THE MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY TO OLDER WOMEN
IN ASSISTED LIVING COMMUNITIES

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The Meaning of Spirituality to Older Women in Assisted Living Communities

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Abstract

Gerontological research in the field of spirituality has been complicated due to difficulties in defining the term “spirituality.” Because spirituality gives credence to evidence that is intangible, spirituality is also difficult to measure. For these reasons, additional research needs to be undertaken to explore the interactions between spirituality, adult development, and aging. Furthermore, there is a great need for research on the topic of spirituality as it relates specifically to women, because much of the previous research on spirituality was conducted by male researchers on male participants. Based on in-depth interviews of eleven older women residing in two assisted living communities, this qualitative study has examined the meaning and importance of spirituality to these older women. The following themes emerged from the data: (a) comparing and contrasting spirituality and religion, (b) using spirituality as a coping mechanism, (c) developing and nurturing spirituality, and (d) sharing spiritual beliefs.

KEYWORDS: women, aging, spirituality, coping
The Meaning of Spirituality to Older Women in Assisted Living Communities

Although spirituality has become a popular topic within the last thirty years, gerontological research has been complicated in this area, due to difficulties in defining the term “spirituality” (Atchley, 2008). Atchley defines spirituality as “an inner, subjective region of life that revolves around individual experiences of being, transcending the personal self, and connecting with the sacred” (p. 12). Individuals describing their spiritual experiences often refer to the qualities of wonder, compassion, clarity, stillness, silence, or expansiveness (Atchley, 2008).

According to many older individuals, their faith and spiritual beliefs are their most important support mechanisms for coping with the many physical, mental and social challenges of growing older (McFadden & Kozberg, 2008). Coping mechanisms vary greatly from individual to individual, prompting researchers to study who copes best and why they do so. Answering these questions of coping through reliance on spiritual beliefs can greatly aid in prevention and treatment of emotional illness in older adults (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999).

“Positive” spiritual beliefs have also been correlated with successful aging (Crowther, Parker, Achenbaum, Larimore, & Koenig, 2002). Crowther and colleagues coined the term “positive spirituality”, and defined it as follows:

Positive spirituality involves a developing and internalized personal relation with the sacred or transcendent that is not bound by race, ethnicity, economics, or class and promotes the wellness and welfare of self and others. Positive spirituality uses aspects of both religion and spirituality (p. 614).

The concept of positive spirituality is important enough to be considered the fourth factor in Rowe and Kahn’s (1997) model of successful aging, which also includes the following
factors: engaging in active life, minimizing risk and disability, and maximizing physical and mental abilities.

Gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) is based on continued spiritual growth in older adults, and is a prominent theory explaining spirituality and aging. According to this theory, as middle-aged and older adults gradually and steadily increase their spiritual development, they readjust their priorities. A materialistic, role-oriented life philosophy is eventually replaced by a transcendent, spiritual perspective when adults reach late old age. In addition, when older adults reach the mature stage of gerotranscendence described as the social selectivity dimension, they make thoughtful choices regarding how best to spend their time on relationships and activities that will be the most meaningful to them. Therefore, relationships with close friends and family are strengthened, while the importance of relating to casual friends and strangers is lessened.

Early research on the topic of aging and spirituality related specifically to men, and was conducted by male researchers. As an affirmation of this statement, in 1996, Learn noted, “Rare indeed is the study that focuses on both older women and their experiences of spirituality,” (p. xv, preface). According to feminist scholars Miller (1986) and Gilligan (1982) (both cited in Learn, 1996), male-generated developmental models are not useful in addressing women's real life experiences. Therefore, results obtained from male researchers studying male participants cannot be generalized to females. In recent years, additional research has been conducted regarding older women and spirituality.

Women seem to use their spirituality as a coping mechanism more so than do men. Studying health-related quality of life after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Gulf coast, researchers found that middle-aged and older women relied more heavily on religious coping skills than did their male counterparts (Brown, Cherry, Marks, Jackson, Volaufova, Lefante et al., 2010). Researchers examining perceptions of aging among older, rural, mid-
western women found that these women identified religion/spirituality as one of four main contributors to successful aging (Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum, & Bello, 2008). A study examining the relationship of women’s spiritual beliefs to successful aging concluded that spirituality serves as a great coping mechanism when dealing with various stressors in the women’s lives. The researchers determined that coping with circumstances through reliance on spirituality was possibly more prevalent in women with low socioeconomic status than in women with higher socioeconomic status (Vahia, Depp, Palmer, Fellows, Golshan, Thompson et al., 2011).

In another study, 14 women aged 60-89 who described themselves as either spiritual and religious or spiritual only, were interviewed in depth to determine their views on successful aging and whether they felt their spiritual beliefs were an important factor in successful aging (Mortimer, Ward, & Winefield, 2008). The researchers concluded that spiritual and religious affiliations were a source of support and well-being to the older women in this study. They also suggested that this research is deserving of further study involving a wider population (Mortimer et al., 2008).

Another phenomenological study examined spirituality and physical health through interviewing ten women aged 65 and older who resided in a rural senior high-rise apartment building (Knestrick & Lohri-Posey, 2005). The researchers found that spirituality, as described by the participants in their study, is a crucial part of an individual and is instrumental in that person’s ability to cope with life’s situations and handle grief. They concluded, “The concept of spirituality should be included in educational programs to promote an understanding of the needs of older women” (Knestrick & Lohri-Posey, 2005, p. 49).

Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) wrote the book, Spiritual Resiliency in Older Women, to describe in great detail the interviews they conducted with eight women whom they
considered to be spiritually resilient. They defined spirituality as “a lived experience that includes attitudes, beliefs and practices that animate (give spirit to) people’s lives” (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999, p. 6); and resiliency as “an ability not only to cope with traumatic difficulties but also to respond with flexibility under the pressures of everyday life” (Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999, p. 6). They felt their research was important because the voices of older women have been ignored in the women’s movement. Three themes, related to spirituality, which they referred to as experiential elements, were identified from their data: community, affect, and close interpersonal relationships.

In a study examining the meaning of aging in women’s lives, Covan (2005), with the help of student researchers, interviewed over 300 women in their 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s. They found that most interviewees in their 80’s believed participation in activities related to their religious institution was an integral part of their lives. Women in their 90’s rated involvement in activities of their religious institution second only to involvement in family life.

In conclusion, Atchley (2008) identified the need for more research on aging and spirituality, and several researchers noted above make an even greater call for additional research on the manner in which women experience aging and spirituality. In conducting this study, rather than espousing one particular theory of spirituality, the researcher was interested in discovering if the women interviewed would add information to major ideas already present in the literature. Several avenues of inquiry were created that addressed components of the conceptual frameworks and/or theories developed by Atchley (2008), Wuthnow (1998), and Tornstam (2005). Atchley, who concentrated his research on individual spiritual journeys, endeavored to define spirituality and considered it to be a central theme for the aging population. Wuthnow identified a distinction between religiousness and spirituality by describing religious dwellers and spiritual seekers. He
described religious dwellers as those who accepted religious authority in its’ traditional forms, and he described spiritual seekers as those who valued individual autonomy over external authority and religious doctrine (Wuthnow, 1998). Tornstam created the theory of gerotranscendence, which claims that older individuals become less focused on material possessions and more focused on spiritual concerns as they grow older.

The research question framing the basis of this study is: What does spirituality mean to older women residing in assisted living communities?

**Methods**

**Participants**

A convenience sample of women recruited from two assisted living communities in southeastern North Carolina was used for this qualitative study on aging and spirituality in older women. Criteria for selection of the participants included the following: (a) female, (b) ages 65 and older, (c) cognitively competent, and (d) residing in an assisted living community.

**Procedures**

The researcher reviewed the names of the residents of each assisted living community with the director and/or social worker of said community, and made a list of those female residents determined by the director and/or social worker to be able to participate in the study. Over a two month period, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten women in the privacy of their own rooms and with one woman in a secluded common area in her assisted living community, because she shared a room and did not have any privacy. An additional woman who was asked if she could be interviewed regarding her thoughts on spirituality declined, but gave no reason for her refusal.
The researcher read the informed consent form to each participant, and asked her to sign the form. Participants were informed that they had the right to stop the interview at any time they desired, without any negative consequences arising from their decision to end the interview. The researcher both verbally and in writing assured the participants that she would transcribe the interviews, omitting names and personal information so that no one other than the researcher would know the identity of who said what. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews, but recorded only the first names of the participants. She destroyed the audiotapes immediately following transcription. De-identified transcripts were stored in a file in the locked office of the primary researcher.

The following table lists many of the avenues of inquiry used during the interviews, and indicates which gerontologist’s work in spirituality and aging influenced the researcher’s choice of questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gerontologist</th>
<th>Conceptual Framework</th>
<th>Avenues of Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atchley</td>
<td>Individual spiritual journeys</td>
<td>What does it mean to you to be a spiritual person? Can you tell me a story about when spirituality was important to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuthnow</td>
<td>Religious dwellers &amp; spiritual seekers</td>
<td>What do you feel are the differences between being religious and being spiritual?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tornstam</td>
<td>Gerotranscendence theory</td>
<td>How and when did you develop your spirituality? How do you continue to nurture your spirituality? Are there times in your life when you felt more spiritual than at other times?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In addition to asking the interviewees the questions listed above in the table, the researcher also included an applied element to her research by asking the following questions: Do you ever talk about spiritual issues to anybody who lives here or works her?
If you don’t currently talk to others here about spiritual issues, do you think you would benefit from sharing these issues with someone who works here? If so, who would it be?

After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher compared and contrasted the interviews to identify themes that help to explain the conditions in which spirituality is important to aging women who reside in an assisted living facility. The findings were organized in four categories, and themes identified in literature regarding older women and spirituality were compared and contrasted with themes present in the interviews.

Results

The women interviewed were demographically homogeneous. They all were Caucasian, all had been married, all had children, and all are widows. They all described themselves as Christian, and two were Catholic. Most of the women were from southeastern North Carolina, although one was from Chicago, one was from Ohio, and another was from New York. Their average age was 88. They were not asked to describe their socioeconomic status; however, all but two women had private rooms, so it would be inferred that they had sufficient economic resources to afford a private room. Both of the assisted living facilities in which interviews were conducted catered to middle class individuals.

When the older women were asked about their ideas on spirituality, it became evident that their notions of spirituality were for the most part intertwined with religious ideas. The vast majority of women said they considered spirituality to be very important in their daily lives. The results are discussed below, and have been grouped into four major themes: (a) comparing and contrasting spirituality and religion, (b) using spirituality as a coping mechanism, (c) developing and nurturing spirituality, and (d) sharing spiritual
beliefs. For purposes of this research report, the women interviewed have been referred to by pseudonyms, to protect their anonymity.

Comparing and Contrasting Spirituality and Religion

When asked what spirituality meant to them, each woman mentioned either believing in God, studying the Bible, being a Christian, or attending church. Also of great importance to them was the manner in which they lived their lives. Charlotte, aged 82, answered, “To be spiritual is to be true to myself and to my God. I’m the same person every time you see me. I think we have an obligation to be that way.” Other similar responses included living according to Biblical principles, having good moral behavior, and living a good life. However, when asked if they considered themselves to be religious, a majority of the women answered “no.” Those who did not consider themselves religious had fairly negative things to say about religion. For example, Beatrice, aged 89 remarked, “The ones that are religious talk about it continually to everybody, and some people do not want to hear it.” Janet, aged 83, shared the following:

    When I think of being religious, I think of attending church every Sunday and reading the Bible constantly, and knowing the Bible inside and out. I think of religion as following rules, having lots of structure. I don’t think you need any structure to be spiritual. I don’t think you need to go to church to be spiritual.

Laura, aged 93, commented:

    I think being spiritual runs deeper than being religious. The religious people sometimes take it to the “Nth” degree and it takes hold of their lives sometimes. I think it’s actually more real and more important in your life if you take it on a firm basis as you go along.

Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism
When asked to share a story of a time when spirituality took on added importance in their lives, most of the women related stories involving struggling to come to terms with the deaths of husbands, or other family members. Beatrice shared a tragic story involving her grandson:

My grandson got involved in drugs. And then he went to Raleigh and he lived up there and he got a job. We thought he was doing fine, and we thought he would come out of it, which he did, but the ones that he got involved with thought he had some more drugs, and they went in and shot him. My son (his father) has done well with it, but you never get over it, losing a son or a family member. (Interviewer: So you feel that your spiritual life helped you cope and get through it?) I certainly do!

(Interviewer: Don’t you wonder how people cope who don’t have faith?) Well, I think it doesn’t help them at all. I think they get ill, and get bothered by anybody and anything. So I said, well, I’m not going to be like that. The good Lord has been with me all these years, and has taken care of me and watched over me and helped me get through that, and I’ve got to be with him.

The women were also asked if there were times in their lives when they felt more spiritual than at other times, and how spirituality helped them. One answer was that spirituality helped a woman cope with her pregnancies. She was often depressed, and it helped get her out of her “moods.” Doris, whose health was failing, shared a story about an experience when spirituality made an indelible impression on her life. Doris actually experienced a vision at a time when she had anger in her heart over her daughter’s divorce. She accompanied her grandson to the front of the church in a ceremony for his confirmation in the Catholic faith, and here are her words:

When we got down to the bishop, I didn’t know what was happening, and I looked up and there was Jesus with his hands out, and he said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Well, it
was like a tingling went through my body. That would be the Holy Spirit. And I said, ‘Amen’....And you know after that, I had no more hate and no more anger. I can’t even dislike people any more. It was a beautiful experience.

Most of the other interviewees said they said they were able to draw strength from their spiritual life, and it helped them cope and get through difficult times.

**Developing and Nurturing Spiritual Beliefs**

When the women were asked, “How and when did you develop your spirituality?”, the overwhelming answer was that they had always been spiritual, because they were raised that way. Annette, aged 92, had this response:

I think it was important all our lives, because we were always Catholics and we always attended church and everything. We always spoke with the people and the priests and stuff like that. We were always interested in the Catholic religion anyway. Our parents were religious and very good people. You had to go to church, you had to get dressed up. Then also, be kind to people, help people; that was their motto.

The other women also equated their spiritual upbringing with attending church or Mass. Spirituality was nurtured by most of these women through prayer, attending church, and attending Bible study. One woman’s response was that she nurtured her spirituality by caring for others, making them happy, encouraging them, and reaching out to them.

Annette answered the question, “How do you nurture your spirituality?” as follows:

Just by sitting and thinking of people and praying for them. I always have to pray for somebody, something or other. Just keep everybody in good health, especially at home. If they’re sick, I hope God will give them a little more courage to fight it.

Marge, aged 85, answered the same question with these words:
By going to the Bible study. That’s as good as I can answer. And he (the preacher) comes here to us every Wednesday morning at 11 o’clock, and I’m there every time unless something very drastic keeps me from it. I guess that’s the only way I can answer it. (Interviewer: And then, prayer, do you think that’s important?) Oh, yes. And I listen to some of the spiritual programs on TV. Do you know Charles Stanley? I dearly love him. I don’t know him personally, but I have a good friend who is a cousin to him.

Laura felt that music paved the way for her to experience and nurture her spirituality: “I’m a musician, and I think my music has helped me immensely. I play the piano and the organ as well, so I play a lot of church hymns.”

**Sharing Spiritual Beliefs**

Every woman interviewed said she either talked to friends or family members about spiritual issues. One woman talked about spirituality with her daughter, who shared similar ideas of caring for and about others with her mother. Another interviewee mentioned discussing spiritual topics with friends who lived in the same assisted living community with her, based on what they watched on television. Yet another said she talked about spiritual issues to fellow Catholics who lived in the same facility she did, but she said they did not get into too much detail and basically kept things private. When asked if they discussed spiritual issues with anyone who worked at their facility, the majority of women said “no”. Annette’s response was: “No, they wouldn’t have no time for that. I can’t take time from them, because they are so busy. I wouldn’t talk to anyone like that about it.”

When asked if they thought they might benefit from speaking with an employee at their community, those who did not currently discuss spiritual issues with an employee also did not think they would benefit from doing so. Several reasons given for this answer were:
(a) the employees were too busy to be interrupted, (b) the residents did not know the employees well enough to discuss this topic, and (c) the women preferred to keep their thoughts on spirituality private. However, Marge had a different perspective on discussing spiritual issues with someone who worked at her assisted living community. She said,

Yes, with some of the maids. There’s one here and I dearly love her. You may know her, her name’s Debbie. She’s a real good Christian person, and we have a lot of good conversations. (Interviewer: That’s wonderful. Do you think she’s a C.N.A.? ) Yes, that’s what she is. (Interviewer: You just talk about spirituality in general?) Yes, general things, and I see her at church.

**Discussion**

Researchers in the field of spirituality have been challenged by the difficulty of defining spirituality and religiousness and determining the interrelation of the two terms. As mentioned previously, Wuthnow (1998) made a distinction between religious dwellers and spiritual seekers. Interestingly, Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999), as cited in Atchley (2008), maintained that cohorts born before World War II believe that religion and spirituality are interrelated, and cohorts born in the late 1940’s and afterwards view religion and spirituality separately. The interviews conducted in this study support that assertion. Although most women felt they were spiritual but not religious, their definitions of spirituality placed them in the category of religious dwellers instead of in the category of spiritual seekers. Perhaps because they held negative views of the term “religious”, they didn’t realize that their emphasis on believing in Jesus and God and in the importance of church attendance and Bible study had much to do with religiousness.

The older women interviewed in this study overwhelmingly felt that spirituality was a major factor in their ability to cope with the loss of loved ones. These findings support the
research of Knestrick and Lohri-Posey (2005), who interviewed women aged 65 and older who resided in a rural senior high-rise apartment building. Knestrick and Lohri-Posey also concluded that spirituality was a crucial part of these older women’s lives and played a huge role in helping the women cope with life’s situations and handle grief. Ramsey and Blieszner’s (1999) in-depth interviews were conducted with eight older women whom they considered to be spiritually resilient. These women were all aging-in-place, which may factor into the common themes of community, affect, and close interpersonal relationships that were identified after research was analyzed. Those themes were not present in the findings of this study, perhaps because it may be more difficult to develop a feeling of community and to establish close interpersonal relationships when one moves into an assisted living facility late in life.

Gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) was partially supported by the data obtained in this study. After interviewing the women in their rooms at their assisted living communities, it was quite apparent that material possessions no longer remained an important part of the women’s lives. However, findings from the interviews did not explicitly corroborate gerotranscendence theory with regard to increased spirituality in later years. These women were already very spiritual in their early years; they simply continued to nurture their already existing spirituality as they grew older. Since they had much more leisure time in their 80’s and 90’s than they did when they were younger, the women were able to devote more time to prayer and Bible study in later years than was possible for them during earlier stages of their lives.

Although the women interviewed mentioned sharing spiritual issues with friends and family members, they did this discriminately. The desire to keep their thoughts on spirituality to themselves was apparent to the researcher when the women were asked to share a story detailing the importance of spirituality to them. The majority of
them answered that spirituality was important when they experienced the loss of family members; however, a few of the women chose not to share the story of their losses and subsequent coping experiences. The researcher sensed by the tone of their voices and/or look of sadness in their eyes that they still felt heartache over their losses, although the women did not actually verbalize this. It is the researcher’s opinion that these women did not want to share their stories because the researcher was basically a stranger to them. These were very personal stories about losses that they did not feel comfortable sharing with someone with whom they were not well acquainted. Further examples of not wanting to share spiritual issues with others surfaced when the women were asked if they ever talked to anyone who either lived in or worked in their facility. The majority of the women said “no.” When the follow-up question was asked, “If you don’t currently talk to others here about spiritual issues, do you think you would benefit from sharing these issues with someone who works here? If so, who would it be?” most of the women again said no, with the exception of a few. One woman, quoted earlier, who said she did confide in a C.N.A. who worked at her facility, described the employee as follows: “I dearly love her….She’s a real good Christian person……I see her at church.” From this description, it appears that the C.N.A. was considered to be more of a friend than merely an employee.

Another study conducted simultaneously in eastern North Carolina corroborates the findings of this researcher that older women may not feel comfortable sharing the private nature of their spiritual beliefs. A fellow student researcher analyzed a satisfaction survey conducted at a continuing care retirement community (Meyer, K., 2013). Residents were asked many questions, and the one pertaining to the topic of spirituality was: “Are your spiritual needs being met?” Both male and female residents responded to the survey and included their names, so for the purposes of this research, only female responses were recorded. Most of the older women who completed the survey felt it was not the
responsibility of their facility to assist in meeting their spiritual needs. Responses ranged from “I don’t ask them for anything,” to “I don’t think Willow Ridge has much to do with it,” to “I go to my own church here.”

The two findings of the study conducted by the researcher considered to be most important were: the determination that the interviewees viewed religion and spirituality as being intertwined (they considered themselves spiritual, but defined themselves using religious language), and the determination that the interviewees shared their spiritual beliefs only with close friends and family members.

Limitations

The challenge of interviewing older women on the topic of spirituality was illustrated best when the final interview question was asked: “Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn’t, anything you want to share with me about your spirituality?” Most respondents replied that they couldn’t think of anything. However, Henrietta, aged 83, had this to say: “Nothing else I’d like to share, because I don’t know you that well.”

Since spirituality is such an integral part of these women’s lives, and it is an important component in the lives of many older women interviewed in other studies, it is this researcher’s belief that further research should be conducted on the topic of aging women and spirituality. One limitation of this study is that the women interviewed were all Caucasian, all Christian, and primarily middle class; there was not any cultural diversity in the demographic characteristics of those interviewed. Another limitation is the private nature of the subject matter; at times it was difficult for the interviewer to elicit much information from the interviewees. Perhaps another reason that some of the women weren’t very talkative was that they were all between 82 and 95 years old, and simply didn’t talk as much as they had when they were younger. This possibility is supported by Cován’s (2005)
research on women in their 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. In describing the women in their 90’s, she mentioned that they were less talkative as a group than were younger women.

**Recommendations**

It was the hope of the researcher that more of the women interviewed would consider sharing their spiritual issues with C.N.A.’s and other employees who worked at their facilities. Having a spiritual bond with another individual can be a powerful and positive experience, and can strengthen one’s own spiritual life. However, since most of the interviewees remarked that they did not desire spiritual discussions with C.N.A.’s, the researcher’s hope was unrealistic, possibly due to demographic differences in age, socioeconomic status, and culture between the residents and the C.N.A.’s. Perhaps in the future, social workers, activity directors, and older volunteers could be trained to be responsive to older women’s spiritual needs as they are expressed. Cultural competence should be an important consideration in matching up older volunteers with residents of similar backgrounds, in order to facilitate a comfortable atmosphere in which spiritual discussions might occur.

A recommendation for further research is to revisit the work of Crowther et al. (2002) who believed that positive spirituality should be added to the other three components of Rowe and Kahn's model of successful aging. Conducting research to determine how positive spirituality may have a beneficial impact on the factors of engaging in active life, minimizing risk and disability, and maximizing physical and mental abilities would add substantially to the body of knowledge on aging and spirituality.

**Conclusion**

The various studies conducted on the topic of aging women and spirituality that were described earlier all concur that spirituality is frequently an important component of older women’s lives. In addition, spirituality often serves as a vital coping mechanism when
older women experience grief and the loss of loved ones. Data obtained from interviews conducted by this researcher corroborate these two statements. Hopefully in the future, as additional studies on this topic are conducted, new models regarding spirituality will be created to increase available knowledge and understanding of aging women and spirituality.

References


