

Working with Religious Families and Family Therapy in Turkey

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ABSTRACT: Religion plays an important role in the lives of many and is observed through their individual and collective religious practices and beliefs. Numerous couples present for counseling ascribe to a religious belief system, including beliefs about God's purpose for their marriage. To understand the worldview of one's clients and deliver effective services, therapist must increase their understanding of various religious beliefs and practices. While many studies have been conducted in developed Western societies, there have been few that have examined religion as it relates to couple and parent-child relationships in developing societies such as Turkey. Although research is limited, studies of family structure in Turkish society show that religion and cultural values are of primary importance. With the rapid social change from a traditional to more modern culture, it is necessary to examine how religion impacts Turkish couples and family life in a changing cultural context. Thus, this study aims to provide a better understanding of role of religion on family relationships and help clinicians be prepared to serve Muslim clients in Turkey. Implications for clinicians working with religious clients are discussed.

KEYWORDS: family therapy, Islam, parent-child, religious families, Turkey

Introduction

The belief in God and practice of prayer are common in many societies (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010) and many individuals consider themselves as religious see their faith as integral to their daily life (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008). It has been known that different aspects of religion are positively correlated with the quality of marriage. Specifically, previous studies found that there is a strong and positive association between religiosity and marital satisfaction, stability, adjustment, and commitment (Mahoney et al., 2008; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Further, religious involvement reduces divorce rates (Mahoney et al., 2008; Vaaler, Ellison & Powers, 2009), decreases infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008), reduces the likelihood of domestic violence (Vaaler et al., 2009), and lowers conflict, (Lambert & Dollahite 2006; Mahoney et al., 2008). Moreover, couples who reported that they were connected with God indicated that their moral values were strengthened through religious teachings and spiritual activities and their desire to please God strengthened their commitment to fidelity and honoring their marriage vows (Dollahite, & Lambert, 2007). Additionally, couples who frequently attend religious services together tend to be more satisfied, experience less conflict, and communicate more effectively in their marriages (Mika, 2011; Parker, 2009).

The practice of prayer as part of one's religious faith also has the potential to positively impact a couple's marriage. Research has indicated that prayer can increase willingness to forgive a partner (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010) lower infidelity (Fincham et al., 2010), and increase gratitude (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, 2009). Prayer with a spouse may also help facilitate conflict resolution (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Furthermore, praying together can increase empathy, decrease emotional negativity, and lead to an increase in problem solving behaviors (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002).

Although Turkey is officially a secular state, according to KONDA Research and Consultancy report (2007), approximately 98.6% of Turkish population is Muslim. Therefore, the nature of Islam must be known to understand the Turkish family structure (Genc & Baptist, 2018). Islam literally means submission to the will of Allah, and is based upon the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and the Sunnah include teachings and practices of Muhammad. In Islam, all aspects of life are organized by religious rule, which includes specific requirements for marriage and family

life. For example; according to Sunnah, which is a more practical book, says that Muslims are not allowed to date or have a physical relationship before marriage.

By the declaration of the secular constitution of Turkey, Islamic rules (i.e., sharia) has not been followed since 1928, which demonstrates Turkey as a modern and westernized country. However religious teachings and values still play an important role in the individuals' life in Turkey. Islam has a huge impact on many Turkish people that provide a sense of meaning in life, shapes individuals' roles, interfere with marriage, family and interpersonal relationships, put in charge family members toward each other, and so on. Thus, Turkey is a unique place among other predominantly Muslim countries. In other words, Turkey is a blend of Eastern and Western cultural features, and its social and cultural mosaic reflects both modernism and Islamic tradition (Eraslan, Yakali-Camoglu, Harunzade, Ergun, & Dokur, 2012; Genc & Baptist, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of religious people's family and parenting relationships in Turkey. Further, many psychotherapy approaches used in therapies developed in Western cultures, which need to be adapted to Islamic cultures while working with Muslim clients. Hence, this study aims to help clinicians to be prepared to serve Muslim families who live in a Westernized country such as Turkey.

The Structure of Turkish Families

Patriarchal structure in Turkish families consistent with both Islamic views and with Turkish culture (Genc & Baptist, 2018; Hortaçsu, Bastug, & Muhammetberdiev, 2001). Traditional Turkish families, especially in the rural settings, are male dominated, and the father is the authority figure over both woman and children (Ataca, 2006; Yakali-Camoglu, 2007). Furthermore, family members must listen and follow men's wishes (Eraslan et al, 2012). Researchers show that the roles of Turkish fathers include: breadwinner, rule maker, decision maker, and implementer of punishment or rewards (Ivrendi & Isikoglu.2010). While financial and decision-making responsibilities belong to fathers, childcare and household labor are perceived as mothers' roles (Ataca, 2009; Eraslan et al, 2012). Furthermore, Turkish youth and children frequently feel closer to their mothers than their fathers, because of the labor division related to childcare in the family (Ozdemir, Vazsonyi, & Cok, 2013).

According to Turkish Statistical Institute (2013), the number of divorces in 2012 increased by 2.7% since the previous year in Turkey. Yet, when compared to international divorce rates, there is not a marked increase. In a recent study, Muslim-Turkish women in south eastern Turkey were surveyed about their religious beliefs and family values (Akdag, 2012). The findings indicate that perspective about divorce and marriage of Turkish Muslim women are not affected by modernization. Specifically, their religious belief protects the family structure from divorce, cohabitation, being a single parent, and illegitimate children.

Although Turkish family structure has shifted from a large multigenerational family to small nuclear families, most Turks are 'functionally extended' (Kagitcibasi, 1982) and they live in a 'culture of relatedness' with emotional and/ or material interdependence between generations (Ataca, 2006). Members of a Turkish family (consisting of parents, children and their relatives) feel responsible to each other; hence the emotional and financial support can be seen between the members (Genc & Baptist, 2018). The strong family bonds and support system also can be seen in Islam which places great importance to maintaining close relationships with family members and close relatives (Akdag, 2012; Genc & Baptist, 2018).

Another feature of Turkish households is the tendency of children to remain in their parents' home until they marry. According to traditional Turkish family norms and values, young adults are not permitted to move away and live alone (Eraslan et al., 2012). Following marriage, adult children maintain close ties with their parents (Ataca, 2006, 2009; Bastug, 2002). In spite of the rapid transmission of the cultural values and norms toward westernization, the Turkish culture remains traditional and patriarchal (Sunar & Fisek, 2005). Many core values that have remained

stable across time, especially related to the structure of the family and the roles and expectations of the members.

Childrearing in Turkey and its Impact on Parent-Child Relationships

Turkish family values and parenting practices are rooted in Islamic principles. In parent-child relationships in traditional Turkish families, love, mercy, and control are valued (Yilmaz, Dalkilic, Al-Mateen, Sood, & Pumariega, 2013). In Turkish families, the Qur'an provides a framework of expectations, including clearly defined rights as well as obligations for parents and children. According to Islamic teachings, children are to obey their parents, treat them with respect and kindness, and help them whenever they need assistance. Muslim parents are expected to provide a peaceful and loving environment at home and impart religious and moral values, which includes teaching spiritual disciplines and talking about God, the Prophet, and eternity (Akdag, 2012; Ozdikmenli-Demir & Sahin-Kutuk; 2012). Parents (and the larger extended family) are committed to sacrificing for their children (Yilmaz, Dalkilic, Al-Mateen, Sood, & Pumariega, 2013).

In Turkish families, children are viewed "as a gift from God, and love is expressed by kissing their cheeks and hugging them" (Yilmaz et al., 2013, p. 41). Discipline is also an act of love, and correction is viewed as necessary to teach the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Some Turkish fathers use rewards and punishment when teaching about Islam, which may have a negative impact on children's social competence, trust, and well-being (Ivrendi & Isikoglu, 2010; Ozdikmenli-Demir & Sahin-Kutuk; 2012). Tension between parents and their children often increases during the teenage years with some adolescents experiencing conflict with their family due to questioning their parents' religious beliefs (Ozdikmenli-Dermir & Sahin-Kutuk; 2012; Yilmaz et al., 2013).

Current child rearing practices in Turkey is based on sex-differentiation, which affects parent-child relationships. As it was in the past, priority continues to be given to male children in the patriarchal family structure. Traditionally, sons have been preferred over daughters because of the desire to carry on the male name and their economic value in contributing to the family welfare through financial and practical help (Kagitcibasi 1982, 2007). Consistent with sex-differentiation, Turkish parents allow more independence and aggressiveness in their sons and expect more dependence and obedience in their daughters (Ataca, 2006). Despite these differences, obedience, dependence, loyalty, and conformity to the family are encouraged in both sons and daughters in Turkish homes (Sunar, 2002; Ozdemir et al., 2013). Although sex-differentiation continues, inequality between male and female roles in Turkey have declined (Kulczycki 2008) as women have become more educated and involved family decision making (Sunar, 2002; Kagitcibasi & Ataca 2005).

There are some unique differences between childrearing approaches in rural and urban settings and among educated, upper class families. For example, Turkish rural parents from middle class they tend to raise their children with parental authority and external reinforcement; whereas, urban middle and upper class parents are more interested in individuation and personal autonomy (Eraslan et al., 2012). Furthermore, a gradual shift has been observed with educated, upper class parents who are becoming less authoritarian, more affectionate, and more encouraging of independence in their children's development (Sunar, 2009; Akyil 2012). These recent changes are likely to impact parent-child relationships in the Turkish culture.

Working with Religious Turkish Families in Therapy

Generally, the issues addressed in marriage and family counseling/therapy in Turkey are similar with those in other countries (Eraslan et al., 2012). It is essential that therapists/counselors understand that religion, specifically Islam, is central to the lives of many Turks and is an important factor that affects the marital relationship, family structure, and childrearing practices

(Genc & Baptist, 2018). It is also important to note that connectedness is greatly valued in Turkish culture as well as Islam. Turkish families must be viewed in the context of their culture of relatedness, which includes emotional and material interdependence in the family and between generations (Genc & Baptist, 2018; Eraslan et al., 2012). Although demographic studies show Turks in nuclear settings, Turkish families experience their lives as extended, with close social ties. Therefore, boundary and communication problems are frequent concerns for Turkish families (Genc & Baptist, 2018; Eraslan et al., 2012).

There are many tools and strategies available to counselors working with Turkish families to address culturally relevant concerns as well as explore religious beliefs and values (e.g., Marterella, & Brock, 2008). To start, therapists/counselors must demonstrate openness and sensitivity to beliefs held by their clients. Counselors lacking knowledge about Islam can increase their knowledge about religious texts, practices, and faith communities (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). When selecting a therapeutic approach, counselors must consider its congruence with clients' religious and cultural values (Daneshpour, 1998) or adapt therapeutic interventions to include a religious focus (Wiggins, 2013). For example, the common "time out" technique with couples during an argument can be adapted so that couples interrupt their negative emotions during an argument by praying together or for each other (Lambert et al., 2012).

Genograms may also be especially useful with Turkish families to gather information and explore how their immediate and extended family's religious and spiritual beliefs impact them (Isik, Akbas, Kirdok, Avci & Cakir, 2012; Marterella & Brock, 2008). The genogram also allows the counselor to learn about the family's subsystems, permeable boundaries, and the nature of the extended family relations. Similarly, the spiritual ecomap, which is used to identify sources of strength, resources, or relationships that affects the family spiritually, can be utilized to foster religious and spiritual discussions in counseling (Frame, 2000).

Another strategy that may be useful with Turkish couples and families is to consider God as a member of the family (Wiggins, 2013). Once God is conceptualized as an active player in family interaction, the circular questioning method can be used to determine how God functions in their family system. For example, the counselor can ask the clients to imagine what would happen if they made changes in their family system and how those changes would impact each member. Asking questions has the potential to help clients think differently about how they are framing the problem and to imagine how they might respond in a new way. This may impact patterns of thinking and behaving and improve relationships.

Conclusion

This study focused specifically on the role of Islam on family life in Turkey. Despite recent changes in the Turkish family structure as a result of the socioeconomic development, especially in the urban areas, many Turks continue to hold customary values, and most families remain patriarchal, authoritarian, and traditional. Understanding the nature of couples' and families' problems within the cultural context in Islamic nations where secular and Islamic traditions coexist could help better inform interventions to improve couple and family relationships and help clinicians while working with couples and families.

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