

# Spirituality and Satisfaction in Elderly's Life: A Pilot Study in Puerto Rico

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**Abstract** The present study investigate the relationship between religious and spiritual attitudes with satisfaction in elderly life. It also investigates if gender has a moderating effect on this relationship. The participants of this study were 100 senior citizens (60 to 70 years old) from diverse households in the metropolitan area of the Puerto Rico Island. In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, as for instance, gender, 41% males and 64% females; as related to religion, 69.7% of the sample identified themselves as catholic; 14.1% as evangelical, and 10.1% as protestant. The results of the correlation test showed a significant ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ) positive relationship between spirituality and life satisfaction. Any moderating effect, using gender as a variable that could affect the relationship between spiritual attitudes with satisfaction in elderly life, was not found. When the correlation between spirituality and life satisfaction was evaluated, a low correlation was observed. We need to remember that the sample of this study was collected after one of the most catastrophic hurricanes affecting the island of Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria, so this study may suggest that the relationship between the religious attitudes, spirituality and life satisfaction could be affected by what elderly experience in an atmospheric disaster. Nevertheless, this study sets out that is necessary to continue the investigation of this variables in a near future, with and without atmospheric phenomena, affecting elderly life.

**Keywords** Spirituality, Religion, Life satisfaction, Atmospheric disaster

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## 1. Introduction

Being a senior citizen involves big changes in the physical, social, spiritual, and emotional level. If these changes are not addressed properly, the individual can develop mental health pathologies, bringing despair and a feeling of poor satisfaction in their lives. Aspects like spirituality, family, community, and friends can contribute to life satisfaction of the elderly.

It is important to consider attitudes towards spirituality and/or religion, since these can bring positive or negative consequences in the life satisfaction the elderly has. It has been described in gerontological literature that when the elderly present positive and stronger attitudes towards religion and/or spirituality, they have a stronger will to continue to confront their problems in a more adaptable forms during the old age (Rodríguez-Gómez, 2010).

According to Pargament (2013), it is important to consider the role of religion and spirituality in mental health. After all,

in many occasions, this could help to strength constructive attitudes individual has and can be of great help in problem management. It is important to emphasize that spirituality is not necessarily attached to religion. Spirituality is a self-process, more internal, whereas religion leads to dogmas. However, it is important to recognize and integrate spirituality and/or religion, since could be an important tool that individuals used to confront their situations.

A great number of investigations suggest that there is a positive relationship between religion and life satisfaction and/or psychological well-being. (Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Achour, Grine, Nor & Yusoff, 2014; Harari, Glenwick & Cecero, 2014; Rule, 2006). Nonetheless, other investigations have found that there is not a connection between these variables (González-Rivera, Veray- Rivera & Rosario-Rodríguez, 2017; Martínez, 2014), reason why it is still a debate in psychology and more research need to be performed.

Pargament (2005) explains the term “religious coping”, as one consisting in a type of approach in which religious beliefs and behaviors are used to prevent or soothe the negative consequences of stressful situations, as well as, to easiness the problem solving. Pargament refers to three types of these religious approaches: 1. Self-directed Style: people trust themselves more than God to resolve their problems. 2. Elusive or Evasive Style: the responsibility is left in the

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hands of the divinity. 3. Collaborative Style: a dynamic is established between men and God when facing a situation. According to Pargament (2005), "If people have a loving perception of God and feel His support, then they will experiment the benefits.". However, he mentions that if God is perceived as a menacing and punishing figure, the effect will be completely the opposite. For this author, the religious or spiritual practices, can influence positively in mental health issues, producing positive effects through emotions that can promote specific attitudes and behaviors such as; hope, forgiveness, an increased self-esteem, peace, well-being, love, and compassion. Moreover, according to Morales (2014), people that practice any religion or spirituality in their lives, can experience positive feelings. In addition, religious practices can offer support and could help to change negative effects, since it gives you the necessary tools to tolerate and overcome any aversive situation, as well as to change negative effects to positive ones. Hence, it can be seen in his study how religion and spirituality can influence elderly quality of life. Besides, it is mentioned that some social changes during the old age, like retirement, can influence life satisfaction.

In a study performed in Puerto Rico (Mejías, 2011), lack of hope and spirituality were measured, and it was found that there is a relationship between them. The greater the spirituality, the less despair the person are. Additionally, throughout this study, the factors that make this population feel hopeless are; the perception of less capacity to carry out daily tasks, the perception of bad physical health, and low levels of spirituality. As stated by Mejías, "there is a belief that feeling hopeless is a normal feeling of the elderly; that feeling sad, tired, and defeated is part of being old. Nevertheless, these myths, are unacceptable for a person at any stage of his life. Also, another study performed in Colombia about spirituality, hope, and dependency as predictors of life satisfaction (Oliver, 2015) found that spirituality has a positive effect on perception and life satisfaction of the elderly.

From the beginning, human beings have been interested in exploring the spiritual dimension. Nowadays, one of the main techniques used is "mindfulness" (Quan, 2008). Some other models have been suggested by Quan (2008) such as biopsychological-spiritual models that help integrate these concepts with the objective of improving the quality of life, particularly of the elderly.

Throughout this study, we pretend to explore specifically, the relationship between attitudes, taking into consideration spirituality and religion with life satisfaction of the elderly. Also, we expect to observe if gender has a moderating effect; identify if there is a relationship between religious and spiritual attitudes with life satisfaction. Taking into consideration that the elderly population is increasing in Puerto Rico, and the rest of the world, this study intends to create awareness about the feelings of the elderly, drawing the attention towards them, in order to promote more studies with this population taking into consideration spirituality/religion and life satisfaction.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Instruments used in this study were: Informed Consent Form as required by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), Sociodemographic Data Sheet and The Scale to Explore Spiritual and Religious Attitudes (EAER) created by Rodríguez (2012). This scale was prepared to measure the religious and spiritual attitudes among the elderly. It consists of 35 reactivities, which explore the religious and spiritual attitudes among Puerto Ricans elderly. The participant chooses an option from a Likert Scale of four points that goes from; "Totally Agree" to "Totally Disagree". Rodríguez-Gómez (2009) made a descriptive-exploratory study to evaluate and validate the the instrument. The alpha Cronbach, a psychometric index that establish the internal reliability of the scale was .89, very appropriate according to Kline (2000).

**Life Satisfaction Scale:** this scale measures the diverse aspects of life satisfaction of the senior citizens. The alpha Cronbach coefficient is .76 appropriate according to Kline (2000). The scale has 20 assertions in the Likert Scale that are answered with 1= "Agree", 2= "Disagree", 3 = "I don't know".

## 3. Results

The participants of this study were 100 senior citizens from diverse households in the north metropolitan area in Puerto Rico. The participants were between 60 to 70 years old, with a 41.0% males, and women with a 64.0%. 69.7% identified themselves as catholic, 14.1% as evangelical, and 10.1% as protestant.

As related to our main research questions, correlation test results showed a significant positive relationship between spirituality and life satisfaction ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ) (See, Table 1).

**Table 1.** Media, Standard Deviation, Alpha and Correlation Spearman Rho

	<i>M</i>	<i>DE</i>	$\alpha$	1	2
1. Life Satisfaction	1.48	.18	.57	1	.21
2. Spirituality	1.65	.29	.79	.21	1

*Note:* All correlations are significant to  $p < .05$  (1-tide); *M* = media; *SD* = standard deviation;  $\alpha$  = Alpha Cronbach

**Table 2.** Moderation Results

Variables Predictors	Dependent Variable: Life Satisfaction				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Gender	.012	.028	.433	.67	.04
Spirituality	.106	.058	1.82	.07	
Gender x Spirituality	-.012	.122	-.096	.92	

*Note:* The moderation model was not statistically significant.

To evaluate if gender had a moderating effect on the religious and spiritual attitudes, and life satisfaction, the 23rd version of SPSS-X computer program was used. Not significant moderation was found. (See Table 2).

## 4. Discussion

The results of this study showed a significant positive relationship between the religious/spiritual attitudes, and life satisfaction, which is consistent with the results informed by Koenig (2012); Maheshwari & Singh (2009) and González-Rivera (2016). However, the correlation obtained in this study was significantly low. There is literature in which has been reported that there is no relationship between these variables (González-Rivera, Veray- Rivera & Rosario-Rodríguez, 2017; Martínez, 2014). Nevertheless, having in mind that the data was gathered after one of the most catastrophic hurricanes in the history of Puerto Rico, hurricane “Maria”, the literature related to natural disasters and religiosity was reviewed in order to explore if this could have affected the data.

For instance in a recently study, it was found that after hurricane Katrina, neither, the religious habits or behaviors/approaches were associated with less anguish or functional deterioration (Park, Sacco & Mills, 2018). However, some religious aspects, particularly the spiritual struggle and the belief that “God is in control” were related with a poor adaptation; this was denominated as a negative religious approach. It is important to mention that most of the religious resources were not related with a better adjustment to the circumstances (Park, Sacco & Mills, 2019). These authors mentioned that this could be due to the situation many people went through Hurricane Maria, since many had to be evacuated and relocated in shelters, and could lost faith in their religious/spirituality belief. Furthermore, the possibility Hurricane disrupted many religious habits, limiting, for instance, its use or attendance (i.e., assisting worship or any other religious services) as well as could create more anguish for not being able to attend any of them. Likewise, it is understandable that the circumstances in which Puerto Rico was left during the gathering of the data, could have affected the low correlation obtained between the religious and spiritual attitudes, and life satisfaction variables. The lack of simple and basic resources to survive, such as water and food, predicted more personal and negative religious claims (Aten et al., 2012). Even though there are many investigations that do not show this pattern, there is an extensive literature that sustains a positive relationship between religious practices and life satisfaction (Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Achour, Grine, Nor & Yusoff, 2014; Harari, Glenwick & Cecero, 2014; Rule, 2006).

In Puerto Rico, González-Rivera, Veray-Alicea and Rosario-Rodríguez (2017), found in their study that there is no-relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being, nor between religiosity and life satisfaction. Also, when gender was also explored, MaheshWari & Singh (2009) found that does not have a significant role in religion, happiness, and life satisfaction. Moreover, Lazar & Bjorck (2016) found that women were more satisfied with their lives compared to the men, but there was not a moderation in gender.

Nevertheless, just as we found studies in which there is no

difference in life satisfaction, we also found studies in which there are significant differences in the aspect of religion. In fact, the previous relationship is seen more in women (Gabriela Habib, Donald & Hutchinson, 2018; Fiori, Brown, Cortina & Antonucci, 2006). However, in our study, we found that gender did not have a moderating effect between the religious and spiritual attitudes, and life satisfaction.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has the purpose of exploring the relationship between the religious and spiritual attitudes with life satisfaction of the elderly and to observe if gender maintained a moderating effect in the relationship. The results demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between the religious and spiritual attitudes with life satisfaction, even though this one was low. When gender was evaluated as a moderating effect on the relationship, it was found that it did not have this kind of effect towards the religious and spiritual attitudes, and life satisfaction. When we revised the literature related to the context in which Puerto Rico lived when the sample of the study was collected, it was observed that there is literature that demonstrates that when people go through an atmospheric disaster, destructive as Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico on September 2017, in which there was a massive destruction of properties, lack of essential resources, and many people were evacuated from their homes; the relationship between their religious and spiritual attitudes, and their life satisfaction could be affected. This can explain or give a more comprehensive outlook about the low correlation obtained in our study. Even so, another study in Puerto Rico, establishes that there is no relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction. (González-Rivera, Veray-Alicea y Rosario-Rodríguez, 2017). We suggest that investigations related to this topic should continue, to keep observing the behavior of this relationship. In addition, we recommend future research in Puerto Rico about this relationship and how it could be affected after a major destructive atmospheric event or under other serious social situations.

In conclusion, with this study, the mental health professionals will have the perception of how important the role of religious and spiritual attitudes to the human being are. We also suggest that these attitudes could be affected after an atmospheric disaster. Besides, this allows serious investigators to think about these aspects and direct future investigation toward them. Also, the study suggests the need to continue exploring the relationship between religion, spirituality and life satisfaction, and observe if it is changing in Puerto Rico.

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