International Journal of Allied Medical Sciences and Clinical Research (IJAMSCR)

ISSN:2347-6567

IJAMSCR |Volume 10 | Issue 2 | Apr - Jun - 2022
www.ijamscr.com

Research Article *Medical Research*

Spirituality as Perceived by Older Adults: A Qualitative Study in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Background
Spiritual Healthcare and Spiritual Nursing Care are emerging fields. Spirituality is a complex and abstract subject with many perspectives and its meaning may vary for different people. To appreciate it better, it is necessary to look more deeply on how the relationship manifests itself among older adults.

Aim
This qualitative, multiple case study sought to establish and analyze how older adults viewed spirituality.

Methods
A total of 12 adults aged 60 and up with various socio-demographic profiles from four cities in the southern Philippines were assessed using semi-structured interviews to determine their perspectives on the concept and understanding of Spirituality. The collected information was then subjected to thematic analysis.

Findings
In describing spirituality, four themes emerged: 1) transpersonal spirituality: experiencing the transcendent nature of God in one's own life; 2) interpersonal spirituality: experiencing spiritual connectedness with others; 3) intrapersonal spirituality: experiencing spiritual connectedness of one's inner self; and According to the findings, spirituality is influenced by a variety of factors and can take on different meanings depending on one's life circumstances.

Implications
This study contributes to an understanding of the role that spirituality plays in the life of older adults. Such understanding is important for nurses and other healthcare practitioners interested in the provision of holistic care in the context of gerontology.

Keywords: *Spirituality, older adults, qualitative study, multiple case study, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of spirituality has become a subject of scrutiny in several studies[13,3]. Spirituality is a complex and abstract subject with many perspectives and its meaning may vary for different people[24]. For some, spirituality is about being involved in organized religion: going to church, synagogue, a mosque, and so on. For others, it may be more personal[7]. Researchers discovered that various groups of people view the meaning of spirituality differently (McSherry & Cash, 2004). For example, spirituality was conceived by older adults principally as support, relationship with the sacred, and transcendence[3]. In the same study, all the elderly participants recognized the importance of spirituality in their lives, and its relationship with old age is in the capacity to bear the limitations, losses, and difficulties that are inherent to the process.

Much has been written about the connection between spirituality and health and wellbeing[20,11,3]. but the lack of consistency in the definition of spirituality may be a barrier for caregivers in providing adequate spiritual care. With regard to the provision of care for older people, a study by[5] found that spirituality was conceived by older adults principally as support, relationship with the sacred, and transcendence. Additionally, all the participants recognized the importance of spirituality in their lives; its relationship

with old age is in the capacity to bear the limitations and difficulties that are innate to the process.

The present study aimed to develop this body of knowledge further by exploring how older adults in different circumstances understand the concept of spirituality and its importance in their lives, and what the implications may be for caregiving.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a multiple case study research design since the aim was to explore the different personal meanings that older adults may attach to their experiences of spirituality. A case study is an appropriate method to use when the objective of is to understand the complexity and uniqueness of a case within a particular context (Stake 2013; Patton, 2002). The diversity among the participants represented a manageable populace, given that the goal of a case study research was to really understand the case (Stake, 2013). Additionally, Creswell (2013) emphasized that even a sample of five can represent a reasonable size, as the most important thing in qualitative research is the quality, not the quantity. Furthermore, two to ten participants or study samples is sufficient to reach saturation (Groenewald, 2004). The goal was to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons were drawn, the cases needed to be chosen carefully so that similar results across cases or contrasting results based on theory can be predicted (Yin, 2009).

Participants

This study involved 12 participants with various socio-demographic profiles. In order to get a true picture of the differences in how older adults conceptualize spirituality, the following criteria were followed in purposely selecting the participants for the study: 1) Adults aged 60 and up considered as "old" based on the UN cut-off. 2) Older adults who identify themselves as Muslim, Catholic and Manobo 3) Older adults who had attained at least a college-level education and older adults who only reached grade school or high school level 4) Older adults who were hospitalized and not hospitalized at the time of collection of data 5) Older adults who self-assessed themselves to be dependent on others for financial support and those who self-assessed themselves to be financially independent or self-sufficient 6) male and female older adults. The participants were properly identified to ensure that each criterion was adequately represented. The goal was to ensure that the study could determine the importance of spirituality in each of the twelve cases.

Data Collection

A pilot study was conducted with five (5) older adults who were representative of the criteria used in selecting the participants. The results were used to predict possible themes which may be generated during the main study. Participants were approached to discuss about their interest in participating in the study. The initial interviews lasted between forty minutes and an hour. Following up on the initial data, additional interviews were conducted to validate it.

Once they had indicated their willingness to participate, a meeting was scheduled for each of the participants to discuss the nature and scope of the study. The participants were informed during the preliminary discussions that their participation in the study would entail answering prepared questions about their opinions and perceptions of spirituality during the interview. There were 4 main questions asked namely (i) Can you describe your understanding of the concept of Spirituality? (ii) Who are the persons (family, friends, others) who have influenced you spiritually? (iii) How did your spirituality or faith influence your relationship with your community (work, neighbors, etc)? and (iv) Has your spirituality helped you overcome a difficult period or hardship in your life and how was it able to do so? For those admitted at the provincial hospitals, the interviews were carried out in their respective rooms after obtaining permission from the hospitals' administration. For the rest of the participants, the interviews were done at their residences, or a place agreed upon by both the informants and the researcher. The security and privacy of the informants during the interviews were considered for ethical conditions. The comfort of the informant was paramount in the selection of the venue for the interviews, considering the vulnerability of older people. During the interview, participants were encouraged to talk freely and to tell their stories using their own words. If there were questions that needed clarification or rephrasing, the participants were allowed to elaborate or provide more relevant information if he/she chose to do so.

Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using an approach for case study analysis suggested by Stake (2013) and Yin (2009). Thematic analysis was then applied to the findings. Thematic analysis is often used as part of the meaning-making process of many research methods, including case study research. According to Stake, data analysis is an ongoing process of taking apart the data of importance to the study to make sense of the parts, and how they relate together. Stake (2013) identified two broad strategies, which are used in case study research to gain new meaning: direct interpretation of individual instances and aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class. The purpose of these strategies is to be able to pull the data apart and put it back together more meaningfully. Yin (2009) advocated the use of pattern matching as one of the most desirable modes of analysis for case studies.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis was then used to provide a qualitative, detailed, and nuanced account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The qualitative phase of the study was through twelve (12) semi-structured interviews. In addition, focus was given to the respondents' experience and the meaning respondents ascribed to those experiences. The themes were developed through a flexible and organic process, by constantly engaging with respondents' personal and subjective accounts of their experiences.

The 12 case studies of older adults were written in such a way that the researcher's assertions were presented, but they were also written in such a way that readers could form their own naturalistic generalizations.

Ethical Considerations

No relationship existed between the researcher and the participants prior to the conduct of the interview. To avoid bias and promote voluntary participation, the participants were assured before the interview that there would be no

potential risks associated with the research and that there would be no incentives or rewards for their participation. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded in order to capture an accurate account of the interview process that could be replayed during data analysis, and the voice-recorded data were not used in any presentation that revealed the participants' voices.

All the research participants were asked to sign an informed consent form. The researcher explained the meaning and implications of the consent letter in the language that could easily be understood by the participants. The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a prepared interview guide. Participants were encouraged to respond in whatever dialect or language they felt most comfortable with. After the data collection, all the data in any form, e.g., printed transcripts or audio recordings, and electronic data files related to the study were kept in a locked filing cabinet and stored in password-protected computers.

RESULTS

The themes that emerged from the analysis suggested four types of spirituality: (1) transpersonal spirituality (experiencing the transcendent nature of God in one's own life); (2) interpersonal spirituality (experiencing spiritual connectedness with others); and (3) intrapersonal spirituality (experiencing spiritual connectedness of one's inner self); The findings of this study add to the existing body of literature by providing nuanced differences on the different types of spirituality.

Each level of spirituality had been expanded to include sub-themes to capture the various dimensions of spirituality from the perspective of the study participants.

Theme 1: Transpersonal Spirituality: Experiencing the transcendent nature of God in one's own life.

A common denominator among all the participants in this study was their experiences related to the transcendent nature of God in their own lives. From several of the informants' responses to the question of what is their understanding of the concept of spirituality, three sub-themes that relate to the theme of transpersonal spirituality were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Belief in the existence of a divine or a higher being greater than oneself

All of the participants shared an unwavering belief in the existence of a higher power, a divinity, or a God to whom they pray and who they believe is watching over them and guiding them in their daily lives.

Some of the Catholic participants' statements attesting to their beliefs and awareness of a higher being greater than oneself are reflected in the following statements. For example, a catholic female participant provided the following contemplative definition of what it means to be spiritual:

> *"To me, Being spiritual means being aware of the presence of a spiritual force."*

Similarly, a Muslim male participant stated:

> *"Being spiritual means being aware of the presence of a higher being in one's life."*

Majority of the Muslim participants believe that spirituality is synonymous with their faith or religion, and that being spiritual entails faithfully practicing Islam. To illustrate what being spiritual in Islam means to a Muslim male participant, the following statement provided a context:

> *"What I understand about spirituality is to believe that there is only one God and that is Allah, and to follow His commandments and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammad."*

On the other hand, the Manobo participants understood the transcendental nature of God more fluidly than their Catholic and Muslim counterparts. They have a name for the higher power they believe in (Mambabaja), but they also believe in the existence of spirits in nature.

There was an emphasis on the unseen. For example, a Manobo female participant stated:

> *" Spirituality is the belief in the power of Mambabaja even if we do not see it. It is said to be a belief because we believe in his power even though we do not see him, even if it is only his spirit that gives us the ability to do so."*

Sub-theme 2: Sense of connectedness and personal relationship with God

When asked to describe their understanding of the concept of spirituality, all the participants described having a personal relationship with God. Some participants recognized this connection or relationship to something external and greater than themselves that inspired them inwardly to live a spiritual life., a Catholic female participant provided a hopeful and intimate meaning of spirituality:

> *Believing the Bible as the Word of God has given me a greater understanding of spiritual things and events in my life in light of that Word. It gives me a sense of being connected to God.*

Other participants characterized their spirituality as being all-encompassing due to God's omnipresence and transcendence. a Muslim male participant provided evidence of Allah as an omnipresence in his life – a present, compassionate, and merciful figure that was able to provide protection through a close and intimate relationship with Him in the following Qur'anic verses:

> *Allah is Omnipresent, Omniscient. He is with us whenever we are. He is also closer to us than our jugular vein. He is closer to us than we all are, yet we all do not see. Being spiritual means believing that Allah is with you wherever you are.*

Other participants discussed this relationship with God in an intimate manner as if they were discussing a relationship

with a significant other.

Sub-theme 3: Expressing gratitude and respect towards God

Expressing their gratitude and respect towards God was a commonality among all the participants and they demonstrated this gratitude in various ways. For some, expressing their gratitude towards God was expressed inwardly and in a more personal way through meditation or quiet reflection, a male Muslim participant said:

> *Communication with God is direct. I am therefore able to express my gratitude to Him anytime.*

For others, like one of the female Catholic participants, expressing gratitude to God was expressed in her daily living and was succinctly captured in the following statement:

> *I talk to Him every morning and I thank Him for letting me wake up to another day and to be here. Every morning I talk to Him. I know He is there with me.*

From the statements of the participants, expressing gratitude through religious rituals is an important practice for the older adults in this study. Regardless of one's religion, prayer was identified as a common expression of gratitude. These are reflected in the following statements of an 80-year old Manobo participant:

> *"Every day, I look to the sky and worship Mambabaja and pray. Every year also, to express our gratitude to him for the kindness he has shown us, we give offering in the form of pig's blood through which our sins will be washed away."*

Theme 2: Interpersonal Spirituality: Experiencing spiritual connectedness with others

Interpersonal spirituality is that spirituality which contemplates connectedness with others and one's natural environment. Although it is true that one can practice one's own spirituality alone, however, Harvey (2007) indicated that interconnectedness is the core of spirituality. To have a holistic appreciation, it is important that social relationships are maintained and cultivated. There are at least two dimensions of interpersonal relationships, which include relationships with family/others and with the community that has emerged from the participants' narratives.

Sub-theme 1: Family and religious role models as positive influences on spirituality

When asked who the persons were who have influenced the development of their spirituality and in what way had that person/s influenced their spirituality, many of the participants spoke of the significant people in their lives. A Muslim male participant identified religious Islamic missionaries as the most important influence in the development of his spirituality and faith. He explained:

> *When I began to accompany Islamic missionary friends who usually travel to spread Islam, my spirituality increased and became strong because I have learned from their explanations the beauty and goodness of Islam as well as the benefits gained for every good deed that we do with the intention of pleasing Allah.*

Similarly, a Catholic female participant identified her spiritual mentor in her bible study as the most influential person in the development of her spirituality. She cited:

> *My Bible study leader took the lead in my understanding the Bible and its effect on my daily life.*

Some of the participants in this study also identified their family members as their spiritual mentors and guides. Additionally, a commonality in their responses would show that parents were among those who were most influential in the development of the participants' spirituality.

Sub-theme 2: Spirituality as a positive influence on interpersonal relationships with others and within the community

Several participants believed that their spirituality had a positive influence on their interpersonal relationships with others and within their community. Although their respective responses were somewhat different, there was an established commonality especially on how they dealt with the people around them, as depicted by a Catholic female participant hereunder:

> *Because of my faith, I try to be tolerant and understanding of my neighbors even if they are noisy, always throw their garbage anywhere.*

Moreover, a male Manobo participant cited:

> *Our beliefs in Mambabaja and our unity were a great help to our community. Everyone in the community help each other by giving chickens, candles, and rice for offerings to Mambabaja.*

Theme 3: Intrapersonal Spirituality: Experiencing connectedness of one's inner self

Intrapersonal spirituality separates oneself and one's situation and therefore signifies distancing oneself from one's problems and difficulties. This distance allows one to see and experience the situation from a different perspective; thus, an opportunity to find meaning amidst losses and painful or difficult circumstances.

The sub-themes of intrapersonal spirituality are suffering and trials as a catalyst for greater spirituality, spirituality as a source of joy, hope, and acceptance, and spirituality as a source of strength in times of hardship. According to some of the participants' statements, it can be gleaned that due to the presence of spirituality, a person undergoes a positive and

transformative change.

Sub-theme 1: Suffering and trials as catalysts for greater spirituality

There was a commonality among the participants when it comes to suffering or trial because most of them have experienced death of a family member. Whereas, other participants experienced personal or self-trials, such as having an illness, hardships in their relationships, work or business.

A Manobo male participant declared that due to the loss of a loved one, he was able to regain his faith:

> *The trials in my family started when my father died of heart attack and then soon after, my mother also died of cancer. These events led me to question if there really a God is. I became delinquent and subsequently suffered depression. Then I met my wife, Adeng, who was sent by the Lord, Mambabaja. Adeng helped me regain my faith in Mambabaja, the creator of our life.*

On the other hand, a Catholic female participant reminisced the sad events that strengthened her spirituality:

> *There were several sad events that made my faith stronger. The first event was when I was bullied in high school. It was then that I was drawn closer to God when I began reading the Bible and scriptures. It really deepened my prayer life. The second event was the death of my parents. Being the elder of two girls, I was gravely affected by their death and have to take all their responsibility. I had to be strong and delay my grieving process for my sister who became very emotional as consequence of their death. At that period, I doubted my faith and wanted to just die but I was able to survive everything because of God's mercy.*

While for other participants, spirituality was a source of hope or acceptance because it helped them cope after the life trials and sufferings they have undergone.

Sub-theme 2: Spirituality as a source of joy, hope, and acceptance

Most of the participants considered spirituality as a source of joy because it helps them to get closer to God. The succeeding statements of a Muslim participant will strengthen this claim:

> *"Spirituality, the belief and trust in Allah gives me joy. It enables us to look for the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. This belief in hope and redemption bring joy in our life. The belief that one day things will be a lot better."*

Another Muslim participant revealed:

> *"As I grew older, even if I was sick, I just prayed and it brought me so much joy because I am grateful to God. Whenever I miss a prayer, I became sad and guilty. One source of my happiness is when I am able to complete my five obligatory prayers and perform the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammad."*

While for other participants, spirituality was a source of hope or acceptance because it helped them cope after the life trials and sufferings they have undergone.

Sub-theme 3: Spirituality is relied on as a source of strength in times of hardship

Regardless of cultural or religious differences or differences in socio-economic and physical status, majority of the participants expressed how their spirituality was relied on as a source of strength in times of hardships. Reliance on spirituality as a theme held relevance across all narratives. For all the participants, spiritual reliance was expressed and contextualized by a belief in God.

For example, A 64-year old male Christian participant who was 'highly educated' and who was categorized as 'not poor' but was suffering from an illness explained that his strength was grounded in his spirituality and belief in God. He described his source of strength as follows:

> *"God has never let me down and even if I am sick right now I believe that Christ will heal me. It is a relationship with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit that has given me hope in my situation. And He never changes which gives me a feeling of security in my spiritual life."*

In addition to relying on their spirituality and belief in God, the participants in this study also trusted that everything in life would eventually be fine. This trust, rooted in spirituality, serves as a source of comfort and support for the participants during the times that it was impossible to believe in God. As one participant, an 82-year old Manobo male who had 'minimal formal education' and who was categorized as being 'poor' and 'ill' explained:

> *"Belief in Mambabaja is the trust and confidence in him, his power and ability during the times that it is impossible to*

> *believe in him. Because when we believe in him and trust him, soon he will show us his power by helping us with our problems, treating our diseases, giving us food and others."*

Furthermore, some of the participants described how they were strengthened and transformed by their experiences of hardship. For example, a 68-year old female Muslim participant who had 'minimal formal education' and was categorized as being 'ill' and 'poor' discussed how her spirituality transformed the uncertainty and fear associated with having an illness. This participant was able to re-frame this adversity, creating a situation that solidified and strengthened her faith. She resolved the adversities while trusting in her conceptualization of God. She explained:

> *"The moment a person gets sick is the moment one gets closer to Allah because He is the only One who can be sought to help and the only One who can be trusted. Now that I am sick my spirituality and my relationship with my Creator became stronger."*

From the statements of the participants, reliance on spirituality emerged as a salient theme, serving as a grounding force and method of coping for the participants. Many of the participants in this study had and expressed a positive association with spirituality and considered their spirituality as a resource that helped them cope with their uncertainties, adversities, hardships, and challenges.

DISCUSSION

The first theme covers the respondents' perceptions of the transcendent nature of a higher being in whom they believe. Regardless of faith system, all respondents expressed strong belief in the higher nature of God. According to Reed (2018), spirituality involves the personal view that there is something greater than oneself. The findings of the present study also have much in common with the findings of a study on Exploring Spirituality with Older People by[14] which showed that older adults expressed their connections in four dimensions: (1) people, (2) creativity, (3) something bigger than themselves or transcendence, and (4) their own inner being.

The differences on how they envisioned the Higher Being they believed in had something to do with their respective belief system. The Christian informants believe in the concept of one God in three divine persons (the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit). Meanwhile, the Muslim informants believe that there is only one God, that He does not have a son or a father. Finally, the Manobos believe that their God exists in everything in nature. Unlike the Christian and Muslim informants, they do not have Prophets or saints in their belief system, which is grounded on animism, while the two former religions share common roots as monotheistic Abrahamic religions. The participants' claim of having a personal connection or relationship with God is in line with various studies wherein spirituality was explained as having a connection with God or having a personal relationship with God (Albaugh, 2003; Reed, 2018).

The second theme covers the respondents' expression of spirituality with respect to how they relate with others. Sub-theme 1 (Family and religious role models as positive influences on spirituality) would show that the respondents consistently identify family members as their strongest influences with respect to spirituality. Aside from family members, respondents also identified religious role models, such as faith leaders or members in the community. Under sub-theme 2 (Spirituality as a positive influence on interpersonal relationships with others and within), respondents expressed how not only were they influenced as to their spirituality by others, but that their own spirituality also had a positive effect on their interpersonal relationships. Harvey (2007) indicated that interconnectedness is the core of spirituality.

As for the third theme focusing on the intrapersonal aspect of spirituality, much of the respondents' responses centered on how their faith enabled them to surmount and survive personal struggles in their lives. The findings in this study suggested that spirituality is a positive resource for coping with adversities, hardships, and challenges. This supports existing literature that have suggested that when individuals face adversities, hardships, challenges, or illness their spirituality allows them to make sense of their problems and cope[11]. These findings suggest that the participants found instrumental and vital support from their perceived connections with God. In other words, the participants in this study were relying on their spirituality as a source of support and strength. Additionally, the participants used prayer as a spiritual resource. It has been demonstrated that prayer as an expression connecting one to God is an essential part of most religions (Hood, et al., 1996). Various studies suggest that prayer is an individual and useful ritual in dealing with health crises, adversities, hardships, and associated stresses (Hood, et al., 1996; McCullough & Larson, 1999). The findings in this study support existing literature that has suggested that when individuals face adversities, hardships, challenges, or illness (their own or someone they are close to), they engage in a spiritual appraisal process as they make sense of stress using their spirituality (Park & Cohen, 1993).

CONCLUSION

All of the participants in this study claimed to have experienced different dimensions of spirituality, which include, but is not limited to the following: (a) experienced the transcendental nature of God in one's own life; (b) shared interpersonal spiritual connectedness with others; and (c) felt intrapersonal spiritual connection with their inner self.

The definition of spirituality emerged as being multifaceted in which each component interrelated with one another. The participants described a holistic approach in their relationship with God. They practiced their spirituality through religious rituals, such as praying and conversing with God. Their personal relationship with God was similar to their relationship with significant people in their lives. They spoke with God the way they would talk to a close friend when seeking advice and making decisions. In essence, God served as their confidante and parent. God provided the necessities of life and a loving soundboard when problems arose. It is

imperative to establish that the definition of spirituality, anchoring on the concept of connectedness, from various scholarly studies have reconciled with the participants' claims. It is the predisposition to create meaning through interrelatedness to dimensions, which transcend oneself in a way which empowers the individual. This relatedness is experienced interpersonally, through connectedness within oneself; interpersonally, through others and the natural environment; and transpersonal, through the unseen, God, or power greater than the self and ordinary source. The results of this study has practical implications especially with respect to the development of a meaningful ageing spiritual care plan.

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