Family Functioning and Disability: a Study on Italian Parents of Disabled Children

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icCSBs 2016
Introduction

During the family life cycle, the critical events are various and can be caused by a variety of factors: the entrance or leaving of a component in the family, the psychosocial deviances related to the development of the children, or the birth of a handicapped child.

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.
Introduction

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.

Another dimension that influences the overall functioning of the family is the type of disability that affects one of the members; the literature shows that higher levels of stress are present in families of children with autism than in those with physical disabilities.

Especially the parents of children with pervasive developmental disorders seem to show an impaired level of mental health, greater levels of stress, sense of worthlessness and guilt, intense anger, and even impaired physical functioning, fatigue or exhaustion.
Methodology

The present study aims to explore the perception that both parents of disabled children have of their family functioning, measuring: the dynamics of the familiar functioning; the perception that the parental couple has about parenting and family functioning; the similarities between fathers and mothers in the perception of these dimensions.

In agreement with the literature we expected that:

a) mothers of children with disability report greater distress than fathers;

b) parents of older children manifest a higher level of family stress than parents of younger children;

c) between the predictors of the family functioning there are: the presence of cohesion, adaptability, the small hallway and enmeshment.
Methodology

The research involved 50 parent couples (age: $M=50.84; S.D=7.23$), who have 100 disabled children (44 males and 56 females) attending two cooperatives for people with disabilities in the town of Catania and Enna. Participants completed:

a) an *anamnestic questionnaire*, to acquire basic information, age and professions of parents, the type of disability, sex age of child;

b) the *Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales* (FACES IV; Olson, 2011) is a 20-item self-report instrument that yields two orthogonal dimensions, cohesion and adaptability;

c) the *Family Assessment Device* (FAD; Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop, 1983) contains scales measuring: problem solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control.
Results

In reference to the first research hypothesis, the T-test for independent groups revealed no significant differences between the father and the mother in dimensions of Faces and Fad ($p = n.s$).

In reference to the second hypothesis, 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 ($F=5.28; p<0.05$): in particular 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 ($F=19.04; p<0.01$): in particular, younger mothers of male children manifest more cohesion; older mothers of daughters have greater enmeshment.
Results

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; $p < 0.05$). Tukey’s post hoc emphasize that: parents with children with Asperger exhibit lower levels of family cohesion; parents of children with pervasive developmental disorder manifest lower levels of disengagement.

The analyses of hierarchical regression for separate blocks show that:

a) child’ sex and family flexibility are predictors of the ability of problem solving (24.4% of the general variance).

b) the level of family disengagement is predictive variable of family communication ($\beta=-2.09$), accounting for only 8% of the variance.

c) the mother’s age is predictive variable of the affective responsiveness is ($\beta=2.09$), accounting for 16.2% of the variance.

d) sex and age of child are predictors of control (21.7% of the general variance).
Implications for policy/Practice

In this study, through analysis of the perception of the characteristics of the family system of parents with disabled children, it has been possible to verify the existence of similarities and differences in the perception of family ties between fathers and mothers.

The first hypothesis that mothers of children with disability report greater distress than fathers appears not to be confirmed, although it appears interesting how: mothers with older child got higher scores in the dimensions of enmeshment; older mothers of male children are more entangled; younger mothers of daughters show greater flexibility; and older mothers of daughters have greater cohesion. In reference to the fathers’ score, the father of a son manifested greater flexibility, the father of a daughter more affective response; and the fathers of grown children seem to experience greater emotional response.
Implications for policy/Practice

Also the type of disability seems to affect the overall family functioning, in fact: while the parents with children with Asperger syndrome exhibit lower levels of family cohesion, instead the parents of children with pervasive developmental disorder manifested lower levels of disengagement. It has been suggested that the presence of behavior and emotional problems contributes significantly to the stress of parents of children with Asperger syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder.

At the last the third research hypothesis appears confirmed, in fact: sex of child and the family flexibility seem to be predictive variables of the family ability of problem solving; predictive variable of family communication is family disengagement; predictive variable of affective responsiveness is the age of mother; and above all, predictors of behavior control are sex and age of child.
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.
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