



SOCIO-COGNITIVE CORRELATES FOR THE LIVES OF THE ATTENDEE OF RELIGIOUS SERVICES IN WESTERN ROMANIA: MENTAL HEALTH VERSUS HOPELESSNESS

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Abstract

This research describes the effects of social cognitive variables on religion from the point of view of the stress-diathesis model, the basic model of the hopelessness theory. This study examined the relationship between hopelessness, social support, life satisfaction, problem solving, loneliness, daily hassles, religion and mental health of adults. Data on life changes were collected from a sample of 126 adults by means of a self-administered questionnaire which included the translated Romanian version of the scales. The results highlight the relationship between religion and hopelessness and other social cognitive factors and also the etiologic role of this variable. The social cognitive variables within this research can form a predictive model, with direct implications in clinical practice, community psychology, psychology of religion, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy.

Keywords: religion; hopelessness; social support; life satisfaction; problem solving; loneliness

Introduction

Personality traits such as optimism, hope, satisfaction and happiness play an important role in forming and maintaining a positive perspective in the

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spiritual life. Increasing optimism and experiencing positive emotions may lead to the formation of a cognitive framework of positive thinking and to the increase of coping resources that may be used in the case of aversive life circumstances (Marian & Roşeanu, 2005).

On the other hand, hopelessness represents a negative expectations system towards the self and future life which is an effective predictor for suicidal ideation. Mihaljević, Aukst-Margetić, Vuksan-Ćusa, Koić, and Milošević (2012) show that religious affiliation together with other factors may reduce suicidal behavior or depression. Another, so called higher, index of religious moral beliefs allows for a better control of emotional distress by offering stability to mental health and a better capacity of psychosocial problem solving.

By looking at the dominant attributional style of the person we can conclude that people with a low need for achievement may process the attribution for failure through internal factors (Fredrickson, 2000; Marian, Drugaş, & Roşeanu, 2005). An accurate perception of reality is one of the best ways of adjustment however we can not ignore the fact that maintaining a positive illusion of the world and the self has a positive effect on health. Based on our previous statement we may recognize around us “happy” people who frequently hold false beliefs about themselves, offer distorted explanations for events and hold exaggerated beliefs regarding their capacity to control their world. Illusions, regardless of their positive or negative nature are linked to self esteem (Marian & Roşeanu, 2005; Marian, 2009). On the other hand, optimism (Peterson, 2000) is determined by the explicative or attributional style of the person. The manner in which the individuals explain to themselves the positive and the negative determines their explicative *style* (Marian, 2010; 2011), which may be an optimist or a pessimist one (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Several studies (e.g., García-Alandete, Martínez, & Gallego-Pérez, 2011) report negative relationships between religiosity (religious practice, engagement and shared beliefs), hopelessness and other variables associated with these such as stress and hopelessness depression.

Religiosity may inhibit the development of hopelessness type of thinking and is an important factor for mental and physical health, life satisfaction, perceived social support, lowered loneliness and psychological and subjective well-being.

Even though there is some sort of consensus regarding the importance of the components of a “good life” such as health and success in relationships, people most likely evaluate differently the value of these components. Hypothetically, individuals have a unique criterion for determining what is “good in life” however in some situations common values are important. Furthermore, people may have very different standards for success for each of the important domains in their lives and thus a global evaluation of satisfaction is more relevant to the overall wellbeing of the person rather than satisfaction in specific domains of life (Marian, 2007).

Factors such as belonging to a certain religious/spiritual group or a certain degree of maturity are important for establishing a baseline at the level of which the fluctuations may occur. Thus, important resources may be family, other relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbors, informal groups or even specialist (priests, doctors, psychologist, etc.). Cutrona (1986) observes that the desire to belong to a certain group in stressful situations is present at a higher level among those with a higher self-esteem.

The above presented information is related to the concept of loneliness which is divided into two dimensions: emotional and social loneliness. The later is associated with the absence of involvement in the social network and predominantly with feelings of marginalization (Schmidt & Sermat, 1983; Marian, 2012).

Internal conflicts, starting from religious beliefs and behaviors, have been identified as risk factors for a variety of psycho-somatic illnesses and psychological distress. Differences in the use of moral and religious resources may offer an explanation for the process through which emotional conflicts lead to a decrease in the physical and psychological wellbeing.

In conclusion, the personal and social characteristics that impede emotional communication are most likely associated with pathogenic effects such as ambivalence in emotional expression, repressive defensiveness, loneliness and fear of intimacy.

Objectives

We aim to analyze the impact of religious spiritual factors on several psychosocial dimensions. Specifically, we expect that an increase in the level of distress (generated by negative life events or hassles) and in the level of

hopelessness to be associated with: 1. a decrease in the perception of problem solving; 2. an increase in the level of loneliness or isolation; and 3. a distorted perception of social support.

We consider that: 1. An increase in the level of hopelessness will be associated with a decrease in the perceived problem solving capacity; 2. Different distortions in the perception of problem solving capacity and of social support are linked to an increase in the frequency of life events and the generation (in the latter case) of the feeling of loneliness; and 3. Orthodox Christians compared to Neo-protestants will show a better perception of their problem solving capacity and are less likely to employ emotional isolation and distorted reactions to negative events.

Method

Participants

A total of 64 *Orthodox Christian participants* were employed in our study. Their age was between 18 years old and 80 years old, with an average age of 42.18 (SD=14.06). With regard to their gender, 45 of them were females (70.3%) and 19 were males (29.7%). Another variable which was taken into account was their marital status, thus 17 (26.6%) participants were unmarried, 39 (60.9%) were married, 3 (4.7%) were widowers and 5 were divorced (7.8%).

The study also employed a number of 62 *Neo protestant participants* with a mean age of 29.2 years (SD=10.94), with a minimum age of 19 years and a maximum of 62 years. There were 33 (53.2%) females and 29 (46.8%) males in this sample. With regard to marital status 36 (58.1%) participants were unmarried and 26 (41.9%) of them were married.

Description of the instruments

Hopelessness Depression Symptom Questionnaire (Metalsky & Joiner, 1997). Alpha coefficients for each subscale were (Marian, 2012): a) Motivational Deficit (retarded initiation of voluntary responses; .83); b) Interpersonal dependency (.77); c) Psychomotor retardation (.83); d) lack of energy (.89); e) Apathy / anhedonia (.83); f) Insomnia (.90); g) Concentration

difficulty (.73); and h) Suicidality (.75). The alpha coefficient for the full HDSQ was .95.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (S.L.S.) devised by Pavot and Diener (1993); it measures one's global satisfaction with life. The scale was not designed to measure satisfaction in specific domains such as health or financial status however it allows the subjects to integrate such issues in the global index. After a rigorous item analysis five items remained to which the subjects respond on a seven point Likert scale. The scale shows high internal consistency and temporal stability Marian (2007).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (M.S.P.S.S.) devised by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988); it consists of 12 items loaded on three factors: a. family, b. friends, and c. significant others. Each item is structured according to the three factors. Internal consistency is .91 (12 items). The test-retest coefficient for the two testing phases was between .67 and .80 (see Marian, 2006).

Survey of Recent Life Experiences. Kohn and Macdonald (1992) proposed the Survey of Recent Life Experiences (SRLE) which they validated starting from 92 items. In our study we use the short version of SRLE which includes 41 items that aim to measure the hassles accumulated during a period of time. The internal consistency of the total score was .90 (41 items). The test-retest coefficient for the two testing phases was between .66 and .78 (see Marian, 2008; Oprea, Marian, Filimon, & Banciu, 2011).

Differential Loneliness Scale (D.L.S.). Schmidt & Semart (1983) used The Differential Loneliness Scale to measure the degree of satisfaction/unsatisfaction related to the four specific social relationships: 1. romantic or sexual, 2. friendship, 3. family, and 4. community relations. The internal consistency was .91 (20 items). The test-retest coefficient for the two testing phases (T1 and T2) was between .51 and .91 (apud Marian, 2012).

The Problem Solving Inventory (PSI); Heppner & Petersen, 1982; Heppner, 2000) is a widely used measure that assesses one's perceived problem-solving ability, behavior and attitude. The PSI is a 35 item instrument that measures the individual's beliefs regarding their general reaction to personal problems in their everyday lives. A single score may be calculated as a general index of problem solving perception. The respondent uses a 6 point Likert scale (from 1 - "strongly agree" to 6 - "strongly disagree") to indicate the extent to which he agrees with each item. In fact, the PSI measures the

evaluative awareness of one's problem solving abilities, and not actual problem solving skills. The instrument is composed of three subscales: problem solving confidence (Cronbach's alpha .83), approach-avoidance style (Cronbach's alpha .80), and personal control (Cronbach's alpha .78) (*see* Marian & Roşeanu, 2012).

Procedure

All the participants filled out the batch of scales presented at the instruments section. Each participant was met at their respective place of worship and was invited to participate voluntarily to the study. None of the respondents gave their names in order to preserve the confidentiality clause of the research procedure.

Results and discussion

In the first part of our analysis we were interested in identifying the frequency of certain classificatory variables, such as the frequency of church attendance of our participants. Most of the Orthodox participants declared that they go to church on Sundays and on holydays, followed by those who attend at least twice a week and finally those who attend on every Sunday.

Furthermore, we analyzed the reasons for which the Orthodox participants attended church and identified the following reasons: prayer (21.9%), desire to be saved (10.9%), positive attitude towards the priest (10.9%), faith (10.9%) and without a clear motive (10.9%).

Similarly, we were interested in the percentage of the frequency of church attendance and motive of attendance for the Neo-protestant participants as well. The order of frequency for church attendance was identical to that of the Orthodox participants. In the case of the motivation for attendance the results showed that 33.9% go to pray, 11.3% desire spiritual equilibrium and 11.3% are motivated by faith.

In the second part of our research we were interested in analyzing the manner in which hopelessness may be affected by the perception of personal problem solving capacity.

The results presented in table 1 sustain the idea that those participants who have high HDSQ scores tend to have a lowered perception regarding their

personal problem solving capacity [$t(62)=-1,812$; $p<.07$]. The situation is similar in the case of personal control when the participant has to deal with life problems [$t(62)=-2,839$; $p<.006$] or trust in their own capacity to resolve problems [$t(62)=-2,434$; $p<.01$].

Table 1. Comparison between participants at different levels of hopelessness with regard to their levels of perception of personal problem solving capacity

	Hopelessness	M	SD	$t_{(df=62)}$	p	d
Problem solving perception	low	85,48	17,07	-1,812	.07	.45
	high	93,61	18,79			
Personal control	low	17,48	4,62	-2,839	.006	.71
	high	20,67	4,35			
Problem-solving confidence	low	28,39	6,32	-2,434	.01	.61
	high	31,80	4,71			

Note: d=effect size

In the next part of our research we were interested in highlighting potential differences between participants that declared that they go to church on Sunday and on holydays, who experienced different levels of negative life experiences and daily hassles with regard to their perceived problem solving capacity, perception of general social support, perception of support from the family and levels of loneliness.

Table 2. Comparison between participants at different levels of negative life experiences or daily hassles with regard to their perceived level of problem solving capacity, perceived social support and loneliness

	Recent life experiences	M	SD	$t_{(df=27)}$	p	d
Problem-solving confidence	low	28,50	6,09	-1,885	,07	.70
	high	32,61	5,51			
Problem solving perception	low	6,39	,46	2,130	,04	.78
	high	5,89	,78			
Social support - family	low	6,60	,49	2,339	,02	.83
	high	5,96	,96			
Loneliness - total	low	3,31	1,99	-2,361	,02	.85
	high	5,76	3,53			

Table 2. Comparison between participants at different levels of negative life experiences or daily hassles with regard to their perceived level of problem solving capacity, perceived social support and loneliness - *continued*

	Recent life experiences	M	SD	$t_{(df=27)}$	p	d
Relationships with family	low	,01	,01	-3,325	,003	1,15
	high	,92	1,11			

Note: d=effect size

The results in table 2 indicate that this group of participants (who declared that they go to church on Sunday and on holydays) tend to have a higher level of trust in their own problem solving capacity even in stressful life situations [$t(27)=-1,885$; $p<.07$]. These participants perceive a higher level of social support when they are not confronted with daily hassles [$t(27)=2,130$; $p<.04$], and a similar situation is observed in the case of support by family members [$t(27)=2,339$; $p<.02$; $d=.83$]. Contrary to these findings we expected that social support would be used as protection against stress, however the results suggest that for the frequent church goer it is the church who offers this protection.

In the case of loneliness, we observed that these participants feel lonely when they are confronted with stressful life events [$t(27)=-2,361$; $p<.02$; $d=.85$] and also they tend to isolate themselves from family and close friends [$t(27)=-3,325$; $p<.003$; $d=1.15$]. It is most likely that in time these participants would have learned that they can't obtain the support of others and thus they seek support from the church.

With regard to the other groups of participants who attended church less frequently we did not have a sufficient number of participants to be able to carry out satisfactory statistical analyses. Thus all our conclusions so far were based on the group of participants who attended church on Sundays and holydays.

The next step of our analysis implied a comparison between the Orthodox and the Neo-protestant participants with regard to their responses towards daily hassles, perception of their capacity to resolve problems and loneliness within romantic/sexual relationships. Our collected data suggests that Neo-protestants present symptoms of stress caused by daily hassles in a greater degree compared to the Orthodox [$t(124)=-2,828$; $p<.005$]. Furthermore, the

Orthodox participants have a greater degree of confidence in their capacity to resolve problems compared to the Neo-protestant participants [$t(124)=2,604$; $p<.01$]. Finally, as far as loneliness is concerned, it was observed that Neo-protestants show a higher degree of isolation from their romantic/sexual partner compared to the Orthodox [$t(124)=-3,357$; $p<.001$].

Table 3. Differences between Orthodox and Neo-protestant participants with regard to daily hassles, problems solving and loneliness

	Religion	M	SD	$t_{(df=124)}$	p	d
Recent life experiences	O	70,87	17,5	-2,828	.005	.50
	N	79,98	18,64			
Problem-solving confidence	O	30,04	5,82	2,604	.01	.43
	N	27,4	5,56			
Loneliness-romantic/sexual relationships	O	1,6	1,22	-3,357	.001	.60
	N	2,3	1,09			

Note: O - Orthodox Christian participants; N - Neo protestant participants; d=effect size

Table 4. Comparison of Orthodox and Neo-protestant participants who attend church for prayer, with regard to loneliness and perception and control of personal problem solving

	Religion	M	SD	$t_{(df=33)}$	p	d
Problem solving perception	O	97,28	14,90	2,527	,01	.87
	N	84,33	14,82			
Personal control	O	21,85	3,10	2,328	,02	.83
	N	18,80	4,17			
Loneliness-romantic/sexual relationships	O	1,14	1,40	-2,640	,01	.90
	N	2,33	1,23			
Loneliness - relationships with larger groups	O	1,57	1,01	1,966	,05	.65
	N	1,00	,70			

Note 1: O - Orthodox Christian participants; N - Neo protestant participants; d=effect size

Note 2: there were only 14 participants in the Orthodox group and only 12 participants in the Neo-protestant group

In order to further analyze the data, we addressed a series of questions to our participants in which we asked about their motives for attending church. Based on their responses we were able to deduce that the Orthodox participants who attended church for prayer perceive themselves as having a higher capacity to solve life problems [$t(33)=2,527$; $p<.01$; $d=.87$] and a better control

of these problems [$t(33)=2,328$; $p<.02$; $d=.83$] compared to the Neo-protestant participants who also attend church for prayer (Table 4).

Our results further suggest that Neo-protestants show a higher degree of isolation within their relationships with a romantic/sexual partner [$t(33)=-2,640$; $p<.01$; $d=.90$] but also within the larger group [$t(33)=1,966$; $p<.05$]. Here we would like to mention that the isolation we are talking about is of an affective nature (not proper physical isolation).

In our final step of our analysis we investigated the manner in which the socio-cognitive variables relate to each other for both samples of religions (Table 5).

For the Orthodox participants we observe that an increase in the frequency of negative life events will lead to an increase in the level of helplessness ($r=.42$; $p<.01$) and loneliness ($r=.38$; $p<.01$). However, these events tend to decrease as social support increases ($r=-.38$; $p<.01$). Life satisfaction is associated with an accurate perception of social support ($r=.27$; $p<.05$). Loneliness is associated with daily hassles ($r=.38$; $p<.01$) and hopelessness ($r=.26$; $p<.05$), however, it decreases proportionally as the accurate perception of social support increases ($r=-.60$; $p<.01$).

Table 5. Association between the socio-cognitive variables for the two samples of religions

Religion		1	2	3	4	5
Orthodox	1. Recent life experiences	1				
	2. Hopelessness	,42**	1			
	3. Satisfaction with life	-,11	-,16	1		
	4. Perceived social support	-,38**	-,28*	,27*	1	
	5. Problem solving perception	,09	,27*	,01	,10	1
	6. Loneliness	,38**	,26*	-,15	-,60**	,09
Neo protestant	1. Recent life experiences	1				
	2. Hopelessness	,21	1			
	3. Satisfaction with life	,05	-,01	1		
	4. Perceived social support	,00	,29*	-,05	1	
	5. Problem solving perception	-,34**	,13	-,01	-,09	1
	6. Loneliness	,15	-,06	,05	-,37**	,00

Note: ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$

In the case of the Neo-protestant participants we observe a different hierarchy of associations between the investigated variables (Table 5). Thus, daily hassles are negatively correlated with perception of personal problem solving capacity ($r=-.34$; $p<.01$). This means that an increase in the level of perception of personal problem solving capacity will be associated with a positively adjusted view of negative life events. On the other hand, hopelessness is positively associated with perceived social support ($r=.29$; $p<.05$). As expected an increase in the level of loneliness was associated with behaviors that would sustain a negative belief towards the social support offered by others ($r=-.37$; $p<.01$).

Conclusions

Hopelessness maintained by attributions for life events play a decisive role in the interpretation at the cognitive level of daily experiences and mainly hassles. In this study we show the manner in which religious-spiritual factors have an impact on psychosocial factors which manifests itself at the level of distress and hopelessness the person experiences.

It has been observed that for both Orthodox and Neo-protestant Christians church attendance is highest on Sundays and on holydays. With regard to the motivation for attendance it was revealed that for both groups prayer is the main reason.

Hopelessness was found to be affected by the person's own perception of her capacity to resolve problems. Thus, persons with high scores on the HDSQ tend to have a perception of low personal problem solving capacity, confidence and control.

Loneliness is most often felt when people are confronted with stressful life events. Furthermore, it seems that they tend to isolate themselves from family and friends in these situations. This result led us to conclude that perhaps this behavior is caused by a perceived inability of others to offer support and thus they turn to the church for support.

Neo-protestant participants showed a higher degree of daily stress compared to the Orthodox participants and also the latter group showed an increased confidence level in their ability to solve daily problems and perceive a higher control over them.

Life satisfaction is associated with an adequate perception of social support mainly in the case of the Orthodox participants. Loneliness is associated with daily hassles and hopelessness but it tends to decrease when the person perceives a high level of effective social support. In the case of the Neo-protestant participants the perception of an increase in their problem solving capacities will lead to a positively adjusted perception of potentially negative life events.

Further studies are necessary in order to assess the relationships between these variables over longer periods of time and across different religions and nations.

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