

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Different meanings of spirituality: A qualitative case study of older adults

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The study of spirituality in old age has been extensively explored in recent years in the field of gerontology, but there is still much debate over the concept itself. To understand it better, it is necessary to delve deeper into how the relationship manifests itself among older adults.

**Objective:** The goal of this study was to determine and analyze how older adults from various socio-demographic characteristics, economic backgrounds, and health status perceived spirituality.

**Methodology:** In using qualitative cross-case analysis in a sample of 12 older adults who were 60 years old and above from Lanao del Sur, Philippines, this study explored the similarities and differences across and between cases in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics, economic backgrounds, and health status of older adults.

**Results:** The findings revealed that one's spirituality is influenced by various factors and may take on different meanings depending on one's circumstances in life. The statements of the participants indicate that one's spirituality may be influenced by several factors such as, but not limited to, one's religion, sex, age, health status, financial condition, and educational attainment.

**Conclusion:** The research is significant because it is critical to comprehend the function of spirituality in the lives of older adults. It was suggested that families, the community, and faith-based institutions work together to analyze, plan, implement, and evaluate interventions for older adults. Exploring the different meanings of spirituality for older adults will improve spiritual nursing care as well as gerontological care. This contributes to the overall well-being of older adult patients.

**Keywords:** spirituality, older adults, Philippines, health status, religion

## Introduction

The concept of spirituality had been a subject of scrutiny in several studies [1]. Spirituality is a complex and nebulous concept that can be approached from a variety of angles. It is a subject that affects everyone in varying degrees. As such, it is a universal human experience, and its meaning may vary for different people.

Studies indicated that different groups of people have distinct perspectives on spirituality [2]. For example, spirituality was conceived by older adults principally as support, relationship with the sacred, and transcendence [3]. A personal relationship with God that extends beyond death, a source of strength, a common bond for women, and an essential component of health and well-being were also

characterized as components of spirituality by several women in another study [4]. Additionally, the educational background may likely give impact on how people view the world and form their perspectives. Most of the literature regarding the effects of education on spirituality is split between whether a positive correlation or negative correlation exists and there were also those who argued that there was no relationship whatsoever [5-7]. According to studies, the prevalence of spiritual commitment decreases as money rises, implying that when material circumstances improve, the perceived need for spiritual resources as a coping mechanism decreases [8]. These studies were examples of the many reports that explored the meaning of spirituality among different groups of people. However, there were very few studies that focused

on how older adults from different socio-demographic characteristics, economic backgrounds, and health status conceptualized spirituality. This study aimed to fill the gap in the body of knowledge by understanding how older adults with different circumstances understand the concept of spirituality and its importance in their lives.

## Methodology

### *Study Design*

Multiple case study research design served as the main methodology since the aim of this study was to explore the different personal meanings that older adults may hold as to their personal experiences of spirituality. A case study was an appropriate method to use to understand the complexity and uniqueness of a case within a particular context [9].

### *Participants*

This study used purposively selected 12 cases that were divided into the age, educational status, health status, financial condition, and sex of older adults to explore the personal meanings of spirituality among and between these cases utilizing the following parameters for the five classifications: (1) for the age category, this study utilized the UN cut-off of 60-79 years as 'old' and 80 years and older as 'oldest old'; (2) for educational status, older adults who had attained at least a college-level education were classified as 'highly educated' while those who only reached grade school or high school level were considered as having 'minimal formal education'; (3) for health status, older adults who were hospitalized at the time of the collection of data were classified as 'ill' while those not hospitalized at the time of the collection of data were considered 'not ill'; (4) for financial conditions, older adults who self-assessed themselves to be dependent on others for financial support were considered 'poor' while those who self-assessed themselves to be financially independent or self-sufficient were considered 'not poor'; (5) for sex, whether male or female. To have an adequate representation of each criterion, it was ensured that the participants were properly identified to equally represent each criterion. The objective was to ensure that the study was able to determine the significance of spirituality across different situations in the twelve cases.

### *Data Collection*

Potential participants who met the criteria were approached to discuss their possible interest in participating in the study. The participants were informed that their participation in the study

would entail answering prepared questions about their opinions and perceptions about spirituality which would last from 45 minutes to one hour and that there may be a need for subsequent interviews with them to clarify some issues that were not made clear. The location of the interviews was chosen to ensure the safety of both the informant and the researcher, as well as the informant's privacy by insulating them from being overheard by others. Given the vulnerability of older adults, the comfort of the informant was paramount in the venue selection for the interviews. To avoid bias and promote voluntary participation, the participants were assured that there would be no potential risks associated with the research and that there would be no incentives or rewards for participating.

All study participants were required to sign an informed consent form that included a cover letter and an information sheet outlining the study's details. The researcher or an interpreter explained the meaning and implications of the consent letter in a language that they can easily understand. The informed consent clearly stated that they were free to withdraw from the research or terminate the interview at any time should they feel uncomfortable to continue being part of the research.

### *Instrument*

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted using an interview guide prepared by the researcher. The questions were developed to suit the objective of the research. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study instrument, the researcher interviewed two older adults to fine-tune the interview guide. The interview was taped to ensure that the equipment was functioning properly. The participants' body language and nonverbal responses, as well as the manner in which the questions were asked, were studied. During the initial interview, the participants were confused by some terminology. The interview with the second older adult went well after minor changes and terms were simplified.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collected in this study were analyzed using approaches for case study analysis suggested by Stake and Yin [10]. Stake employs a combination of categorical aggregation and direct interpretation to comprehend the case's intricacies. Data analysis, according to Stake, is a continuous process of dissecting important study data to make sense of the pieces and how they interact. According to Stake, Direct interpretation of "individual examples" and "aggregate" of cases until something can be said about them as a class" are two major methodologies employed in case

study research to generate new meaning. The goal of these strategies is to be able to dissect data and reassemble it in a more meaningful way. Pattern matching, according to Yin, is one of the most ideal forms of analysis for case studies.

The twelve case studies of older adults were structured in such a way that the researcher's assertions were conveyed, but they were worded in a way that readers might infer naturalistic generalizations from them. A cross-case analysis that addressed the research questions posed was also presented.

*Ethical Consideration*

All procedures conducted in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of Cebu Normal University, as well as international and national standards. The appropriate approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Cebu Normal University before the researcher commenced the study.

**Results**

The data revealed that there were similarities and differences in how the participants conceptualized spirituality. The statements of the participants indicated that spirituality varies according to certain factors and that one's spirituality may be influenced by various circumstances such as, but not limited to, one's sex, age, health status, financial condition, and educational attainment. This implies that different people have different personal, interpersonal, as well as sociocultural circumstances, such that people would also have different meanings of spirituality.

**Table 1. Cross-case Analysis Summary**

Name	Religious Affiliation	Sex	Age	Age Classification	Health Status	Financial Condition	Educational Status
P1	Muslim	Male	71	Old	Not ill	Poor	Minimal formal education
P2	Manobo	Male	81	Oldest Old	Not ill	Poor	Minimal formal education
P3	Muslim	Male	80	Oldest Old	III	Not poor	Highly educated
P4	Catholic	Male	64	Old	III	Not poor	Highly educated
P5	Manobo	Male	82	Oldest Old	III	Poor	Minimal formal education
P6	Muslim	Male	67	Old	Not ill	Not poor	Highly educated
P7	Catholic	Female	80	Oldest Old	III	Not poor	Minimal formal education
P8	Muslim	Female	68	Old	III	Poor	Minimal formal education
P9	Catholic	Female	82	Oldest Old	Not ill	Poor	Highly educated
P10	Catholic	Female	61	Old	Not ill	Not poor	Highly educated
P11	Catholic	Female	72	Old	III	Not poor	Highly educated
P12	Manobo	Female	80	Oldest Old	Not ill	Poor	Minimal formal education

**Discussion**

*Themes Generated*

The themes in this study were developed to reflect the points at which older adults have spirituality-related experiences to create an overarching sense of spirituality in their lives. According to the participants' statements, a person's spirituality can be influenced by a variety of factors including religion, sex, age, health, financial situation, and educational attainment.

**Theme 1: The meaning of spirituality differs from person to person depending on religion.**

A common denominator among all the participants in this study was their personal experiences with God's transcendent nature, as evidenced by several of the informants' responses to the question of what spirituality means to them. Regardless of their religious affiliations, all the participants shared an unwavering belief in the existence of a higher power, a God to whom they pray and whom they believe is watching over them and guiding them in their daily lives. Spirituality, according to Reed [11], is the personal belief that there is something greater than oneself.

The difference, on the other hand, is in the ways they address the higher power they believe in. 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. Their differing perspectives on the Higher Being they believe in could be related to their respective belief systems.

P9, a female participant provided the following contemplative definition of what it means to be spiritual:

“To me, spirituality means an awareness of a higher being available to us in our lives. As a Christian of course, I believe the divine God is that Supreme Being.”

Meanwhile, the Muslim participants believe that spirituality is synonymous with their particular faith or religion, that to be spiritual is to practice Islam faithfully. P6, a Muslim male participant in the following statement provided a religious and Qur'anic verse of what is being spiritual in Islam:

“To be spiritual in Islam is to believe in the Qur'anic verse: 'La ilaha illallah, Mohammedan Rasul Allah,' which means there is no lord worthy of worship except Allah and Mohammad is the messenger of Allah.”

For the Manobo informants, their understanding of the transcendental nature of God seems to be more fluid than that of their Christian and Muslim counterparts. Although they have a name for the higher power, which they believe in (Mambabaja), they also believe that spirits exist in nature.

## **Theme 2: The meaning of spirituality differs from person to person depending on sex.**

Although for the participants in this study, expressing gratitude towards God was a commonality among all of them, however, the underlying reason for that gratitude and ways of conveying them may be different. There was an impression that the female participants expressed their gratitude towards God in a manner that was more all-encompassing compared to their male counterparts since they expressed their appreciation and gratitude to God for everything in their lives and they conveyed this gratitude in their daily living.

P1, a Christian female participant commented:

“My spirituality is what completes me, guides me, protects and provides me with what life could be and

must be with people, my environment, and me. It is thus my way of saying thank you for everything I have, be it happy or hard times.”

Meanwhile, a Muslim female participant, P8 said:

“I am always thankful to Allah for another day added to my life. I do not know when I will die, my days are numbered with all the ailments I have going on in my life and every day I wake up, I am thankful to my Creator.”

The female participants also expressed their gratitude for simply being alive, which showed the importance of this value in their expression of their spirituality. While the other female participants turned to prayer as an expression of their gratitude, believing that God answers all their prayers. It was observed that the women in this study expressed their gratitude to God in a manner that encompasses everything and was characterized as more fervent and frequent as compared to how the male participants expressed their gratitude.

In comparison, the male participants expressed their gratitude by giving offerings to God in the form of rituals for protecting them from evil spirits and blessing their harvests. Additionally, the male participants were more philosophical in their approach to spirituality whereas, the women dealt with spirituality on a more personal level. The male participants expressed their respect for God by being sensitive to the ethical principles of major religions. Their way of expressing their gratitude was through their actions toward the whole human race. They took an open-minded perspective on spirituality as connecting all members of human race regardless of religious denomination. In comparison, the women in this study expressed their gratitude in a more personal manner.

P6, a male Muslim participant provided a comprehensive definition of spirituality inclusive of the world's religious ethics:

“My personal view is that most religions agree on the basic essence of God and the relationship of man to God and to each other. Differences are minor and have to do with the form more than substance. I firmly believe that we can belong to any religion and still be spiritual. For me, I express my respect to Allah (SWT) by being sensitive to these ethical principles of our major religions, endeavoring to live my life in accordance with them.”

Most current researches indicate that women tend to be more spiritual or religious than men. A study conducted by the

Pew Research Center in 2010 determined that more women have absolute belief in God compared to men (69% vs. 57%); more men reported that they do not believe in God compared to women (12% vs. 6%); and more women considered religion or spirituality as important in their lives compared to men (59% vs. 47%). Buchko revealed that females, to a greater extent than men, have experienced a strong spiritual relational component to their religious faiths [12].

Identifying the statistical disparity of sex when it comes to spirituality was the least focus of empirical research; however, the conspicuous level of religious differences between females and males have been more readily documented across different life spans. However, there are other possible causes for this phenomenon. Rich investigated the relationship between sex and spirituality, and the results back up this theory, as there was essentially no difference in the spirituality test scores between men and women. The findings revealed that rather than women being more spiritual than men, there is a difference in how men and women display their spirituality [13], which was consistent with this study's findings.

### **Theme 3: The meaning of spirituality differs from person to person depending on age.**

As to the findings on how age might influence one's spirituality, the participants' statements would support the hypothesis that perceived spirituality increases with age as some of the participants mentioned being more spiritual now in their old age compared to when they were younger.

For example, P3, an 80-year-old, male Muslim participant said:

“Now that I am old, I try to go to the mosque five times a day to pray to thank Allah. I am already very old, and I know the angel of death is coming for me soon so even if it is very difficult, I still pray because it is the only way for me to be saved from going to hell.”

In light of the fact that increasing age and frailty render older adults more vulnerable to death and illness, there is a potential for them to consciously experience a fear of death and sickness. Some of the participants experienced being ill and the inevitability of death approaching but because of their perceived connection to God, they were able to come to terms with their illness and their inevitable death as they age. Additionally, those who were categorized, as 'oldest old' also seemed to be more accepting and at peace compared to those categorized as 'old', which may also lend credence to the assumption that as you grow older, you become more spiritual.

Some of the statements from the participants also supported the assumption that cultural or religious differences influence how age might affect spirituality. For example, some of the Christian and Manobo participants admitted that they were not initially spiritual in their youth but became spiritual later in life, through a variety of influences.

P10, a 61-year-old, female Christian participant stated:

“I was not really a very spiritual person in my youth but because of the things that have happened in my life, I became more spiritual now as I grow older.”

Similarly, P5, an 82-year old, Manonobo male participant stated:

“As I grow older, my body deteriorates and I start to feel the natural sicknesses of old age. Like most people, I ask Mambabaja to give me a longer life. But more importantly, I pray that I will not suffer unduly as I grow older. At my age, I celebrate every morning that Mambabaja gives me and thank him for how my life has turned out.”

Meanwhile, for the Muslim participants, it was constantly repeated that they had a strict religious upbringing from the beginning, which implies that their level of spirituality did not increase as drastically as their Christian and Manobo counterparts as they grew older. However, the Muslim participants still stated that they had a deeper spirituality now in their old age, as they were more aware that they can die at any time and would want to meet their Maker with more good deeds rather than bad deeds.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the Christian and Manobo participants' spirituality surged as they grew older to fill the gap of spirituality that they were not able to experience when they were still young. The Muslim participants' strict religious upbringing from a very young age until they grew older supported the contention being raised regarding the effect of age on spirituality. Researchers have argued that the natural process of aging, with the consciousness that life will eventually end, creates a context where older adults can become more self-accepting and free to subjecting the mind, body, or spirit to a deeper sense of knowing [14].

The results in this study as to how age might influence perceived spirituality coincided with that of the findings in other studies. Various studies showed that spiritual capacity gradually increases among many aging individuals, especially with regard to self-acceptance and perceptions of one's life having meaning [1,14,15].

In addition, a longitudinal study conducted by the World Values Survey and European Values Study in 2015 concluded that people around the world became more religious/spiritual as they aged, with 726,977 respondents ranging in age from 12 to 104 years old, representing 80 countries, and conducted over 33 years [15]. When the researchers did cross-cultural comparisons, however, an interesting trend appeared. In comparison to Southeast Asia, the Islamic world, and even hardly present in Africa, the age impact was notably noticeable in Western countries, Latin America, and Confucian countries [16]. But these tendencies challenged statements made by psychological theories of aging and religiosity/spirituality, because it is unclear whether late-life identity crises and fear of mortality are relative rather than universal human experiences. Another factor that might be overlooked especially in the Islamic world was that they might have reached the peak of their spirituality at a young age and even before they become very old.

#### **Theme 4: The meaning of spirituality differs from person to person depending on the health status.**

Some of the statements from the participants supported the assumption that the health status of an individual would influence one's spirituality, at least as to how suffering and trials were catalysts for greater spirituality. A commonality among all the participants who were categorized as being 'ill' was that they considered their illnesses as reasons why their spirituality increased, although there were differing approaches.

P8, a 68-year-old female Muslim participant stated:

“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.”

P3, an 80-year-old, male Muslim participant stated:

“My belief is that the only One who can cure my sickness is my Creator because He created all sickness, therefore He also created the cure to all diseases. These doctors are just instruments of Allah to cure diseases through the knowledge given to them by Allah.”

Meanwhile, for some of the participants, such ailments were considered blessings in disguise because the trials they had undergone paved the way for them to get closer to God.

An 80-year-old female Christian participant, P7 stated:

“Everything that happens to me including the fact that I am now hospitalized and everything that that will happen in my life is God's will. I am asking Him to guide and heal me.”

Similarly, P3, an 80-year-old male Muslim participant revealed:

“Now that I am old and sick, I feel that this is a blessing in disguise from Allah since I can pray to Allah and repent.”

Some studies also suggest that the relationship between religion/spirituality and physical health may be causal. It can be inferred that spirituality and religion may reduce the likelihood of certain diseases as claimed by Creswell [17] while the study of Seeman & Seeman [18] specified that spirituality and religion can bring emotional stability and better lifestyle and may indirectly protect a person against cardiovascular disease and sickness.

#### **Theme 5: The meaning of spirituality does not differ greatly from person to person based on financial condition.**

With regards to the financial condition, the findings in this study would show that there were hardly any substantial differences between those categorized as 'poor' and 'not poor' with respect to their level of spirituality. Even those who were comparatively better off in life were still very spiritual and considered their financial income as part of the blessings of God that they should be thankful for. Meanwhile, those who considered themselves in the 'poor' category were also spiritual because they were still grateful for what they have. They were thankful for having good health, as they had no illness. Thus, it would seem that the difference lies in their meaning of spirituality. Although both groups have expressed strong faith, the meaning of that faith differed between both groups.

Those categorized as 'not poor' considered their faith as the cause of their many blessings and were grateful.

P7, an 80-year Christian female participant who was hospitalized at the time of the interview and was categorized as being 'not poor' stated:

“I am always grateful to God, and I express this gratitude through prayers because I personally believe that He always answers my prayers in the best way for me. When I am sad, I pray to Him for comfort. When I have a problem, I pray to Him for guidance, wisdom, and discernment. When I am happy, I pray to Him to give thanks. When I have a big problem like being hospitalized, I know that I have a bigger God.”

In comparison, although those who were categorized as

'poor' were also grateful, they seemed to lean more on their faith as a source of succor compared to their counterparts.

This may be because, relatively, they faced more hardships in life. P8, a 68-year-old female Muslim participant who was also hospitalized at the time of the interview but was categorized as being 'poor' said:

"I am always thankful to Allah for another day added to my life. I do not know when I will die, my days are numbered with all the ailments I have going on in my life and every day I wake up, I am thankful to my Creator. I pray a lot for my health and for Allah to make me healthy again so that I can devote my life to expressing my gratitude to Allah through prayers."

Therefore, it seemed that the difference lies in the different meanings that the participants may hold as to their varied experiences of spirituality. Although both participants who had different financial conditions expressed strong faith, the meaning of that faith differed between them, with those in the lower income group relying more on their faith as a vital support. This may be because, relatively, they faced more hardships in life. As a result, the findings of this study can be attributed to cultural and social factors, as Asian countries are less materialistic than Western societies [19]. It also implies that there are other factors that have a greater impact on one's spirituality, with a focus on social relationships or interconnectedness.

#### **Theme 6: The meaning of spirituality does not differ greatly from person to person based on educational attainment.**

The findings for educational attainment in this study mirrored that of the findings for financial condition. Based on the findings, there seemed to be little difference in the level of spirituality if based on the educational attainment of the participants. This meant that whether the participants were highly educated or with minimal formal education, had little bearing on their faith or spirituality.

However, there were observed differences in how the participants articulated the meaning of spirituality. Those categorized as 'highly educated' seemed to be more articulate in expressing the different dimensions of their spirituality and what their faith means to them compared to those considered as having 'minimal formal education'.

P6, a male Muslim participant who was categorized as 'highly educated' stated:

"Outwardly, I am not a religious type. I keep my spirituality to myself. After all, only God can judge me in the hereafter."

In comparison P12, a female Manobo participant who was considered as having 'minimal formal education' stated:

"We lit a candle in a quiet corner of our house where we communicate with the spirits. We also have rituals where we offer pork or chicken as well and we also call on the spirits to guide us, be sorry, or say thank you."

For educational attainment, the findings in this study are different from the finding in the study conducted by Pew Research Center [20], which revealed that 66% of the participants in the study believed in God among those who finished high school, 57% for those in college, and 52% for those who have attained postgraduate degrees. As for the importance of religion/spirituality in their life, it was 58% for high school levels, 47% for college, and 46% for postgraduate level. This would seem to indicate that people with higher educational attainment tend to be less spiritual than those who had lower education levels.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal that spirituality can take on various meanings and expressions depending on one's life circumstances. Based on their belief systems, Muslim, Christian, and Manobo respondents all have different perspectives on how they define a Higher Being. The results suggest that women and men differ in expressing their spirituality. Although expressing gratitude to God was a commonality among all the participants, women expressed their spirituality in a more all-encompassing manner than men. The findings of this study in terms of how age influences spiritual capacity show that spiritual capacity gradually increases among many elderly people, particularly in terms of self-acceptance and perceptions of meaning in one's life. An individual's health status also influences their spirituality, at least in terms of how suffering and trials serve as catalysts for greater spirituality.

Furthermore, there were no significant differences in spirituality between those classified as "poor" and those classified as "not poor," which could be due to cultural and social factors, implying that other factors, rather than materialism, have a greater impact on one's spirituality. Similarly, the educational attainment of older adults in the study has little bearing on their faith.

Despite the differences in sociocultural circumstances that result in different meanings of spirituality, there is a commonality in how spirituality serves as a source of strength in their transformative experience. Whether caused by an

external event or internal factors such as physical limitations and ailments, older adults dealt with their difficulties with dignity through their spirituality.

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