evaluated in isolation on the ADOS-2. Rather, all responses about relationships (friendship, romantic relationships, and marriage) are considered together and rated on a single item (Insight into Typical Social Situations and Relationships) according to the scale outlined in Table 1. Instructions to the evaluator are to consider, “(a) the nature of the specific relationship (e.g., what is friendship), and (b) the participant’s role in these relationships,” (Lord et al., 2012, p. 16-17).

The scoring algorithm expands to capture the diversity and complexity of social relationships that the assessment item is measuring. Some impairment exists if elements in understanding, such as the variety of social relationships is limited or if understanding of own role is limited across relationships. A clear impairment is indicated if the individual can only describe characteristics of one relationship without mention of his or her own role. Finally, a severe impairment exists if no or only very limited insight is evident.

The score on this ADOS-2 item is for clinical im-
pression only; it does not become part of the ASD diagnostic algorithm. There are many items on the ADOS-2 that are in this category – they inform the clinician about the client’s understanding of social communication for intervention planning purposes, but are not predictive enough to be included as part of the diagnostic algorithm.

Over the course of three years, assessments using the ADOS-2 were conducted as part of research projects approved by the Institutional Review Board of Brigham Young University. Some assessments were also part of clinical teaching/training case studies in autism assessment. Participants whose score met or exceeded the cutoff for autism spectrum disorder (total ADOS-2 score=7), were included in the sample.

Data Collection
All study participants were administered the ADOS-2, Module 3 (Fluent Speech: Child/Adolescent) or Module 4 (Fluent Speech: Adolescent/Adult) by a research reliable clinician. Responses were recorded on the ADOS-2 protocols in the normal course of assessment. The hypothesis for this research project was established after the clinician recorded all responses, so the potential for bias in recording responses was minimal. Total ADOS-2 scores and the score on the single item, “Insight into Typical Social Situations and Relationships” were taken from the ADOS-2 protocol for analysis.

A comparison group (n=878) was constituted from the National Database for Autism Research (NDAR: Payakachat, Tilford & Ungar, 2015; Hall, Huerta, McAuliffe, Farber, 2012). Records of total ADOS-2 scores and the single ADOS-2 item (Insight into Typical Social Situations and Relationships) on ADOS-2 Modules 3 and 4 were downloaded for analysis. Re-

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**Table 1. Questions About Marriage Related to the ADOS-2 Item, “Insight into Typical Social Situations and Relationships”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions Asked</th>
<th>Algorithm for Evaluating Responses*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Do you ever think about having a long-term relationship or getting married (when you are older)?”</td>
<td>0 = “Shows examples of insight into the nature of several typical social relationships (without evidence of lack of insight into these same relationships), including his or her own role in at least one. May show no more than one example of inaccurate understanding of other social relationships.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Why do you think some people get married or live with a boyfriend or girlfriend when they grow up?”</td>
<td>1 = “Shows examples of insight into several typical social relationships, but not into his or her own role, OR into only one relationship including his or her own role.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What would be nice about it?”</td>
<td>2 = “Shows some insight into one typical social relationship, though not necessarily about his or her own role in it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What might be difficult about being married or living with a boyfriend or girlfriend? Or living with a roommate?”</td>
<td>3 = “Shows no or limited insight into typical social relationships.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Scores on the ADOS indicate level of impairment. Higher scores indicate more impairment. Questions and scoring algorithm text from the ADOS-2, Modules 3 and 4 (Lord et al., 2012).
cords were cleaned to eliminate participants outside the age range of the study sample, and only individuals with ADOS-2 total scores meeting a cutoff score of 7 or higher (for autism spectrum classification on the ADOS-2) were included. Comparison group data were collected between 2000 and 2015.

Analysis was conducted using two methods: (1) Descriptive statistics for the Insight item score on the ADOS-2 were computed for both groups; (2) Further qualitative analysis of verbatim responses in the study sample included categorization of responses according to criteria based on the scoring algorithm for the Insight into Social Relationships item on the ADOS-2. In most cases, the clinician had recorded specific comments related to friends or marriage on the protocol on the scoring page at the time of original scoring. Categories for responses were assigned according to these notes and the clinical impressions of the administering clinician. Notes on responses (recorded verbatim) were listed in one of three graduated categories: examples of insight on marriage including his or her own role (highest level of insight), examples of insight but not his or her own role (moderate level of insight), and limited insight into marriage (limited or no insight). Comparison of qualitative data between groups was not possible because no verbatim responses were included in NDAR.

Results

Because of the large discrepancies in sample sizes, inferential tests of the null hypotheses were not conducted because spurious results are often found with notable sample size differences. The descriptive statistics illustrate some minimal differences in the samples, most notably that the study sample had marginally better (closer to 0) Insight scores ($M=1.44$, $SD=.629$) than the NDAR group ($M=1.54$, $SD=1.003$)

Although the study sample mean scores were closer to a typical development score than the participants in the NDAR sample on the Insight item, the responses from the study sample are not likely to be mistaken for responses from typically developing youth. Only 2 of 16 participants in the study sample mentioned love as a reason why people want to get married, for example. Only 2 of 16 participants expressed understanding of his or her own role in marriage. Four participants mentioned religion specifically as a reason to get married. Three mentioned “eternal” in their response.

Responses from the study sample most commonly mentioned “children,” “kids,” or “family,” as reasons for marriage. Fifteen of the sixteen participants talked about the responsibilities of having children or a family as a difficult aspect of marriage, with an overall sense of responsibility required to take care of children. One participant mentioned looking forward to playing with his children. Four mentioned, “If I get

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2. Participants and Comparison Sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$n=16$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>males = 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>females = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ADOS Scores Module 3 or 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Score on the ADOS Item, “Insight Into Typical Social Relationships.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Higher ADOS scores indicate more impairment. The Total ADOS-2 cutoff score for an ADOS classification of autism spectrum is 7.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to have a family” or hoping that they would be able to have a family. The desire to get married was highly prevalent in the study sample (14/16 participants).

Among the different levels of insight shown in responses, the largest group of participants gave responses judged to show a moderate level of insight (7/16). Four participants gave responses judged to show the highest level of insight (4/16), and 5/16 gave responses that showed limited to no insight into marriage relationships or roles. Female participants were represented in the highest (n=1) and moderate groups (n=3), but not the limited insight group. Comments from children younger than 12 (n=2) were represented in the moderate and limited insight groups only. Individuals 16 and older were in both the highest insight group (n=2) and the moderate group (n=1) only.

Discussion

This study examined insights about marriage within a small sample of individuals with autism spectrum disorder symptoms who participated in research and teaching/training case studies in a predominantly LDS community setting. Our sample included children, adolescents, and young adults who had been exposed to LDS culture and teachings about marriage. When compared to a national sample, scores on a single assessment item, the “Insight Into Typical Social Relationships” were somewhat higher and more consistent with typical social development. The Insight item on the ADOS-2 is a combined rating of an individual’s insight and understanding of his or her own role in friendship and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships as well as marriage. This confound makes it impossible to compare insight into marriage directly across samples, but the qualitative analysis of the verbatim responses about each of these relationships showed the majority of responses (11/16) to have moderate or high levels of insight into marriage relationships.

Our conclusion is that the slightly more typical scores found within our sample may be reflecting a common understanding of marriage within an LDS population of individuals with ASD. Responses from the study sample to questions about friendship and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships were quite consistent with the clinician’s experience in other populations over nine years of administering the ADOS in research and clinical practice. However, only the responses about marriage stood out as being distinctly different from ADOS assessments in other diverse populations.

The mean score in the study sample in Insight was 1.44, falling slightly closer to a score of 1, representing insight into only one relationship, or insight into several relationships, but not his or her own role. The participants’ mean score was not as close to the score of 2 indicating increasingly limited insight (only one type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Example of Insight into Marriage, Including Own Role</th>
<th>Desire to Get Married?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16+</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Down at BYU, culturally a big deal [marriage], norm expected. Social reasons (for marriage), obligations. In other cases, people meet each other, want to be together. I prefer having private space. Kids are a huge commitment, you have to make sure of their basic needs, food, water, sleep, school, extra curricular.</td>
<td>I want to develop socially, develop close relationships, hard to see that in the current state I am in. I don’t see myself... Pretty content living alone. Not a living pattern I am dying to pursue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>[People want to get married because of] religious stuff, not sure how I’d word it. [I want to] have a family, someone you love always [would] be with you. Raising children would be hard--finance, I need a good financial plan for when I grow up.</td>
<td>[I want to] marry someone, obviously, then hang out with my dorm buddies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-13</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>[People] want to have children, have someone who would pay the bills, someone who might get a job, someone to wake up with. [It would be difficult] paying attention to the other one’s needs.</td>
<td>I want an eternal family, when I am way, way older.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of relationship without understanding of own role). Insights may not translate directly into establishment of successful marriage relationships in the future, but suggest that in individuals with ASD, a more typical understanding of why people get married and what marriage relationships might be like is an advantage of being exposed to LDS doctrines about marriage as a child and adolescent. Participants frequently cited the importance of marriage within the LDS culture as part of their desire to be married, suggesting an awareness of social convention and expectation related to their own lives.

These findings are consistent with other research regarding the protective factors and relatively favorable outcomes that may exist within individuals with autism who also participate in LDS faith activities, in-
struction, culture, and community. Farley, et al. (2009) found that adult outcomes were better than expected in a longitudinal follow up of individuals with autism in Utah, perhaps due to predominant involvement of the sample participants in LDS religion, communities, and culture. Another longitudinal study of protective factors in risk for eating disorders among female students at BYU found similarly favorable outcomes that may be associated with the support found in LDS communities (Fischer, et al., 2013).

Finally, we believe that the foundational understanding of marriage relationships found in this study sample may give these children, adolescents, and young adults with autism a “headstart” or advantage in intervention and therapy to develop satisfying involvement in typical social relationships in adulthood. Directions for future study include longitudinal follow up of the sample into adulthood to monitor marriage outcomes. Further exploration of insights into marriage and other romantic relationships using in-depth interviews may clarify the level of internalization of LDS teachings about marriage in individuals with autism and what effects these insights have on dating, romantic behavior, and marriage relationships.

Limitations on the study include the small size of the study sample and the lack of verbatim responses within the NDAR sample for comparison. Also, demographic information is not generally available in NDAR records to determine if the comparison was appropriate. The size of the NDAR sample was intended to mitigate the influence of demographic differences. Further, comments about marriage are not scored separately from other social relationships, so the Insight scores are merely an approximation of the possible differences in marriage understanding that make up part of the Insight item score.

The influences of LDS culture and beliefs about marriage are evident in the comments made within this small sample of youth with autism spectrum disorder during autism assessment. It is possible that this influence has resulted in a higher level understanding of social relationships (including marriage), when compared to a national sample. If this is actually the case, LDS individuals with autism may be more responsive to interventions to increase the quality of social relationships that lead to marriage. The desire to be married is highly prevalent within the study sample, which is further indication of potential for benefit from social relationship intervention.

References


Fischer L., Fischer J., Valentine L., et al. (2013). Longitudinal course of female eating disorder risk at Brigham Young Uni-


