

DECISION TO GO TO CHURCH AFTER AN EPISODE OF MARITAL CONFLICT IN THE PREVIOUS DAY, IN AN IMAGINARY SITUATION USING VIGNETTES

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines the effect of marital conflict on church attendance, mediated by religious practices, with a focus on gender differences. It explores how conflict within marriage affects men's and women's likelihood of attending church in an imaginary situation, hypothesizing that men are more negatively impacted by marital discord.

Methods: The research employs quantitative methods (self-reported, questionnaire based) to analyze the relationship between conflict intensity and church attendance, accounting for the mediating role of frequency of religious practices. The participants were 182 married adults from Suceava, Romania, 111 wives (62.2%) and 71 husbands (37.8%).

Results: Results confirm significant gender disparities, with marital conflict discouraging church attendance more in men than in women.

Discussion: The findings contribute to understanding the complex dynamics of how personal relationships influence the frequency of religious practices, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive approaches in addressing marital issues related to church attendance.

Keywords: church attendance, marital conflicts, gender differences, religiosity, spillover effect.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women have always been associated more with religion than men in science and the association is still a puzzle, as we don't really know how much of nature, nurture or a combination of both are the ultimate cause (Mitchell, 2016a). These influences are not uniform. Women weekly worship attendance is significantly higher than that of men in 30 countries predominantly in Christian religion. In 25 Christian countries were found no significant differences between men and women. Men weekly worship attendance is higher than that of women in 28 countries predominantly Muslim. Romania was not on that list (Mitchell, 2016b).

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Historically, researchers from various disciplines have proposed multiple explanations for the higher religiosity observed among women. Age (Walter, 1990), men were seen more as public prayers and women as private prayers (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975), the desire to be saved (Dowling, 1982), women higher reports of anxiety (Pigott, 2003), beliefs (men see God in terms of authority, hierarchy, and power, women see God as loving, comforting and forgiving) (Walter, 1990), guilt, in general, men feel less guilt than women (Lutwak, 2001) although some studies did not find that difference (Luck *et al.*, 2020), God as a father figure (Walter, 1990) etc. There are no studies to show variations in church attendance by gender after a marital conflict.

2. MARITAL CONFLICT AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE

A few studies investigated marital conflict and church attendance. Conflict is a present reality in every relationship (Turliuc, & Marici, 2013; Marici *et al.*, 2023). Pathological conflicts in close relationships can be characterized by levels of intensity, duration or frequency. Probably the variable that weights the most is conflict intensity (Marici, 2015). It refers to the effort dislocated by conflicting actors in a conflict episode (Todorova *et al.*, 2022), which often is associated with frustration, negative emotions and emotional hurt. High-intensity conflicts are more likely to result in unsolved issues, eroded trust (Lucas-Thompson *et al.*, 2016) less effective problem-solving (Beasley, & Ager, 2019). In contrast, lower-intensity conflicts, may offer more opportunities for dialogue, compromise, and growth within the relationship

The association of marital conflict with church attendance can be attributed to spillover effect. It indicates that tension in one role (e.g. lover) can be unloaded in another role (e.g. church attendee). This is sustained by more theoretical paradigms that do not differentiate between gender roles. Family units are interconnected systems where behaviors of one member can have ripple effects on the entire system (Minuchin, 2018). Turmoil in the identity of spouse may be associated with an identity crisis that impacts activities associated with the identity of religious person (Stryker and Burke, 2000). When stressors appear they may cause individuals to withdraw from social supports and activities as a way of coping (Pearlin *et al.*, 1981) especially when they feel isolated or ashamed (House *et al.*, 1988) although this is more frequent in case of men. Experiencing conflict within the home can result in a temporal breakdown of community ties (Sampson & Groves, 1989) as marital conflict role can drain a person's emotional energy necessary to feed the willingness to attend church (Biddle, 1986).

Decisions to go or not to church may be triggered wither by the intensity of marital conflicts in general or by a single conflicting episode, or by both with conflict intensity as the qualitative relationship indicator and a single conflicting episode as the trigger.

3. THE ROLE OF GENDER ON CHURCH ATTENDANCE

There is even more limited research specifically examining how marital conflict over church attendance varies between genders. Most studies dealt with the effect of religiosity on marital conflict. Yet, studies show that men and women deal differently with marital conflict. Most likely gender difference in church attending are due to more competing factors that rather the result of one factor. Regarding the conflict resolution styles, within the home setting, men seem to be more competitive than women (“I win, you lose.”), and women seem to be more compromising (“I win some, you win some”) and more accommodating (“You win, I lose”) than men (Dildar, & Amjad, 2017; Rahim, 2002). In the same setting, wives seem to prefer demanding behavior, while husbands prefer withdrawal behavior (Cingöz-Ulu, & Lalonde, 2007).

A meta-analysis found that women respond to conflict more expressively and loyally, meaning that they communicate openly, seek solutions and keeping commitment, while men are more negligent, ignoring problems or not addressing them directly (Alonso-Ferres *et al.*, 2019). Women are more forgiving than men (Andrea *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, “wives desire more change and therefore demand, whereas husbands desire less change and withdraw to maintain status quo” (Holley *et al.*, 2010. p. 1) This may suggest that after a marital conflict man could be more affected and refrain from going to church or getting involved in religious practices owing to mental and emotional negative loadings.

4. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

In general, religious faith may act as a buffer in a way that these negative effects of marital conflicts may be softened by the moral guidance, coping behavior, and social support the couple receives, thereby enabling them to work their way through disagreements with more resilience and understanding (Bahnaru *et al.*, 2019; Nadolu *et al.*, 2020). Although in general Christian women are more religious, men seem to benefit the most from religiosity, more than non-religious husbands or even more than women. Religious men have more satisfying marriages, and less conflicts, probably because practicing religion provides them with norms and clearer family norms making them more devoted and caring (Wolfinger, & Wilcox, 2008). Yet, the other way round, marital conflict may make men be more emotionally disturbed than women, which may alter religious practices including church going. For religious women, their faith is a source of resilience as their relationship with their husband has a spiritual dimension. Getting along with their husband after a marital conflict may be a duty and part of a spiritual plan (Lyman *et al.*, 2024).

Up to present there is no study to investigate the effect of the intensity of conflict by gender on the decision to go to church after an episode of marital conflict in the previous day.

5. THE PRESENT RESEARCH

5.1. CLINICAL OBSERVATIONS

The present study was inspired by clinical observations during therapeutic sessions, along with related accounts of conflicting episodes from dyadic members who reported differing stories about church attendance following a marital conflict. Married men reported that they do not attend church if they had conflicts with their wives on Saturday, and wives complained that their husbands are not as religious as they would like them to be because they skip church programs. Given the frequency of these observations, men argued that marital conflicts induce emotional states incompatible with church attendance, (*"I don't feel like going to church when I am angry"* or *"I must be in a good mood to go to church"*), while women contended that going to church should be an obligation and an opportunity to emotionally recharge (*"I go to church to calm down"* or *"Because there I find peace and calm my heart and thoughts"*).

Another observation is that in marital dyads, there are frequent conflicts about why the husband does not attend church like his wife, leading to him being less respected and the wife feeling less loved. At the observational level in therapy, these tensions seem also to affect marital quality and mental health. In addition, this study is important as it indicates that marital conflict may decrease church attendance in males and consequently decrease children's attendance. A study showed that if only the father goes to church, at least two-thirds of the children will go too. If only the mother goes, two-thirds of the children won't attend (Low, 2003; Egan, 2002). This indicates the crucial role fathers have in church attendance, and this partially justifies the necessity of the present study.

5.2. STUDY TYPE AND PURPOSE

This study employed a cross-sectional vignette-based quantitative design. Participants were presented with a standardized hypothetical marital conflict scenario and asked to report their anticipated church-attendance decisions and emotional reactions.

The purpose of the present research is to investigate the mediating role of religiosity between conflict intensity in the last four weeks and inclination to go to church the next day after a marital conflict.

5.3. HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses used in this research are the following:

H1: Wives will decide to attend church more than husbands after a previous day marital conflict, in an imaginary situation.

H2: Conflict intensity in the last four weeks will predict the decision to attend church, after an imagined previous day marital conflict, differently by gender.

H3: Husbands' reports of higher marital conflict intensity in the last four weeks will be associated with a lower tendency towards church attendance, following a marital conflict in the previous day, as compared to wives, when the relationship is mediated by the frequency of religious practices.

The presumed model of casual relationships is presented below (see *Figure 1*).

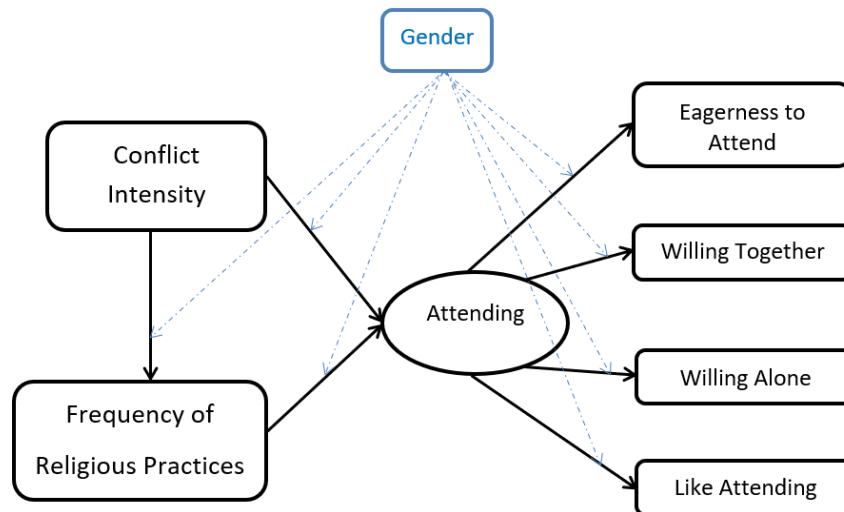


Figure 1. The Presumed Structural Equation Model of Causal Relationships between the Main Research Variables.

5.4. PARTICIPANTS

Participants' Selection: Participants were selected using snowball sampling. The items were inserted into Google Forms and the link was distributed by students to relatives or friends. One limit of this method is that the sample is not so homogenous regarding age of participants, resulting in a larger age span. The Google Form had items for screening and limiting participants in order to get more homogenous participants. For this it was selected only married and orthodox participants, selecting only one religion affiliation for more homogeneity. Another reason for selecting only married participants was that this sample resembled the sample of clients in the therapeutic sessions where I observed the association and which motivated the study. At the same time, there were selected only participants who were not having health issues that could affect their judgment and decision making regarding church attending.

Participants' Characteristics: The study included 182 married participants, with 62.2% female and 37.8% male. The mean age of the participants was 37.7 years ($SD = 21.5$), with spouses averaging 36.5 years ($SD = 8.98$). Most participants came from urban areas (51.1%), while 47.3% resided in rural settings. All

participants identified as Orthodox Christians. The average number of children per household was 1.99 (SD = 1.70), and the mean duration of the relationship was 13.8 years (SD = 7.92). In terms of income, nearly half of the participants (49.1%) reported having exactly what they need, while 18.9% had less, 27.7% had more, and 4.4% had much more than they need.

Participants Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria: From the 182 sample, 12 were excluded as they reported they were not religious at all, and the study investigated religious practices.

Cultural Context: As a matter of fact, Romania, predominantly Orthodox Christian, has a high level of religious engagement, with 91.5% of people identifying as religious (Șandor, & Popescu, 2008), 95.8% engaging in prayer, and 98.3% expressing belief in God (Norris, & Inglehart, 2003). The country has seen a notable religious resurgence over the past three decades (1991-2018): “During the last 30 years Romania has experienced a revival of church attendance, and a significant increase in the number of houses of worship, having the highest rate of construction in Europe.” (Voicu, 2019, p. 465), highlighting the deep-rooted value of religious practices and church participation among Romanians. Regarding attending church this is a key prosocial activity for religious families in Romania, where parents strive to instill religious beliefs and cultivate spiritual closeness with their children (Marici, & Turliuc, 2012; Marici, 2015a; Runcan, 2014) or religious intimacy in couple. This means that Romanian culture might prescribe easier going to church as a de-escalation of emotional intensity and solution seeking in the face of conflicts in relationships. Romania was not selected from a list of options for this study but as the most accessible context, being the author’s country.

5.5. INSTRUMENTS

The main instruments used for research are the following:

Likeness attending to church – It was measured using a single item measured on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much): “How much would you LIKE to go to church after such a conflict?”

Willingness to attend church alone – It was measured using a single item on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much): “How WILLING would you be to go to church alone in this situation, without your partner.”

Willingness to attend church with the partner – It was measured using a single item on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much): “How WILLING would you be to go to church with your partner in this situation?”

Eagerness to attend church after a conflict – It was measured using a single item on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much): “How EAGERLY would you go to church after this conflict?”

Marital conflict intensity – Was measured marital conflict intensity using a single question: “How INTENSE have the conflicts with your partner been in the last month?” on a Likert scale from 0 (not at all intense) to 9 (very intense).

Frequency of religious practices – We measured this by asking two questions, which were summed, about how much do they read the holy book and how much do they pray. The items were measured on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Besides the demographic variables, the study measured other variables used as control variables in the study such as:

Frequency of attending church in the last 4 weeks – It was measured with a single item ‘How many times have you gone to church in the last 4 weeks?’. The respondents indicated the actual numbers of times they went to church.

Frequency going to church in general – Measured by a single item ‘How frequently do you go to church in general?’ on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Age of the relationship – Measured by a single item ‘How many years have you been in a relationship? (including dating and marriage)’. Respondents indicated the number of years.

Frequency of conflicts in the last month – It was measured by a single item ‘What is the frequency of conflict with your partner in the last month?’ on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Rapidity making peace after conflict – Measured with a single item like this: ‘How quickly do you reconcile when you have conflicts?’ on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 9 (very much).

Single-item measures were used because each variable refers to a clear, specific, and directly accessible behavior or evaluation that does not require multiple indicators to be understood. Using a scale with multiple items would have introduced redundancy and artificial aggregation of distinct processes, without adding meaningful precision.

5.6. VIGNETTE STUDY CHOICE

The study was based on vignettes, as we asked participants to imagine a situation and make decisions regarding that. We chose this method as we considered that judgement and decision making are the foundations of gender differences in couples. In addition, my observations were that romantic partners were often having misunderstanding about the decision to go or not to church, actually before going to church, and the verbal fight had the purpose to convince each other about their different truth to stay home or to go to church. Thus a study based on vignettes tested better judgment and decision making in an imaginary situation.

5.7. VIGNETTE CREATION

The vignette creation followed more steps (*Figure 2*). The initial phase of the vignette development process entailed delineating the essential attributes that the vignette should embody. The objective was to construct a vignette that encapsulates a typical marital discord scenario, characterized by brevity and designed to elicit feelings of distress among participants. Through a comprehensive review of

various alternatives, the text was collaboratively formulated. Subsequent iterations of the vignette were generated through multiple revisions to achieve the desired outcome. Moreover, considerations were made regarding the thematic focus, the specific details to be included, the intensity of the conflict, the focal point of the narrative, and the requisite information necessary for rendering the conflict as plausible.

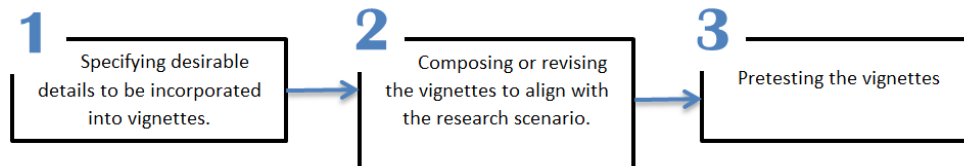


Figure 2. The Steps to Vignette Creation.

The final vignette used was this:

“Imagine it’s Saturday evening, and you’re at home with your partner. You have a discussion about unnecessary expenses that have accumulated and created financial difficulties, and the discussion degenerates into a verbal conflict. Your partner accuses you of never being responsible with money. You’ve argued, raised your voices at each other, and you feel emotionally hurt”.

After reading the vignette the respondents were asked four specific questions referring to the situation described and indicate how much they would like to go to church after such a conflict, how willing would they be to attend church alone after such a conflict, or with their partner and how eagerly would they go to church after such a conflict. Then followed other items such as: gender, distance in kilometers from home to church, age of respondents, age of the couple partner, age of the romantic relationship, number of children, how quickly the two spouses reconcile, how affected the respondent is after reading the vignette or how furious the respondent is after reading the vignette. All the instruments were applied in Romanian and then translated into English for this manuscript.

The pretest of the vignette referred to asking 15 participants to answer the whole questionnaire and provide us with feedback about the meaning of the items, clarity, or wording.

5.8. DATA COLLECTION

The research employed an online survey that was distributed through snowball sampling. University students were asked to share the survey with their married relatives and friends. Although this approach was practical, it might lead to selection bias. For instance, individuals without internet access or those who are less vocal about the topic could be underrepresented. Furthermore, the voluntary

participation aspect might influence the outcomes. While the sample included a range of participants, it does not reflect a nationally representative group. The snowball sampling technique could have resulted in an overrepresentation of specific social circles. Additionally, since all participants identified as Orthodox Christians, the results may not apply to other religious groups.

5.9. DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The study collected quantitative data using the instruments described. All items required responses in Google Forms, ensuring no missing data and no manipulation of the database prior to analysis. For the analysis, we used descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, the Mann-Whitney U test, path analysis in Jamovi, and path diagrams in AMOS.

5.10. ETHICS

Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, including electronic consent for online data collection where applicable. All data were collected anonymously, with no personally identifiable information recorded, and were processed in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In the case of couple participants, each partner completed the questionnaire independently to ensure confidentiality and minimize response bias, and no financial compensation was provided for participation.

6. RESULTS

6.1. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

First of all, we performed a multiple Pearson Correlation analysis and means and standard deviations for the main variables of the research (see *Table 1*).

Table 1

Number of participants, Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations for Variables (N = 182)								
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1.Conflict intensity (last month)	159	1.40	1.74	-				
2.Like attending	164	6.12	3.05	-.218**				
3.Willing attending alone	164	3.57	3.39	.067	.234**			
4.Willing attending together	164	6.95	2.89	-.270***	.669***	.164*		
5.Eagerness to attend	164	6.634	2.55	-.165*	.442***	.224**	.314***	
6.Frequency of religious practices	164	11.3	4.55	-.210**	.390***	-.038	.301***	.071

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Out of the 15 correlations analysed, twelve reached statistical significance, while three did not. The strongest association was between *Willing attend together*

and *Like attending* ($r = 0.669$). Conversely, the weakest statistically significant relationship was found *between Willing attending together and Willing attending alone* ($r = 0.164$), reflecting a small positive association.

6.2. CONTROL OF THIRD-PARTY VARIABLES

We also provided information on participants' religious characteristics and church attendance patterns before experiencing marital conflict. Such information is critical for interpreting the findings. It is plausible that men in the sample to be less religious and less likely to attend church even before marital conflict occurred. If this is the case, the argument that marital conflict discourages men's church attendance more than women's may not hold, as men's attendance could already have been lower prior to the conflict. Thus, we analyzed some variables previously measures about the sample (see Table 2). In the first place we eliminated 12 respondents who declared that they are not religious and confirmed by qualitative data (explaining in words) that church does not matter or has no connection with marital conflicts. We kept only religious people. Secondly, all respondents were married, and regarding their affiliation, all of them reported that they were of Orthodox religion. This is important because different religions might have different religious practices regarding church attendance (Lazerwitz, 1961).

To have a clear overview of the influence of other third-party variables, we performed a multiple regression in Jamovi between the variable church attendance (total score) and relevant variables measured in the study which were anticipated to count. We tested the individual effect and the interaction effect between sex and a third-party variable on the total score of church attendance (see Table 2).

Table 2

Multiple linear regressions for exploring the effect of third-party variables on church attending by sex.

Predictor	Stand. Estimate	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept ^a		719.4	1457.9	0.493	0.623
1. age	-1.05	-71.4	53.6	-1.332	0.186
<i>sex * age:</i>					
<i>(masculine – feminine) * age</i>	1.05	71.9	53.5	1.343	0.182
2. Kms to church	-0.14	-26.3	23.6	-1.114	0.268
<i>Kms to church * sex:</i>					
<i>Kms to church * (masculine – feminine)</i>	0.08	15.0	35.3	0.424	0.672
3. Attending church in the last 4 weeks	-0.39	-151.2	70.0	-2.160	0.033
<i>Attending church in the last 4 weeks * sex:</i>					
<i>Attending church in the last 4 weeks * (masculine – feminine)</i>	0.30	115.9	94.8	1.222	0.224
4. Frequency going to church in general	0.40	329.2	107.8	3.053	0.003
<i>Frequency going to church * sex:</i>					
<i>Frequency going to church * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.27	-268.2	176.7	-1.517	0.132

Table 2 (continued)

5. Partner's age	0.22	51.1	41.5	1.229	0.222
<i>Age partner * sex:</i>					
<i>Age partner * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.26	-61.2	60.0	-1.020	0.310
6. No. children	-0.06	-77.9	145.8	-0.534	0.594
<i>No. children * sex:</i>					
<i>No. children * (masculine – feminine)</i>	0.24	285.2	314.4	0.907	0.367
7. Age of the relationship	0.13	15.9	61.9	0.256	0.798
<i>Age of the relationship * sex:</i>					
<i>Age of the relationship * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.18	-28.6	84.5	-0.338	0.736
8. Frequency conflicts last month	0.03	44.1	148.5	0.296	0.767
<i>Frequency conflicts last month * sex:</i>					
<i>Frequency conflicts last month * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.10	-115.7	233.5	-0.495	0.621
9. Rapidity making peace after conflict	0.05	50.6	131.2	0.385	0.701
<i>Rapidity making peace after conflict * sex:</i>					
<i>Rapidity making peace after conflict * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.07	-64.1	213.2	-0.300	0.764
10. Income:					
<i>Less than needed – Exactly as we need</i>	0.32	565.4	562.0	1.006	0.317
<i>More than needed – Exactly as we need</i>	0.50	862.9	585.5	1.473	0.144
<i>More than needed – Exactly as we need</i>	-0.37	-797.4	1151.6	-0.692	0.490
11. Income * sex:					
<i>(Less than needed – Exactly as we need) * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.17	-119.5	1318.0	-0.090	0.928
<i>(More than needed – Exactly as we need) * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.45	-419.4	961.3	-0.436	0.664
<i>(More than needed – Exactly as we need) * (masculine – feminine)</i>	0.68	1690.9	1767.2	0.956	0.341
12. Responsibility in church:					
<i>yes – no</i>	-0.35	-811.1	704.5	-1.151	0.252
13. Responsibility in church * sex:					
<i>(yes – no) * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.11	164.2	1114.5	0.147	0.883
14. Busy with work:					
<i>Yes, I worked in some days – No, I do not work in the days to go to church</i>	0.00	139.4	496.1	0.280	0.779
<i>Yes, I worked in all days to go to church – No, I do not work in the days to go to church</i>	-0.33	-439.5	2203.2	-0.199	0.842
15. Sick not going to church:					
<i>yes, I was – no, I was not</i>	0.17	216.8	464.9	0.466	0.642
16 Sick not going to church * sex:					
<i>(yes, I was – no, I was not) * (masculine – feminine)</i>	-0.33	-325.7	946.4	-0.344	0.731

Note: (1) the criterion variable was attending church (total score). (2) numbers are reduced to 3 decimals.

The analyses offer statistical clues about the religious behaviors before a marital conflict. For example, men and women in the sample used to attend church

in the last 4 weeks statistically the same. The number of conflicts in the sample before the imagined marital conflict did not differ statistically, neither the rapidity to make peace after a conflict. In fact, the analyses revealed that no composite variable investigated has any significant effect on church attendance scores. Most notably, the variable measuring the frequency of going to church has a significant main effect on church going after a marital conflict ($p = 0.003$) but not in interaction with the variable sex ($p = 132$).

6.3. TESTING HYPOTHESES

In the present study we had 3 hypotheses which are tested below.

Testing H1: “Wives will decide to attend church more than husbands after a previous day marital conflict, in an imaginary situation.” In order to test this hypothesis we used t(Mann-Whitney U) test in Jamovi (see *Table 3*).

Table 3

Results for Mann-Whitney U test

	feminine		masculine		t (Mann-Whitney U)	p	Cohen's d
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
How much would you LIKE to go to church after such a conflict?	6.61	2.99	5.32	3.01	2273	0.001	-0.2813
How WILLING would you be to go to church ALONE in this situation, without your partner?	4.39	3.55	2.21	2.61	2037	<.001	-0.356
How WILLING would you be to go to church with your PARTNER in this situation?	7.34	2.66	6.29	3.14	2426	0.004	-0.233
How EAGERLY would you go to church after this conflict?	7.10	2.26	5.854	2.814	2331	<.002	-0.263

The results indicated significant results and the effect size by Cohen's d is small in three cases ($d < 0.3$) and medium in case of willing attending church alone ($d > 0.3$). The hypothesis is thus confirmed.

Testing H2: “Conflict intensity in the last four weeks will predict the decision to attend church, after an imagined previous day marital conflict, differently by gender.”

In order to test this hypothesis we performed a path analysis in Jamovi, having conflict intensity in the last month as a predictor and church attendance variables (like attending, willing to attend church together, willing to attend church alone, and eagerness to attend church) as predicted variables (see *Table 4*). Covariates are presented in *Table 5*.

Table 4

Results for Path Analysis in Jamovi

Group	Path		Standardized Regression Coefficients	S.E.	β	[95%] <i>CI</i>	p
	Dependent	Predictor					
feminine	Like attending	Conflict intensity	-0.282	0.195	-0.145	[-.66, .09]	0.146
	Willing attending together	Conflict intensity	-0.078	0.1769	-0.0448	[-.42, .26]	0.657
	Eagerness to attend	Conflict intensity	-0.077	0.146	-0.0540	[-.364, .20]	0.593
masculine	Like attending	Conflict intensity	-0.452	0.182	-0.3031	[-.80, -.096]	< . .013
	Willing attending together	Conflict intensity	-0.778	0.172	-0.5014	[-1.11, -.44]	< . .001
	Eagerness to attend	Conflict intensity	-0.364	0.172	-0.2612	[-.70, -.026]	.0035

Table 5

Covariates

Group	Variable 1	Variable 2	Estimate	S.E.	β	[95%] <i>CI</i>	p
Feminine	Like attending	Willing together	6.03	1.008	0.758	[4.054, 8.00]	< . .001
	Like attending	Eagerness to attend	2.56	0.712	0.390	[1.163, 3.95]	< . .001
	Willing attending together	Eagerness to attend	1.60	0.622	0.269	[.383, 2.82]	< . .010
Masculine	Like attending	Willing attending together	3.48	1.087	0.450	[1.35, 5.61]	< . .001
	Like attending	Eagerness to attend	3.42	1.086	0.441	[1.29, 5.55]	< . .002
	Willing attending together	Eagerness to attend	1.67	0.962	0.228	[-.215, 3.564]	0.083

This model indicates (see *Table 6*) a perfect fit across all fit indices. The CFI, TLI, RNI, GFI, and AGFI are all 1.000, and the SRMR and RMSEA are both 0.000, indicating no residual error. These results suggest that the model explains the data optimally, without significant discrepancies between observed and expected covariance matrices.

Table 6

Model fit indices

Fit Index	Value	Interpretation
Baseline Model χ^2	158 (df = 12), $p < .001$	Significant, but does not impact the final model fit
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be ≥ 0.90)
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be ≥ 0.90)

Table 2 (continued)

Relative Noncentrality Index (RNI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be ≥ 0.90)
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be ≥ 0.90)
Adjusted GFI (AGFI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be ≥ 0.90)
Parsimonious GFI (PGFI)	1.000	Perfect fit (should be higher)
Akaike Information Criterion (AIC)	208	Lower values indicate a better fit
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)	2282	Comparisons with other models needed
Adjusted BIC	2206	Indicates a well-fitted model
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.000	Perfect fit (should be ≤ 0.08)
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.000 (95% CI [0.00-0.00])	Excellent fit (should be ≤ 0.08)

These results indicate that conflict intensity in the last month does not predict wives' decision to attend church in an imaginary situation but it is negatively associated with church attendance variables in husbands.

Testing H3: "Husbands' reports of higher marital conflict intensity in the last four weeks will be associated with a lower tendency towards church attendance, following a marital conflict, as compared to wives, when the relationship is mediated by the frequency of religious practices."

The results of SEM analysis in AMOS IBM, for the tested model, moderated by gender, showed the following results (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

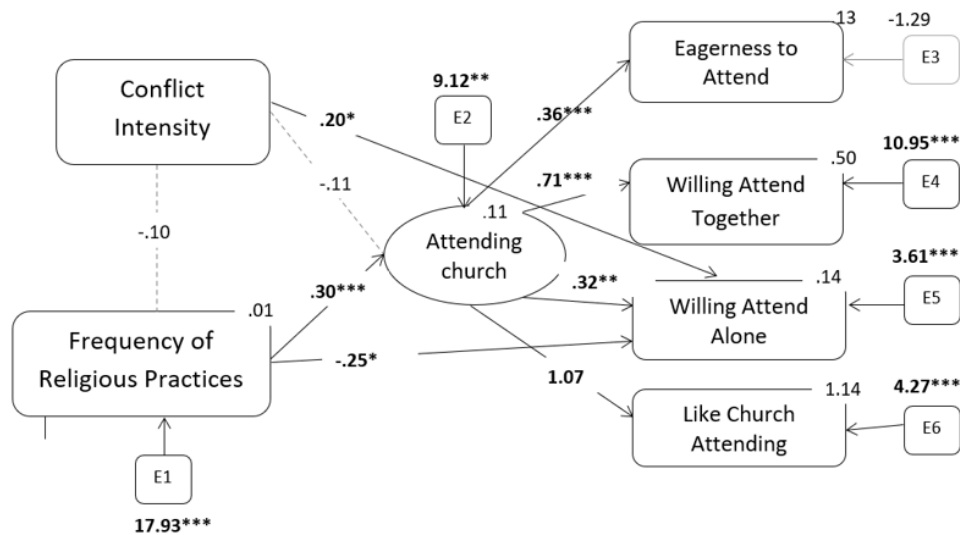


Figure 3. Path Diagram Indicating Results in AMOS, for Wives.
Note: Continuous arrows represent significant effects, while dotted arrows represent not significant effects.

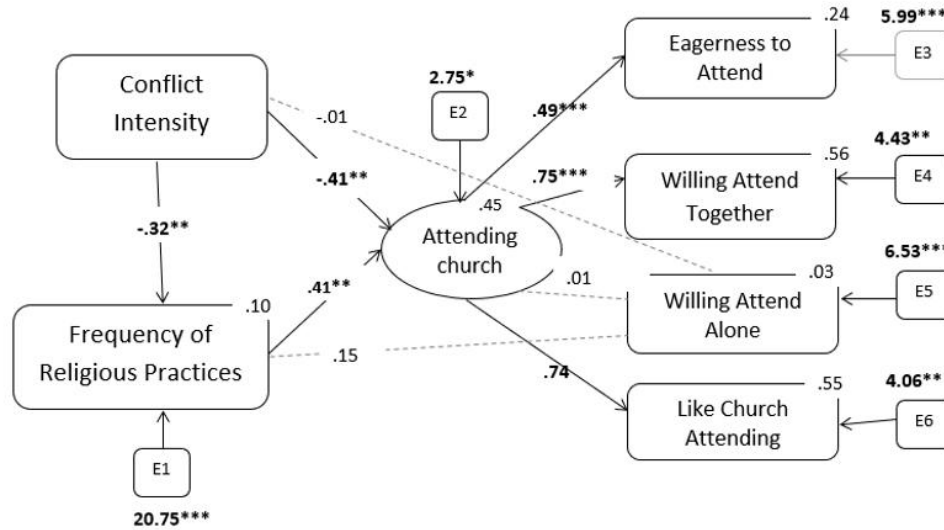


Figure 4. Path Diagram Indicating Results in AMOS, for Husbands.

Note: Continuous arrows represent significant effects, while dotted arrows represent not significant effects.

The model fit indices indicated the following: $\chi^2 (12, N = 98) = 15.6$, $p > .209$ which shows that the observed and the expected models, are statistically identical. Model indicators show that the model obtained is good: CFI = .9801, GFI = .970, AGFI = .894, NFI = .926 (most of them are above .90) and RMSEA = .044 (which is below .05), within a confidence interval between .000 and .098. PCLOSE = .516, which is greater than .05.

In order to find evidence for mediation in the model, split by gender, we used the bootstrapping method to estimate the standard errors for un-standardized or standardized total effects and indirect effects. We asked AMOS IBM to produce 1000 bootstrap samples, with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, which would also provide us with a test of significance for the indirect effect.

In case of wives the paths are not significant meaning that there is no mediation between conflict intensity in the last month and attending church after a marital conflict, relationship mediated by frequency of religious practices. The standardized indirect effect of conflict intensity in the last month on attending church, for husbands, is $-.132$, with a standard error of $.084$. The p value for the indirect effect is equal to $.013$ (Two-Tailed), 95% CI $[-.368, -.024]$ which indicates that we have evidence to reject the null hypothesis of no mediation. Thus, we can say that the path from conflict intensity in the last month to attending church after a marital conflict, for husbands, is not mediated by frequency of religious practices.

It was decided to put "Willing attend alone" in relation with Conflict Intensity (IV) and Frequency of Religious Practices (MedV), as marital conflict

may reflect additional relational and coping processes beyond the general church-attendance tendency represented by the latent construct “Attending church.” Unlike the other indicators, “Willing attend alone” may also capture interpersonal withdrawal, emotional distancing, and individual coping following conflict, distinct from the other variables in the latent construct, which may rather refer to the positive and motivational aspects. Therefore, modelling this variable separately through direct relationships with the predictors was considered conceptually more appropriate (Kline, 2023; Byrne, 2016).

7. DISCUSSIONS

The focus of the research was to investigate the effect of marital conflict in the previous day in an imaginary situation on the decision to attend church, highlighting gender differences in judgement, relationship mediated by the frequency of religious practices. It hypothesizes that gender differences in church attendance is significant and that the frequency of religious practices moderates the relationship between conflict intensity in the last 4 weeks and church attendance decision differently for men and women.

Regarding the first hypothesis, the study found that wives choose more often to attend church after a marital conflict in the previous day. In all situations tested, women were more likely than husbands to choose to go to church after a marital conflict, whether alone or together. They also indicated that they were more willing to attend church in the aftermath of a marital conflict and predicted they will have a more pleasant experience at church, as compared to their husbands.

These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that women may turn to religious activities, such as church attendance, as a means of coping with emotional distress or relationship challenges, such as marital conflict, although there is a debate regarding differences between men and women and church activities (Schnabel, 2015; Schnabel *et al.*, 2018). The inclination of women to engage in religious practices after a conflict may be tied to the greater emphasis women often place on maintaining relationships and seeking emotional and social support through religious communities. Mahoney *et al.* (2001) found that religious involvement plays a more central role in the lives of women than men, especially during times of relational strain. Women tend to view religious participation as a coping mechanism that provides emotional relief and reinforces relational bonds, particularly after conflict. Ellison *et al.* (2010) suggested that women used religion more deliberately as a means of emotional modulation and relationship repair than men did. It was more common for the women, as part of their effort to repair relational ruptures, to attend church, thus making them more frequent attendees after the conflict than men. Women frequently report turning to religious practices, which is a key element of their coping strategies (Holman, & Podrazik, 2018).

Regarding the second hypothesis, it was found that conflict intensity significantly predicted the decision to attend church in an imaginary situation after a marital conflict in the previous day, but only for husbands. The higher the intensity of the marital conflict, the less likely husbands were to attend church, either alone or with their wives. Additionally, if they did go to church, they were less likely to have a pleasant experience after a marital conflict. We did not find any evidence in this analysis that marital conflict intensity in the last 4 weeks predicted the decision to go to church in case of wives.

These findings are consistent with existing research on gender differences in coping mechanisms and responses to marital conflicts. More specifically, husbands are less likely to use religious activities, such as church attendance, as a coping behavior in managing the emotional fallout from marital conflict, especially when the conflict is more heated. Such a pattern may be embedded in broader sex-based coping strategies to the extent that men generally tend to withdraw emotionally and physically rather than seek out social or emotional support, including religious participation, in response to conflict (Frick, 2021). There is evidence that men are more likely to deal with their stress independently, which contributes to lower help-seeking rates. In situations where the source of stress is relationship stress or marital conflict, there is usually a very minimal approach towards seeking help. The self-reliance fits into broader patterns of emotional withdrawal that are commonly observed in men during and after conflicts. As a result, men disconnect from social activities, like going to church; thus, arguably explaining their lower activity rates than women's following the intense marital disputes (Zwicker & DeLongis, 2010; Carr & Umberson, 2013). By contrast, women are more likely to engage in social or religious activities as a way of coping with stress, particularly in the aftermath of conflict. Men and women navigate relationship stress differently, with women often seeking external support systems, while men withdraw from them. Yet, both, men and women have a higher church attendance when their wellbeing is higher whether state or trait (Kent *et al.*, 2024; Francis, & Kaldor, 2002).

Finally, the study confirmed that for husbands, a higher perception of marital conflict intensity in the past 4 weeks is associated with a lower tendency to attend church following a marital conflict, when the frequency of religious practices mediates the relationship. This mediation is partial meaning that in case of men conflict intensity has a direct significant effect and an indirect effect on attending church through the mediator frequency of religious practices. This partial mediation indicates that while religious practices play a role, it do not fully explain the relationship between conflict intensity and church attendance for husbands. The model tested also indicated that conflict intensity and the frequency of religious practices do not have a significant effect on attending church in case of women. However, we did not find evidence of a significant mediation effect of religious practices between marital conflict intensity and church attendance in the case of women. The lack of a significant mediation effect for women may point to their

more stable patterns of religious practices, which are less impacted by fluctuations in marital conflict intensity.

In addition, when conflict intensity is high women tend to go alone to church but not husbands, while when the frequency of religious practices is high women tend to be less willing to attend church alone. In case of husbands, we did not find these associations to be significant.

Men are more likely to exhibit changes in religious behaviors, such as church attendance, following relational stress, particularly in situations of high conflict (Ellison & Lee, 2010). This supports the idea that the variable religious practices is a mediating factor for husbands but not as strongly for wives. Religiosity is often integrated into men's coping mechanisms but is more susceptible to disruption when marital discord is high, whereas women tend to maintain consistent religious practices regardless of marital conflict (Mahoney *et al.*, 1999). Women's religiosity tends to be more intrinsic and stable, while men's religious engagement, including church attendance, is more conditional on external factors, such as relational harmony (Wilcox, 2018).

Our findings are in accordance with previous studies. Love is important and leads to wellbeing, regardless of gender (Bhargava, 2024). Marital relationship is for both men and women an equilibrium factor in life. However, it seems that "both men and women feel that men need to be married more than women do." (Kaufman & Goldscheider, 2007, p. 29). Another study found that "family matters more for men's well-being" than for women (Cable *et al.*, 2012, p. 166). Marriage has health consequence for morbidity and mortality stronger for men than women (Wanic *et al.*, 2011). In the context of church attendance, it is highly likely that conflicts in marital relationship to affect men more than women. Clinical observations indicate that the decision not to go to church is often wrongly interpreted by wives as bad intention or lack of interest for their inner spiritual life, and a bad model to children, when it is actually rather emotional pain and retreat to as men do to solve their problems.

Limitations of this study include not assessing demand-withdraw behaviors – demand refers to the degree partners make pressures on the partner to go to church when there is a conflict and withdraw refers to the behavior to retreat when the same conflict occurs - a slightly gender-unbalanced participant sample, and reliance on self-reported data. Since all participants identified as Orthodox Christians, the findings should be interpreted with caution when generalizing to other religious groups. In addition, the data were self-reported, which may have increased the risk of social desirability bias and subjective interpretation of the items. Furthermore, the cross-sectional vignette-based nature of the study limits causal interpretations between the variables. Experimental control over the examined processes may consolidate these findings.

Future research should examine more balanced gender samples, utilize longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of marital conflict and religious

practices over time and explore the influence of demand-withdraw dynamics on the frequency of religious practices. Demand-withdraw behaviors in couples occur when one partner seeks change or discussion (demand) while the other avoids or withdraws from the interaction, creating a cycle of conflict and communication breakdown. In addition, extending the research in different cultures than Romania would add further understanding to this study, as genes and environment has been proved to influence church attendance (Kirk, 1999). Future research will also need to go beyond the limit of Romanian Orthodox country and extend research to other cultures, more individualistic or less religious and compare the results. Future studies should also consider using sampling methods that ensure greater representativeness.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The article examines the impact of marital conflict in the last 4 weeks on the decision to attend church, emphasizing gender differences and the mediating role of frequency of religious practices.

The findings suggested that women generally remained more open to church attendance following conflict, both alone and together with their partner. In contrast, men who reported more intense marital conflicts showed lower willingness and enthusiasm to attend church after such situations. The analyses further indicated that religious practices helped explain this association only among men, implying that men's church-related behaviors may be more sensitive to relationship distress, whereas women's religious involvement appeared comparatively more stable in the context of conflict.

The article highlights the necessity for empathy, understanding and tolerance within couples, particularly concerning emotional experiences influencing the decision to attend church. Although the study focuses on decision making in an imaginary situation, different judgement between men and women probably matters the most as it may lead to real behaviors. The study suggests respecting gender differences and individual decisions, noting that men may be particularly more affected by conflict in the previous days in their willingness to attend church. Furthermore, the article advocates for reducing pressure within dyadic relationships, recognizing how conflicts can spill over into other areas, such as the frequency of religious practices. These insights help us understand better the interplay between marital dynamics, personal beliefs, and cultural contexts, and offers a foundation to develop more supportive relationship strategies (Marici, 2025) and improve mental health.

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