

The World at Large

Conceptualizing and Assessing Spirituality among Chinese Elders: Towards Evidence-based Practice

Vivian W. Q. Lou

The University of Hong Kong

Catherine L. Y. Chan

Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Hong Kong

Doris Y. P. Leung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Shirley S. Y. Fok

Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Hong Kong

Amy K. M. Tsui

Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, Hong Kong

S. X. Gui

East China Normal University

Daniel T. L. Shek

The Polytechnic University of Hong Kong

Background

Spiritual care is one of the essential but often ignored elements of the holistic care model. Despite its importance in human behaviour and to the Chinese culture, scientific studies of the importance of spirituality have been very limited in Chinese communities.

How can spirituality contribute to the holistic well-being of Chinese elders? Inspired by curiosity and a passion for enhancing the quality of life of elders among us, we have experienced a rich and rewarding journey, together with elders and their family members, as well as health care professionals and workers, to discover the meaning of spirituality among Chinese elders.

Research Process

The research project was started in November 2009 and went through three phases. Phase one was qualitative research that involved adopting focus groups and conducting in-depth interviews to elicit the underlying meaning of spirituality from the perspective of Chinese elders and those having close relationships with them. Altogether, eight focus groups were held, four in Hong Kong and four in Shanghai. In both cities, we invited elders and their caregivers to participate. Focus group participants included: (1) residential home-dwelling elders, (2) community-dwelling elders, (3) family caregivers of elders, and (4) staff members of social services for elders. In addition, three in-depth interviews with elders were conducted in Hong Kong.

Phase two was a Delphi study aiming to reach expertise consensus on the meaning of spirituality among Chinese elders. Two rounds of Delphi exercises were carried out between May 2010 and July 2010, with an expert panel consisting of 16 members from three Chinese communities, including Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Panel members were asked to rate the degree of relevance of each item and to provide their comments and suggestions relating to the Chinese conceptualisation of spirituality. Two rounds of expertise meetings were also organised to further discuss the rating items. The first draft of a Spirituality Scale for Chinese Elders (SSCE) was then developed, which led to further validation.

Phase three consisted of quantitative research aiming to validate the Spirituality Scale for Chinese Elders (SSCE). Together with other standardised measures, including the World Health Organization Quality of Life measures (WHOQoL), Purpose in Life (PIL), and Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), the 44-item, 5-point Likert SSCE draft was administered to 825 elders in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Face and content validity of SSCE were established through a Delphi process. Internal consistency, construct validity, and criterion validity of the SSCE were examined by Cronbach's alpha confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and correlations with PANAS, Purpose in Life, and psychological well-being in WHOQoL respectively.

Key Findings

Seven key components of spirituality, including spiritual well-being, meaning of life, transcendence, and relationships with self, family, people other than family members, and environment were generated from the Delphi study in Phase two. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that measurement models for the seven SSCE components, with spiritual well-being and relationships with people other than family members having two subscales and the other five having one scale, were all well fit, as indicated by the model fit indices. Cronbach's alpha values for all the subscales were higher than or close to 0.6 (Table 1). Correlations of SSCE components with PANAS, PIL, and four subscales in WHOQoL were moderate, significant ($p < 0.001$), and in the expected direction, except that between transcendence and WHOQoL environment subscale ($p = 0.10$) (Table 2). Results of the present study showed that the conceptualization of spirituality in the Chinese context should be understood in regard with relationship orientation and interdependent self-construct of Chinese people. Along this line, SSCE was a reliable and valid measure that assesses spirituality among the Chinese older population in which the social-cultural context is featured by nonreligious, relationship-oriented and interdependent self-construct. Emphasis on helping elders to expand harmonious relationships with different systems can improve their spirituality as part of holistic care.

Future Directions

As the first scale purposefully developed for measuring spirituality among Chinese elders, the research team has been working on developing intervention protocols that aim to enhance spirituality among Chinese elders.

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Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of measurement models of SSCE components

Component	# item	R- χ^2 (df)	SRMR	R-CFI	R-RMSEA (90% CI)	Alpha
Spiritual well-being		68.7 (19)	.048	.924	.056 (.042-.071)	
Positive	5					.74
Negative	3					.68
Meaning of life	5	31.4 (5)	.040	.959	.080 (.055-.108)	.76
Transcendence	6	38.6 (9)	.036	.953	.063 (.044-.084)	.70
Relationship with self	4	2.7 (2)	.015	.998	.021 (.00-.076)	.71
Relationship with family	8	64.0 (19)	.029	.969	.054 (.039-.068)	.89
Relationship with people other than family		36.1 (13)	.042	.950	.047 (.029-.065)	
Friends	4					.60
Others	3					.59
Relationship with environment	6	66.5 (9)	.064	.905	.088 (.069-.108)	.70

Table 2. Correlations of SSCE components with PANAS, Purpose of Life, and WHOQoL measures

SSCE component	PANAS	Purpose of Life	QoL Physio	Q o L Psych	Q o L Social	QoL Env
Positive spiritual well-being	.52	.48	.44	.59	.41	.48
Negative spiritual well-being	-.50	-.39	-.32	-.48	-.28	-.29
Meaning of life	.47	.53	.30	.46	.31	.27
Transcendence	.47	.35	.19	.35	.18	.06 [#]
Relationship with self	.24	.29	.22	.35	.24	.29
Relationship with family	.35	.33	.18	.42	.36	.31
Relationship with friends	.40	.36	.27	.38	.48	.23
Relationship with others	.31	.30	.22	.40	.40	.30
Relationship with environment	.26	.30	.29	.42	.30	.50

Note. All p-values < 0.001 except the correlation with #.