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**Raising a Child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder:
The Experience of Stigma by Association,
its Impact on Caregiver Wellbeing, the Influence of Signature Strengths,
and the Experience of Growth**

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Abstract

The life of a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is known to include many difficulties, not only due to social, behavioural and communication difficulties, but also as the child does not fit society's specifications of 'normal.' Stressors encountered by caregivers raising a child with an ASD are well documented; however one often overlooked stressor for caregivers is *stigma by association*. Research to date has begun to explore the impact of stigma by association on the wellbeing of caregivers raising children with an ASD. However research is scarce, and has not yet addressed how some caregivers who experience stigma by association manage to resist this negative influence. Through two studies this thesis explored the experience of caregivers of children with ASDs New Zealand, looking in particular at stigma by association and whether personal signature strengths (particularly hope, gratitude and curiosity) may decrease its impact on caregiver wellbeing. It also examined whether, in spite of documented negative outcomes for caregivers, there is in fact room for a caregiver to experience growth as a byproduct of raising a child with an ASD.

Participants took part in interviews (Study One, six participants), or completed an online questionnaire (Study Two, 100 participants). All caregivers spoke of difficulties associated with raising their child which on the whole reflected previous research. Difficulties included practical restrictions, personal costs and social stigma. Every caregiver was found to have experienced stigma by association. Study Two participants had all encountered both enacted and internalised stigma by association in the previous six months, and stigma by association had a significant negative relationship with caregiver wellbeing. Positively, if a caregiver possessed higher levels of hope or gratitude, mediation analysis found the presence of these strengths decreased the influence of stigma by association on wellbeing. Promisingly, all caregivers were also able to identify many ways in which they had grown as a byproduct of the experience of raising their child, whether it was through increased positive emotions, experiences, or personal development. Findings suggest that in spite of caregiver's challenges they may not only survive, but thrive.

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Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Contents	iii
List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	viii
Preface	ix
SECTION ONE	1
Chapter One: Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Importance of Primary Caregivers	1
Epidemiology of Autism Spectrum Disorders.....	1
The ASD Difficulties Triad and our Social World.....	3
Chapter Two: The Challenges of Raising a Child with an ASD	5
Supporting a Child with an ASD.....	5
Difficulties Associated with Raising a Child with an ASD.....	5
Raising a Child with an ASD in New Zealand.....	8
Chapter Three: How Stigma Contributes to the Challenges of Raising a Child with an ASD ...	11
The Nature of Stigma.....	11
The Development of Stigma.....	12
Stigma Terminology.....	13
The Impact of Stigma.....	14
The Stigma of ASDs.....	15
Stigma by Association.....	15
Stigma by Association and ASDs.....	16
Chapter Four: Protecting The Wellbeing of Caregivers of Children with an ASD	21
Wellbeing: A Positive Psychological Perspective.....	21
Caregiver Wellbeing: Staying Well in the Face of Adversity.....	22
External Protective Factors.....	22
Internal Protective Factors.....	23
Wellbeing in the Face of Stigma by Association.....	25
Enduring Stigma By Association When Raising a Child with an ASD.....	26
Individual Traits as Protective Factors.....	27
Signature Strengths.....	27
Chapter Five: Positive Outcomes for a Caregiver of a Child with an ASD?	34
Caregiver Growth Associated with Raising a Child with an ASD.....	34
Chapter Six: Introduction to the Present Research	38
SECTION TWO	40
Chapter Seven: Study One: Exploring Caregiver Experiences of Raising a Child with ASD, Stigma By Association, and Growth in New Zealand	40
Method.....	40
Chapter Eight: Study One Results	43
Having a Child with an ASD is Hard.....	43

.....	44
Practical Restrictions	44
Personal Cost	48
Social Stigma.....	51
Having a Child with an ASD is Not All Bad	56
Positive Emotions	56
Positive Engagements.....	58
Personal Development	60
Chapter Nine: Study One Discussion	65
What Challenges are Encountered by Caregivers of Children with ASDs in NZ?	65
Is the Phenomena of Stigma by Association Encountered by NZ Caregivers, and what are its Consequences?.....	67
Do Caregivers Recognise Experiences of Growth as a By-product of Raising Their Child?	69
SECTION THREE	74
Chapter Ten: Study Two: Surveying the Experience of Stigma by Association, Wellbeing, and Growth in Caregivers of Children with ASDs	74
Design and Methods.....	74
Target Sample.....	75
Ethical Considerations	75
Measures	76
Questionnaire Design	88
Questionnaire Trial	90
Recruitment.....	90
Considerations Prior to Statistical Analysis	91
Quantitative Data Analysis	92
Qualitative Data Analysis.....	93
Chapter Eleven: Study Two Results	94
Statistical Analysis	94
Descriptive Statistics.....	94
Exploratory Analysis	102
Qualitative Analysis	111
Study Two: Having a Child with an ASD is Hard.....	111
Study Two: Having a Child with an ASD is Not All Bad	114
Chapter Twelve: Study Two Discussion	117
Study Two: Summary of Findings	117
Do New Zealand Primary Caregivers of Children with ASD Experience Stigma by Association, and if so what are the Common Experiences?.....	117
Does Stigma by Association Negatively Affect Caregiver Wellbeing?	120

Can Caregiver Signature Strengths of Hope, Gratitude or Curiosity Positively Influence Caregiver Wellbeing and Reduce the Impact of Stigma by Association on Wellbeing? ...	122
Do Caregivers Identify Common Experiences of Growth as a Byproduct of Raising their Child?	123
SECTION FOUR	127
Chapter Thirteen: Overall Findings: Understanding Stigma by Association and the Exploration of Wellbeing and Growth in Caregivers of Children with ASDs	127
Do Caregivers of Children with an ASD in NZ Experience Similar Challenges to Those Identified in Previous Research?.....	128
Practical Restrictions.....	128
Personal Costs	129
Do New Zealand Caregivers of Children with ASD Experience Stigma by Association, and if so what are the Common Experiences?	130
Experienced Stigma by Association	131
Internalised Stigma By Association	133
Individual Caregiver Characteristics Associated with Decreased Stigma by Association Severity	133
Can the Presence of Caregiver Signature Strengths of Hope, Gratitude, or Curiosity Explain why Some Caregivers Cope Better than Others with the Impact of Stigma by Association on Wellbeing?	134
In Spite of how Difficult the Experience of Raising a Child with an ASD can be, can Caregivers Experience Personal Growth as a Byproduct of this Experience?	136
Strengths and Limitations of this Research and Suggestions for Future Research	138
Concluding Comments.....	142
References	143
Appendices	161
Appendix A DSM-IV-TR Criteria for ASDs and related Pervasive Developmental Disorders	161
Diagnostic criteria for 299.00 Autistic Disorder.....	161
Appendix B The VIA Inventory of Strengths and Virtues	164
Appendix C Study One: Ethical Permission	165
Appendix D Study One: Semi Structured Interview Question Schedule.....	166
Appendix E Study One: Information Sheet	167
Appendix F Study One: Consent Form	169
Appendix G Study Two: Information Sheet	170
Appendix H Study Two: Ethics Permission.....	172
Appendix I C-SAM Pilot Information and Questions.....	173
Appendix J C-SAM Pilot Email	177
Appendix K CSAM Pilot Statistical Supplements.....	178
Appendix L.....	180

Appendix M Study Two: Poster Advertisement	197
Appendix O Study Two: Email Advertisement.....	199
Appendix P Study Two: Data Analysis Supplementary Tables	200
Appendix Q Additional Subthemes Identified During Analysis of Study Two Open Ended Questions.....	203
Having a Child with an ASD is Hard	203
Having a Child with an ASD is Not all Bad.....	206

List of Figures

Figure 8.1. Thematic Map Showing Themes Related to How Caregivers Identified Having a Child with an ASD is Hard	44
Figure 8.2. Thematic Map Showing Themes Related to How Having a Child with an ASD is Not All Bad.....	56
Figure 11.1. Effects of Stigma by Association and Hope on Wellbeing, with Standardised Regression Coefficients Shown in Parentheses (N = 87)	107
Figure 11.2. Effects of Stigma by Association and Gratitude on Wellbeing, with Standardised Regression Coefficients Shown in Parentheses (N = 88)	108
Figure 11.3. Map of Themes for Study Two Related to the Overarching Theme: Having a Child with an ASD is Hard	112
Figure 11.4. Map of Themes from Study Two Related to the Overarching Theme: Having a Child with an ASD is Not All Bad.....	115

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Stigma Experiences of Caregivers of Children with ASDs.....	19
Table 10.1	Development of Experienced Stigma Themes for use in the Caregiver Stigma By Association Measure.....	78
Table 10.2	Development of Internalised Stigma Themes for use in the Caregiver Stigma By Association Measure.....	79
Table 11.1	Caregiver Demographic Characteristics, N = 100	95
Table 11.2	Child Demographic Characteristics, N = 100.....	97
Table 11.3	Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliability of the Questionnaire Variables	98
Table 11.4	Principal Component Analysis Results of One Factor Solution for the C-SAM.....	99
Table 11.5	Analysis Results of the Caregiver Stigma by Association Measure (C-SAM) Item Scoring and Item Correlations, N = 100	101
Table 11.6	Pearson's Correlations Between Stigma by Association, Wellbeing, Signature Strengths, Positive Change, and Caregiver Variables	103
Table 11.7	Results Individual Regression Analysis Results of Significant Correlates with WEMWBS Scores.....	105
Table 11.8	The Unstandardised Beta Values, Standardised Beta Values, R^2 , Effect Sizes, and Significance for a Regression of Wellbeing on Stigma by Association and Hope .	107
Table 11.9	The Unstandardised Beta Values, Standardised Beta Values, R^2 , Effect Size and Significance for a Regression of Wellbeing on Stigma by Association and Gratitude	108
Table 11.10	LMS-PCS Item Rating Frequencies, Item Means, and Standard Deviations (N = 98)	110