Religiosity and family functionality in Romanian Orthodox religion

Petruta-Paraschiva Rusu a*, Maria-Nicoleta Turliucb

aFaculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, ‘Alexandru Ioan Cuza’ University, Toma Cozma Street no 3, Iaşi, 700554, Romania

Abstract

The aims of the present paper were: (1) to explore whether personal and family religiosity can predict family functionality for Romanian Orthodox believers and (2) to investigate the influence of some of the socio-demographic factors on family functionality, and personal and family religiosity. The research sample consisted of 140 married people with children. We used the following instruments: Self-Report Family Inventory, Religious Faith Questionnaire, Religious Behaviour Questionnaire and Family Religiosity Questionnaire. The results of the regression analysis indicate that family religiosity is a better predictor for family functionality than personal religiosity. The best predictor for family functionality is family religious behaviour, followed by family religious faith, personal religious behaviour and personal religious faith. Independent sample t-test results suggest that family functionality is influenced by years of marriage, but it is not influenced by gender or number of children. Also, religiosity is influenced by gender, women reporting significant higher scores than men on personal religious behaviour, personal religious faith and family religious faith. There are no significant differences between rural and urban people in terms of family functionality, or personal and family religiosity. The results provide evidence to support the relation between personal religiosity, family religiosity, demographic factors and family functionality for Romanian Orthodox believers. Implications of these findings for marriage and family therapy are discussed.

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Keywords: personal religiosity, family religiosity, family functionality, Romanian Orthodox religion

1. Introduction

Research results have demonstrated that valuing religion within the family and regular religious practice influence family functionality, being associated with a high degree of marital stability and marital satisfaction (Larson & Goltz, 1989; Call & Heaton, 1997; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001). In a study analysing the ways in which religion influences marriage, Marks (2005) showed that spiritual beliefs influence marriage through three channels: 1. spiritual beliefs discourage divorce; 2. sharing the same spiritual beliefs means spouses have similar views on family life; 3. faith in God protects marriage and is a support that helps couples overcome difficult situations. Recently, Lambert and Dollahite (2008), by studying very religious couples of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths, identified the processes by which religiosity influences marital commitment: 1. including God as the third cord in marriage (the belief that God made it possible for the two spouses to meet and the continuous presence of God in marriage); 2. belief in marriage as a religious institution that can and must survive; and 3. finding a meaning in committing to marriage. Sharing the same values (faith in God, religious commitment and commitment to good parenting) are associated with the ability to manage conflicts in marriage (Rosen-Grandon, Myers & Hattie, 2004).

Many of the studies that analyse the factors that determine the functionality of the marital relationship also take into account socio-demographic factors. Haynes, Floyd, Lemsky, Rogers, Winemiller, Heilman, Werle, Murphy & Cardone (1992) demonstrated that there are gender differences regarding the perceptions of marital functionality and satisfaction, men reporting higher levels than women; on the other hand, Levenson, Carstensen and Gottman

* Petruţa-Paraschiva Rusu. Tel.: +40 745366015; fax: +40 230 520465.
E-mail address: petrutarusu@gmail.com.

1877-0428 © 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license. Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the 2nd World Conference on Psychology, Counselling and Guidance. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.106
(1993) maintain that there are no gender differences regarding marital satisfaction. As far as the number of years of marriage is concerned, studies vary with respect to its influence on marital functionality. Some researchers maintain a decrease of marital functionality and satisfaction over time (Glenn, 1990), whereas a number of others show that there are fluctuations in the level of functionality and satisfaction over time (Collins & Coltrane, 1991). Other studies report the negative influence of the number of children on marital quality (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999).

Most studies on the relation between religiosity and family functionality have been conducted in western cultures, on people from Neo-Protestant religions. In Romania, more than 87% of the population are Romanian Orthodox believers. Since the religion and cultural background of the Romanian population differ, the objective of the present study is to analyse the relation between religiosity and marital functionality in Romanian Orthodox believers, as well as the influence of certain socio-demographic factors on religiosity and family functionality.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The research sample consisted of 140 subjects, 95 women and 45 men, 72 from rural habitats and 68 from urban habitats, people of orthodox religion, married, with children. The participants were between 22 and 73 years old, with an average age of 39.05. We used a snowball sampling technique and identified respondents among university students who then referred us to other respondents. The intention of this research was made clear and the confidentiality of the respondents was assured. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires in the privacy of their homes and to return them at a time and place established by mutual agreement.

2.2 Instruments

We used the following instruments:

The Self-Report Family Inventory (Beavers, Hampson & Hulgus, 1985), which has 36 items, ranging from 1 = fits our household very well, to 5 = does not fit our household at all, which assess the individual’s perception of his/her family functionality. The inventory has five subscales: health/competence, conflict, cohesion, expressiveness and leadership. In the present study we consider the general family functionality, whose score is given by the sum of the subjects’ answers to all the items of the scale. The Cronbach's alpha for the total score is \( \alpha = 0.74 \).

The Religious Faith Questionnaire (Cucoș & Labăr, 2007) has fourteen items ranging from 1 = not true to 4 = always true, which assess personal religious faith (to what extent the subjects believe in God and in divine help, and consider themselves religious people). The Cronbach's alpha for the personal religious faith dimension is \( \alpha = 0.90 \).

The Religious Behaviour Questionnaire (Cucoș & Labăr, 2007) has eighteen items ranging from 1 = not true to 4 = always true, which assess personal religious behaviour (prayer, going to church, bringing religious arguments into discussions, fasting, confession, eucharist). The Cronbach's alpha for the personal religious behaviour dimension is \( \alpha = 0.93 \).

The Family Religiosity Questionnaire was devised by us for the purpose of carrying out this research. The questionnaire has eighteen items ranging from 1 = not true to 4 = always true. The questionnaire assesses two dimensions: religious faith (beliefs about God’s role in the evolution of the couple, observing Christian teachings within the family, to what extent faith offers support in solving family difficulties) and religious behaviour (taking part in religious services together with the other spouse, praying together, fasting together, asking the confessor’s advice). The Cronbach's alpha for the two scales of the questionnaire are: for the religious faith dimension, \( \alpha = 0.92 \), and for the religious behaviour dimension, \( \alpha = 0.90 \). To check the factorial validity of the scale we applied factor analysis, using principal component analysis and the Varimax rotation method. After rotation, the two factors explained 59.79% of the eighteen-item variance, the first factor covering 30.03% of the variance, and the second one covering 29.76% of the variance. The results thus indicate of the strong reliability and stability of the questionnaire.

3. Results

In this section, we present the results of regression analysis and independent sample t-tests. Regression analysis is used for modelling and analysing several variables, when the aim is to understand how the typical value of the dependent variable changes when any one of the independent variables is varied, while the other independent variables are held fixed. The independent t-test was used to test the significance of the effect of the independent variables on dependent variables. In the tables, t and p values are presented.

The results (table 1) show that the best predictor for family functionality is family religious behaviour (which explains 15.2% of the family functionality variance), followed by family religious faith (which explains 12.4% of
the variance), personal religious behaviour (explaining 11% of the variance) and personal religious faith (accounting for 6.4% of the variance).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcccc}
\hline
Predictive variable & R & R^2 & $\beta$ & SE B \\
\hline
Personal religious faith & .253 & .064 & .25 & .16 \\
Personal religious behaviour & .331 & .110 & .33 & .08 \\
Family religious faith & .352 & .124 & .35 & .16 \\
Family religious behaviour & .389 & .152 & .38 & .14 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Results for regression analysis on predicting family functionality from personal and family religiosity}
\end{table}

An independent sample t-test was used to analyse the influence of the number of years of marriage on family functionality, and personal and family religiosity. The scores of the variable years of marriage were divided according to the median test (med=15). Group 1 refers to people married for fewer than fifteen years, and Group 2 refers to people married for more than fifteen years. The results are presented in Table 2.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcccccc}
\hline
Variable & Years of marriage & N & Mean & SD & t & df & p \\
\hline
Family functionality & 1,00 & 75 & 161.66 & 10.58 & 2.78 & 138 & .00 \\
 & 2,00 & 65 & 155.86 & 14.02 & & & \\
Personal religiosity & 1,00 & 75 & 102.38 & 16.07 & 1.825 & 138 & .07 \\
 & 2,00 & 65 & 97.27 & 17.02 & & & \\
Family religiosity & 1,00 & 75 & 62.52 & 11.37 & 2.02 & 138 & .04 \\
 & 2,00 & 65 & 58.41 & 12.60 & & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Independent sample t-test results of family functionality, personal religiosity and family religiosity scores according to years of marriage}
\end{table}

The data indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the scores for family functionality at $p \leq 0.05$ ($t (138) = 2.78$) between Group 1 and Group 2, the level of family functionality of the subjects married for fewer than fifteen years ($m= 161.66$) is significantly higher than that of the subjects married for more than fifteen years ($m=155.86$). Also, the results show that the number of years of marriage has a significant influence on family religiosity. The results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the scores of family religiosity at $p \leq 0.05$ ($t (138) = 2.02$) between Group 1 and Group 2, the religiosity level of the subjects married for fewer than fifteen years ($m= 62.52$) is significantly higher than that of the subjects married for over fifteen years ($m=58.41$).

In order to determine gender differences in the perception of family functionality, personal religiosity and family religiosity, an independent sample t-test was conducted (Table 3).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lcccccc}
\hline
Variable & Gender & N & Mean & SD & t & df & p \\
\hline
Family functionality & Male & 45 & 158.53 & 13.58 & -2.28 & 138 & .07 \\
 & Female & 95 & 159.17 & 12.17 & & & \\
Personal religiosity & Male & 45 & 93.44 & 19.95 & -2.93 & 64 & .99 \\
 & Female & 95 & 103.12 & 13.91 & & & \\
Family religiosity & Male & 45 & 57.60 & 13.20 & -2.05 & 138 & .04 \\
 & Female & 95 & 62.04 & 11.32 & & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Independent sample t-test results of family functionality, personal religiosity and family religiosity scores according to gender}
\end{table}

The independent sample t-test (Table 3) shows that there are gender differences in the perception of personal and family religiosity. The differences are statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$ ($t (138) = -2.93$) for personal religiosity, women reporting a significantly higher level of personal religiosity ($m= 103.12$) than men ($m= 93.44$). Also, in Table 3 we see statistically significant gender differences of $p \leq 0.05$ ($t (138) = -2.17$) for family religiosity, women...
reporting a significantly higher level of family religiosity (m= 55) than men (m= 51). There are no gender differences in the scores of the subjects with regard to family functionality.

An independent sample t-test shows that the environment (urban or rural) and the number of children do not influence family functionality, personal religiosity or family religiosity.

4. Discussion

The study analyses the relationship between religiosity (personal and familial) and family functionality, as well as the influence of certain socio-demographic factors (years of marriage, gender, environment, number of children) on family functionality, personal and family religiosity. The results show that family religiosity is a better predictor of marital functionality than personal religiosity. The best predictor of family functionality is family religious behaviour, followed by family religious faith and, to a lesser extent, personal religious behaviour and personal religious faith. The fact that the spouses share the same religious convictions and that they manifest religious behaviour positively influences the couple's relationship. The findings of the present study are consistent with other studies which show that: sharing religious holiday rituals correlates with marital satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), sharing religious experience correlates with marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997), and religious participation correlates with high levels of marital commitment and increased marital satisfaction (Larson & Goltz, 1989). In the light of the relation between family religiosity and marital functionality which was found in the present study, Romanian couples and marriage therapists should be prepared to integrate religiosity in any therapy. Duba and Watts (2009) recommend therapists working with religious couples to: (a) systematically assess the couple’s religious faith, preferences and potential conflicts; (b) demonstrate respect for and try to use the couple's religious beliefs to establish the therapeutic relationship; (c) investigate together with the partners the strengths, supports and opportunities of their religious beliefs in marriage; (d) integrate the religious language of the couple in the therapeutic process; (e) consult with religious leaders who can better understand the couple’s needs and beliefs.

The data obtained indicate that the subjects who have been married for fewer than fifteen years perceive a higher level of family functionality, unlike those married for more than fifteen years. During the first stages of the family lifecycle an idealization of the partner or of the relationship may appear more frequently. Platzer (1985) shows that the subjects who overestimate their partner’s qualities have a higher relationship satisfaction, are more committed to the relationship, love their partner more, are more willing to be submissive and have fewer health problems.

In this research it was also found that there are differences in family religiosity according to the number of years of marriage, people married for fewer than fifteen years having significantly higher scores of family religiosity compared with those married for over fifteen years. A possible explanation for this is the fact that people married for more than fifteen years lived their childhood under the communist regime, which forbade religious education and overt religiosity. Once the communist regime fell, the religiosity of the people living in ex-communist countries grew. Inglehart (2010), while studying the relationship between religiosity and well-being, concluded that in the Central and East European ex-communist countries people’s religiosity increased after the fall of communism, although well-being remained poor.

Gender does not influence the perception of family functionality, health or competence but the results of this research show that there are gender differences in terms of personal and family religiosity. Women report scores significantly higher than men for personal religious faith and personal religious behaviour and they perceive religious faith as having a larger role in the development of the married relationship and in overcoming difficult situations. The gender differences in religiosity are sustained by a series of studies. Loewenthal, MacLeod and Cinnirella (2001) show that women are more religious than men only in Christian religions, whereas in the Jewish and Muslim religions men are more religious than women and more actively involved in the life of the religious congregation. Therefore, the results we obtained for the Orthodox Christian population correlate with the ones obtained for other Christian religions.

5. Conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that religiosity is related to family functionality in the case of Romanian Orthodox believers. Family religious behaviour has a greater impact on family functionality than family religious faith, a finding consistent with earlier researches (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Call & Heaton, 1997; Larson & Goltz, 1989). Family functionality is influenced by the length of the marriage, being higher in the first years, as Platzer also suggested (1985), but it is not influenced by gender or number of children. Also, religiosity is influenced by gender,
women reporting significantly higher scores than men on personal religious behaviour, personal religious faith and family religious faith. There are no significant differences between rural and urban people in terms of family functionality, or personal and family religiosity.

The present study helps us to understand the influence that certain socio-demographic factors have on family functionality within a sample of married people of Romanian Orthodox religion in Romania. Most of the research on this topic is performed on samples of the North American population and particularly includes people of Neo-Protestant religions. Yet, more often than not, the results of such research are not conclusive for other religions as well. Considering the differences between Neo-Protestant religions and the Orthodox religion regarding faith and behaviour, family rituals and traditions, mentality and cultural context, we see it as essential to conduct research on a sample population of Orthodox religion in order to understand the predictive value of clients’ religiosity and to integrate religiosity adequately in the professional activity of family and couple therapists.

Acknowledgements: This work was partially supported by the the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646]

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