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Marital quality and religiousness of couples parenting children with autism

Abstract:

A number of research projects have shown that both religiousness and quality of the marital relationship are important resources that can be used by parents rearing children diagnosed with autism. Our article brings up the link between religiousness of parents who have children with autism and the quality of their marriage. Fifty-three married couples (106 persons) living in Poland and bringing up children diagnosed as having autism were surveyed. Results obtained indicate that there is a relationship between parents' religiousness (personal religiousness) and their marriage quality. These results can help family therapists, social workers and priests supporting couples parenting children with autism.

Keywords:

religiousness, marriage, parenthood, autism

Streszczenie:

Szereg badań pokazuje, że zarówno religijność, jak i jakość relacji małżeńskiej to ważne zasoby, którymi dysponują rodzice wychowujący dzieci z autyzmem. Tekst podejmuje problem związku między religijnością rodziców dzieci z autyzmem, a jakością ich małżeństwa. Badaniem objęto 53 małżeństwa (106 osób) z dzieckiem z diagnozą autyzmu, zamieszkujące na terenie Polski. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na związek między szczególnym typem religijności rodziców – religijnością osobistą, a jakością ich małżeństwa. Rezultaty mogą być przydatne dla terapeutów rodzinnych, pracowników socjalnych oraz duszpasterzy, wspierających rodziców dzieci z autyzmem.

Słowa kluczowe:

religijność, małżeństwo, rodzicielstwo, autyzm

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Introduction

Currently about 1% of children are diagnosed with autism (Baxter et al., 2015). Thus, many families have to meet such a challenge like caring for a child suffering from this disability. Autism involves deficiencies in the following functional areas of the child: verbal and non-verbal communication, imagination and social relations as well as existence of fixed behaviour patterns (Zimmerman, 2008). Additionally, the child can have problems with sleeping, eating as well as sensory integration disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and both aggressive and self-aggressive behaviours (Maskey et al., 2013). Raising a child with autism involves serious stress that the child's parents must wrestle with (Altiere & von Kluge, 2009; Andreica-Săndică et al., 2011; Harper et al., 2013). And this stress is more intense than in the case of families who bring up healthy children or ones suffering from other disorders (Dąbrowska & Pisula, 2010; Bitsika, Sharpley & Bell, 2013; Shobana & Saravanan, 2014). Chronic, permanent stress can cause a parent to fall into depressive and anxiety disorders (Shtayermman, 2013; Bitsika, Sharpley & Bell, 2013), can result in exhaustion or destroying their powers (Seymour et al., 2013), lead to health problems (Benjak, Mavrinac & Simetin, 2009) or even to marital breakdown (Hartley et al., 2010).

Except for intense pressure, being a parent of a child suffering from such a serious disorder breeds a question about the sense of such an experience. In their search for an answer, striving for acceptance and wrestling with stress interpretations offered by culture and in particular by religion may be helpful (Siller et al., 2013; Brown & Rogers, 2003; Kheir et al., 2012). A number of research projects have empirically verified this observation. In their study P. Coulthard & M. Fitzgerald (1999) expressed the meaning of prayer and faith as internal coping resources possessed by the child's parents and organised religion as an institutional resource. This research indicates that sources of support which parents of children with autism draw on are first of all their religious beliefs and their prayers; organised religion helps them to a much less considerable degree. N. Tarakeshwar & K. Pargament (2001) highlighted the fact that parents who bring up disabled children (including those with autism) and wrestle with stress, may apply both positive and negative religious strategies. And in the first case rearing children with autism is interpreted as a kind of vocation and a chance to develop spiritually, deepening the relationship with God and cooperating with Him out of concern for the child's best interests. In the other one – as being forsaken by God, doubting His mercy or even experiencing a more or less well-deserved punishment sent by a stern Lord. Only the first case can be a source of support, hope and sense.

Research by N. Ekas, T. Whitman & C. Shivers (2009) were devoted to religious beliefs (as an expression of the attitude to God), religious activities (involvement in religious observances) and spirituality (feeling a closeness to and harmony with God) of mothers parenting children with autism. They have shown that religious beliefs and

spirituality are linked with a lowered symptoms of depression and lowered intense parental stress. It is intriguing that respondents more deeply involved in religious practices have experienced more intense parental stress and shown more symptoms of depression. It can result from the fact that either mothers become particularly intensively involved in religious activities when they are in difficult or critical situations or that attending Mass with the child is stressful and/or religious institutions do not support the mothers appropriately. Or maybe it results to a certain degree from the aforesaid negative religious strategy accepted according to the parent's religious maturity level and putting it into practice but not necessarily by their conscious and rational choice. Other research (Lee et al., 2008) has shown that families of children with autism take part in church services more rarely than those who have healthy children or children with Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). In general parents avoid such activities (like other outside activities) due to the child's problem behaviour, the necessity of devoting to him or her all their parental attention and their conviction that the outsiders do not understand their child's behaviour.

As mentioned above, positive religious strategies applied by parents of disabled children are grounded on a feeling of cooperation (and more widely – a relationship) with God. It involves a certain kind of religiousness. There are many psychological and sociological attempts to characterise this phenomenon, among them a paradigm of an attitude towards God (Hutsebaut, 1980). Conceived personal religiousness worked out by R. Jaworski alludes to this paradigm. While considering conclusions drawn from Catholic theology and psychology as well as his own psychological research, R. Jaworski (1987/1998; 1989; 1998; 2006) has described two extreme varieties of religiousness: personal and impersonal. "Personal religiousness" means "[...] involving a human being's relationship with personal God. A human as the person taking part in a religious conversation between two partners involves all his or her "being" in a direct and actual encounter with "You" of the Deity. In their action the humans consider themselves free and creative and aware of their aim and their own Christian dignity. They consciously shape their attitude towards God and feel responsible for it. The Person of God integrates an entire human's world of values. The essential feature of the relationship between God and humans is mutual dynamic presence and love. And this relationship constitutes a central, long-lasting and stable value and doesn't destroy any receptiveness to new knowledge and experiences" (Jaworski, 1989, page 67). "Impersonal religiousness", in turn, means "[...] a way of experiencing a relationship between a human being and God who is treated as "a thing" or "an instrument" satisfying a human's egotistic needs. It most often constitutes a unilateral monologue. Forms of impersonal religiousness are based on emulation and bring out superstitious features (magic). Communication with the Deity is subjected to objectives and oriented toward attaining values different from God's. In the relation-

ship with God the human often feels an external compulsion or behaves passively or indifferently. Lacking a sense of responsibility for the relationship exempts him or her from deepening it creatively and seeking new forms to express it. Religion and God become outer, marginal values that are isolated from other spheres of life. For people who treat religiousness impersonally it is not a source for finding dignity (self-esteem). Religious practices constitute here an instrument for achieving other goals. And generally they are not oriented towards direct and actual contact with God” (Jaworski, 1989, pages 67, 68).

Jaworski’s concept corresponds to the Roman Catholicism in Polish religiousness. First of all, the contact between a human being and God not only engages the human personally but develops his relationship with God as well. Deity is perceived as the Person you can make direct, emotionally close and even intimate contact with. A relationship experienced this way enables one who believes in God to meet and start a dialogue with Him. A person’s chief qualities for believing in God are autonomy and respect for Him as well; moreover they feel responsible for their receptiveness and readiness for feeling ties with God in any situation in life. In any situation, therefore in just such a situation that affects parents of children with autism.

At the same time research has suggested that, apart from religiousness, quality in the marital relationship is a significant resource for parents with children with autism. High marital quality involves lower parental stress and a lower number of depression indicators (Kersh et al., 2006). J. Ramisch & E. Onaga (2014) analysed strategies used for maintaining and strengthening marriage bonds. They have found that key factors are communication with the spouse and the married couple’s shared (mutual) expectations regarding their marriage as well as – concerning women – spending time with their husbands.

When you consider the aforesaid, while preparing programmes for comprehensive support for parents of children with autism it is worth asking the following question: *Is there any relationship between religiousness and the quality of their marriages?* Our paper constitutes an initial attempt to answer this question.

Method

Our respondents lived in two provinces in eastern Poland (Podkarpackie and Lubelskie Provinces). We surveyed married couples who had brought up at least one child diagnosed with autism. We reached them through specialised educational institutions as well as centres and associations rendering therapy services to our respondents’ children. Before we started a poll our pollsters had asked both the management of a given institution and the married couple for permission to conduct the poll. The polls were confidential. After incomplete or incorrectly filled-out questionnaires (several dozen) had been re-

jected, data and information given by 53 married couples (106 persons) bringing up children with autism were qualified for further analyses. The surveyed couples had been married for three to 37 years and the median was 14. Children were between two and 20 years of age, the median was seven years. Twelve couples (22.6% of all respondents) had one child, 27 couples (50.9%) – two, seven couples (13.2%) had three children and another seven couples (13.2%) – four.

The following research tools were used:

1. In order to evaluate both the level and type of a married couple's religiousness the Personal Religiousness Scale (the PRS) explained by R. Jaworski (1989) was employed. The PRS covers instructions and 30 statements. Accuracy of the tool was checked using the retesting method; for individual answers to questions and statements it was within the range $0.69 \leq \text{Spearman's } \rho \leq 0.85$. Verification of theoretical accuracy was presented in details in R. Jaworski's works (1989, 1998). The PRS includes four aspects: *faith (F)* – i.e. strength of a relationship with God treated as the Being that gives meaning to a human's life; *morality (M)* – an aspect determining the extent of compliance between moral behaviour and religious beliefs; *religious practices (RP)* – means the level of involvement with God through prayer, contemplation, broadening knowledge of God; and *religious ego (autoidentification, RE)* – means how close the human feels to God and a sense of pride in "being a Christian". The surveyed person was to indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 the degree to which their beliefs comply with the meaning of individual statements. The conviction that the Deity is the Person you can get in touch with is defined as the sum of coefficients (numerical weights) calculated by adding all weights related to answers while considering a key that takes into account the individual statements. The maximum score – 210 points – means highly personal religiousness. The lowest score – 30 points – indicates impersonal religiousness.

2. Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (the WMCQ-2) by M. Plopa & J. Rostowski was used for evaluating marital satisfaction. It includes the following aspects: *intimacy* (i.e. close relationship between a married couple, or the belief that both spouses love each other); *self-realisation* (marriage as a relationship enabling each partner to realise themselves and – in consequence – an important part of satisfying life); *resemblance* (the extent to which there is unanimity among husband and wife relating to important aims in their married and family life, e.g. leisure, developing their matrimony, family tradition, rearing children, and family life organisation); and *disappointment* (belief that marriage restricts to a certain degree the partner's independence and autonomy or that the spouse is trying to renege on and escape from the relationship and does not want to take responsibility for it). A detailed description of psychometric features of the tool: accuracy of the aspects (from 0.80 to 0.90), discriminatory power position (0.38 up to 0.75), and the questionnaire's theoretical correctness were presented in the M. Plopa's publication (2008).

3. Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (the CCQ) by M. Plopa & M. Kaźmierczak – this tool serves to examine communication behaviours towards the spouse. The questionnaire consists of two forms: first, to appraise one spouses' behaviour and, second, to appraise the other spouse's behaviour. Each form contains 30 items, both of which serve to examine three main aspects of conjugal communication: *support* (appreciating the spouse's efforts, interest in his or her problems and readiness to solve them jointly); *involvement* (showing feelings to each other and talking about them, aiming for a compromise and harmony); and *depreciation* (criticism, unpleasant comments, controlling the spouse and aggression towards him or her). The surveyed person takes a stance on each statement based on a scale of 1 to 5. A detailed description of the tool's psychometric features: the questionnaire's accuracy (from 0.77 to 0.93), power of discriminatory position (0.25 up to 0.81), and its theoretical correctness were presented in M. Plopa's publication (2008).

Results

Most respondents declared themselves to be believers of the Roman Catholic faith (fathers – 81% and mothers – 86%). Scores obtained are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison between responses provided by respondents to the following question: „Are you a believer accepting basic dogmas of the Catholic faith?”

	Yes		No		It's hard to say	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mothers of children with autism	46	86.8	6	11.3	1	1.9
Fathers of children with autism	43	81.1	7	13.2	3	5.7

Table 2. Pearson's correlation coefficients between scores resulting from Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (the WMCQ-2) and Personal Religiousness Scale (the PRS) among mothers of children with autism (N=48).

	Faith	Morality	Religious practices	Religious ego	Total score
Intimacy	0.39**	0.37*	0.46**	0.50**	0.52**
Disappointment	-0.44**	-0.34*	-0.43**	-0.38**	-0.47**
Resemblance	0.33*	0.34*	0.41**	0.42**	0.43**
Self-realisation	0.30*	0.29*	0.42**	0.47**	0.42**
Total score	0.35*	0.32*	0.49**	0.47**	0.49**

** correlation substantial at a level of 0.01

* correlation substantial at a level of 0.05

Among the mothers all subscales of the PRS correlated with WMCQ-2. The correlation coefficient value fluctuated between 0.286 and 0.525. As regards scores presented in the subscales, strong correlations were found between *religious ego* and *intimacy*, *religious*

ego and *self-realisation*, *religious practices* and *intimacy*, *faith* and *disappointment* (negative correlation), *religious practices* and *disappointment* (negative correlation), *religious ego* and *resemblance*, and between *religious practices* and *resemblance*.

Table 3. Pearson’s correlation coefficients between scores resulting from Well-Matched Couple Questionnaire (the WMCQ-2) and Personal Religiousness Scale (the PRS) among fathers of children with autism (N=47).

	Faith	Morality	Religious practices	Religious ego	Total score
Intimacy	0.29	0.29*	0.31*	0.38**	0.38**
Disappointment	-0.20	-0.12	-0.20	-0.31*	-0.25
Resemblance	0.34*	0.39**	0.30*	0.43**	0.40**
Self-realisation	0.20	0.39**	0.38**	0.38**	0.39**
Total score	0.28	0.36*	0.29*	0.36*	0.40**

** correlation substantial at a level of 0.01

* correlation substantial at a level of 0.05

Among the fathers a number of statistically substantial correlations were found. The value of the correlation coefficient fluctuated from 0.292 to 0.435. The strongest correlations were found between the following subscales: *religious ego* and *resemblance*, *morality* and *resemblance*, *morality* and *self-realisation*, *religious ego* and *intimacy*, and *religious practices* and *self-realisation* as well as between *religious ego* and *self-realisation*.

Table 4. Pearson’s correlation coefficients between scores resulting from Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (the CCQ) and Personal Religiousness Scale (the PRS) among mothers of children with autism (N=48).

	Faith	Morality	Religious practices	Religious ego	Total score
Support (appraisal of own behaviour)	0.29*	0.33*	0.26	0.33*	0.24
Involvement (appraisal of own behaviour)	0.21	0.20	0.17	0.33*	0.19
Depreciation (appraisal of own behaviour)	-0.04	-0.09	-0.18	-0.15	-0.21
Support (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	0.31*	0.17	0.32*	0.225	0.35*
Involvement (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	0.16	0.02	0.22	0.19	0.16
Depreciation (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	-0.15	-0.05	-0.23	-0.14	-0.23

** correlation substantial at a level of 0.01

* correlation substantial at a level of 0.05

Interrelationships of a coefficient exceeding 0.3 related to the following subscales: *morality* and *support* (appraising one’s own behaviour), *religious ego* and *support* (apprais-

ing one's own behaviour), *religious ego* and *involvement* (appraising one's own behaviour), *religious practices* and *support* (appraising the spouse's behaviour) as well as *faith* and *support* (appraising the spouse's behaviour).

Table 5. Pearson's correlation coefficients between scores resulting from Conjugal Communication Questionnaire (the CCQ) and Personal Religiousness Scale (the PRS) among fathers of children with autism (N=47).

	Faith	Morality	Religious practices	Religious ego	Total score
Support (appraisal of own behaviour)	0.39**	0.37*	0.35*	0.43**	0.40**
Involvement (appraisal of own behaviour)	0.30*	0.28	0.37*	0.29*	0.35*
Depreciation (appraisal of own behaviour)	-0.21	-0.22	-0.24	-0.34*	-0.29*
Support (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	0.26	0.25	0.31*	0.37*	0.37*
Involvement (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	0.14	0.11	0.30*	0.27	0.27
Depreciation (appraisal of spousal behaviour)	-0.19	-0.19	-0.18	-0.30*	-0.26

** correlation substantial at a level of 0.01

* correlation substantial at a level of 0.05

Comparatively strongest correlations (not less than 0.37) related to the following subscales: *religious ego* and *support* (appraising one's own behaviour), *faith* and *support* (appraising one's own behaviour), *religious ego* and *support* (appraising spousal behaviour), *religious practices* and *involvement* (appraising one's own behaviour) as well as *morality* and *support* (appraising one's own behaviour).

Discussion

1. Results above indicate a relationship between religiousness of parents bringing up children with autism and their marriage quality. Mothers who show a higher level of personal religiousness declare as well that they have a closer and more satisfactory intimacy, resemblance and self-realisation with their husbands and feel relatively less disappointed in their marriages. An analogical relationship can be seen among the surveyed fathers, although its statistical significance has not been explicitly determined, perhaps because fathers tend to blame mothers who gave birth to autistic children. The reason for this opinion, in turn, may result not only from natural rights of physiology but – regrettably – from a popular stereotyped way of thinking as well, although the fathers may not be fully aware of this fact (Cook, Cusack & Dickens, 2010).

The level of personal religiousness is also explicitly linked with features of conjugal communication which in turn obviously corresponds to married life quality (e.g. Carroll et al., 2013). Thus, the women in judging their conjugal communication behaviour are of the opinion that they give their husbands a lot of support, that they are very much involved in communicating with their husbands and do not belittle them. However, though their husbands appreciate such support the statistical significance of involvement and depreciation have not been sufficiently confirmed. Observations regarding the surveyed fathers are exactly the same.

To sum up, the higher the extent of the married couple's personal religiousness, the more satisfactory the quality of their marriage is. The same or even more is in the case when they have to bring up a disabled child.

2. Catholic religiousness says matrimony between a woman and a man is a sacramental bond and that's why it implies some specific consequences; for instance, there is the doctrinal inability to dissolve it. Thus, even for this reason it can be assumed that religiousness may constitute a resource which a married couple can draw from in many fields of their lives. One can imagine that this stability (Call & Heaton, 1997) resulting from the lack of an alternative constitutes unity which imposes, as it were, cooperation on married couples and forces them to act jointly in order to seek solutions when in difficult situations or in facing adversities.

3. Of course a married couple's (parents') religiousness cannot be limited to the sacramental aspect of matrimony only. Manifesting religiousness can be achieved in varying intensities, at various levels of maturity, and in any possible area in an active married life – and we think here about conjoined activities (like caring for and rearing children, taking part in the local community's social life, concern for housekeeping, prayer, sexual relations, handing down cultural values and traditions from generation to generation, etc.) and the individual activity of each spouse (a career, developing passions and interests, forming friendships, etc.). The religiousness – developed and cultivated by husband and wife not only individually but also (and maybe first of all) mutually – can play a significant role, especially in a situation where the couple face the challenge of rearing child with autism.

4. It is worth emphasizing that family religiousness can be an important resource for not only married couples but for their children as well. In their research E. Liu et al. (2014) attempted to answer the following question: what is the importance of religion and faith in the life of teenagers and young adults suffering from developmental disorders (including autism) and how do those people perceive their disabilities in the context of their religious faith? They surveyed 20 persons suffering from autism and intellectual disability whose parents were avowed Christians. Importantly, only children answered (in each case to the extent that their disabilities enabled them to give replies). All respondents owned that they prayed, some hint-

ing at their own religious experiences. They positively appraised a religious community as a circle where they didn't feel different from persons who were good to them. And finally, in the context of faith, most positively perceived themselves and even their disabilities. Their answers lead to an important conclusion: parental religious involvement translates into involvement of their children with autism contributing to creating an important circle that can be a resource and support for the whole family.

5. Conclusions presented herein can be of help to many specialists: family therapists, social workers and priests supporting parents of children with autism. While working with religious parents who identify themselves as Christians and who bring up children with autism it is worth – leaving aside many other forms of support – developing personal religiousness, especially in shaping both the religious ego (autoidentification) and a sense of closeness, as well as in feeling that one is cooperating with God.

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