The Effects of Toastmasters for Adults on the Autism Spectrum: An Ongoing Qualitative Investigation

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Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face social-communication challenges that most often require intervention. While extensive services exist for children with ASD, a services gap exists in adulthood (Steinbrenner et al., 2020), leaving many autistic adults with limited opportunities for joining social groups that are designed to fit their needs. Social skills interventions, which focus on teaching specific skills (e.g., peer entry strategies), have shown efficacy (Laugeson et al., 2015). However, the skills are often taught out of “real-world” contexts, limiting their generalizability. Further, autistic people are often taught to act in neurotypical ways, which can lead to anxiety (Monahan et al., 2021). Alternative programs for adults with ASD are needed to address these issues. Through thousands of chapters, Toastmasters is a well-established international organization that teaches communication and leadership skills through public speaking. A local non-profit organization, the Orange County Asperger’s Support Group (OCASG) offers Toastmasters exclusively for adults on the autism spectrum. For the present study, the Primary Investigators partnered with OCASG to investigate whether Toastmasters program is an effective program for people with ASD. Adults with ASD who were current or former Toastmasters members (N=22) were individually interviewed (~45 mins) along with their caregivers and/or mentors (N=11), and interviews were transcribed and are currently being coded to identify common themes. Example themes that have emanated from our initial coding of transcripts include direct and indirect consequences of participation. Direct consequences of participation include improvements in explicit communication skills (e.g., impromptu speaking), increased confidence, and sense of community. Indirect consequences of participation include establishing friendships/social connection, improved social-communication skills (e.g., understanding social cues), and mental health benefits. Coding procedures and additional preliminary themes will be presented. Results from this ongoing study will help us understand the impact Toastmasters can have on autistic individuals.