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THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY ON THE QUALITY OF THE LIFE AMONG ELDERLY PEOPLE IN ISRAEL AND ARMENIA

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The goal of this research is to explore the experience of life satisfaction and spirituality among elderly Armenians and Israeli Jews. The findings are based on deep semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis as a methodological tool for taking interviews. The aim is to contribute to the findings, which can lead to greater satisfaction among older adults in Israel and Armenia, which can also make a connection to different nations such as Bhutan and Norway explored before. The multicultural perspective on happiness can lead to the essence of the connections and differences that can disseminate inspiration worldwide. As the average age of the world's population continues to rise, it is essential to address the life satisfaction of older citizens across countries and thus inspire others. Israeli participants have Jewish nationality but recognize and observe Judaism as a cultural, national heritage and tradition, but only a minority inclined to the Jewish faith. Their pillar of life satisfaction is family, its strong bounds and mainly grandchildren. Whereas Armenian participants are strongly committed to their Armenian apostolic church, and they cannot imagine daily life without praying or visiting the house of God. They often stress Armenia was the first country to accept Christianity as a national religion, and they feel the connection to their roots in the belief. However, the results show a similar high importance and source of life satisfaction in family and especially in grandchildren for elderly Armenians. That is also the reason to explore this phenomenon in more countries where it can vary.

Keywords: *well-being, happiness, spirituality, belief, Christianity, Judaism, quality of life, interpretative phenomenological analysis*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The research aims to examine the quality of life and spirituality of people over 60 years of age among Armenians and Israeli Jews. Both nations have a different concept of their spirituality, which can also be reflected in their socio-cultural view of the world and subjective feeling of satisfaction. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to evaluate the results based on in-depth semi-structured interviews. The research goal is also encouraged by the fact that the number of elderly people is increasing.

In their research, Sawatzky, Ratner and Chiu (2005) found out in their meta-analysis based on 51 studies that spirituality stand in the relationship to the quality of life. Baysal (2022) states that in the positive psychology framework, spirituality is not only recognized as a vital character strength but also plays a crucial role with its functions like serving as a resource for individuals to draw upon during challenging times and acting as an effective strategy for coping. Salgado (2014) states that prayer is linked to a sense of control and is considered a type of intrinsic

motivation. Beliefs and religious practices often help to make sense of suffering, alleviate stress, provide self-care, and help in preventing depression.

The research of Meisenhelder and Chandler (2002) also confirmed a positive link between spirituality and mental health. Their research focused on analyzing how attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of spirituality are linked to physical and mental health outcomes among elderly community dwellers. It assessed the frequency of prayer, importance of faith, and the dependence on religion for coping, to see how these factors were associated with physical and mental health. The research results have shown that prayer, faith, and religious coping all have a strong positive correlation with mental health outcomes, but these measures have not shown a significant relationship with physical health.

These studies show the crucial role of spirituality on the quality of life which is also reflected in my research where spirituality is an important pillar for better understanding the depth of the interviews.

Every culture has its own guidelines and traditions for experiencing subjective well-being and quality of life. Mental well-being is understood differently across different cultures (Joshanloo, de Vliert, Jose, 2021). The authors also describe distinctions which include the importance of pleasure-seeking experiences, self-improvement, independence, and the impact of situational factors on well-being. These intersecting factors offer a structure for organizing and understanding the variety of cross-cultural research on mental well-being. The distinctive role of culture within the experience of quality of life and subjective well-being is why I have chosen to describe this phenomenon across different nations. Even though there is a considerable contrast between Armenian and Israeli culture, similarities in their fundamental pillars of happiness have also been found.

Uchida, Ogihara and Fukushima (2015) in their review stress the difference between the mindset of the East and West culture. They claim, that specifically in Japan, unlike in European American cultures where well-being is pursued through individual achievement or self-esteem, well-being is perceived as a state of balance and harmony, attained through collective and interdependent efforts. In the case of the chosen nations for this study, results show that Israeli respondents seem more individualistic oriented, whereas Armenians are immersed in their social interconnectedness for perceiving their achievements.

With the swift rise in life expectancy, there's growing interest in well-being during the later stages of life. Therefore, this study aims to emphasize the ways in which successful ageing in a multicultural perspective can be achieved, resulting in positive functioning and happiness in one's later years. The review study by Papadopoulos (2020) concluded that well-being along with religious and spiritual practices, play crucial roles in influencing the psychological health, life satisfaction, and social functioning of the elderly. The meaning of life was also explored in Li et al.'s (2010) study, involving 1,807 adolescents from Hong Kong, aimed to explore the relationship between the sense of life's meaning, optimism, and overall well-being. The findings indicated that having a sense of purpose and meaning in life is strongly associated with various positive outcomes related to well-being.

There are different research studies which have identified a positive link between spiritual well-being and the quality of life in older adults. Ali et al. (2015) and Heydari et al. (2012) each discovered a notable connection between these two aspects, with Heydari et al. (2012) highlighting that this correlation was especially pronounced in the psychological, social, and environmental aspects of quality of life.

However, some studies, such as You (2009), have not found a significant connection between spirituality and general health or depression. The research aimed at Koreans older than 65 years has not proven relationships between the importance of religion and general health and depression. Thus, this area also needs more attention for the exploration.

As we see in the study of Yoon (2004), the relationship between spirituality and subjective well-being also varies across different cultures. The research analyzed a sample of 215 elderly individuals from rural communities, including Caucasians, African Americans, and Native Americans, to investigate the impact of spirituality and religiousness on their subjective well-being. The study revealed ethnic variations in dependence on the level of religiosity and spirituality, and it also identified a significant link between aspects of religiousness and spirituality and subjective well-being across those ethnic groups of rural elderly individuals.

There has been important multicultural research made by Lun and Bond (2013) observed variations in the perception of quality of life and satisfaction based on the notion of spirituality within different national contexts around the world. They discovered that countries with a more prevalent spiritual life exhibited higher levels of life satisfaction compared to countries where spirituality was less prominent. In countries where religious faith is more commonly integrated into socialization, there was a positive correlation between spiritual practices and subjective well-being. Conversely, in countries with less emphasis on religious socialization, the link between spiritual practices and subjective well-being was negative. Furthermore, in countries experiencing greater social hostility towards religious groups, the positive connection between faith in religious leaders' authority and subjective well-being was more pronounced than in countries with milder hostility. Therefore, the relationship between various aspects of religion and spirituality and subjective well-being varies across different national settings.

All the studies mentioned above encourage us to immerse ourselves more in the phenomenon of the quality of life and spirituality of elderly people in two different cultures.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHOD

2.1 The aims of the thesis and the research question

The research focuses on investigating and detailing the relationship between seniors' experiences of spirituality and their quality of life. *The aim is to delineate how elderly individuals relate to their spiritual lives and personal satisfaction, with a particular focus on a multicultural perspective that encompasses both Israeli and Armenian populations.*

This research intends to deepen our understanding of how spirituality influences the quality of life among seniors, thereby contributing insights into the factors that enhance their satisfaction. This is particularly relevant given the growing population of elderly individuals. To provide a comprehensive multicultural perspective, the study includes Armenian and Israeli respondents,

representing two distinct cultural backgrounds. The methodological approach selected for achieving the study's objective is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). *The main research question it seeks to answer is: How do seniors with varying spiritual backgrounds experience the quality of life within a multicultural framework of the Armenian and Israeli populations?*

2.2 Research file

Participants in the study must represent the specified ethnicity and be senior citizens, aged over sixty years. The study will include 6 participants from each country, split evenly between three women and three men. This corresponds to the IPA suggestion to involve a limited number of participants. The need for an in-depth examination of experiences justifies concentrating on a select group of participants who accurately embody the phenomenon being studied (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006).

Selection of participants will be conducted using the snowball sampling method, with a requirement that they must be capable of conducting an interview in English. The snowball technique, an intentional sampling strategy, is often utilized in qualitative research for accessing populations that are challenging to reach (Naderifar, Goli, Ghaljaie, 2017).

Additional selection criteria for participants, regardless of nationality, include their level of education and the number of children they have. Each participant should possess at least a high school diploma and have 2 to 3 children. Furthermore, participants must be living in a marital relationship and share a common household. Adhering to these criteria ensures a higher degree of sample homogeneity, which is crucial for the interpretive phenomenological analysis approach adopted in this research. The key criterion for selecting participants is ensuring the sample's homogeneity, ensuring that the participants effectively encapsulate the phenomenon in question (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009).

2.3 Method of collecting and processing research data

For this study, a qualitative methodology was selected, aligning with the nature of the problem under investigation (Yin, 2014). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) specifically adopts a methodological perspective that values the personal and subjective experiences of individuals undergoing a particular phenomenon. This approach is characterized by its flexibility and its descriptive nature, allowing researchers to capture and contextualize lived experiences in detailed richness, while also exploring how individuals interpret these experiences (Cronin, Lowes, 2016). The above-described character of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is essential for the capturing of the research aim to depict the phenomenon of how elderly individuals relate to their spiritual lives and personal satisfaction from a multicultural perspective. Thanks to IPA, detailed contextual narratives are created, offering insights into the fundamental nature of significant phenomena (Cronin, Lowes, 2016).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables the identification of shared traits and variances within the ethnicity being studied. The research data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, as IPA suggests (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Such interviews are instrumental in IPA, facilitating a deep dive into the views and experiences of participants (O'Connor et al., 2008). Yet, they present challenges, especially in online formats where the

absence of non-verbal cues can be significant. (O'Connor et al., 2008). Thus, in this research, all participants were interviewed face-to-face. Audio recording was used to process the data, which Miovisky (2006) states is capable of capturing the nuances of speech, ensuring fairness and authenticity, thus being highly suitable for this study.

The inquiries of this study are categorized into five sections that explore life satisfaction and spirituality, rooted in the Areas of Life as a source of life satisfaction (Hawis and Fahrberg)¹, encompassing intimate relationships, relationship to oneself, relationship to the environment, social relationships, and spirituality. The research questions are designed to mirror these areas. The questions used were akin to those developed with Prof. PhDr. Vladimír Smékal, CSc., for my diploma work, with additional inspiration from the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (MacDonald, 2000) and The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995), tailored to address the aspects of quality of life more accurately.

To gather more comprehensive information about the participants, The Life Line method by Tyl (1985) was also employed. The schema named Areas of Life as a source of life satisfaction (Hawis and Fahrberg) acts as a guiding framework for the interviews and helps orient discussions within each thematic area. Nevertheless, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) outcomes are not bound by the initial schema. The topics analyzed in the interviews are identified independently from Hawis and Fahrberg's original schema. The categorization of topics raised by participants adheres to the IPA guidelines set forth by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009).

3.0 RESULTS

During my research in Israel, I engaged in semi-structured interviews with Jewish participants; however, access to the Palestinian territories was precluded due to prevailing security conditions at the time of data gathering. The interviewees unanimously conveyed that their sense of support, purpose, and happiness was deeply intertwined with the perpetuation of their familial lineage. They actively engaged with their grandchildren, organizing excursions and devising a variety of recreational activities. Additionally, half of the participants highlighted their participation in regular outdoor dance classes specifically tailored for seniors as a significant contributor to their daily wellbeing. The Jewish respondents were distinguished by a high level of engagement and maintained various interests, frequently of a cultural nature, well into their senior years. Some voiced criticisms of Israeli domestic policies, noting a dichotomy between rural residents' contentment with governmental actions and urban dwellers' inclination to protest. Nonetheless, they collectively expressed profound national pride and emphasized the importance of Jewish holidays and enduring traditions in their lives.

Most of them subscribed to atheism. They stressed that it was not true that in Judaism the religion and nationality weren't inseparable. Galit, a participant, exemplified this viewpoint stating, "MI am proud to be Jewish, but I definitely do not believe in God. I like religious celebrations because they are part of my culture, which I love, but I don't look for any spiritual essence in it." Generally, the respondents regarded Judaism primarily as a marker of national identity, distinct from religious

¹ Prof. PhDr. Vladimír Smékal, CSc., provided the schema for this research. The year the schema was created is unknown.

connotations, and classified themselves as atheists. They affirmed that familial relationships were the foundational aspect of their lives. Conversely, one participant, previously an adherent to Orthodox Judaism, disclosed that he had distanced himself from his religious beliefs several years prior to our dialogue. He reflected on the nature of religious observance within Judaism by noting, "In Judaism you can be religious a lot or not at all. Our faith has a lot of rules and commandments, and you either follow them or you don't. It's not very possible to choose a middle path here."

The participants primarily attributed their life's meaning to familial connections. They tended to reflect deeply on the question of happiness in life, and most reported that even when faced with the turmoil of war, they try to find happiness in the little things of everyday life, although they are not always successful. Concerns regarding personal security and the prospect of their future, coupled with sentiments of national solidarity and unity among Jewish individuals, were prominent themes in every interview. Many of them reflected deeply on themselves and the world and reported that they enjoyed discussions with many opinions and points of view. Respondents were also very keen to stress the importance of a proper academic education for themselves and for the nation as a whole. Their statements came across as open and intelligent and thoughtful.

In the context of Armenia, I conducted a series of semi-structured dialogues with Armenian participants; however, I was unable to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh due to extant security considerations. The participants universally underscored the importance of their national and spiritual customs, which they actively integrate into their daily practices. All interviewees reported that they regularly attend church services, with a unanimous affiliation to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Respondent Valentina's statement on this topic was, "I go to church regularly with my whole family, my mom's mom did it, her mom did it, and my granddaughter will continue to do it with her grandchildren." The prominence of religious ceremonies was a recurring motif among the Armenians engaged in this study. The data gleaned from these exchanges revealed a pronounced collective pride regarding Armenia's historical precedence as the inaugural nation to enshrine Christianity as the official state religion. They felt very strongly about their roots and spiritual traditions, as well as the strength of their ties with their loved ones, whom they perceived as their great social support.

Predominantly, participants articulated the notion that state provisions for their welfare were insufficient; however, they identified this deficit as a catalyst for strengthening the mutual support provided within their familial networks. They stressed that they were happy to be able to look after their grandchildren while their children were earning a living for the whole family. Comparable to Israeli Jewish counterparts, their profound daily joy was found in the intergenerational connections, especially those with their grandchildren. Moreover, they frequently expressed a sense of pride in their descendants' achievements and in experiencing them firsthand. The majority highlighted that their life satisfaction is manifested in their continued cohabitation with the extended family into their senior years, collaborating and providing reciprocal assistance. "It would be a shame for the young ones if the neighborhood knew that they had put us seniors in a nursing home. It happens, but they are rare exceptions and I feel sorry for those people. I am proud of the fact that our family ties are stronger than a rock," expressed respondent Alla.

The individuals of Armenian descent who participated in this study identified their spiritual practices and familial connections as the pivotal elements and central meanings of their existence. Concurrently, approximately half of the interviewees voiced concerns regarding financial difficulties. They underscored the precariousness of living at the margins of poverty and expressed

that greater economic stability would confer a more profound sense of tranquility upon themselves and their families. Notwithstanding these economic challenges, they generally reported satisfaction with their life circumstances. In a display of national pride that mirrors sentiments found among Israeli Jews, they frequently acknowledged their reliance on a supportive network that extends beyond immediate family members to encompass the broader Armenian community. This sentiment persisted despite the vast dispersion of the Armenian Diaspora, suggesting a perception of national unity akin to a tightly interwoven collective.

Similarly to the Jewish participants previously interviewed, Armenian respondents placed considerable emphasis on the importance of educational achievements. Despite their routine encounters with political and state-level instability, the narratives they provided did not convey a sense of acute concern regarding these disturbances. They were more inclined to concentrate on aspects that brought joy to their everyday lives rather than on elements that were not working. Nearly all respondents emphasized daily gratitude as a source of awareness of their satisfaction. The strength of their connections to each other and to their cultural and spiritual roots became their mainstay and answer to their quality of life.

The common themes identified among the groups of nations studied include national pride, culture and traditions, relationships, and education. Table 1 displays the shared themes and subthemes for the nationalities examined, as determined by IPA.

Table 1 Topics based on IPA for given nationalities

1. National Pride		
	Armenia	Israel
International issues	*	*
Fear of the future	*	*
Unity of the nation	*	*
2. Culture and Traditions		
	Armenia	Israel
Traditional celebrations	*	*
Religious traditions	*	*
Culture over spirituality		*
Strength of deep roots	*	*
Importance of holly mass	*	
3. Relationships		
	Armenia	Israel
United families	*	*
Importance of offsprings	*	*
Introspection		*
Everyday joy with the closets	*	*
Gratefulness	*	
4. Education		
	Armenia	Israel
Initiative mindset	*	*
Contemplation	*	*
Importance of Diploma	*	*

3.0 DISCUSSION

The research included data from twelve semi-structured interviews with participants from each country. These interviews were analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis, uncovering a range of themes and subthemes for each group of respondents. Common themes identified among the groups from the selected countries include national pride, culture and traditions, relationships, and education.

The research incorporated two countries—Israel and Armenia—due to their numerous differences, including spiritual and cultural aspects, as well as their many similarities, which encompass wartime threats, diaspora, and a sense of national pride and unity. In Israel, I conducted interviews with local Jews over the age of 60 who considered their national religion of Judaism important to their roots and cultural traditions. They adhered to religious customs and holidays, including synagogue visits, even those who identified as atheists. The source of their life satisfaction lies in the belief in the continuation of their lineage and actively spending time with grandchildren. However, the ongoing conflict serves as a constant internal tension in their daily lives, from which they manage to detach by focusing on the present moment where immediate danger is absent, allowing them to savor small joys with their loved ones or through their diverse hobbies.

In Armenia, interviews were conducted with local Armenians over the age of 60. All respondents reported that, in addition to family relationships, a major source of their contentment is their national religion—the Armenian Apostolic Church—to which they proudly belong. According to their testimonies, regular church attendance provides them with peace of mind and thus a sense of life satisfaction, despite the war unrest that Armenia faces. However, a significant issue for some participants was the inadequate income to meet basic living needs. Their family and community thus form an essential support network they can rely on. Similar to the Jews, the Armenian respondents also adhered to their cultural traditions and religious holidays. They often expressed gratitude for the small daily joys, most notably including the strength of bonds with their loved ones and their deep-rooted connections.

The research outcomes illustrate diverse understandings of national spirituality, which can be in the connection of the variations in life satisfaction. This aligns closely with Yoon's (2004) findings, which identified a strong link between differing views of spirituality and life satisfaction among various cultures. In a similar vein, Lun and Bond (2013) observed variances in life quality and satisfaction perceptions related to spirituality across different national contexts globally. They discovered that nations with more prevalent spiritual practices reported higher life satisfaction levels than those with a lesser focus on spirituality. In my research, for instance, it was revealed that while Armenians could alleviate their worries through their faith, Israeli Jews remained preoccupied with these concerns, leading to stress.

The outcomes are shaped by the researcher's personality and life context. Another limitation involves the participants' readiness to respond, as some might partially hide their real stories, leading to potentially skewed answers. Additionally, the selection process posed a limitation, particularly the choice of participants, which was conducted through the snowball sampling method as part of the selection strategy.

The findings of this research will further be contextualized with results from other countries, such as Bhutan and Norway. However, the potential for further exploration is substantial, as every country in the world can offer inspiration through its unique cultural context and distinctive approach to perceiving spirituality and life satisfaction.

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