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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPACT OF THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN ON THEIR FAMILY FUNCTIONING DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Families with school-age children were particularly affected by the changes resulting from the Covid 19 pandemic. Facing the new reality, the family systems and the family members were challenged to reorganize their individual and family functioning, given their practical, relational and emotional developmental tasks in a changed life context.

Objective: This research aims to examine the impact of socio-demographic variables on the family on their general functioning on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Method and Materials: The research included 148 respondents – parents of school-age children. The research was conducted in the period from October 2020 to April 2021. The instruments used in the research are Demographic Data Questionnaire and Family Assessment Device (FAD).

Results: The results show that higher level of education, higher family income as well as employment of the family members are associated with better family functioning. According to the results, a larger number of family members is associated with poorer family functioning, as well as a larger number of children in the family.

Conclusion: Certain socio-demographic characteristics of families with school-age children have an impact on their overall family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic. It is common for all families to face problems in pandemic conditions, but it depends on their abilities and strengths how they deal with them. Psychological support for the families can be useful in overcoming the challenges, considering their characteristics, needs, as well as the specifics of the family life cycle.

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Introduction:-

Theoretical Background

Research on the effects of previous pandemics and disasters suggests that the changes experienced by each individual and each family can have an impact on multiple levels of functioning. (Madhav N., 2017) All the changes that were happening in the country and in the world as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic imposed the need for more research, which have in their focus the clinical and health aspects of the pandemic and the specifics of the impact of the pandemic on different regions, cultures, groups and individuals. (Brooks et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Salerno et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2020)

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Families with school-age children were particularly affected by the pandemic changes. As a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, schools were closed and transitioned to online teaching in which parents had a significant role in the educational process of children.¹ Although in this family life cycle it is expected that children form their own independent relationship with school and the educational process, and that parents have more flexibility in the organization of their free time and professional development, in the changed conditions of functioning they were directly involved in supporting their children in the performance of school duties from home. (Ross, 2021; Calcar et al., 2022) Facing the new reality of parents such as working from home, temporary unemployment, children's schooling and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, have an impact on their individual and family functioning. (WHO, 2021) During the pandemic, many families were faced with increased pressure and reduced social support. In families, financial concerns, social isolation, emotional reactions such as sadness and loneliness affect the well-being of members. (Lee & Ward, 2020; Cluver et al., 2020; Smith, 2020) Research shows that families whose members have health problems and are faced with social inequalities are more affected. Findings from a survey conducted in 2020 show that both women and men have faced an increase in the number of hours spent performing domestic activities. (Bashevska, 2020) An increase in domestic violence and the frequency of violence against children has also been observed as a result of the collision of these stressful factors. (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Kofman & Garfin, 2020; Lee & Ward, 2020). The changes indicate modifications in the family functioning that can result in inadequate adaptation and appearance of dysfunctional patterns of behavior and interaction.

The functioning of the family system is conceptualized through developmental interactions and processes that ensure the integration and survival of the family as a unit and the ability to accomplish its tasks. In the past two years, families have been faced with the challenge of responding to new situational, organizational and economic requirements, in changed conditions of functioning. Research in the last period talk about the implications of crisis conditions of functioning on different populations. (Kantamneni, 2020; Hwang et al., 2022) Several studies in the period before the Covid 19 pandemic highlight the connection between family characteristics (gender, socioeconomic status, family structure, etc.) and family functioning. (Botha et al., 2018; Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017; Tiffin et al., 2007) The findings of studies investigating how families adapt to the new reality, taking into account their socio-demographic specifics, are limited. Kumar et al. (2012) point out that the pandemic may affect groups with different demographic characteristics differently, and lead to social, economic and health disparities.² In the Republic of North Macedonia, no research aimed at determining the impact of the socio-demographic characteristics of families with school-age children has been conducted until now. For those reasons, this research is conducted, in the direction of determining the factors that influence the functioning of families with school-age children, taking into account their developmental characteristics.

Method And Materials:-

Participants

The research population consists of all families that have school age children (from 6 to 14 years). The research includes 148 respondents - parents of school age children in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, who during the period of conducting the research are students in elementary school. Respondents from six regions were included: Skopje - 17.6%, Northeastern - 1.4%, Eastern - 20.9%, Southeastern - 4.7%, Vardar - 25% and Pelagonian region - 30.4%. The respondents are included voluntarily in the research, for which they have given a written Declaration of consent. The structure of the sample with basic demographic data is given in Table 1.

Table 1:- Sample structure with basic demographic data.

Variables		%
Family role	Mother/Wife	56.8
	Father/Husband	43.2
Degree of education	Primary	4.7

¹ Garbe, A., Ogurlu, U., Logan, N., & Cook, P. (2020). COVID-19 and Remote Learning: Experiences of Parents with Children during the Pandemic. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 45-65. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/8471>

² Kumar S., Quinn S. C., Kim K. H., Daniel L. H., Freimuth V. S. (2012). The impact of workplace policies and other social factors on self-reported influenza-like illness incidence during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102, 134–140. 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300307

	Secondary	46.6
	Higher	48.6
Ethnicity	Macedonian	93.9
	Albanian	4.1
	Roma	1.4
	Vlach	0.7
Employment	Employed	81.1
	Unemployed	18.9
Monthly income at a family level	0-20.000 den	4.1
	20.000-30.000 den	20.9
	30.000-40.000 den	23.6
	40.000-50.000 den	20.3
	50.000 den and above	31.1
Family type	Nuclear family	74.3
	Extended family	25.7
Variables		M, Min, Max, SD
Age of respondents		38.74 Min=23, Max=56, SD=5.474
Number of members in the family		Min=3, Max=7, SD=1.069
Number of children in the family		Min=1, Max=4, SD=0.609

Data Collection

The research took place over a period of six months, from October 2020 to April 2021. Parents of children who at the time of the research were students in elementary school, were included in the research after giving a written Declaration of consent. The research materials were distributed to the participants by the school professionals (psychologists, social workers etc.), and after completion by the parents they were returned in a sealed envelope. During the research, all ethical principles prescribed by the Chamber of Psychologists of the Republic of North Macedonia were applied, and all active measures for prevention and protection against the spread of the coronavirus were respected.

Measurement:-

The instruments used in the research are the Questionnaire for demographic data and the Family Assessment Device (FAD).

The Questionnaire for demographic data was constructed for the purposes of this research and contains data on: Family role of the respondent, Level of education, Region in which the respondent lives, Ethnicity, Employment, Monthly income at a family level, Type of family, Age of the respondents, Number of members in the family and Number of children in the family.

The Family Assessment Device (FAD) is a publicly available questionnaire for assessing family functioning.³For the purposes of the research, the questionnaire was translated and adapted from English to Macedonian. The questionnaire is based on the McMaster's model of family functioning and it assesses the structural and organizational characteristics of the families, and the patterns of transactions between the family members. It contains 60 items relating to six dimensions of family functioning: Problem Solving, Communication, Roles, Affective Responsiveness, Affective Involvement and Behavioral Control. Apart from these six dimensions, the scale includes an assessment of the General functioning

Statistical Analysis

Statistical data processing was performed in the SPSS Statistics 23.0 program. For the series with descriptive characteristics Family role, Level of education, Ethnicity, Region in which the respondent lives, Income in the family, Employment, Type of family system, frequencies-percentages were calculated. Descriptive statistics (Mean, Std. Dev., Minimum, Maximum) were calculated for the series with numerical data Age, Number of members in the

³Family Assessment Device (FAD). Retrieved on 14.09.2018 from https://isucounselingresources2017.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/3/4/11344496/family_assessment_device.pdf

family, Number of children in the family. Descriptive statistics (Mean, 95% Confidence Interval for Mean, Std. Dev., Variance, Median, Minimum, Maximum, Range, Interquartile Range) were calculated for the series with numerical marks General family functioning. A correlation analysis was made of all independent variables with the variable General family functioning with the Pearson Correlation test.

The coefficient of internal homogeneity of the instrument in this research Cronbach's alpha is 0.896 for the basic group, while for the control group it is 0.881 and it can be stated that the internal consistency of the entire instrument is very good. The level of statistical significance was defined at $p < 0.05$, for low significance $p < 0.1$ and very high significance $p < 0.001$. The results obtained after conducting the research are presented in tables, and are properly analyzed and interpreted.

Results:-

For the purposes of the research, the impact of the individual relevant variables on family functioning in families with school-age children was analyzed. In particular, the impact of Family role, Level of education, Ethnicity, Family income, Employment, Type of family system, Age, Number of Family Members and Number of Children in the family on the General family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic was examined. In order to understand the influence of certain characteristics of the family on the General family functioning in families with children of school age, the connection of the mentioned variables with the obtained score of General family functioning was analyzed. Table 2 presents the descriptive indicators for the obtained results for the variable General family functioning in families with school-age children.

Table 2:- Descriptive statistics for the variable General family functioning.

		Statistic	Std. Error	
General family functioning	Mean	1.7700	.03426	
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	1.7023	
		Upper Bound	1.8377	
	5% Trimmed Mean	1.7609		
	Median	1.7500		
	Variance	.174		
	Std. Deviation	.41680		
	Minimum	1.00		
	Maximum	3.00		
	Range	2.00		
Interquartile Range	.58			

The theoretical cutoff score for the variable General family functioning is 2.00. A score greater than or equal to the cutoff score indicates low functioning in that dimension, while a score less than a cutoff score indicates high functioning in that dimension. According to the obtained results in Table 2, greater part of the families with children of school age were functional in this dimension of family functioning.

In addition, a correlation analysis was made of the variables Family Role, Level of Education, Ethnicity, Income in the Family, Employment, Type of Family System, Age, Number of Members in the Family and Number of Children in the Family with the variable General Family Functioning. The obtained results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3:- Correlation analysis of the variables General family functioning and Socio-demographic characteristics of families with school-aged children.

Socio-demographic characteristics	General family functioning	
	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Family role	-0.121	0.142
Level of education	-0.161	0.051
Ethnicity	0.109	0.188
Income in the family	-0.171	0.037
Employment	0.196	0.017
Type of family system	0.022	0.791

Age	-0.051	0.540
Number of members in the family	0.178	0.031
Number of children in the family	0.257	0.002

From Table 3 it can be seen that statistically significant results were obtained for the connection of the variable General family functioning and the variables Level of education, Income in the family, Employment, Number of members in the family and Number of children in the family. For the variables Family Role, Ethnicity, Type of Family System and Age of the Respondents, no correlation was confirmed with the variable General Family Functioning.

The results show that the level of education of the respondents negatively correlates with family functioning ($r=-0.161$, $p<0.1$), i.e. a higher level of education of family members is associated with better family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic (lower score of the variable General family functioning indicates better family functioning, while a higher score indicates worse family functioning). Higher incomes in the family are also related to better family functioning according to the obtained results ($r=-0.171$, $p<0.05$). The employment of family members during the pandemic is associated with better general family functioning ($r=0.196$, $p<0.05$), i.e. an increase in unemployment causes a deterioration in family functioning (the coding of the variable in the SPSS program is 1 for employed respondents, 2 for the unemployed).

According to the obtained results, a larger number of family members is associated with worse family functioning ($r=0.196$, $p<0.05$), as well as a larger number of children in the family ($r=0.257$, $p<0.05$).

Discussion:-

From the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 until now, more research has addressed the impact of the changes caused by the Covid 19 outbreak on different populations. The structural, organizational and relational patterns of families with school-age children were challenged by the changed living conditions as a result of the pandemic, and in this paper an attempt to determine the impact of the socio-demographic characteristics of families on their general family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic was made.

The changes imposed by the pandemic are followed by a crisis of understanding and coping with the stress they have caused. The results obtained from the research show that higher education of the respondents is related to better family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic. Education affects the quality of life in several ways. People with low skills and competencies have limited job opportunities and economic stability, and research shows that people that leave school early face a higher risk of social exclusion, and schooling has a positive impact on success in making choices that include marriage and size of family by enabling better access to information for decision-making. (Wolfe & Haveman, 2001; Berrington, 2001; Zhan, Su & Chang, 2022; Eurostat, 2021) In a research conducted in Turkey (2016), the relationship between education and family style is highlighted, a higher level of education is associated with higher achievements of respondents regarding the style of family functioning.⁴ Davis-Keane (2005) states that parental education is associated with a warm social climate in the home.⁵ Research findings regarding the relationship between education and family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic are limited. Rataj et al. (2021) point out that the level of education may be related to risk perception, knowledge and protective behavior related to the corona virus.⁶ Education as a factor may influence changes in family functioning (work, housing, health care) and family members' skills to cope with pandemic stressors.

⁴Copur, Z., AydinerBoylu, A., &Oztop, H. (2013). Investigation of the Factors Influencing Family Functions Style. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147- 4478), 2(3), 26–40. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v2i3.69>

⁵ Davis-Kean, P.E. (2005) The Influence of Parent Education and Family Income on Child Achievement: The Indirect Role of Parental Expectations and the Home Environment. Journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association, 19, 294-304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.19.2.294>

⁶Rattay P, Michalski N, Domanska OM, Kaltwasser A, De Bock F, Wieler LH, et al. (2021) Differences in risk perception, knowledge and protective behaviour regarding COVID-19 by education level among women and men in Germany. Results from the COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring (COSMO) study. PLoS ONE 16(5): e0251694. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0251694>

A lower level of education is also associated with a lower economic status. (Jason, Roberts & Below, 2012) Studies show that during the pandemic many people have faced unemployment, working in essential positions, working from home while caring for children, facing economic insecurity and managing many family stressors. (Canady, 2020; Fontanesi et al., 2020) Many pre-pandemic studies confirm the positive correlation between family functioning and family income. (Krasnow, 1995; Hayden et al., 1998; Mansfield, Dealy & Keitner, 2013) A study conducted in the USA examining the experiences of families with school-age children during the first three months of the Covid 19 pandemic shows that the level of family income and ethnicity/race play a significant role in the lives of families dealing with various challenges due to the pandemic. (Chen, Byrne, & Vélez, 2022) Since the beginning of the pandemic, many people have also faced unemployment or a changed way of performing work tasks such as working from home, which has an adverse impact on family relationships and the well-being of members. (Wang et al., 2021; Andrade, Gillen & Molina, 2022) Economic concerns of one or both partners, loss of jobs, parental stress, changes in relationships with close people and many other factors create difficulties in their relationships. (Daks et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021) These findings confirm the research results showing that higher family income and employment of family members during the pandemic are associated with better overall family functioning.

The analysis of the research results shows that there is a correlation between the number of members in the family and the number of children in the family with worse overall functioning in the family during the Covid 19 pandemic. In changed conditions of functioning, family members faced the challenge of restructuring their family roles and to respond to the demands and needs of members, including the educational needs of the children.⁷ Performing multiple roles can lead to the risk of serious distress. (Lahelma et al., 2002; Walters, McDonough & Strohschein, 2022). Takeda et al. (2004) state that there is a positive correlation between the number of family members and the degree of concern.⁸ Research conducted in Canada (2021) highlights that families with children under the age of 18 have experienced worsening mental health due to the pandemic, and recognizes the need to adequately respond to the diverse needs of families and mitigate the potential for widening health and social inequalities for parents and children.⁹ In a research conducted in Croatia, it is stated that parents of children of preschool age in conditions of isolation during the Covid 19 pandemic have difficulties in maintaining consistency in conditions when they are engaged in work and push the boundaries of upbringing, i.e. ignore the situations in which children do not behave according to the rules and allow them greater freedom of choice of behavior. (Višnjić-Jevtić & Visković, 2021) No data is available on family functioning in large and extended family systems in the conditions of the Covid 19 pandemic, but changes in their family dynamics are expected as a result of drastic contextual changes, their developmental needs, the available resources, and the capacities of the family to adapt to new and changed conditions of functioning.

Conclusion:-

Certain socio-demographic characteristics of families with school-age children have an impact on their general family functioning during the Covid 19 pandemic. The research shows that more educated respondents have better family functioning. Also, higher incomes in the family and employment of family members during the Covid 19 pandemic are related to better general functioning in the families. The analysis of the results shows that families with more family members and families with more children have worse overall family functioning. The obtained results of the research confirm the findings of previously conducted research, which speak of the multiplied challenges that family systems are faced with in terms of adapting to the changes imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic. (Brooks et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Salerno et al., 2020; Ding et al., 2021)

What all families have in common is that they are facing problems during the pandemic, but how they deal with them depends on their abilities and strengths. The findings of the conducted research indicate the need to strengthen the family resilience and the ability to adapt, in direction of improving the family functionality. Psychological

⁷Vanderhout, S.M., Birken, C.S., Wong, P. et al. Family perspectives of COVID-19 research. *Res InvolvEngagem* 6, 69 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-020-00242-1>

⁸Takeda, Y., Kawachi, I., Yamagata, Z., Hashimoto, S., Matsumura, Y., Oguri, S., & Okayama, A. (2004). Multigenerational family structure in Japanese society: Impacts on stress and health behaviors among women and men. *Social Science and Medicine*, 59(1), 69-81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.10.003>

⁹Gadermann, A. C., Thomson, K. C., Richardson, C. G., Gagné, M., McAuliffe, C., Hirani, S., & Jenkins, E. (2021). Examining the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family mental health in Canada: findings from a national cross-sectional study. *BMJ open*, 11(1), e042871.

support of families through psychoeducation, counseling and psychotherapy can be useful in overcoming the challenges of families, taking into account their characteristics, needs, as well as the specifics of the family life cycle in which they are functioning.

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