

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WHY MALAY ELDERLY FEMALE FREQUENTLY ENGAGED IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES DURING LEISURE?: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH IN SELANGOR

Minhat HS

Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UPM, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

Diversified leisure involvement pose various health benefits to the elderly population. However, some elderly are too focus on doing a particular type of activity during their leisure time such as religious activity. This study aims to explore factors that could possibly contribute to the higher involvement in religious activity among the Malay ethnic elderly in Malaysia. In depth interviews were conducted, involving a total of 20 elderly aged 60 years and above with stratification by background characteristics. Each interview was conducted for an average of 15 to 30 minutes. They were purposively selected from two health clinics located in two different districts in the state of Selangor, representing an urban and a rural area. Majority of the elderly interviewed perceived that by engaging in religious activities such as prayer and reciting the Holy Quran or old Islamic scripture gives them serenity or calmness. Additionally, they also felt that involvement in such activities is very synonymous with being old and therefore one should be actively involved in religious activities with increasing age. In view of the lack of diversity of leisure involvement among the elderly and the passive and solitary nature of some of the religious activities, the elderly should be made aware of the importance of participating in other types of leisure activities especially physical activities. Although, they gain spiritual and social benefits from involving in religious activities, they also need to perform other form of activities that can improve the physical health status.

Keywords: Religious activity, leisure, Malay, Elderly

INTRODUCTION

Leisure participation has been found to be beneficial for improving quality of life and in the development of successful aging society. Leisure has been conceptualized and measured in a number of ways¹. It involves the discretionary use of time² and purposive behavior designed for self enhancement. Whereby leisure activities refer to any activities other than the obligations of work, family and society, to which the individual turns at will, for either relaxation, diversion or broadening his knowledge and his spontaneous social participation³.

Suitable activities are especially important for elderly to help them adapt with the life changes related to ageing process. Studies have shown that the practice of religious activity improves health and increases longevity⁴. A growing body of literature has documented the salutary effects of religious involvement on various health outcomes⁵. Specifically, compared with individuals who attend religious functions less frequently, individuals who often attend religious services have

lower levels of functional disability⁶, lower prevalence of hypertension⁷, and better functional recovery following an acute myocardial infarction⁸.

Participation in religious activity by older adults has also been linked to increased subjective well-being, decreased depression, higher life-satisfaction and self-esteem, better perceived health, and less suicidal ideation and emotional distress^{9, 10}. According to Lawler-Row & Elliott¹¹, spiritual wellbeing and prayer contributed to the prediction of psychological wellbeing, subjective well-being, physical symptoms and depression, even when the contributions of age, gender, healthy behaviors and social support were included. Previous studies have also linked higher religious attendance and longer survival in which older adults who participated in religious activity before the onset of activity of daily living (ADL) impairment appear to have a survival advantage over those who do not¹². However, the causal directions of these temporal relationships, however, are not fully understood.

Religiosity and spirituality seem uniquely able to promote purpose, value, and meaningfulness for older adults, by providing them with an overarching interpretive scheme for making sense of their lives and a place to meet regularly with like-minded persons^{13, 14}. The literature suggests that religion may enhance various aspects of well-being in at least four ways; 1) through social integration and support; 2) through the establishment of personal relationships with a divine other; 3) through the provision of systems of meaning and existential coherence and 4) through the promotion of more specific patterns of religious organization and personal lifestyle¹⁵.

With the growing number of elderly women and the feminization of ageing phenomenon, it is important to understand their health issues and factors that can improve their health and quality of life. Despite their large numbers, aging women have not been the focus of much geriatric research¹⁶. In the Western society, women past their childbearing years are often subjected to double discrimination as women and as older persons¹⁶. Being the main religion and ethnic in Malaysia, the Malay elderly who are commonly Muslims are often involved in religious activities. A study conducted by Zainab et al.¹⁷ reported that majority of the older persons in Malaysia were involved in certain religious activities. This study aims to explore the reason behind the higher participation rate into religious activities among the elderly women.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 20 elderly aged 60 years and above were involved in this study. Respondents were selected using the snow-balling technique among elderly women living in the different districts in Selangor. The first respondent was recommended by an elderly who was previously involved in another research conducted by the researcher which also

involved elderly in Selangor. They were chosen based on their willingness to participate in the study and residing in Selangor at the time of data collection.

Eight of the respondents were living in the rural locality, whereas twelve from the urban area. Of all the respondents involved, only three of them were Chinese and one Indian, which were all from the urban area. An in-depth interview was conducted with each respondent, exploring on the pattern of their leisure involvement and constraints faced by them in order to pursue certain types of activities. Each respondent was interviewed for the duration of 15 to 30 minutes. The respondents were initially asked with regard to their leisure participation in general. The higher involvement in religious activities was reflected by their involvement in activities other than the mandatory religious activities such as the five times daily prayer for the Muslims. These female elderly were further interviewed in depth related to the issues being explored. Of the total of 20 elderly interviewed, 15 were found to actively involve in religious activities, which was dominated by ethnic Malay elderly.

The interviews were conducted in a room without any interruption from other people. Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim following each interview and field notes of reflexive observations were recorded in a research diary. Transcripts were analyzed using standard methods of qualitative thematic analysis. The material was read through several times and then coded. The codes were further collapsed into key themes related to constraints or barriers of leisure, allowing construction of an exploratory theoretical framework. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Medical Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Putra Malaysia prior to data collection.

RESULTS

Three themes were identified from the content of the in-depth interviews and these are sense of serenity or calmness, religious activity is synonymous with being old and as a method of socializing.

Sense of serenity or calmness

Almost half of the respondents involved in this study stated that they were actively involved in religious activities during their free time, especially reciting the Holy Quran after performing the routine the five times a day daily prayers. They could spend up to two hours reciting the Holy Quran before or after each prayer. A 60 year old respondent stated that she intentionally limits her involvement in other activities in order to focus on reciting the Holy Quran as many as possible in a day. When asked why she did that, this was her explanation,

'When I was young, I was busy working, doing the daily chores, looking after children... There was very little time to even recite a page of Quran in a day. Sometimes, I feel uneasy and not calm. But now, since my late husband passed away few years back, I spent more time reciting the Holy Quran and I am more relaxed and calmer'.

The sense of calmness or serenity was not only linked to solitary activities such as praying or reciting the Holy Quran on their own, but also by teaching others to recite the Holy Quran. According to one of the respondents who was a 71 year old elderly, she has been actively teaching others to recite the Holy Quran since 3 years ago. She purposively attended special courses and received certificate of eligibility in order for her to be able to teach others correctly. Interestingly, although actively teaching others, she was still able to exercise almost every morning. This was what she commented on her involvement in that activity,

'I have always been an active person. I will not just sit down without doing anything beneficial. Since I started teaching other elderly to recite Quran correctly, I feel very happy and relaxed and I did not do it for money... Once I've finished teaching them, sometimes I'll continue reciting the Holy Quran on my own. It gives you calmness that you will never get from doing other activities...But actively involved in this type of activity does not stop me from exercising. I still go for my morning walk every morning and read the newspaper after that....'.

Religious activity is synonymous with being old

Some of the respondents also felt that reading other types of materials such as newspaper, magazines and books were less important compared to reciting the Holy Quran. Madam A, who was only 61 year-old stated that,

'Sometimes I feel reading the newspaper is not important. What important is reciting the Holy Quran or Yassin...why not, we are getting old...Elderly people like me should concentrate more on reciting the Holy Quran'.

Another elderly who was 68 years old stated that,

'I am an old lady... what else to think about at this age. It is only between us and Allah. Most of the time, I'll recite the Holy Quran. Sometimes, reading the old Islamic scripture left by my late mother and father... '.

Similarly, another 71 year old elderly commented that,

'I am done with other activities. I have done it all when I was young. I

feel like just resting, praying and reciting the Quran at this age....'.

A method of socializing

Although majority of the respondents focussing on a solitary type of religious activities, few of them were also involved in religious activity that can be performed in group, such as 'marhaban' and also informal classes on how to recite the Holy Quran. Such activities became an access for them to socialize and also to share any ideas and problems. According to a 61 year-old lady, the excitement and enjoyment meeting with her friends during the reciting classes motivated her to continue attending the classes in the evening despite had to look after her grandchildren during the day:

'I had so much fun meeting up with friends during the classes....sharing stories and ideas...less stressful'.

Another respondent who was a 61 year old lady stated that, other than she was able to recite the Holy Quran correctly, she also able to meet others by attending the informal Quran recitation class which was conducted at nearby *surau* or mosque. This was what she said,

'I am leaving in an apartment with my children since my husband passed away. This area is full of youngsters....by going to the recitation class, I can meet others of my age... able to meet new friends'.

DISCUSSION

A person's religious or spiritual commitment may be able to provide a sense of meaning for suffering and loss, particularly at the end of life. According to Yeung and Chan¹⁸, religiousness can promote various resources, including spiritual, cognitive, psychological and social resources. Spiritual resources could be something particular to religious involvement¹⁸. Religious people

are assumed to be less afraid of death because they often believe that they will be rewarded for their religious behaviour in the afterlife¹⁹. Positive associations between religion and happiness, feelings of usefulness and adjustment had been reported increased with age²⁰. Although involvement in religious activities correlated with improved physical and mental health, experts cannot determine whether religion contributes to health or whether psychologically or physically healthier people are attracted to religious groups²¹.

There have been a large number of studies exploring the daily life of older people in recent years, especially their involvement in leisure activities. The elderly people were also said to be very selective in the choices of leisure activities they want to involve. Recent research revealed that people become more religious and actively engaged in religious activity when they are getting older. There is evidence that the role of religion in an individual's life increases in importance with age and is associated with a number of physical and psychological benefits¹⁹.

In a comparative study conducted among elderly aged 60 years and older in Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan and Singapore reported that, various forms of religious activity were reported by over 90% of the elderly in Philippines and Thailand, equalling or exceeding radio or television involvement, while two-thirds of respondents in Singapore and one-thirds in Taiwan indicate religious activities¹.

One potential reason that religion increases in importance in old age and is associated with so many positive outcomes might be that as individual approach the end of the life course, they begin to seek a deeper, more existential meaning for their lives, their losses, and the challenges of the dying process, which most religious systems are able to provide²².

In comparison with young people, older people think that religion is more important for them, especially for those who are toward the end of life^{23, 24}. Whichever explanations are more salient in depicting the relationship, religious involvement is obviously a critical factor for older people to cope better and have better social and psychological adjustments while facing the debilitating process of aging¹⁸.

The elderly also reported to feel more relaxed and calm by involving in religious activities. The association between religious activity and the sense of serenity or calmness has been indirectly reported in many studies, especially in relation to mental health. Over the past two decades, a lot of studies have uncovered a strong positive association between religiousness and mental health¹⁸.

The inverse association between the elderly religious involvement and depression was concluded in two different studies conducted by Braam and his colleagues among the older Dutch citizens^{25,26}. This association has extended across various populations, especially among the physically vulnerable populations. Interestingly, this study found that the effect of religious activities on the spiritual aspects of the elderly was also reported among the physically healthy elderly populations.

Religious activities can also act as a method of socializing. This is commonly associated with religious activities which are performed in groups or in the public, including prayers that are conducted in mosque or surau, involving in marhaban group, informal Quran recitation classes and also public religious talk. Religious beliefs and practices often foster the development of community and broad social support networks²¹.

This is because every aspect of our life and all other agents are based on religion. Mosque and other places of

worship are the organizational embodiments of the institution of religion and also one of the primary venues for religious socialization. However, there is mutual association between social network and religious activity. Greater supportive social network will further enhance people's religious involvement and in turn reinforce their spiritual resources¹⁸. It is because people with greater sense of belonging and having close relationships in the faith community will be more willing to conform and follow the religious values, norms, teachings and traditions¹⁸.

Although the findings of the study provide a new knowledge on the importance of religious activities from the elderly female perspectives, the information gained were mainly concentrated among the Malay ethnic elderly. Other contributing factors may be obtained if more elderly from other ethnic groups were involved.

CONCLUSION

To a certain extend the findings from this study provide a local view on the factors that contribute to the high level of involvement in religious activities among the female elderly in Malaysia. Knowing the spiritual and social benefits that can be gained from participating in such activities, elderly should not be constrained from actively involved in religious activities, but to encourage them to specifically involve in the sociable religious activities. At the same time, they should also be encouraged to diversify their leisure participation.

Acknowledgement

I would also like to acknowledge and thanks the PPPKAM (Persatuan Pakar Perubatan Kesihatan Awam Malaysia) for awarding me the grant to conduct this study.

REFERENCES

1. Hermalin AI. The well-being of the elderly in Asia: A four-country comparative study, 2003. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
2. Kelly JR. Leisure, 1982. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.
3. Dumazedier J. Towards a Society of Leisure, 1967. New York: Free Press.
4. Deem R. Scientific Studies that Show a Positive Effect of Religion on Health, 2006. Available from: <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/religionhealth.html> (accessed 2 May 2013)
5. Corsentino EA, Collins N, Sachs-Ericsson N, Blazer DG. Religious Attendance Reduces Cognitive Decline Among Older Women With High Levels of Depressive Symptoms. *J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci*. 2009; **64A**(12): 1283-1289.
6. Idler E, Kasl SV. Religion among disabled and nondisabled persons II: attendance at religious services as a predictor of the course of disability. *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci*. 1997; **52B**(6):S306-S316.
7. Gillum R, Ingram DD. Frequency of attendance at religious services, hypertension, and blood pressure: the Third Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. *Psychosom Med*. 2006; **68**:382-385.
8. Martin KR, Levy BR. Opposing trends of religious attendance and religiosity in predicting elders' functional recovery after an acute myocardial infarction. *J Relig Health* 2006; **45**(3):440-451.
9. Barkan SE, Greenwood SF. Religious attendance and subjective well-being among older Americans: evidence from the general social survey. *Rev Relig Res* 2003, **45**(2):116-129.
10. Chen H, Cheal K, McDonel Herr EC, Zubritsky C, Levkoff SE. Religious participation as a predictor of mental health status and treatment outcomes in older persons. *Int J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2007; **22**(2):144-153.
11. Lawler-Row KA, Elliott J. 2009. The Role of Religious Activity and Spirituality in the Health and Well-being of Older Adults. *Journal of Health Psychology* 2009; **14**(1): 43-52. DOI: 10.1177/1359105308097944
12. Helm HM, Hays JC, Flint EP, Koenig HG, Blazer DG. Does private religious activity prolong survival? A six-year follow-up study of 3,851 older adults. *J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci* 2000; **55**(7):M400-5.
13. Ellison CG, Gay DA, Glass TA. Does religious commitment contribute to individual life satisfaction?. *Social Forces* 1989; **68**:100-123.
14. Petersen LR, Roy A. Religiosity, anxiety, and meaning and purpose: Religion's consequences for psychological well-being. *Review of Religious Research* 1985; **27**: 49-62.
15. Ellison CG. Religious involvement and subjective well-being. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior* 1991; **32**: 80-99
16. Neill CM, Kahn AS. The Role of Personal Spirituality and Religious Social Activity on the Life Satisfaction of Older Widowed Women. *Sex Roles* 1999; **40**(314): 319-330

17. Zainab I, Wan Ibrahim WA, Elmi B. Religious participations among the older persons in Malaysia. *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 2012; **6**(3): 388-391
18. Yeung WJ, Chan Y. The positive effects of religiousness on mental health in physically vulnerable populations: A review on recent empirical studies and related theories. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation* 2007; **11**(2): 37-52
19. Ardel M, Koenig CS. The role of religion for hospice patients and relatively healthy older adults. *Research on Aging* 2006; **28**(2): 184-215
20. Blazer D, Palmore E. Religion and Aging in a Longitudinal Panel. *The Gerontologist* 1976; **16**:82-85.
21. Berkman BJ, Kaplan DB. 2012. Religion and Spirituality in the Elderly, 2012. Available from: http://www.merckmanuals.com/professional/geriatrics/social_issues_in_the_elderly/religion_and_spirituality_in_the_elderly.html (accessed 2 May 2013)
22. Berger P. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 1969. New York: Doubleday.
23. Koenig HG, George LK, Titus P. Religion, spirituality, and health in medically ill hospitalized older patients. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 2004; **52**(4): 554-562.
24. Moreira-Almeida A, Neto FL, Koenig HG. Religiousness and mental health: A review. *Revista Brasileira De Psiquiatria* 2006; **28**(3): 242-250.
25. Braam AW, Van Tilburg TG, Deeg DJ, Van Tilburg W. Religious involvement and depression in older Dutch citizens. *Social Psychiatry Epidemiology* 1997; **32**: 284-291.
26. Braam AW, Hein E, Deeg DJ, Twisk JW, Beekman AT, Van Tilburg W. Religious involvement and 6-year course of depressive symptoms in older Dutch Citizens: Results from the longitudinal aging study Amsterdam. *Journal of Aging and Health* 2004; **16**(4): 467-489.