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Spoiled child or a child with autism: Exploring Somali and Eritrean parents' understanding of autism and their experience with stigma and discrimination in Norway

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Background: Autism is a major public health problem among immigrants, with immigrants from Somalia and Eritrea having the highest prevalence in Norway. This study explored the knowledge of the causes and treatment of autism and discriminations experienced by Somali and Eritrean parents of children with autism in Norway.

Method: A qualitative study was used to collect data through in-depth interviews with Somali and Eritrean parents (N=15) of children with autism living in Norway using a pilot-tested semi-structured interview guide. A mix of purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants who 1) identified as an Eritrean or Somali immigrant, 2) identified as a parent of a child with autism, and 3) were 18 years and older. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated and cleaned for errors. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using Nvivo12 software.

Results: The findings showed that most of Somali and Eritrean parents had very good knowledge of the risk factors for and treatment of autism. However, some parents believed that the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine was behind the autism of their children, while others have reported that bone marrow from camels can help alleviate the symptoms of autism. Widespread stigma, judgment, blaming and subsequent isolation of parents and children with autism were reported. This was associated with a lack of knowledge about autism among Eritrean and Somali communities in Norway.

Conclusion: These results underscore the urgency for community awareness about autism. Developing and disseminating culturally tailored information that reflects the unique sociocultural contexts of Somali and Eritrean communities may lessen the discrimination and stigma experienced by parents and children with autism in Norway.

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