

Spirituality, not religion, is critical to black women's well-being

September 25 2014, by Sharita Forrest



RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY: New research by doctoral student Tamilia D. Reed, pictured, and educational psychology professor Helen A. Neville indicates that spirituality, rather than religiosity, may be the element that is critical to black American women's life satisfaction and mental health. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A number of studies have suggested that religion plays a critical role in black Americans' mental health and life satisfaction, aiding their ability to cope with personal and societal stressors. However, a new study indicates that spirituality, rather than religiosity, may be the element that is essential to black women's psychological well-being.

University of Illinois researchers Tamilya D. Reed and Helen A. Neville conducted the study, which appeared recently in the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

Reed is a doctoral student in counseling psychology in the College of Education and a graduate assistant counselor with the Faculty/Staff Assistance Program on the Urbana-Champaign campus. Neville is chair of the counseling psychology division and holds appointments in educational psychology and African-American studies.

While religiosity and [spirituality](#) are related, prior research has shown that black women perceive them to be distinct concepts.

Religiosity is typically defined in terms of an individual's participation in religious institutions and adherence to prescribed beliefs. Spirituality, on the other hand, involves meaning-making and relational dimensions, such as having a relationship with a higher power and being connected with other people and the universe, Reed said.

"For black women, interpreting the significance of life experiences via one's relationships may be more critical to mental health and [life satisfaction](#) than adherence to religious doctrine or engagement in [religious activities](#)," she said.

More than 160 black women participated in an Internet survey that explored their religious and spiritual values and practices. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 75 years. More than 60 percent of participants held graduate or professional degrees and identified themselves as middle class.

Participants were assessed on their [psychological well-being](#), their overall contentment with their lives and their religiosity – as evidenced by their participation in religious activities and their commitment to

common religious values. The survey also assessed their spirituality – i.e., their relationship with a higher power/universal intelligence, their beliefs regarding nature and their sense of purpose in life.

More than three-fourths – 79 percent – of participants reported that they were "fairly to very spiritual." Less than one percent said that they were "not at all spiritual."

In terms of religious affiliation, more than 82 percent were Christian (mostly Baptist), while 11 percent reported no religious affiliation and 7 percent were non-Christian (Buddhist, Neo-Pagan, Kemetic, Ifa or Muslim).

The researchers found that spirituality fully mediated the relationships between religiosity, mental health and life satisfaction – women who possessed higher degrees of spirituality had better mental health and were more satisfied with their lives.

"Spirituality's full mediation of the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction suggests that participants' relationships to other people and to divine beings, along with meaning-making processes, may be the underlying mechanism that connects religion to [mental health](#) and life satisfaction," Reed said. "Based on our findings in the current sample, positive psychological well-being for [black women](#) may be better accounted for directly by spirituality than by [religiosity](#)."

More information: Tamilya D. Reed and Helen A. Neville, "The Influence of Religiosity and Spirituality on Psychological Well-Being Among Black Women" *Journal of Black Psychology* August 2014 40: 384-401, first published on June 4, 2013 [DOI: 10.1177/0095798413490956](#)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Spirituality, not religion, is critical to black women's well-being (2014, September 25)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-spirituality-religion-critical-black-women.html>

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