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PREVIEW

**EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY
IN OLDER WOMEN**

by

Linda S. Foley

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Community

and Human Resources

Under the Supervision of Professor Shirley Waskel

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DISSERTATION TITLE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY

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BY

LINDA S. FOLEY

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

Shirley Waskel

12/5/97

Signature

Dr. Shirley Waskel

Typed Name

Prof. Josie Metal-Corbin

12/5/97

Signature

Professor Josie Metal-Corbin

Typed Name

Ann Coyne

12/5/97

Signature

Dr. Ann Coyne

Typed Name

Signature

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Signature

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Typed Name



GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY IN OLDER WOMEN

Linda S. Foley, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska, 1997

Adviser: Shirley Waskel

The spiritual domain or spirituality of the individual is an area that is currently being researched with increasing frequency. Spirituality is a multifaceted concept that appears to increase in importance with aging and is often defined as finding meaning in life. Research in the area of spirituality is lacking especially as it relates to older women. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe spirituality in the lives of older women and to examine the effects of age, marital status, health, religion and education on spirituality.

The design of this study was nonexperimental correlational. A convenience sample of 210 older women ranging in age from a reported 61 years to 102 years completed the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale and a demographic data sheet. The JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale is a 21- item tool that was developed to assess spiritual well-being in older adults.

Spirituality seems to be an important component in these women's lives, however, the results of this study did not demonstrate that spirituality increased as women got older. Women who were married had a higher significant mean total spirituality score than the women who were not married. In addition, women who

were healthy had higher factor spirituality scores. Surprisingly, women who attended college (54% of the sample) also had higher factor spirituality scores.

Successful aging as a goal for older women becomes very meaningful as the population continues to age. Considerable research needs to be conducted in order that new knowledge will be used to influence successful aging in the area of spirituality.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The continued aging of the population results in longer life expectancies for both men and women. In reality, these demographic shifts have resulted in the United States being referred to as an aging society. It is estimated that by the year 2030, those adults 65 years and older will exceed 21 percent of the total population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1993). In addition, by the year 2000, there will be 6.12 million more older women than men (Statistical Abstract, 1995).

Intrinsic to this aging population is the impetus for successful aging. Successful aging as a goal of older adults is a dynamic, continuous process requiring adaptation in the psychological, sociological, physiological and spiritual domains. The spiritual domain or spirituality of the individual is an area that is currently being theorized or researched with increasing frequency outside the theological realm.

Spirituality is often defined as finding meaning in life (Burkhardt, 1993; Emblen, 1992; Frankl, 1984; Hungelmann, Kenkel-Rossi, Klassen, & Stollenwerk, 1996). This construct is a broad, multidimensional, multifaceted, abstract term that lends itself to individual definition according to the lived experience.

Spirituality appears to increase in importance with the aging process leading to a heightened meaning in life and growth toward wholeness. Moberg (1971) maintains that the spiritual domain provides the greatest opportunity for growth in later years. Spirituality then becomes a tool which assists older adults in seeking the meaning of life and responding to stressful life events.

The Problem

Research in the realm of spirituality is lacking especially as it relates to older adults and specifically to older women. The literature does, however, discuss that spirituality is important in the lives of older adults (Atchley, 1995; Demerath, 1993; Haitt, 1986; Hungelmann, Kenkel-Ross, Klassen, & Stollenwerk, 1996; Missinne & Willeke-Kay, 1985; Moberg, 1984; Stoll, 1989). Research is essential in order that older women's experience of spirituality can be explored, described and understood further leading to successful aging.

Some writers contend that women may express and experience spirituality differently from men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982, Ochs, 1983). Research on aging and spirituality was initiated from the male perspective. Life span theorists have assumed that adult development research conducted on males can be generalized to women (Aden, 1976; Erikson, 1963;

Fowler, 1981). Research on women's developmental experiences reveal differences from the male models (Dobbie, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). Spiritual development and experience are often interconnected with issues of role changes and health and/or illness concerns. Therefore, conducting spiritual research independently related to older women would guide understanding of how older women develop and make sense of life and death issues leading to ultimate meaning in life (Vogel, 1995).

Spirituality is often used interchangeably with religion. The literature does not adequately address this issue. Spirituality should be seen as the essence of the individual, with religion as a part of that spirituality. Individuals can be spiritual and have no religion, however, those that are religious are generally also spiritual (Moberg, 1971). According to the White House Conference on Aging (1995), spirituality (separate from religion) is a fundamental component of old age dealing with making informed decisions, dependency, loss and death.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study is to explore and describe spirituality in the lives of older women and to examine the effects of age, marital status, health, religion and education on spirituality. The JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale was

administered to older women. According to Moberg (1984), O'Brien (1982), and Stoll (1989), spiritual well-being is an indicator of spiritual health. Spiritual well-being is associated with the mental, emotional, social and physical aspects of life and may include a transcendent component (Banks, 1980; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982; Stoll, 1989).

It is expected that the results of this study will add to the current knowledge base regarding spirituality, specifically related to older women. This research may begin to provide valuable information about differences in the spirituality of women and assist with a deeper understanding of spirituality from their perspective.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses will be investigated utilizing the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being scale and demographic information:

1. There will be a significant positive relationship between the total score of the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the age of older women.
2. There will be a significant positive relationship between scores of the three factors (Faith/Belief Dimension, Life/Self Responsibility and Life Satisfaction/Self-Actualization) of the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale and the age of older women.

3. There will be no significant relationship between the total and factor scores on the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale among older women and their marital status.

4. There will be a significant positive relationship between the total and factor scores on the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale among older women and their health.

5. There will be a significant positive relationship between the total and factor scores on the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale among older women and their religion.

6. There will be no significant relationship between the total and factor scores on the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being Scale among older women and their education.

Assumptions

The following assumptions will guide the research study:

1. Spirituality as a concept is different from religion and religiosity but may include religion and religiosity depending on an older adults' beliefs.
2. Spirituality is important in the lives of older women.
3. Spirituality is a path for finding greater self-understanding.

4. Spirituality is a unifying force, encompassing the physical, psychological and social dimensions of the human.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions applicable to this study are:

1. Adaptation to aging. Adjusting to the aging process with the outcome of satisfaction, independence and accomplishment of life issues.

2. Faith/Belief dimension. A factor of the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being scale that describes how one deals with purpose in life, life after death, belief in a Supreme Power, prayer and spiritual belief.

3. Life Satisfaction/Self-Actualization. A factor of the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being scale that describes how an individual has the ability to set life goals, receive and give love to others, appreciate differences in others and accept life's situations.

4. Life/Self-Responsibility. A reversed scored factor of the JAREL Spiritual Well-Being scale that reflects lack of belief in a Supreme Power, unforgiveness of others and inability of accept change in life or make decisions regarding one's life.

5. Meaning of Life. Choices made in relationship to the way one's life is lived (i.e.: values and morals).

6. Spirituality. The broad sense that gives meaning to one's life. According to Hungelmann, Kenkel-Rossi, Klassen, and Stollenwerk (1989), "spirituality is a sense of harmonious interconnectedness between self, others, nature and Ultimate Other which exists throughout and beyond time and space" (p. 394).

7. Spiritual Domain. Unifying force that integrates all other psychodynamic dimensions (i.e.: physiological, psychological and sociological) of the individual.

8. Spiritual Well-Being. The integrating aspect of human wholeness and spiritual wellness that is characterized by meaning and hope.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

As older adults struggle with issues related to meaning in life and death, spirituality or spiritual well-being becomes a meaningful concept to study. The literature on spirituality is actually quite vast; depending on the definition used, subjects and /or variables under study. The research literature, however, appears to be inadequate for a complete understanding of this concept related to older adults in general and older women specifically.

This review will discuss, critique and analyze the spirituality literature related to theoretical rationale, history, religion and religiosity, definitions, quantitative and qualitative spirituality research in general and those related specifically to older adults and women.

Theoretical Rationale

Spiritual growth occurs throughout the life course, generally following an uneven process, with individuals acquiring different stages or levels of spirituality depending on their lived meaning of life experiences (Farran, Fitchett, Quiring-Emblen, & Burck, 1989; Jung, 1966; Hiatt, 1986). Life experiences can be characterized as experiences or crises that are considered universal in nature such

as health, illness, birth, pain, suffering and death. These experiences or crises are the vehicles for spiritual development.

According to Jung (1966), the first half of life is devoted to acquiring ego-identity; whereas, the second half of life is devoted to the process of self-realization (individuation) leading to transcendence of the past and finding meaning in life. The spiritual domain as the unifying force that integrates and permeates all other domains (psychological, sociological, physiological) of the individual results in a human wholeness characterized by hope and meaning (Clark, Cross, Deane, & Lowry, 1991; Farran, et al., 1989).

As adults age, they may begin to discover new aspects of what life is about and seek to know its depths. The older adult is free to explore deeper, ultimate meanings from the many provisional meanings incurred throughout life, resulting in a deeper and unified spirituality (Missinne & Willeke-Kay, 1985). Seeking and finding meaning in life through spirituality appears to be a privilege of the older adult resulting in discovery of distinct paths leading toward deeper meanings and experience.