

How do Multiple Dimensions of Religiosity Associate with Total and Disability-Free Life Expectancy among Older Adults in Taiwan?

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Objectives: Twelve years of panel follow-up data (1999 to 2011) is used to investigate the association between religiosity and life and disability-free life expectancy (LE/DFLE) in Taiwan. Much evidence on salutary effects of religion is based on the association between religious attendance and life expectancy in Western societies. This study expands the discourse in a number of ways: it looks at a broad set of religiosity dimensions, focuses on Taiwan, and adjusts the association for a number of intervening factors that are often implicated as mechanisms in the association.

Methods: Baseline data come from the 1999 “Taiwan Longitudinal Study on Aging” (TLSA) (N=4,440; Age 53 to 98). This wave of the TLSA is unique because it incorporated an extensive series of items on religiosity. Our study examines four dimensions: affiliation, attendance, belief and practice. The data contain measures of disability, repeated in panel data collected in 2003, 2007 and 2011. Mortality is monitored and linked to a national mortality database ensuring validity. LE/DFLE estimates use the recently modified version of the Stochastic Population Analysis of Complex Events software (SPACE).

Results: Our study first assesses unadjusted estimates of four religiosity dimensions on LE/DFLE and then, to ascertain whether associations are a function of intervening factors, adjusts estimates for health behaviors, social support and psychological well-being. Preliminary results indicate strong associations with attendance, moderate with other religiosity dimensions, and some effect of intervening factors. Associations are observed for both DFLE and LE.

Conclusion: The paper addresses unanswered questions regarding the association between religiosity and health. 1) Most research has taken place in the West where Judeo-Christian religions dominate. This study expands evidence to different religious traditions, norms and ways of expressing religious conviction. 2) Little research has looked at how religiosity associates with length of healthy in addition to total life. Our study suggests religion has impacts on both quality and quantity of life. 3) Religion is a complex construct and the benefits of religiosity may incorporate a range of components. Our study indicates associations across dimensions can vary.

Keywords: Disability, Religion, Taiwan