Family Functioning and Disability: a Study on Italian Parents of Disabled Children
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The presence of a child with physical and/or psychological disability causes a block in the family life cycle: this tends to inhibit the conjugal integration between the parents and the general level of the family functioning; the confusion of roles, the feeling of helplessness and dissatisfaction might induce a growing state of malaise which, in some cases, can degenerate into psychopathological forms.

Literature suggests a mutual relationship between the problematic behavior of the child, the parents’ stress and their consequent behavior; this ratio appears to be mediated by parents’ negative emotional reactions to the problematic behavior of the child, and their psychological resources, such as problem solving, coping strategies and resilience.

In agreement with the literature we expected that: mothers of children with disability report greater distress than fathers; parents of older children manifest a higher level of family stress than parents of younger children; between the predictors of the family functioning there are: the presence of cohesion, adaptability, the small hallways and enmeshment.

The research involved 50 parent couples (age: M=50.84; S.D=7.23), who have 100 disabled children (44 males and 56 females). Participants completed: an anamnestic questionnaire; the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES IV; Olson, 2011); the Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop, 1983).

Results

The T-test for independent groups revealed no significant differences between the father and the mother in dimensions of Faces and Fad (p = n.s).

The Manova emphasizes the influence of independent variables on Faces and Fad scores of mother; in particular:
- the main effect of mother’s age on the level of enmeshment (F=5.25; p<0.05) and affective responsiveness (F=5.28; p<0.05): mothers with older child got higher scores in the dimensions of enmeshment;
- the main effect of child’s gender on the level of enmeshment (F=7.65; p<0.05): mothers of daughters show greater enmeshment;
- the effect of interaction between mother’s age and child’s gender on the level of cohesion (F=9.84; p<0.05) and enmeshment (F=19.04; p<0.01): younger mothers of male children manifest more cohesion; older mothers of daughters have greater enmeshment.

The Manova shows the influence of the type of disability on Fad and Faces scores of both parents; the data underline the main effect of the cohesion (F = 2.58; p <0.05) and the hallway (F = 2.74; p <0.05): parents with children with Asperger exhibit lower levels of family cohesion; parents of children with pervasive developmental disorder manifest lower levels of disengagement.

Conclusion

Literature points out how a harmonious family environment, characterized by good functioning, can lead parents to be more sensitive to the children’s pain, to develop less depression and greater functional involvement. While these protective effects have been identified, most of the research till today has focused on the negative outcomes associated with the poor functioning of the family.

Future research should explore the functioning of the family as a possible protective factor.

References
