Effects of Economic Pressure on Marital Conflict in Romania

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This study examined the interrelationships among economic pressure, maternal depression, social support, and marital conflict in a sample of 239 mothers in Romania. Data were collected through a school-based survey. Findings indicated that higher levels of economic pressure were associated with higher levels of marital conflict. Economic pressure was also associated with higher marital conflict indirectly through increased maternal depression and lowered social support. The present results were similar to those obtained in studies conducted among U.S. samples.

Keywords: economic pressure, Romania, women, marital conflict, maternal depression

The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s has resulted in the political, economic, and social transformation of many former communist bloc countries. Over the past decade, Romania, similar to other East European countries, has moved toward a democratic political system, a capitalistic economy, and personal liberty, including independent and freely functioning families. However, the rapid and often chaotic rebuilding of the economic and political systems has created instability and placed families and communities under severe economic pressure (Tesliuc, Pop, & Tesliuc, 2001). The closure of several state-run industries, the lack of capital investments in new manufacturing and technological industries, and the decline of the agricultural sector have created considerable worker unemployment, underemployment, and job insecurity (Robila, 2003; Zamfir, 2001).

The postcommunist period has been economically difficult for many Romanian families. During the period 1991–1993, the poverty rate was 22% (poverty level was defined as 60% of average household consumption expenditure per adult; World Bank, 1997), it rose significantly during the period 1995–1999 (Tesliuc et al., 2001), and by the year 2000, 44% of the Romanian population was living at or below the poverty level (Government of Romania, 2001).

The poverty rate in Romania is among the highest of the former communist nations (World Bank, 2000). Within the context of rising prices, limited governmental subsidies, and unemployment, many Romanian families experience high levels of economic strain (Zamfir, 2001).

Family economic situations assessed through family incomes (e.g., salaries and dividends), unstable employment, loss of employment, and family assets and debts have been associated with emotional negativity and family disruptions (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 1990, 2002). Researchers (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994) have suggested that deprived family economic situations are associated with economic pressure/distress, which is in turn associated with intense emotional reactions and negative consequences for families (Lorenz, Conger, & Montague, 1994). Economic pressure or distress, conceptualized as the family’s perceived financial inability to meet family necessities, is distinguished from economic conditions that include more structural indicators of poverty (e.g., Conger et al., 1990, 2002). In this study, we examined the impact of economic pressure on family relationships within the Romanian context. Drawing from Conger’s family stress model of economic stress (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 2002), we propose that economic pressure is associated with higher levels of emotional distress, which in turn are associated with increased conflict within the marital relationship. Also included within this proposed conceptual pathway is the role of social support, which functions as an intervening variable between economic distress and marital conflict.

The family stress model, developed by Conger and colleagues (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 1990, 2002; Lorenz et al., 1994), suggests that economic pressure increases spouses’ psychological distress. The family’s low income and daily economic difficulties (inability to pay bills or buy food or clothing) provoke sadness, pessimism about the future, and anger. As spouses become more emotionally distressed, they tend to interact with one another in a more irritable and less supportive way, thus increasing the level of marital conflict. Moreover, when confronted with increased...
economic pressure, families isolate themselves from extended family and friends. However, spouses who receive social support from family and friends are able to better manage their situation and provide support to each other.

The pathways linking economic pressure and marital conflict are complex, with psychological functioning and social support being intervening variables (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 2002; McLoyd, 1990). Stress, anger, frustration, and loss of control as a result of inadequate financial resources are associated with elevated depressive symptoms (Conger et al., 2002; McLoyd, 1990) and with marital relationships characterized by negative content (criticism) and negative affect (anger; Conger et al., 2002; Lorenz et al., 1994).

Scholars have found a strong link between depression and marital conflict in samples of married couples, with negative mood positively related to irritable or hostile behavior between partners (Conger et al., 1990, 2002). Some prospective studies suggest that, among certain individuals, marital conflict is a significant predictor of depression (e.g., O'Leary, Christian, & Mendell, 1994); conversely, other studies have shown that spousal depression can have a negative impact in terms of marital conflict (Coyne, Thompson, & Palmer, 2002).

Research on the role of social support suggests that, in stressful situations, people reach out to their friends for support (e.g., Wheaton, 1985). However, some scholars have found that families faced with increased levels of economic pressure isolate themselves from their environments (e.g., Lorenz et al., 1994). There is consensus regarding the beneficial effects of perceived social support in reducing depression and marital conflict (e.g., Cutrona, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Procidano & Heller, 1983). Perceived social support refers to subjective appraisals that a person makes about the amount and quality of support he or she receives from others (Procidano & Heller, 1983). It is defined as the extent to which an individual believes that his or her needs for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Behaviors such as relying on family or friends for financial and emotional help and sharing emotions and thoughts are considered to be indicative of received social support. Barrera (1986) suggested that social support received from immediate and extended family members contributes positively to enhancing the quality of the marital relationship by lowering levels of conflict and promoting closeness. There is evidence that availability of social support decreases marital conflict in-
$10) after completing the survey. The sample for this investigation was restricted to married mothers. Single, cohabiting, divorced, remarried, and widowed mothers were excluded from the analyses, resulting in a sample of 239 mothers. The mean age of the mothers was 39.8 years (range: 30–49 years). Seventy-one percent had one or two children and had at least a high school education. The majority of mothers (75.9%) reported having a family income lower than 6 million lei per month (approximately $200), and 21% of them had lost their job at least once over the past 2 years.

Measures

All measures were translated and adapted for use within the Romanian sample.1 Items were checked for content appropriateness in the Romanian context via the translation–back translation method (Hambleton, 1994). The instruments were translated from English to Romanian and then back translated to English to determine whether there was any drift in meaning on any of the items. Experts fluent in Romanian and English examined the clarity and meaning of different items. Questionnaires were also examined for cultural appropriateness of words and phrases.

Economic pressure was assessed through mothers’ reports on 10 items adapted from earlier research (Conger & Elder, 1994). Examples of items included how often in the past 2 years the mothers’ families had experienced difficulties in paying for food, paying utility bills, and buying things for their children. Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (frequently). Factor analysis (with maximum likelihood as the method of factor extraction) indicated that the items loaded on a single factor. The scores were summed, and an economic pressure scale was created. Higher scores reflected greater economic pressure. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for this scale was .90.

Perceived social support was assessed with the Perceived Social Support Scale (Procidano & Heller, 1983). This scale contains two sets of items, one assessing support from family and the other assessing support from friends. Each set of items includes 14 declarative statements (e.g., “I rely on my family/friends for emotional support”). Responses are made on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 3 (frequently). Factor analysis (using maximum likelihood as the method of factor extraction) indicated that the items loaded on two factors (support from family and support from friends). Scores were summed, and two scales were created for social support from family and friends. Higher scores reflected greater perceived social support. Cronbach alpha coefficients were .80 for support from family and .89 for support from friends.

Maternal depression was examined with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Mothers responded to 20 items regarding how frequently they had experienced depressive symptoms (e.g., poor appetite and restless sleep) over the past week. Responses were made on a scale ranging from 0 (rarely/none of the time) to 3 (most/all of the time). This instrument has been shown to have adequate validity among various demographic groups within the U.S. population (Mチェック, 1990) and has been examined for content validity by Romanian experts (Vrasti, Schreppler, & Olteanu, 1986). Scores were summed, and scores of 16 or higher were classified as indicating clinical depression. Sixty-seven percent of the mothers had scores higher than 16.

Marital conflict was assessed through mothers’ responses to seven questions, developed by Buehler et al. (1998), assessing how often they and their spouses engaged in harsh and aggressive behaviors as a way of dealing with disagreements (e.g., “How often do you yell at each other?”). Responses were made on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always). Factor analysis (using maximum likelihood as the method of factor extraction) indicated that the items loaded on a single factor. The scores were summed, and a marital conflict scale was created. Higher scores reflected greater marital conflict. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the scale was .75.

Results

Descriptive data are presented in Table 1. Tests of mediation were based on Baron and Kenny’s (1986) guidelines, as follows: (a) A significant relationship should exist between economic pressure and marital conflict, (b) a significant relationship should exist between economic pressure and the mediating constructs (maternal depression and social support), (c) a significant relationship should exist between the mediating constructs and marital conflict, and (d) a significant drop should occur in the association between economic pressure and marital conflict after the introduction of the mediating constructs in the model.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the proposed conceptual model (see Figure 1). SEM is particularly suited to testing mediators because it permits the simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect paths (Arbuckle, 1999; Schumacker & Lomax, 1996). The fit of the model was evaluated according to the following criteria: chi-square and degrees of freedom, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), confirmatory factor index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). After examination of the models using SEM, the significance of the indirect pathways was assessed via Sobel’s test (Sobel, 1982). This test (Sobel, 1982) involves calculating the t ratio from the beta values and standard errors of the links between the independent variable and intervening variable and between the intervening variable and dependent variable. Ratios of 1.96 or larger were considered significant at the .05 level.

Before initiating SEM, we conducted several analyses to test the assumptions on which SEM are based (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). These included tests of scaling and assessments of multivariate normality. To examine whether the constructs were linearly associated with each other, we regressed the dependent variable on each independent variable entering a quadratic cubic term. Results indicated a linear association between the independent and dependent variables. Also, examination of the data indicated no outliers. As an initial check for multivariate normality, we examined the univariate distributions of the variables; the variables indicated only slight deviations from normality. Given that this could have an impact on multivariate normality, we normalized all of the data using Blom normalizing transformations. The analyses conducted with the non-normalized and normalized data indicated almost no significant differences. However, to guard against possible violations of SEM assumptions, we conducted the analyses using normalized data.

The model was examined controlling for maternal edu-

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1 The instruments can be obtained on request from Mihaela Robila.
cation. Results indicated that maternal education was associated with marital conflict ($r = .21$). As a first step, the direct impact of economic pressure on marital conflict was examined, and the link was significant ($\beta = .33; \text{critical ratio } [\text{CR}] = 5.36$). Higher levels of economic pressure were related to increased reports of marital conflict. The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(2, N = 239) = 2.36, ns$; $GFI = .99; AGFI = .98; CFI = .99; \text{RMSEA} = .03$.

In the second step, maternal depression and perceived social support were introduced. Findings indicated that there were significant paths between economic pressure and perceived social support ($\beta = -.33, CR = -4.53$), between perceived social support and maternal depression ($\beta = -.35, CR = -2.57$), between maternal depression and marital conflict ($\beta = .40, CR = 5.64$), and between perceived social support and marital conflict ($\beta = -.25, CR = -3.52$). The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(11, N = 239) = 8.18, ns$; $GFI = .99; AGFI = .98; CFI = 1.00; \text{RMSEA} = .00$. Sobel tests indicated four significant indirect pathways. A significant indirect effect was obtained between economic pressure and marital conflict through maternal depression, $t(237) = 5.71, p < .05$. Significant indirect effects were also obtained between economic pressure and marital conflict through perceived social support, $t(237) = 2.50, p < .05$; between economic pressure and maternal depression through perceived social support, $t(237) = 3.58, p < .05$; and between perceived social support and marital conflict through maternal depression, $t(237) = 5.71, p < .05$. In summary, the findings suggested that the interrelationship between economic pressure and increased marital conflict can be explained through lowered social support and increased maternal depression.

**Discussion**

The present study examined the impact of economic pressure on family processes (perceived social support, maternal depression, and marital conflict) in Romania. We used a quantitative approach and a path-analytic technique (SEM) to test the mediational model. Constructs were assessed through mothers’ reports. Our findings suggest that the pathways between economic pressure and family processes in this Romanian sample support research findings with U.S. samples. They also indicate that when Romanian mothers report high economic pressure (inability to meet their family’s economic needs), they report feelings of helplessness, sadness, and hopelessness as well. This finding is similar to results from Czech Republic (Hrabá et al., 2000) and U.S. samples indicating that increased economic pressure is associated with increased levels of depression (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994). Increased economic pressure is associated with higher levels of marital conflict only indirectly, through depression. In this study, higher levels of maternal depression were associated with increased marital conflict. This finding is similar to that obtained in studies with U.S. samples (Coyne et al., 2002; Dehle & Weiss, 1998), which have indicated that spouses who report more depressive symptoms report low marital quality and frequent conflicts as well (Conger & Elder, 1994).

The results of this investigation suggest that perceptions of economic pressure are related to perceptions of social support. This is also similar to findings with U.S. samples, which indicate that when people are confronted with economic pressure, they withdraw from their family and friends (Lorenz et al., 1994). Our results indicate that in the face of economic uncertainty, Romanian mothers, as is the case with U.S. families, appear to perceive less emotional and financial support from their family and friends. Romanian mothers who perceive that they have access to help from their family and friends in times of need feel empowered and able to cope with their difficulties. Perceptions of financial and emotional support from family and friends were associated with significant decreases in levels of maternal depression, supporting results from U.S. studies suggesting that such instrumental and emotional support can help promote family members’ psychological well-being (e.g., Lorenz et al., 1994). Also similar to findings from studies involving U.S. samples (e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), economic pressure was associated with greater isolation from friends and extended family, which in turn was associated with increased marital conflict.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the family stress model developed by Conger and colleagues (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 1990, 2002; Lorenz et al., 1994). Consistent with this model, our results...
indicate that high levels of economic pressure are associated with increased psychological distress among women and, subsequently, with increased marital conflict. High levels of economic pressure are also associated with lower perceived social support, whereas higher perceived support is associated with less depression and marital conflict.

Some limitations must be considered when evaluating the findings of the present study. This study did not involve a nationally representative sample of Romanian families, and therefore the findings cannot be broadly generalized and need to be interpreted with caution. We examined mothers’ self-reports of various behaviors, increasing the probability of perceptual bias underlying the associations among the variables and the possibility of inflated associations. We estimated the amount of shared informant variance by conducting confirmatory analyses and allowing error terms to freely correlate; approximately one third of the error terms (3 of 10) were freed to achieve a good fit. The results suggest that there was a moderate level of shared error among mothers’ ratings of constructs. Including fathers in future investigations would provide a more comprehensive picture of Romanian family processes. Self-reports by mothers offer an “insider’s” perspective (Olson, 1977), whereas observations of various family processes would provide a more “objective reality.” Finally, this study involved a cross-sectional design. Longitudinal research has been encouraged by family scholars as a way to better understand families and changes in family processes over time (N. B. Miller, Cowan, Cowan, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993; R. B. Miller & Wright, 1995).

Despite these limitations, the present study has several strengths and offers a significant contribution to research on economic pressure and family functioning. The fact that economic pressure has an impact on family functioning has been indicated through several studies conducted in different parts of the world (e.g., Conger et al., 1990; Hraba et al., 2000). Because we analyzed the impact of economic pressure on several family processes, including social support, depression, and marital conflict, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of the paths linking economic hardship and family functioning. By tailoring the conceptualization and operationalization processes appropriately and adequately to the Romanian context, we developed valid and reliable survey questionnaires for the Romanian population. Considering the paucity of instruments available to explore family processes in Romania, this represents a significant contribution, in that the information obtained through these inventories could be used to develop other appropriate measures of family functioning.

The results of this investigation support the development of interventions on several levels. First, intervention strategies should focus on helping families learn instrumental skills to manage their resources. Second, programs should be developed that help adults learn new job skills that would be more marketable in a capitalist economy. Finally, given the central role of depression in marital conflict, health care agencies should incorporate procedures that allow for the detection and treatment of depression.

References


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