

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

Objective

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.nederlandsautismeregister.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

Predictors obj. & subj. functioning

- Older age → 23%
- Fewer autism traits →
- Higher intellectual ability →
- No co-occurring conditions →
- Fewer autism traits → 13%
- Lower intellectual ability →
- No co-occurring conditions →

NB: Men and women did not differ in initial level nor change in objective and subjective 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

1: Howlin & Moss (2012). *Can J Psychiatry*, 57, 275-283. 2: Roux et al. (2013). *JAACAP*, 52, 931-939. 3: Ayres et al. (2018). *Autism*, 22, 774-783. 4: van Heijst & Geurts (2015). *Autism*, 19, 158-167. 5: Mason et al. (2020). *JADD*.

