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Research in Social Work on coping and migration: Coping strategies of Migrant generations of rural Moroccan and Muslim background in the Netherlands.

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Key words: Coping; adaptation; migration; religion; Muslims; Social Work practice

Abstract: This article focuses on religious and non religious coping strategies of migrants of the first, second and third generation Muslims of rural Moroccan background in the Netherlands. We found that in dealing with stressful events and difficult emotions the younger generations make still use of the religious coping strategies of the first generation but combine them with more active problem-solving behaviour and a less deferring, more collaborative religious coping style towards God.

In this paper we describe our research projects on coping strategies for migrant families of Muslim and Moroccan background in the Netherlands. As researchers on Social Work practice, we think that the theoretical coping paradigm might be innovative. Since 2004 we conducted research on the relationship between migrant generation, empowerment and religion among Dutch citizens with a religious and migrant background. We focused in particular on Muslims, since an increasing number of Social Workers and clients are of Muslim background. We wanted to know more about the ways these Muslim migrants cope. The first generation migrants originally came from rural, economically poorly developed areas, they had no access to lower or higher levels of education (Pels 2007). This first generation was very religious and often prayed, and we wondered how praying helped them and if the next generations still used prayer to cope with problems and stress.

As Lazarus made clear in "Emotion and Adaptation" (1991), coping is essential in adapting to a new environment. Especially members of migrant families are challenged in their ways of coping, because old ways of problem-solving behaviour are less adequate (Loewenthal 2007). So members from migrant families, especially those who are used to survive in a very different social context, need to develop new coping strategies. In order to make the best of their new society, parents motivate their children to learn new skills. Especially these new generations are able to educate themselves and get better paid jobs. However, these new coping strategies might conflict with the problem-solving behaviour of the first generation. How do migrant families cope with these differences in cultural and economical attitudes ?

So the study of coping strategies among migrant families could learn us more about the dynamics of coping and this is relevant for Social Work (Loewenthal 2007; Park 2005; Pargament 2007; van Uden & Pieper 2005).

To learn more about coping strategies we initiated several research projects that were conducted by our Social Work students. They collected in total about 250 in-depth interviews with Muslims of the first, second and third generation. They also interviewed about 30 migrants from Christian backgrounds. These qualitative research projects on coping strategies with our Social Work students were very interesting and rewarding. Students interviewed migrants in a systematic way about their inner motives and gave attention to coping strategies they learned from their parents and from their own life experiences. As Social Work teachers we were able to discuss with students how religious migrants used to deal with problems and stress in a deeper and more respectful way.

We were able to develop new knowledge with these kinds of data and design new research projects. In 2007 we started also a PhD research on the religious and non-religious coping strategies of high-educated Muslim women of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands. We used theories on coping from Lazarus (1991; 2006) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and on religious coping from Pargament (1997); Pargament, Koenig & Perez (2000); Emmons (2005) Ladd & Spilka (2002), Spilka (2005). Pargament (1988) developed scales to assess specific religious styles of problem-solving. He distinguished a deferring, a collaborative and a self-directive religious coping style.

In the Netherlands this religious coping paradigm was developed by Janssen (et al. 1990); Alma (1998), Van Uden, and Pieper (2003; 2005), Bänziger (2006; 2007).

In 2003 Alma, Van Uden, and Pieper (2003) developed a Receptivity scale. In 2009 van Uden, and Pieper (2009) formulated a scheme of religious and non-religious coping strategies that were used by patients who had to deal with cancer, see appendix. This became a basis for our PhD research. Our research questions were:

What is the meaning of religiosity and especially prayer, for high-educated Muslim women of Moroccan descent? Do they use their religiosity and specifically prayer to deal with problems and emotions?

With Alma, van Uden, and Pieper, van der Valk conducted a survey with Likert scale questions about religiousness (DRI, RWBS, see Pieper 2004), ways of prayer (Janssen et al. 1990; Bänziger 2006; 2007), religious coping (RCOPE, Pargament et al. 2000) and religious coping styles (Pargament et al. 1988, Alma, Pieper & van Uden 2003), among 177 Muslim women of Moroccan descent, 13 respondents with different prayer types were selected for in-depth interviews. The prayer types we found by factor analysis were: women who tried to pray at all fixed *salat* prayer times and in all available places; women who prayed *salat*, *du'a* or *dhikr* when possible; women who prayed especially during crisis situations, and women who prayed in a more reflective way. Most women had a collaborative religious coping style. We found that in periods of daily or situational stress all Muslim women used ritual and petitionary prayers to cope. Almost all turned to God for help in all kinds of stressful situations. We found that the ritual prayer of the *salat* was used especially to praise God and to find inner peace. *Salat* prayer seems to have a more meditative effect, as you recite and keep your focus only on God. In terms of Ladd and Spilka (2002) this might be seen as "Upward" prayer. But in

the prayer of *du'a* Muslims pour out their hearts to God (Yucel 2007). *Du'a* prayers can be part of a *salat* prayer or done on other moments of the day. This kind of prayer is used to ask direct help from God to deal with difficult situations or emotions. For instance, respondents asked God to take away their distress or help them to solve their problems. This last form of prayer has a more reassuring and comforting effect. We did not find that these Muslim women talked in a dialogical, informal, reflective, personal way to God, which we found with some Christian women from Ghanaese or Suriname migrant background. These women seem to pray more like Afro-American women in America like in the research on religious coping of Mattis (2002).

We discovered by the qualitative research of our Social Work students among Muslim women of the first generation that they expressed distress or painful emotions nearly always only to God. They used avoidance strategies in their own families and did not talk about their inner emotions. Some older women still grieved about losing a parent in childhood without telling their own children about that painful period. They did not want to upset their children by telling about the dark sides of life and some also believed that they would get more spiritual rewards in the after-life by suffering alone and suppressing complaints. They felt they had to accept their fate as the will of God and regarded at painful, difficult moments as tests to show their devotion. This is more a deferring religious coping style: they feel passive towards God (Pargament 1988). The younger generation Muslim women was influenced by this religious outlook, but combined it with problem-solving behaviour and a change in attitudes toward life (also see Pels, & de Haan 2003, 2007). This was influenced by their parents who had migrated from rural backward regions with no access to education, as they motivated their daughters to use all opportunities that their new environment had to offer. So this second and third generation developed their talents, skills and became successful in their profession. For their mothers it was important that their daughters became economically independent from a husband. This seemed to result in a shift in attitudes towards God, fate and religious practice well. The younger generation felt less passive towards God, because they felt responsible to change their circumstances with the help of God. As God had given them opportunities and talents, they had to use them to become a good Muslim. They also asked God for help in their prayers, but expressed their emotions and wishes towards others as well. This is more according to a cooperative religious copings style (Pargament 1988). In the process of grieving their lost loved ones they discovered that the avoidance strategies of their mothers had blocked their deeper inner feelings. So they learned that they had to express themselves towards family and friends and take more time for grieving. This is illustrated by one of our cases:

During the return trip from Morocco one young Muslim woman of Moroccan descent saw her mother and young brother die in a car crash. Her father who was driving only wept during the accident and after that he avoided to show his emotions. He did not talk about it any more and remarried almost immediately. She said that her father changed from being an open minded friendly parent to a monster, strict and without feelings. His behaviour had an enormous impact on all other children, because they could not comprehend what had happened. Their father found them a new mother, but they could not cope with her and left home as soon as possible. Their father seemed not to care at all and focused on his new children. The older children helped the younger and gave them a new home. Our respondent said that a younger brother developed delinquent behaviour as he could not cope emotionally with the guilt he felt towards his mother as he had quarrelled with her before her depart to Morocco. The children supported each other and found comfort in praying to God. They believed that God had taken their mother and brother because he loved her so much, and that they would be reunited in heaven. However, this was not enough to stop nightmares and feelings of abandonment. With help of a social worker our respondent

started to talk about the accident with her siblings, her father and the family members of her mother. She was able to forgive them for their neglect and started to cope with her trauma with help of her religion and skills. She now feels more empowered and less influenced by what other people want her to do. She fights prejudice and attacks on homosexual colleagues by Moroccan men and opts for a round-the-world trip. Her relationship to God is now more lovingly and without obligations. Daily prayer is important to her, it gives her inner peace and drives off nightmares. God will take her to Him as He pleases, but first she needs to do good deeds for others in this earthly life. She is motivated to become a good Muslim, but in her own way.

Our Social Work students reported that the reaction of this father is not unusual in Moroccan Dutch Muslim families from rural backgrounds. Death is seen as the will of God and family life must go on. Family member avoid exchanging their feelings of grief. Parents use avoidance coping strategies and encourage their children to do the same. Some Muslim families tell their children to stop weeping, as tears will harm the deceased. Showing too much distress is not encouraged, because it shows that you do not accept the will of God. It is back to normal again, without exchange of emotions. Frustration, anger and sadness are only expressed towards God in the privacy of their individual prayer. Some respondents said that their mothers stopped them from complaining by telling them that they were ungrateful to God and that their own life in Morocco was so much harder and uncomfortable. Some said that they did not know what to do when their parents were sad themselves, because they saw themselves as emotionally weak and were therefore unable to support their own parents. They reacted by crying and leave the room. Some also had this reaction when a spirit possessed their mother: they ran to their room and shut the door until it was over.

In another study Tamara Boering (2010) asked professionals who help Moroccan Dutch families who have adolescent children, about how these parents cope with parental problems. These professionals noticed that parents use avoidance as an important coping strategy, combined with asking God to help them and finding significance in God's will. Most parents of the first generation externalized or minimised problems with their children's behaviour, hoping that problems would disappear by praying for the help of God. However, in this study we also found that the second and third generation parents were more apt to reflect on their actions and take the responsibility to change their own behaviour. So in a religious coping sense they seem to change from an avoidant, deferent style towards a more active cooperative style. Therefore, as they developed more social capital they also developed a different relation towards God.

We are still analyzing our qualitative data and hope to publish more about religious and non religious coping strategies in the future. We think that if religious clients are able to talk and reflect on their own religious and non-religious coping strategies, they may develop a greater insight into what is more or less adequate for them. This may help them to become more open to different options and perspectives, and integrate new insights within their religious framework. In that way the focus on religious and non-religious coping strategies could contribute to improving Social Work methods and help religious clients more effectively.

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Appendix

Scheme of religious and non-religious coping strategies, Van Uden and Pieper (2009).

Religious coping strategies	Non-religious coping strategies
<p><i>1. Meaning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Positive religious appraisal: God's plan or deeper meaning or lessons for life. b. Negative religious appraisal: God's punishment c. Attributing things to the devil d. God's power is limited: human freedom e. Religious hope f. Religious belief (existence of an afterlife) g. Theodicy (reflection on the relationship suffering and God) <p><i>2. Relationship to God</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Cooperating with God b. Active and passive surrender to God c. Asking for a miracle or divine intervention d. Being abandoned by God e. Anger: rebellion against God <p><i>3. Comfort and closeness to the Divine</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Looking for God's love and power b. Focusing on the religious domain c. Seeking forgiveness d. Comfort from the Divine/ e. Living more strictly according to religious rules f. Religious practices (celebrating/performing religious practices) <p><i>4. Intimacy with fellow believers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Support of spiritual caregivers b. Support of fellow believers c. Praying for others d. Others pray for you <p><i>5. Transformation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Asking God for a new goal in life b. Conversion c. Forgiving others 	<p><i>1. Problem Confrontation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identifying the problem b. Dealing actively with the problem c. Taking responsibility d. Expressing emotions e. Planning f. Orientating towards the future: hope g. Suspending distracting activities h. Seeking a reason /cause <p><i>2. Considering the problem from a different perspective</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Seeking distractions b. Distancing oneself c. Delaying actions d. Downward social comparison (personal situation is better) e. Putting things in a different perspective (humour) f. Helping others g. Meditating h. Reading / music / art <p><i>3. Support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Instrumental social support b. Emotional social support c. Professional support d. Social support <p><i>4. Positive reframing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Positive reappraisal b. Making one's own power explicit c. Giving a positive turn to things d. Acceptance e. Resigning oneself f. Letting things go g. Self-control/ self-directing <p><i>5. Problem denial and avoidance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Denial b. Protest / resistance c. Avoidance d. Playing things down e. Doom-mongering / upward social comparison (own situation is worse) f. Abandoning one's effort g. Consuming alcohol/ using drugs h. Delaying confrontations with problems