

Memories of Elderly People about the Dimensions of Spirituality and Religiosity During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the memories of elderly people regarding the dimensions of spirituality and religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of Halbwachs' theory of social memories and the theory of social representations. This is an exploratory, cross-sectional study conducted in a Basic Health Unit, with 22 participants, using a sociodemographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview script. The results were analyzed using content analysis and categorized according to the similarity of the narratives. The statements highlighted the significance of participation in religious activities for these individuals and how the interruption of these activities had personal, social, and mental impacts. The exercise of spirituality was observed as a coping tool. The research also identified how religious television channels and social networks managed to mitigate the effects of the absence of in-person activities. The narratives also allowed the collective memories about this group's relationship with religion and spirituality during the pandemic to be revealed.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the SARS-COV 2 virus was identified as the cause of a severe respiratory disease, the repercussions of which led to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring a pandemic in March 2020. The first cases appeared in China, spreading rapidly and affecting various areas of society [1]. This virus has the ability to cause anything from asymptomatic infections to severe respiratory failure, causing symptoms such as fatigue, dry cough, and dyspnea, which can lead to serious conditions in patients [2]. In addition to physical health, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has also had implications for individuals' mental health and social lives.

In an unprecedented scenario, in which there were no defined strategic plans to be executed [3], one of the earliest measures enacted was social isolation of the population, mainly due to the contagious nature of the virus. In addition to being an effective measure to prevent the spread of the pandemic, isolation, on the other hand, caused changes in the population's behaviour, increasing the level of physical inactivity and causing a deterioration in eating habits [4]. This context of social isolation, coupled with the global scenario of infections,

deaths, and fear, has also led to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression [5]. In the context of religion and spirituality, the pandemic period also had significant impacts, such as adaptations, for example, the use of online platforms to transmit messages, in addition to encouraging the exercise of faith at this historic moment [6,7].

Despite the interrelationship between the terms, religion and spirituality are distinct dimensions and have well-established concepts. Religion is considered a doctrine and is the expression of individual choices, while spirituality is part of the nature of the individual [8] and does not depend on a religious component [9]. During the pandemic, individuals' relationship with religion and spirituality revealed a reduction in negative impacts on mental health, often becoming a tool to help them cope with the process [10]. The use of religion and spirituality in times of crisis, such as during the pandemic, is not restricted to any age group, being practiced by everyone from children to the elderly [11]. However, it is worth noting in this context the significance of these dimensions for older adults, who often see religion/religiousness as the true meaning of existence, which is particularly prominent among the Brazilian population.

This group of individuals, along with the entire world population, faced the challenges of the COVID-19 [12] pandemic with great delicacy. The elderly population suffered from high mortality rates during the pandemic period, being categorized as a risk population, mainly due to their association with Chronic Noncommunicable Diseases (CNCs) [13]. Due to the particularities of these individuals, the aforementioned measures to prevent contagion were even more incisive, such as social isolation. This process had negative repercussions on the physical and mental health of this population, with some outcomes including anxiety, depression, and impaired sleep quality, even requiring multidisciplinary care [14,15]. In this perspective, the present study aims to reveal the memories of elderly people about the dimensions of spirituality and religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic in light of Halbwachs' theory of social memories and the theory of social representations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is an exploratory cross-sectional study with a qualitative approach, based on the theoretical and methodological contributions of Collective Memory and Social Representations Theories. This work is part of a doctoral thesis entitled: Memory and social representations of elderly people regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their health, from the Graduate Program in Memories: Language and Society, at the State University of Southwest Bahia.

The study was conducted in a Basic Health Unit (UBS) located in a peripheral neighbourhood in the interior of the state of Bahia. The participants in this study were 22 UBS users, randomly selected by the health team to undergo a geriatric consultation at the unit where the interviews were conducted. Participants met the following criteria: they were aged 60 years or older, resided in the area covered by the UBS, and had the communication and cognitive abilities necessary to respond to the questionnaire and interview script for the study.

Two instruments were used to collect data for the study: a questionnaire for sociodemographic data and a semi-structured interview script with questions related to the pre, during, and post-COVID-19 pandemic periods, focusing on issues related to physical and mental health, as well as preventive measures for coronavirus transmission.

The interviews were conducted at the health centre itself or at home, by prior appointment with the UBS health team. Initially, the elderly were invited to participate in the research with an adequate explanation of its content,

followed by reading and signing the informed consent form. The interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission, and then transcribed in full by the researcher himself, with the help of the Reshape platform (<https://www.reshape.com.br/>) to convert audio to text.

The interviews were analyzed using the Content Analysis technique described by Laurence Bardin [16], with the support of the qualitative data analysis tool Iramuteq 2013, which codes and stores the corpus in categories and enables the use of Bardin's content analysis. Thus, the interviews and information from the focus group were transcribed, an initial reading was carried out, and hypotheses and objectives were formulated.

The research project was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Faculdade Independente do Nordeste (Protocol No. 5,340,843). The participants involved in this research were informed about the objectives of this study and only participated after signing the Free and Informed Consent Form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For a better understanding of the results found, we chose to present and discuss them in four segments. The first two segments address older adults' perceptions of the practice of religion and spirituality during the pandemic, as well as the restrictions on these activities, attributing the meaning of these dimensions to these individuals. The third and fourth segments cover the instrumentalization of religion and spirituality during the pandemic and the strategies used.

Collective memory of the interruption of religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the risk of virus contamination, during the COVID-19 pandemic, recommendations were established to suspend numerous in-person celebrations, including in religious temples, where crowds of people inevitably gather: 1. Memória coletiva da interrupção das atividades religiosas durante a pandemia COVID-19

- I didn't go to Catholic church for over a year because of my husband's age. We didn't go for over a year (Interview 21).

In this sense, given the global scenario and the interruption of in-person religious activities, the statements of the elderly people interviewed in this study showed how these individuals were impacted and how this affected their social lives. The statements also pointed to the significance of social participation in religious activities for these individuals. The relevance of religion/spirituality in their lives:

- For me, the worst part of the pandemic was not being able to go to church. Not being able to go to the doctor wasn't a problem, because everyone stopped going (Interview 5).
- Before the pandemic, I went to church every week. Ave Maria, I would rather go without food than miss going to the seminary there (Interview 18).

The narratives of older adults, as in the study by Nunes et al. [16], showed that spirituality, religiosity, and personal beliefs are associated with feelings of satisfaction in this group of individuals, as well as social support. In addition, the well-being of these individuals is positively affected by spiritual practices, which were negatively affected during the pandemic due to the interruption of these activities.

As in this study, Oliveira and Menezes [17] also reported that religion and religiosity are resources and tools present in the human aging process, being attributed a high degree of meaning and importance by individuals undergoing this process. According to these authors, religion/religiosity is associated with the process of human beings finding themselves, establishing meaning for the existence of older adults, and allowing them to feel active and a sense of solidarity with others.

As Halbwachs [18] points out in his work, individuals' memories are always collective memories. According to this sociologist, even though personal experiences, viewing events from a unique and individual perspective, memories will always be collective. This aspect applies to the present study, in which, even in social isolation within their own homes, the elderly people investigated here had collective memories.

Thus, the reflections described here, although personal, reverberate group experiences, according to Halbwachs' Theory of Collective Memories. In this case, the religious groups to which they belonged. Even without physical contact, the narratives were very similar, revealing a supposed nonconformity with the situation in which they found themselves, highlighting the value of these practices for these individuals.

Halbwachs [18] also states in his theory that when entering a sacred place, Christians know that they will feel a state of mind they have experienced there before, creating an environment of shared memories with the other people who occupy these spaces. As seen in this study, the inability to physically access these places caused discomfort to these individuals, mainly because they were unable to access the state of well-being that the physical temple promoted in them, as well as establish the bonds they already had in that environment.

Collective memories of the impacts on mental health

The pandemic period had direct repercussions on the physical health of individuals affected by the virus. However, effects on mental health were also noted, with no age restrictions [18]. Thus, older adults were affected in this regard, and narratives conveying this were noted in this study:

- The pandemic affected my health more in terms of anxiety, because I was used to going to church every day, you know? So, I felt trapped (Interview 2).

The pandemic period had direct repercussions on the physical health of individuals affected by the virus. However, effects on mental health were also noted, regardless of age group [19]. Thus, older adults were affected in this regard, and narratives conveying this were noted in this study:

- The pandemic affected my health more in terms of anxiety, because I was used to going to church every day, right? Then I got stuck (Interview 2).

Most of the statements observed mainly describe how social isolation and the lack of interaction with individuals in these people's social circles, imposed during this period, had a negative impact on the mental and emotional health of this group:

- The church people who always came stopped coming, and I missed them because I like church (Interview 8).

According to the study by Roy et al. [20], the social isolation promoted by social distancing protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 affected the psychological well-being of older adults, especially due to this group's involvement in social and religious gatherings. The statements observed in this study confirm this:

- I missed going to church because all my friends are there every Sunday. I missed it (Interview 14).

It is clear from this that religious gatherings and spiritual practices are also places of leisure for older adults, where they can establish friendships, interact with others, and feel welcome. It is possible to observe in the interviewees' statements how the absence of these physical gatherings has led to feelings of loneliness and sadness.

The exacerbation of negative feelings in older adults during the pandemic was also reported in the study by Narciso et al [21]. The data obtained from an institutionalized population reinforced how the process of isolation of these individuals is associated with poorer mental health, highlighting the importance of adopting strategies

aimed at caring for this area of health and encouraging mental health care and social interaction among this group. As in the present study, feelings of sadness, fear, worry, and isolation were also reported.

- I stopped going to church during the pandemic, but I've started going again. [...] I was afraid of catching COVID-19 when all those deaths started happening, you know? (Interview 17).

Naranjo-Hernandez et al. [22] also showed in their study that the unsatisfactory emotional states detected in older adults during the pandemic may be associated with the fact that these individuals were not attending their religious practices or visiting friends, family, or neighbours. This finding, as well as that of the present study, corroborates the understanding that distancing from daily activities, especially those of a religious nature, promoted feelings of loneliness and negative emotions in these groups, which contributed to mental illness.

According to Halbwachs [18], in order for people to remember their steps, they draw on the memories of others, recalling references beyond their individual perspective. People then retrieve references from society and the group to which they belong, thus building up a wealth of memories. The narratives described here point to this. They reveal the emotional reverberations of the pandemic in a group that was previously involved in social and religious gatherings, in places of connection and interaction, from which they retrieved memories of how they felt at that moment and how they were mentally affected by social distancing.

Collective memories and social representations of the use of religion and spirituality as tools for coping, hope, and comfort during the pandemic

The approaches to religion and spirituality in the statements of the elderly people in this study focused on the use of these tools as a strategy for coping with the pandemic period. In a context of many fears and uncertainties, many individuals used spiritual and religious practices as a refuge to alleviate negative feelings.

The elderly people interviewed reported that, despite the impacts on their mental health, the news about the increase in the number of cases, the increase in the number of deaths of people infected with the diseases, and sometimes the impacts on their own physical health and that of those close to them, there was confidence and security in a higher being that provided strength and hope to face that period. Some of the statements are highlighted:

- I was very worried, but I clung to God. When I first heard the news about COVID-19, I didn't feel anything, because I said, "God blesses us and doesn't let it happen to us" (Interview 6).
- I am a person who prays. All I know how to do is pray, kneel down, and pray. In the silence of Mary [...] But I turned things around and said to myself: "Don't lose heart. Be strong, be strong. You will overcome [...] It is faith that helps me, that gives me this strength" (Interview 11).

Peixoto et al. [23] also identified that the exercise of faith in older adults during the pandemic mitigated feelings of helplessness and provided feelings such as confidence and peace. According to these authors, religiosity and spirituality are relevant strategies for coping with situations that challenge the quality of life of older adults, such as the circumstances generated by COVID-19. Similarly, the study by Ke et al. [24] noted that during the period of restrictions and social distancing, religion was used as a coping mechanism by older adults through prayer, which helped them during the quarantine period by comforting them.

The fear caused by the new virus, associated with the categorization of elderly people into well-known risk groups due to the particularities of this group's health, was also mitigated through the exercise of spirituality and religious practices. The statements identified in this study listed how this tool was used as an instrument of comfort and hope, as can be seen in the statements below:

- Religion helped me a lot to deal with this fear, everything is under God's eyes, right? I said my prayers and asked God for guidance (Interview 9).
- I wasn't afraid, I clung to God, I hoped that I could still get up [...] (Interview 15).

The research conducted by Nunes et al. [16] showed that the application of spirituality in the daily lives of older adults during the pandemic contributed to their well-being and minimized suffering and mental distress, providing support for fear, anxiety, insecurity, and other negative feelings, becoming a source of hope and improving their quality of life.

According to Halbwachs' Theory of Collective Memory¹⁸, what we understand as individual memories are, in reality, points of view of collective memory, and this point of view changes according to the place and relationships in which the individual is inserted. Thus, as can be observed in this study, although the interviewees' statements reveal personal perspectives on the use of religion and spirituality as a coping tool, they are all points of view of a larger collective memory. Thus, from this macro perspective, this group of individuals experienced the instrumentalization of religion/spirituality as positive coping during the pandemic, in which they were able to find comfort and security.

Along the same lines, Moraes et al. [27] explain that Moscovici's Theory of Social Representations helps describe and explain social phenomena, making it suitable for justifying the phenomena observed in this study. As these authors point out, groups of individuals acquire knowledge, develop it, and crystallize it over time, reproducing these thoughts and behaviors in a similar way. These events are visualized in the statements of the elderly people who participated in this research, as they narrate the characteristics of the social representation that religion/spirituality has for them.

Collective memories and social representations of the use of religious channels and their repercussions during the pandemic

Due to the social isolation restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and measures prohibiting activities that could lead to large gatherings of people, masses, worship services, and group meetings were suspended. As a result, on a global scale, various sectors had to adapt to the new context.

Thus, the digital reality took over and offered new ways of accessing which was in-person before the pandemic. Sales companies, for example, adopted the use of websites and product advertising on social media, including food sales, which facilitated the purchasing process for individuals who could not leave their homes due to the risk of contamination.

Similarly, educational institutions had to adjust to the new teaching-learning process by adopting the use of communication and information technologies [26]. Online platforms such as YouTube and social media were chosen to broadcast spiritual and religious celebrations, while messaging apps served as a means of communication to promote dialogue, social interaction, and the sharing of words of comfort during that period.

Some elderly people in this study reported using television to follow Masses and prayer channels:

- During the pandemic, I stopped going to church and started watching Mass on television (Interview 12).
- I started watching religious programs more often. That's what helped me overcome it (Interview 13).

In addition, the elderly people in this study also reported using church groups on social media to interact with people who were part of their social circle in these environments and also to access messages of faith:

- Television helped me a lot to deal with this fear. And the groups I have on WhatsApp, a church group and a group here in São Paulo. The church group helped me a lot (Interview 21).
- Before the pandemic, I used to go to church, but then churches closed, so I participated via my cell phone. Because there were many church groups (Interview 16).

This axis was included in the present study due to the relevance attributed to these channels by the elderly people interviewed. It was possible to note how these technologies managed to mitigate the absence of in-person spiritual and religious activities. It was even reported how these channels provided positive feelings of hope and strength by transmitting prayers and positive words to these individuals:

- We didn't miss church very much, because we turned on the television at the right times for the rosary and Mass. Television helped us; the bad news on television didn't bother us here (Interview 20).
- It is my faith that helps me, that gives me strength. The prayer channel on television gives me strength. They can't take that channel off the air (Interview 11).

The study by Serafim et al., [27] which assessed the perceptions of elderly people of different religions during the COVID-19 pandemic, also identified the use of electronic devices in this group, especially cell phones, for using social networks to communicate with other people, search for prayers, and watch celebrations and worship services, which were also identified in the present study.

According to Halbwachs [18], the sequence of memories, including even the most personal ones, is explained by the changes they cause in relationships with the collective, by the changes they generate. The memories described here, of individuals adapting to the need to access their religious field accessing these resources through technology reflect how the construction of this group's memories is linked to Halbwachs' reflection. The changes generated during this period had repercussions on the elaboration of these memories, impacted the sequence of memories, and reverberated in the construction of this group's collective memory.

Adaptations to the new pandemic scenario were necessary and these built legitimate social representations, highlighting how society has adjusted and adapted to new ways of experiencing faith. In this specific aspect, regarding the use of religious channels, cell phones, and social networks, it was possible to verify that new forms of social representation of technology were generated in the elderly. A new social representation of how religion can be experienced, and how technology has provided a way to connect with religion or spirituality.

Furthermore, the social representation of loneliness may even have been redefined in this process, since, in light of the above, physical isolation did not necessarily represent spiritual isolation, as older adults continued to practice their religion through the channels available to them, even if from within their homes. Thus, television, previously attributed to entertainment, and technology, often associated with complexity of access and use by the elderly, came to represent means of spiritual experience, helping individuals connect with their faith and the religious community to which they belong.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It was noted, through the memories revealed by the elderly people in this study, that religion and spirituality were dimensions directly affected during the pandemic period. The participants revealed how they felt and what the impacts were of the interruption of the religious activities they usually performed. They also listed how their mental health was affected in this context, especially in relation to the process of social isolation and not being able to attend religious temples and group meetings.

Furthermore, it was remarkable how religion and spirituality were used as coping strategies and tools in the face of the unprecedented and complex situation these individuals experienced, with statements of hope, security, and comfort in faith being expressed. Another point that was highlighted in the narratives was the use of religious channels and technology as instruments to continue accessing and participating in religious celebrations, maintaining contact with other people who were part of their religious/spiritual context.

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