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Religious feelings in pre-school children in their own and their mothers' perception

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to compare the expression of religious feelings in pre-school children and the perception of these feelings by the children's mothers. Ninety Polish children from Catholic families aged 4, 5 and 6 participated in the study. A picture method along with interviews with children's mothers were employed to gather the data. Data from the two sources was compared, taking into consideration the content and ways of expression of the described feelings. Relations between positive and negative feelings were investigated and further statistical analyses were focused mainly on negative feelings. It was found that structure of negative religious feelings obtained directly from the children bears significant similarity to the mothers' perception.

KEYWORDS: religious feelings, pre-school children, mothers' perception, Anacor, comparison

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the issue of religiousness arouses more and more interest (Francis, 1994; Tamminen, 1994; Corrigan, 2004; Walesa,

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2005; Król, 2006; Oser, Scarlett, & Bucher, 2006; Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008; Tatała, 2008; Persinger, 2009; Kostrubiec-Wojtachnio; Tatała, 2014). Within this area of research, the topic of religious feelings, being a component of religiousness, is also being discussed (Socha, 1996; Walesa, 2005; Tatała, 2006, Zee, 2007; Zee, Hermans, & Aarnoutse, 2007; Van Cappellen, Saroglou, 2012).

The psychological knowledge of religious feelings, and especially of their development, is still fragmentary and insufficiently justified. The empirical work on this issue has led to some interesting results. However, it has also shown that there are some methodological difficulties within the subject, concerning the phenomenon of religiousness and the sphere of feelings.

Describing the attitude of people towards their surroundings, psychology employs the terms of emotions and feelings, with a tendency toward using the word emotions more. It is agreed that emotions are complex, organized states composed of cognitive assessments, stimuli to act and use patterned somatic reactions (Frijda, 1989; 1992; Socha, 1996). In turn, feelings are understood as a conscious and established readiness to react, especially towards people and the surrounding reality. In comparison to emotions, feelings are less intense and last (Reykowski, 1992; Jarymowicz, 1998; Olechnowicz, 2000; Reber, 2000; Gasiul, 2002). Hence the use of „religious feelings” as opposed to “religious emotions” to describe experiences related to sacrum. It seems that in relation to values, it is more appropriate to describe emotional processes in terms of cognitive, esthetic, moral and religious feelings (Kowalczyk, 2011). On the basis of the above-mentioned theoretical clarification (at the same time being conscious of psychological differences between the two terms) the word “feeling” will be mainly used, with an occasional replacement by the term “emotion”.

A characteristic feature of religious feelings is a certain difficulty in their simple description. Since they combine together, they combine and create families of meanings containing differ-

ent, complementary or even contradictory emotional responses (Fisher, Shaver, Carnochan, 1990). In addition, within the scope of religious feelings, there can occur intensified difficulties in the verbal expression of the sensations experienced. For example, the feeling of religious fascination may signify differently experienced compositions or generically different feelings. The differentiating criterion may originate from the origin of a particular experience. The criterion of dissimilarity can have its source, among others, in the origin of this experience. According to G.W. Allport (1950), there is no such thing as a single and unique religious emotion, but there is a varied set of feelings which concentrate on a religious object.

Despite the abovementioned difficulties some feelings concerning the religious phenomenon can be distinguished, e.g. joy, hope, love, longing for God, sadness, sorrow, repentance, distress or fear for everlasting life. It is worth noting here that the same stimulus can evoke different religious feelings. For example, the sense of man's dependence on God in some cases evokes the feeling of joy of being under Providence's care, but in others triggers protest, anger and fear (Corrigan, 2004).

Religious feelings viewed as a single dimension are a part of an eight-component structure of religiousness proposed by C. Walesa (2005) among with, e.g. a bond with a fellowship of believers and religious practices. In general, religious feelings follow religious awareness (feeling creates connotative layers of awareness). The more developed, the richer, better structured and strengthened by different components awareness is, the more helpful it is to evoke, form, modify and stabilise religious feelings. Therefore, individual pieces of religious information have much less influence on the development of religious feelings than the information constituting a certain semantic integrity leading towards a certain disposition to the Sacred. This process, which occurs at the level of awareness, is accompanied by a richer and deeper religious feelings. An individual's intense relationship with God evokes

the need for the co-existence with other believers, and this shapes numerous interpersonal relationships. Religious feelings, linked with relationships, demand appropriate socialisation and cultural forms of expression. The authentic bonds with a fellowship of believers help religious feelings to develop and be implemented in a more mature way. This particularly concerns children, who learn to express feelings, name and react to particular situations as they grow older. What supports a more adequate expression of feelings is active participation in religious practices. Such practices not only precede such feelings, but also may evoke them. In turn, religious feelings support and deepen external forms of religiousness.

METHOD

Two sources of empirical data concerning the religious feelings in children were used in the presented study: (1) standardized explorative interview with the children; (2) interviews with their mothers.

In this way it was possible to answer the following research question: Does the expression of religious feelings in pre-school children correspond with the perception of these feelings by their mothers?

Explorative interview was conducted using five pictures representing important events from Jesus' life, as described in the Gospel (I. The Holy Family, II. Jesus Teaches and Heals, III. The Storm on the Lake, IV. The Crucifixion of Christ, V. The Resurrection of Christ). Asking suitable questions stimulated the subjects to answers which were loaded with feelings. It was assumed that children identify with the characters in the pictures and project their feelings. Since talking about them is not an easy task, questions about the feelings of the people in the pictures were asked. For instance for the picture "Storm on the lake" the interviewer

asked *How is it over there? How do they feel?* or asked directly *How would you feel if you were there, during that storm?*

The data concerning children's religious feelings as observed by their mothers have been obtained through an interview consisting of 9 items. The questions concerned different religious feelings (e.g. *With reference towards what events, religious in nature, have you seen that made [name of the child] cheerful or sad*).

Ninety Polish children from Catholic families were examined, 30 at a time, aged 4, 5 and 6 (15 boys and 15 girls in each age group), as well as their mothers. Apart from the age, the level of children's religiousness had also been taken into account while choosing the test (Tatala, 2000).

RESULTS

The initial phase of data analysis was made using the appropriate classification of religious feelings. They were divided into positive and negative feelings and then, in each of these groups, the feelings were grouped according to their content.

Presentation of the Research Results (Raw Data) Concerning Positive and Negative Feelings

Table 1 presents the comparison of the data on the expression of positive feelings formulated on the basis of children's and their mothers' answers.

The results of the research are characterized by the following statements.

Joy is definitely the dominant positive feeling out of the ones investigated in the study; it occurs in 85 children, that is 94.4%, and in 88 mothers, i.e. 97.8%. As an individual feeling, it has been observed in 28 children (31.1%) and in 6 mothers (6.7%). However, in complex statements containing other positive feelings, apart from joy, it occurs in 57 children, which constitutes 63.3% of the

Table 1. Numerical balance for three categories of positive feelings in children's answers and mothers' assessments

Positive feelings			
CHILDREN'S ANSWERS		MOTHERS' ASSESSEMTNS	
Categories	Number	Categories	Number
joy only	28	joy	6
joy and another positive feeling	57	joy and another positive feeling	82
other positive feelings (different than joy)	5	other positive feelings (different than joy)	2
Sum	90	Sum	90

answers, and in 82 mothers, i.e. 91.1%. A more detailed division of this category, being based on the feelings accompanying joy, has turned out to be of little use to the analysis conducted, as the subcategories received have been much diversified and, because of this, there have been too few respondents to these subcategories. Only 5 (5.6%) of children reported their positive feelings without using the word joy, and only 2 (2.2%) of the mothers in the description of their children's positive feelings did not use the term joy.

It was observed that there was a concordance between 55 children's (61.1%) answers and feelings noticed by their mothers. Table 2 presents the comparison of the data concerning the expression of negative feelings obtained from children's and their mothers' answers. Sadness, which occurs in the replies of 25 children, that is 27%, and in 51 (i.e. 56.7%) of the mothers' answers, appears most often as a single negative feeling. However, fear as an individual feeling has been registered in 9 children, which constitutes 10.0%, and in 2 mothers, i.e. 2.2%.

Complex feelings: sadness, fear and compassion are the most frequent categories in children's answers. It was observed in 40

Table 2. Numerical balance for four categories of negative feelings in children's answers and mothers' assessments

Negative feelings			
CHILDREN'S ANSWERS		MOTHERS' ASSESSEMTNS	
Categories	Number	Categories	Number
sadness	25	sadness	51
fear	9	fear	2
sadness and fear, compassion	5	sadness and fear, compassion	18
no display of negative feelings	16	no display of negative feelings	19
Sum	90	Sum	90

participants, i.e. 44.4%, and in only 18 mothers, that is 20.0% of the respondent group. The number of children who did not show negative feelings during the research is 16, which constitutes 17.8%, and the number of mothers is similar, and constitutes 19, i.e. 21.1%.

Analysis of the results carried out on the raw data has a descriptive character. The most characteristic observation is finding the same categories of religious feelings in both the children's answers and their mothers' assessments.

Further analysis of the results was made with reference to negative feelings only, which have a richer set of relationships than positive feelings. No other category was proved to ultimately prevail. The goal was to find latent variables, a group of factors explaining numerical arrangements for the selected categories of feelings. In order to do this, analysis of correspondence (ANACOR) was used. This analysis performs an analogous role for nominal variables similar to the principal components method with reference to the variables measured on an intervallic scale.

Expression of Negative Feelings in Children and Mothers

Using ANACOR requires presenting the results as nominal variables, and each categories as variables. Three variables were analysed:

1. Negative feelings in children's answers (NEG_CH)
2. Negative feelings in children's answers observed by their mothers (NEG_M)
3. Age/sex presented as nominal variables (AGE_SEX)

Values of the variables:

Negative feelings in children's answers: Sadness (SAD), Fear (FEA), Sadness, fear, compassion (SFC), No display (NON)

Negative feelings in children's answers observed by their mothers: Sadness (sad),

Fear (fea), Sadness, fear, compassion (sfc), No display (non)

Age/sex presented as nominal variables (AGE_SEX): Boys age 4 (b4) 4. Girls age 4 (g4), Boys age 5 (b5) 5. Girls age 5 (g5), Boys age 6 (b6) 6. Girls age 6 (g6)

Because of analysis of correspondence it is possible to describe any two sets of categories (observed variables) in a frame of reference composed of a small number of latent orthogonal coordinates. In this manner incomparable categories (since they are different qualitatively) are transformed into measureable variables on an intervallic scale in the "new space". The results of analysis of correspondence allowed to:

1. Identify categories which are most similar for one variable in the context of another variable. For instance, similarities between two age groups in a way of expressing religious feelings can be made
2. Interpret the distance between pairs of categories which belong to two different variables. This permits to assess the similarity between the corresponding categories distinguished from answers of children and mothers.

Detailed analysis of the results was carried out to track the relations between children's age and sex, and the meaning of the expressed feelings (that is examining strictly developmental relationships). Raw data and the obtained relationships will be presented for NEG_CH and NEG_M.

ANACOR for the variables NEG_G vs AGE_SEX. Analysis of correspondence aiming at finding relationships between negative feelings, age and sex of the subjects was carried out on the basis of data presented in Table 3.

Tabele 3. Numerical distribution (raw data) for NEG_G (negative feelings) and AGE_SEX

Categories of variables of age and sex (AGE_SEX)	Categories of negative feelings (NEG_G)				
	SAD	FEA	SFC	NON	Sum
b4	5	3	4	3	15
b5	2	3	8	2	15
b6	3	1	6	5	15
g4	5	1	5	4	15
g5	6	1	6	2	15
g6	4	0	11	0	15
Sum	25	9	40	16	90

On the intersection of one group of children, e.g. b5 (boys age 5) and a category of negative feelings, e.g. SFC (more than one feeling of sadness, fear and compassion), there is a number of participants who belong to the analyzed category of feelings, in the example it is 8 children. The results of the analysis of correspondence are presented in Appendix B. Here, the obtained results will be described qualitatively.

For 4-year-old girls, typical feelings are sadness and no display of negative feelings. For 5-year-olds, the feeling of sadness, and

for 6-year-olds, more complex nomenclature (sadness, fear and compassion). Whereas for boys, the most characteristic fact is that some 6-year-olds do not express negative feelings, 5-year-olds tend to express complex feelings (SFC), as well as fear as a single feeling. This last category can also be observed in 4-year-old boys along with evoking the feeling of fear.

The differences between boys and girls regarding the expression of feelings can be observed at every age level. The more transparent results were obtained through the interpretation of the distinguished dimensions.

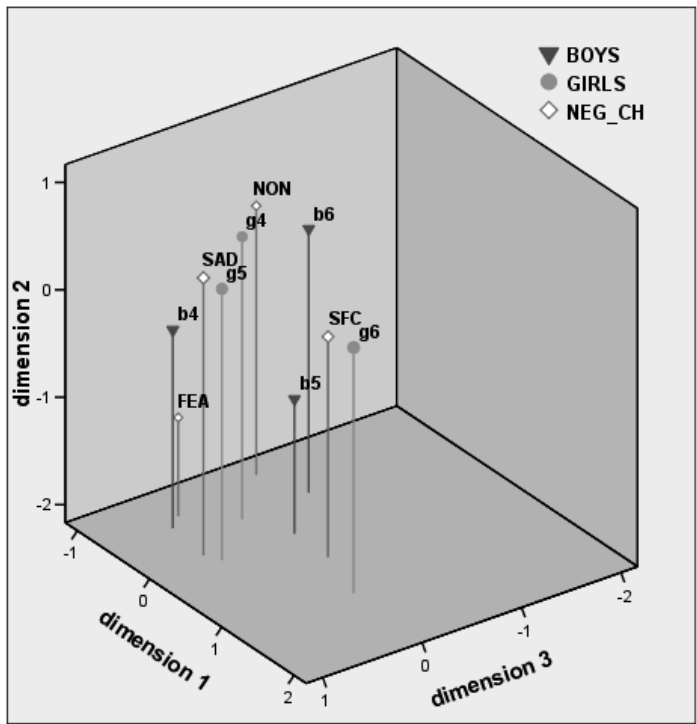


Figure 1. Layout of the variables NEG_CH and AGE_SEX in the new system of coordinates

The three-dimensional solution, obtained for the NEG_CH set, allowed for the identification of particular dimensions characterising the development of the expression of negative religious feelings.

The first dimension, distinguished in the analysis of correspondence, illustrates the developmental regularities in the girls. The relationship shows that, with age, the complexity of answers expressing negative religious feelings grows.

The second dimension has been identified as a latent variable present in boys. The developmental changes do not have such an explicit interpretation as in the case of girls. This dimension does not classify the boys in accordance to age. The most substantial negative emotional expression is observed in 5-year-old boys. 4-year olds experience mainly sadness, 5-year-olds also show compassion and fear. In turn, 6-year old boys were observed not to display negative emotions. Needless to say, it does not prove a lack of vocabulary to express emotional states, but rather a restraint in showing what they feel. It is probably due to cultural conditioning which demands that boys conceal their negative emotions, especially fear.

The third dimension presents the diversity of the developmental changes in the case of religious feelings between the boys and the girls. For instance, two groups the 5-year-old girls and the 6-year-old boys, when compared in this dimension, show a similarity between them.

ANACOR for NEG_M vs AGE_SEX. On the basis of data presented in Table 4, analysis of correspondence was carried out. It shows the relationship between the categories of negative feelings observed by the mothers, and their children's age and sex.

Table 4. The comparison of numerical strength (raw data) of the variable NEG_M (negative feelings in mothers' answers) and AGE_SEX (children's age and sex)

Children's age and sex	Categories of negative feelings (NEG_M)				
	sad	fea	sfc	non	Sum
b4	9	0	2	4	15
b5	9	0	5	1	15
b6	8	1	3	3	15
g4	8	0	1	6	15
g5	10	0	4	1	15
g6	7	1	3	4	15
Sum	51	2	18	19	90

For the set of NEG_M two-dimensional solution was obtained. On the basis of the research results (Appendix B, Figure 2), it can be noted that, in the mothers' perception, the developmental changes for the expression of negative religious feelings occur identically in boys and in girls.

The first dimension describes a dependency between children's age and the complexity in communicating their feelings; from no display of feelings in 4-year-olds to evoking complex feelings in 5-year-olds. **The second dimension** differentiates 6-year-old children and the remaining age groups, and shows that the age of 5 is a turning point in the development of religious feelings. The present research does not reveal the nature of this mechanism, further studies are needed to explore this finding.

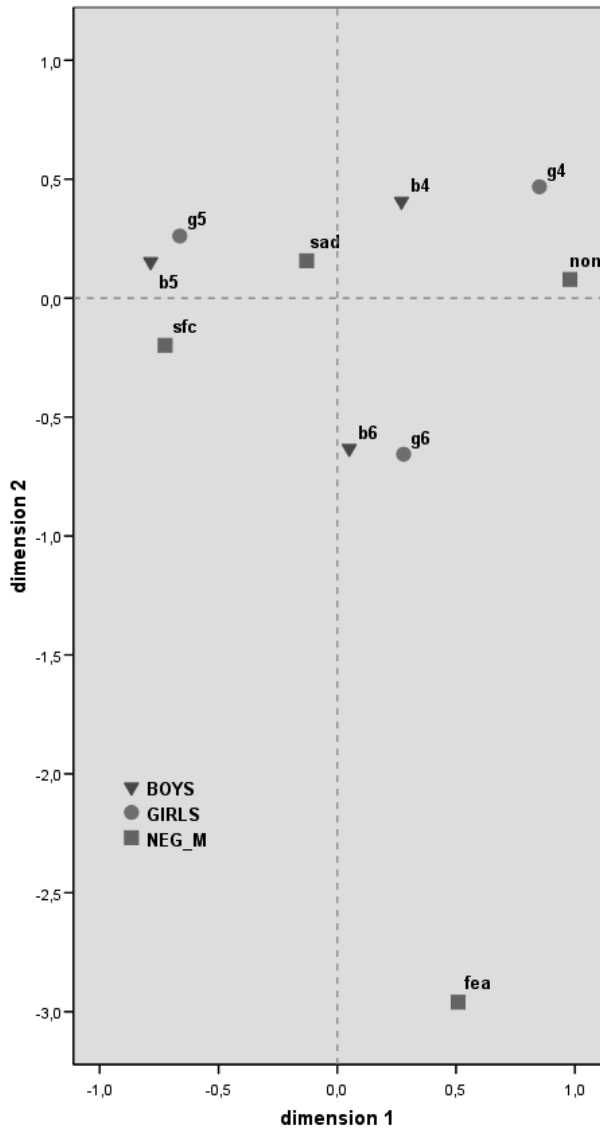


Figure 2. Layout of the variables NEG_M and AGE_SEX in the new system of coordinates

DISCUSSION

The present research aimed at analysing religious feelings in preschool children. The data comes from both children themselves and their mothers. It needs to be stressed that the method of obtaining the data does not change the basic relationships between the variables, however, it introduces noticeable modifications.

Positive feelings prevail over negative feelings in the expression of religious feelings in a sense that some children evoke positive feelings and do not display negative ones. The reverse relation was not observed. In the area of positive feelings, joy was found to dominate. It appears both as an individual category or in connection with another positive feeling. Similar observations were made for both sets of data (originating from both the children and their mothers).

In regard to negative feelings the analyses show both similarities and differences in results coming directly from the children or their mothers. The same categories of feelings could be distinguished in both sets. A noticeable difference can be spotted only in the category of fear. Fear as a single negative religious feeling is not common. However, when it does appear it originates only from the children and is present in boys rather than in girls.

Interesting results in regard to the development of negative feelings arose after using ANACOR in the context of age and sex of the subjects. Two regularities were found. Firstly, the relation between age and the complexity in communicating one's feelings show development in communicative competences. Secondly, qualitative changes in the expression of feelings, which occur between the age of 5 and 6, say a lot about an appearing reluctance to talk about what one feels at the moment. At the time between 5 and 6 logical thinking starts to occur, permanence in object properties (mass, weight, volume) and other cognitive structures. Also verbal abilities start to emerge, which allow for a more efficient expression and communication of feelings as well

as higher level of control. At the end of this period a child is able to auto-analyse and reflect on their behaviour and experiences, thus gaining a better self-control.

The basic difference in the representation of the data obtained from children and their mothers is that, in the first case, a three-dimensional solution has been obtained, whereas, in the second case, the solution is two-dimensional. In the mothers' answers, the development of religious feelings in boys is analogous to the development of those feelings in girls. However, in the analysis of the data obtained from the children directly, this development demonstrates a diversity due to gender.

In relation to positive feelings the main difference is that the scope of feelings experienced by the children, as seen by their mothers, is richer than in the answers coming directly from the subjects.

According to the adopted model of religiousness (Walesa, 2005), the expression of religious feelings is influenced by different parameters apart from religious consciousness. While observing their children in natural situations, mothers could use external sources of information regarding the emotions experienced by their children. It is certainly not the only cause of the differences present in the data coming from two sources, since, regarding the negative feelings mothers do not see dominant complex feelings.

On the level of the negative feelings in the mothers' reports, the category of sadness dominates to such an extent that it should be treated as a certain constant quantity, and not as a quantity which change depending on age and sex.

Nevertheless, as a result of the conducted research, it should be stated that on the level of global regularities, both sources of data, which contain answers about religious feelings in children, present a similar quality. The detailed analysis, though, discloses local-scale differences. However, the results obtained do not contradict, but mutually complement each *other*. At the same time, different methods of data collection allowed for a more comprehensive picture of the examined reality.

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Appendix A

Results of ANACOR for feelings NEG_CH vs AGE_SEX

	Factor		Value		Percentage of explained variance	
	1		0,33664		56,5	
	2		0,23767		26,4	
	3		0,18496		17,1	
	Dimension 1		Dimension 2		Dimension 3	
	r ²	Udział UDZ	r ²	Udział UDZ	r ²	Udział UDZ
NEG_D						
SAD	0,012	0,003	0,385	0,210	0,603	0,509
FEA	0,310	0,152	0,647	0,678	0,043	0,070
SFC	0,898	0,414	0,025	0,025	0,076	0,117
NON	0,765	0,431	0,072	0,087	0,163	0,304
Sum	-	1,000	-	1,000	-	1,000
AGE_SEX						
b4	0,607	0,165	0,129	0,075	0,264	0,238
b5	0,011	0,003	0,941	0,604	0,048	0,048
b6	0,321	0,082	0,111	0,061	0,568	0,480
g4	0,468	0,065	0,530	0,157	0,002	0,001
g5	0,037	0,004	0,370	0,093	0,593	0,232
g6	0,992	0,681	0,007	0,010	0,000	0,001
Sum	-	1,000	-	1,000	-	1,000

Appendix B

Results of ANACOR for feelings NEG_M vs AGE_SEX

	Factor		Value		Percentage of explained variance	
	1		0,32259		67,2	
	2		0,21767		30,6	
	3		0,05751		2,1	
	Dimension 1		Dimension 2		Dimension 3	
	r ²	Udział UDZ	r ²	Udział UDZ	r ²	Udział UDZ
NEG_M						
sad	0,423	0,029	0,421	0,064	0,157	0,340
fea	0,042	0,018	0,953	0,894	0,005	0,066
sfc	0,915	0,326	0,046	0,036	0,039	0,438
non	0,988	0,627	0,004	0,006	0,008	0,156
Sum	-	1,000	-	1,000	-	1,000
AGE_SEX						
b4	0,385	0,038	0,590	0,127	0,024	0,075
b5	0,941	0,319	0,024	0,018	0,035	0,371
b6	0,009	0,001	0,952	0,306	0,040	0,182
g4	0,828	0,375	0,169	0,167	0,003	0,042
g5	0,882	0,227	0,092	0,052	0,026	0,210
g6	0,207	0,040	0,774	0,330	0,020	0,120
Sum	-	1.000	-	1.000	-	1.000

The results show that Factor 1 explains over 67% of the common variance, and together with Factor 2 they explain 98%, hence the two-dimensional solution is optimal.