

Personality Correlates of Spirituality among the Elderly

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Abstract

The elderly are regarded as a group of people with more spiritual knowledge. They live in deplorable conditions facing challenges of deteriorating physical and mental health. The elderly, especially women and widows, are subjected to abuse, neglect, isolation, and economic exploitation. For their well being, their socio-economic status must be uplifted. Recognition of their capacity to impart their knowledge to the younger generation may enhance their socio-economic status. The present study made three hypotheses. First, 'female participants will report higher levels of spirituality than male participants.' Second, 'Spirituality will positively correlate with Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness across gender.' Third, 'Spirituality will negatively correlate with Neuroticism and Extraversion across gender.' 25 male and 25 female elderly participants of the 80+ age groups were chosen as the sample. This sample was included from Sri Ram Chandra Mission, Lucknow. The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) by Underwood and Teresi (2002) and Big Five Inventory (BFI) by John and Srivastava (1999) were used to gauge spirituality and personality traits, respectively. Hindi Adaptation of the DSES by Hussain (2016) was used to obtain standard DSES scores. The research findings showed no gender difference in spirituality among the elderly, and thus H1 was rejected. Also, spirituality negatively correlated with neuroticism, conscientiousness, and positively correlated with openness, agreeableness, and extraversion, and thus H2 and H3 were only partially retained. Future endeavors in this area must consider socio-economic background, political influences, environmental factors, and physical and mental co-morbidities of aging.

Keywords: Personality, Spirituality, Elderly.

Introduction

According to Hurlock (1986), "old age is the closing period of the lifespan. It is a phase when people move away from previous, more desirable times of functionality." The U.N. agreed cutoff is 60+ years to refer to the older population.

According to the Indian population census of 2011, about 10.4 crore elderly persons (aged 60 years or above) comprise 5.3 crore females and 5.1 crores males. The dependency ratio (old-age) ascended from 11% in 1961 to 14% in 2011 for India in general. For females and males, it was 15% and 14% in 2011, respectively.

Among the challenges associated with old age are the mental and physical plunge and being pushed to a minority group status, reducing interactivity with other groups in the population.

The elderly are often vulnerable to crime, frail, sick with diseases, suffering mental health problems, elderly abuse, neglect and isolation, and thus are dependent on others and frequently require urgent support. As a result of dependence on children or spouses, many face economic exploitation and inadequate nutrition.

There is no homogenous group of all older persons. Indian oldest old women are especially an impuissant group, largely comprised of widows. They suffer manifold miseries of being women, widowhood, poverty, and leading more protracted and excruciating lives than men. These gendered aspects may impact their personality and spirituality. Their financial self-sustenance must be guaranteed.

Literature shows that spirituality can stimulate positive denouement of age-related health problems. Mindful, spiritual exercises mitigate mental health problems, like anxiety and stress. Spirituality enmeshes in positive health changes such as effective communication, a

healthy diet, a reversal of tobacco and alcohol consumption, and improved emotional/psychological health (Iwamasa & Iwasaki, 2011).

Elders indulge in religious and spiritual practices, often relaying these teachings to the younger ones. Spirituality and religion are, however, different. While religion is organized and has traditions and rituals, spirituality involves searching for meaning and purpose in life, focusing on self-perfection.

It connects one deeply with other people and engenders a sense of oneness, servitude, compassion, and love towards all sentient beings. These are widely accepted characteristics of a spiritual person. Thus it manifests in the personality of an individual.

"Personality is the complex organization within the entity of those psychophysical processes which decide its actions and thinking characteristics"(Allport, 1961, p. 28).

Most modern personality researchers believe in five specific personality elements, sometimes referred to as the "Big 5" personality characteristics. The theory's five specific personality characteristics are extraversion, agreeability, honesty, conscientiousness, and neuroticism.

Available literature shows that each gender group is similarly conscious of their relationship with God (Simpson et al. 2008).

The older adult in modern industrialized and urbanized societies, dominated by nuclear families, live in a deplorable status (Harlan, 1964).

Students have a medium level of spiritual intelligence. There is a strong and statistically meaningful association between the aspects of spiritual knowledge and personality characteristics. (Mahasneh et al., 2015). This implies that spiritual practices like meditation, if taught to the elderly, maybe furthered to the young generation and former may improve their socio-economic status.

Previous studies also suggest that spirituality/religiousness showed stronger associations with Conscientiousness, Openness, and Agreeableness than with Neuroticism and Extraversion (Löckenhoff et al., 2010). Similar studies show that Spirituality negatively correlates with neuroticism and extraversion.

The literature on spirituality and personality holds that spiritual practices could also promote significant emotional benefits. Resilience is closely associated with spirituality. Community reinforcement is strongly tied to happiness with life, and faith was inversely tied to depression. Gender differences within the psychology of spirituality are unclear, and evidence is scant.

This research attempted to answer the following questions: Are there gender differences in spirituality among the Indian elderly of 80 and above? Can spirituality become a medium to include the elderly in the mainstream? Can the recognition of their spiritual soundness improve their socio-economic conditions? Moreover, how are the Big Five Personality Traits related to spirituality?

Method

Rationale

The present study aims to better understand, than the previous unclear research findings, the roles of gender and spirituality in the 80+ age group. The profound experiential knowledge of spirituality with the elderly can be transferred to younger generation in the families. They can resolve the social crisis of growing scepticism against religious and spiritual institutions by inducing a spiritually sound environment at home. Upon recognition of their spiritual potential, their familial status would improve, followed by an improvement in the relation between older and younger generation. This would thereby advance their capability to cope with worsening physical and mental conditions.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study were:

1. To study gender differences in spirituality among the elderly.
2. To find a relationship between personality traits and spirituality among the elderly across gender.

Hypotheses

1. Female participants will report higher levels of spirituality than male participants.
2. Spirituality will be positively correlated with conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness across gender.
3. Spirituality will be negatively correlated with neuroticism and extraversion across gender.

Research design

The research design chosen was a correlation design.

Variables

1. Subject variable- Gender
2. Predictor variable-Elderly
3. Criterion variable-Spirituality.

Sample

25 males and 25 females elderly participants of the 80+ age groups were included (N=50). The sample was chosen from Sri Ram Chandra Mission, Lucknow, India. Shri Ram Chandra Mission is a meditation center present globally. Only urban participants living with families and who are not engaged in any economic activity are included.

Measures used

Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES)

The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) made by Underwood and Teresi (2002) was used to measure Spirituality among the participants. It is a unidimensional scale. It includes constructs such as awe, mercy, gratitude, a sense of connection with the transcendent and compassionate love, and the measures of awareness of discernment/inspiration, and a sense of deep inner peace.

It is a 16-item self-report measure of spiritual experience, assessing ordinary or daily experiences of connection with the transcendent in daily life – and how they are a normal part of the individual's life.

Cronbach's alphas for the scale have continuously been elevated, 0.89 and above, for instance, 0.94 and 0.95 for the General Social Survey (GSS) specimens, establishing reliability and validity.

Test-retest results have been reliable with a test-retest Pearson correlation of 0.85 over two days (Underwood and Teresi, 2002).

Big Five Inventory (BFI)

Big Five Inventory (BFI), created by John and Srivastava (1999), is an inventory of 44 items that test an individual on the Big Five personality factors

(dimensions). Instead, each of the variables is further divided into aspects of personality. BFI also shows high convergent validity with other self-report scales and with Peer ratings of the Big Five. Previously tested reliability of the BFI was typically ranged from 0.79 to 0.88

Table 1: Showing t-test between DSE scores of male and female participants.

MALE			FEMALE		
$\Sigma X=56$	$\Sigma x^2=60$	$Mx=3.73$	$\Sigma Y=79$	$\Sigma y^2=62.89$	$My=5.27$
df=28	SD=0.395	$SE_d=0.14$	$t_o = 0.055$		

The raw scores obtained from the DSES were converted to corresponding stanine scores using the Hindi Adaptation of DSES by Hussain (2016). With Degree of freedom, $df=28$, $SD=0.395$, and Standard Error of Difference, $SE_d=0.14$ the obtained t-ratio, $t_o = 0.055$. When $df=28$, at 0.01 level of significance, tabulated t-ratio, $t_t = 2.76$ (refer Table-D in appendix). Therefore, $t_o < t_t$, i.e.,

< 2.76 , and obtained t-ratio is insignificant at 0.01 level of significance.

The difference between the two means, $M_x = 3.73$ and $M_y = 5.27$ (i.e., 1.54), is insignificant. Hence, H_1 stating that 'female participants will report higher spirituality levels than male participants' was rejected.

Similar studies show no gender differences in endorsement of spiritual experiences, religious practices, or congregational support. Reid Arndt, Stephanie (2011).

H_2 stated that 'Spirituality will positively correlate with Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness across gender.' Product-moment coefficient $r_1 = -0.14$ represents a negative relationship between Spirituality and conscientiousness. Product-moment coefficient $r_2 = 0.05$ represents a positive relationship between Spirituality and agreeableness, and $r_3 = 0.19$ represents a positive relationship between Spirituality and openness. There is relatively good agreement among workers with psychological and educational tests that an r from .00 to +/- .20 denotes indifferent or negligible relationships. The hypothesis was rejected in one case, i.e., the relationship between Spirituality and conscientiousness was expected to be positive. However, in the other two cases, i.e., relationships between agreeableness and openness were positive. Therefore, the H_2 was partially accepted.

Table-2: Showing correlations between Spirituality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.

	Σ		M	r	
DSE	135	$x^2=139.4$	4.5		
Extraversion	100	$e^2=15.85$	3.3	$xe= 3.25$	$r_5= 0.06$
Agreeableness	119	$a^2=13.13$	3.9	$xa= 2.5$	$r_2= 0.05$
Conscientiousness	109	$c^2=37$	3.6	$xc= -10.7$	$r_1= -0.14$
Neuroticism	85	$n^2=16.2$	2.8	$xn= -2$	$r_4= -0.04$
Openness	102	$o^2=17.2$	3.4	$xo= 9.4$	$r_3= 0.19$

H_3 stated that 'Spirituality will negatively correlate with Neuroticism and Extraversion across gender.' Product-moment coefficient $r_4 = -0.04$ represents a negative relationship between Spirituality and neuroticism; and, $r_5 = 0.06$ represents a positive relationship between Spirituality and extraversion. The hypothesis was rejected in case of extraversion. Therefore, H_3 was partially accepted.

Discussion

The study found no gender difference in spirituality. The difference between the average scores was statistically insignificant. There could be several possible reasons for this. There could be individual differences in perception of the terms "Religion," "Spirituality," and "God." Although to reduce this error, purposive sampling was used. Also, there is no single working definition for the above-mentioned terms. The study was conducted on a tiny portion of the population of people practicing spirituality. Old age is also associated with brain degeneration, such as loss in memory and cognitive abilities, which may have affected their responses.

The second significant finding shows that spirituality correlated negatively with

conscientiousness and positively correlated with agreeableness and openness. Due to this occurrence, the second hypothesis was partially accepted.

The third significant finding shows that spirituality correlated positively with extraversion. On the other hand, Spirituality correlated negatively with neuroticism. Thus, the third hypothesis was also partially accepted. Possible reasons for these results could be:

1. Although the sample was chosen from a single spiritual school, socio-economic factors, political influences, and other environmental factors that affect personality traits were not examined.
2. The sample size was small for generalizing the findings.

Research findings of the study, therefore, show no gender difference in Spirituality among the 80+ elderly. Also, Spirituality strongly relates to personality traits openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

The study is conducted around a correlational design paired with purposive sampling. This was the best method to proceed with the study

because,

1. The aim was to examine the correlation between personality and Spirituality and not a causal relationship.
2. Spirituality and its constructs have subjectivity. Thus, targeting a group of participants who would have a consensual understanding of the terms like religion, Spirituality, and god was essential.

The study has some limitations which have caused contradictory results. Spirituality was initially thought of as negatively correlated with extraversion and positively correlated with conscientiousness. However, opposing results were found. The present study does not consider the degenerative effects of aging, particularly in the 80+ age group, the educational background, socio-economic background, political influences, and environmental factors. It is suggested for future researches to consider these factors which influence personality traits. It is possible to believe that Spirituality brings positive change in physical and mental health and overall well-being of an individual. However, it does not nullify the effects of the mentioned factors.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore gender differences among the elderly in the age group 80+ across gender. Additionally, it attempted to explore the correlation between Spirituality and Big-Five Personality traits. The study hypothesized that female participants would report higher levels of Spirituality than male participants. Also, Spirituality will negatively correlate with neuroticism and extraversion and positively correlate with openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

The first hypothesis was rejected, as the study could not find a gender difference in Spirituality. The second and third hypotheses were partially retained. Some contradictory findings were arrived at due to limitations of the study.

The study has the potential to show a strong relationship between spirituality and personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This study could be a humble step in enhancing the socio-economic status of the elderly, where the family could play the role of the medium for intervention as an institution. The integral parts of this intervention are recognition and acceptance of the elderly, whose legacy we inherit. This should lead to them being viewed as torchbearers of Spirituality and spiritual knowledge sources for the younger generation.

Keeping the shortcomings and recommendations in mind, future research should be done on larger sample size. Other than gender, age, spirituality and personality traits, socio-economic background, political influences, and environmental factors must be considered.

Implications of the Study

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status of the elderly, where the family could play the role of the medium for intervention as an institution. The integral parts of this intervention are recognition and acceptance of the elderly, whose legacy we inherit. This should lead to them being viewed as torchbearers of Spirituality and spiritual knowledge sources for the younger generation.

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