

## Finding Spirits in Spirituality: What are We Measuring in Spirituality and Health Research?

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**Abstract** What are we asking when we ask about spirituality? When research subjects check survey boxes for “religiosity” and “spirituality” measures on health surveys, those of us who use them often assume that these responses indicate a relationship with—or reaction against—normative, conventional, Protestant-shaped religious practice and experience. We present a qualitative interview study of 13 low-income mothers with a history of depression, analyzing their descriptions of spiritual and religious coping practices. On the basis of a focused analysis of four mother’s narratives, we argue that conventional survey answers may frequently hide more than they reveal about people’s cultural, religious, and idiosyncratic experiences with ghosts, spirits, magic, and haunting presences that are relevant, sometimes integral, to illness and healing. We demonstrate that listening to participants’ narratives challenges researchers’ unconsciously normative assumptions and ought to help us reshape our understanding of the ways spirituality and religion influence health in a hyperdiverse society.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Measurement · Methodology · Religion · Depression · Spiritual coping · Narrative analysis · Ghosts · Magic · Communication with the dead · Spirits · Culture and measurement bias · Poverty, stress, and depression · Trauma

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## Introduction

What are we asking when we ask about spirituality? When research subjects check survey boxes for “religiosity” and “spirituality” measures on health surveys, those of us who use these measures often assume that these responses represent a relationship with—or reaction against—normative, conventional, Protestant-shaped religious practice and experience, such as attending church, finding comfort in scripture, social support, and personal prayer for divine intervention. In this essay, we suggest that these survey answers may frequently hide more than they reveal about people’s cultural, religious, and idiosyncratic experiences with ghosts, spirits, and haunting presences that are relevant, sometimes integral, to illness and healing.

Our team, consisting of a medical anthropologist with a background in comparative religion, a divinity school student, and a doctoral student in psychology of religion, began this study of spirituality and maternal depression with what we thought was an open-ended concept of spirituality, but we were surprised by what we found. We do not, therefore, raise these questions about measurement to suggest that we have arrived and have the answers, but rather to demonstrate that listening to participants’ narratives challenges researchers’ unconsciously normative assumptions and ought to help us reshape our understanding of the phenomena we seek to discuss.

## Background

Debates about how to understand spirituality have been a constant feature within the psychology of religion. For most of its history, the term spirituality was used to describe a specific form of the wider category, religion (Oman 2014; Sheldrake 1998). But toward the middle of the twentieth century and beyond, spirituality was increasingly considered as something distinct from religion (Barnes 2003). Often this distinction was framed in terms of contrast.

Most generally, spirituality designates the more inward and personal sides of relating to the sacred, in contrast to religion, which denotes the more institutional or organized forms of relating to the sacred (Oman 2014; Pargament et al. 2013). But, the dichotomies drawn between religion and spirituality vary widely: religion is external/spirituality is internal; religion is objective/spirituality is subjective; religion is fixed/spirituality is flexible, etc. (Pargament et al. 2013; Zinnbauer et al. 1999). These polarized characterizations of religion and spirituality persist within popular conceptions and even influence some attempts to formally study the two concepts. But, as many have argued (cf. Pargament et al. 2013), such polarizations are riddled with theoretical problems.

Foremost among these difficulties is the fact that religion and spirituality are not easily separable—individualized spirituality often depends on the given forms of institutionalized religion, while organized religion is built from the personal proclivities and nuance of practitioners (Pargament et al. 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that any supposedly clean polarization quickly falls under the weight of counterexamples. But, this demand for careful avoidance of polarization is not the same as suggesting that there is no difference between religion and spirituality. Perhaps the contrast between the two is most apparent within the category of “spiritual but not religious.” Yet even here scholars have shown that often the category is used politically by individuals to distance themselves from what is perceived as the rigid institutional forms of religious traditions (Ammerman 2006; Hood

2003). Even more problematically, other studies have shown that the distinction between religion and spirituality is not widely used by many marginalized groups in the USA (e.g., Chatters et al. 2008). The question remains: how do we avoid evaluative polarizations while still accurately capturing the meaning of each term in ways that are widely inclusive?

As a resolution to this difficulty, Pargament has defined spirituality as “the search for the sacred” and religion as “the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality” (Pargament et al. 2013). These definitions appropriately reflect the interdependence of religion and spirituality without reifying polarized characterizations that misrepresent the terms. Furthermore, casting spirituality as the search for the sacred is sufficiently vague and broad to handle the wild diversity of phenomenon labeled as spiritual. But, when we move beyond theory to measure spirituality, this vagueness is necessarily refined. Therefore, we must remain vigilant to what is obscured and what is highlighted within the process of measurement, i.e., which aspects of “the search for the sacred” do we capture and which do we miss?

Multiple scholars have reviewed the available measures of spirituality and religiousness within the psychology of religion (cf. Hill and Edwards 2013). In a recent review, Hill (2014) draws from Tsang and McCullough (2003) to suggest that measures of religiousness and spirituality can be organized hierarchically. The broadest level, or type of measure, are those that assess a *dispositional* spirituality. For example, Piedmont’s (1999) Spiritual Transcendence Scale is aimed to measure an individual’s ability “to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective perspective” (p. 988). Piedmont’s understanding of spirituality, reflected in this measure, depends on elements of transcendence, expansion, and a correspondingly encompassing sense of insight. Another broad-level measure is Paloutzian and Ellison’s (1982) Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), which is widely used in the mental health literature. The SWBS includes both religious well-being, referring largely to one’s perceived relationship to God, and existential well-being, which is a blend of sense of purpose, life satisfaction, and positive relationships with others. Jointly these two dimensions give a measure of spiritual well-being. Within this measure, spirituality is construed through a relation to God that specifically bears upon an individual’s feelings of purpose and meaning, which shape emotional and social states.

Other broad-level measures assess religious or spiritual commitment, such as the Religious Commitment Inventory (Worthington et al. 2003), which leaves spirituality implicitly defined and instead assesses the way in which individuals organize their lives around their spirituality. Another approach is to assess spiritual practices rather than spirituality per se. While such practice-oriented scales vary widely, as they are designed to be used with specific traditions, they commonly characterize prayer as one of the most typical spiritual practices (e.g., Ladd and Spilka 2002). Emphasizing prayer implicitly reinforces a view of spirituality as internal and individual.

We highlight these tacit conceptions of spirituality not to argue that they are misguided. Instead we review them to show how they reflect specific slices of the wide and diverse range of phenomena that can be understood as spiritual. More specifically, these conceptions still construe spirituality as a largely individual phenomenon that infuses everyday life with a higher or deeper meaning that is experiential, emotional, and noetic. Whether or not this is the appropriate cluster on which to focus our attention remains an open question; and as we mentioned before, there are indications that this characterization of spirituality in contrast to religion may not be appropriate for many minority groups within the USA (Chatters et al. 2008).

Beyond the broad, dispositional level measures of spirituality, other measures examine the more specific functional dimensions of spiritual practice. The most commonly used is the Religious Coping Scale (RCOPE; Pargament et al. 2000). This scale assesses how individuals engage in their religion or spirituality to deal with stress, whether physical, social, or psychological. Furthermore, the RCOPE divides into both positive and negative religious coping strategies such as seeking spiritual support, benevolent religious reappraisal, or religious purification (Pargament et al. 2000). These functions range from psychological capacities like meaning-making, to community-based functions like social support. The advantage of such a functionally determined measure is that it leaves spirituality largely undefined: any participant will respond from their own understanding of what is spiritual for them. Yet, as scholars we are still left with the responsibility of interpretation, which should ideally approximate the conceptions of spirituality that respondents are deploying. Therefore, it is important that we remain attuned to the full range of emic understandings of spirituality.

The appreciation of emic conceptions is even more necessary with regard to scales that use a single-item measure to ask how spiritual one considers themselves to be. For example, the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS; Fetzer Institute/National Institute of Aging Working Group 1999) includes 10 domains (e.g., Daily Spiritual Experiences, Values/Beliefs, and Private Religious Practices) but is also summarized by an overall measure. This overall measure includes two items in which an individual rates herself (from 1 to 4) as a religious and as a spiritual person. Here, the critical question is whether the researcher's understanding of spirituality—potentially shaded by tacit conceptions like those highlighted above (e.g., internal, individual, transcendent, and meaningful)—matches the understanding from which individuals respond.

In a significant critical essay on measurement, Hall and colleagues suggest that “measures of religiousness tend to focus on belief or experience, rather than the more nebulous notions of character formation, virtue, or cultural-linguistic fluency” (Hall et al. 2004, 393). Rather than measuring spirituality by the most appropriate means (on a religious tradition's emic terms), researchers tend to measure what is most convenient or observable. The authors, following A.R. Feinstein, call this an “avoid-and-divert” strategy. They conclude that “spirituality has substance and form only within the cultural-linguistic context in which it finds expression.” Such a perspective suggests that an ethnographically informed qualitative study of “spirituality” might raise epistemological and methodological questions about the relationship between religious or spiritual coping and mental well-being. Concepts of self, person, health, and religion differ cross-culturally, as do the idioms with which wellness and dis-ease are expressed (Shweder and Bourne 1984; Germond and Cochrane 2010; Nichter 2010).

## Methods

The discussion that follows is based on transcripts of 13 qualitative interviews conducted with mothers in the greater Boston, Massachusetts, region between October 2014 and May 2015. The women, who were recruited from a previous study on maternal depression among low-income women, shared four basic criteria. The first was economic. The original study recruited women through Head Start (federally funded preschool) centers attended by their children. Therefore, at the time of their recruitment in 2012 their incomes fell below the federal poverty line or they met other criteria (e.g., receiving social security income,

housing insecure, or foster family) (“MASSACHUSETTS HEAD START ASSOCIATION” 2016). Second, all screened positive at that time for either a full depressive episode based on the MINI-MDE test or “depressive symptoms” based on a modified PHQ-2 scale (Löwe et al. 2005; Lecrubier et al. 1997). Third, the mothers we selected form the original sample spoke English and, fourth, all answered positively to at least one of two questions about spiritual coping (Brief COPE; Carver 1997) on a survey administered by the previous study (Feinberg et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Once identified, participants were recruited by phone for a one-time, in-depth interview that focused on four key domains: mothers’ explanatory models for their stress and depression symptoms, their spiritual and religious coping practices, their experiences of motherhood, and their attitudes and beliefs about mental health. Interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant (e.g., participants’ homes, local cafes, or other convenient locations) and lasted an average of 45 min. Our team of three researchers used NVivo 10 (QSR 2014) to apply a modified grounded theory analysis of themes, followed by narrative analysis of interviews for greater depth and context.

Additionally, participants filled out the Stressful Life Events Screening Questionnaire (Goodman et al. 1998), a quantitative measure of past traumatic history. At the end of the interview, participants were given a thank-you card and an information sheet with local resources for families. As human subjects research, the study was approved by the institutional review board at Boston University School of Medicine.

## Finding

The interviewer asked participants questions about “spirituality” in relation to motherhood, stress, or depression and about “spiritual and religious practices” for coping. To our surprise, several women spoke about their own relationships—or those of a close relative—with spirits of dead relatives and friends, or with ghosts. They talked about seeing lights and having premonitions about the death of others. In particular, we found that relating to spirits was a part of how these participants grieve and maintain a sense of community amidst the persistent loss of loved ones. These findings led us to explore how interactions with spirits add a dimension to the concept of spirituality, and to its relationships with coping and health.

## Whom are We Asking?

Given that the mothers in our study were recruited from Head Start centers throughout greater Boston, they formed a diverse group with differing religious affiliations, ethnicities, approaches to depression, and goals for healing. Five women in the study self-identified as African-American, five identified as Latina, two as multiracial, and one as white. Four women identified as non-denominational Christians, four as Catholic, two as Baptist, one as Pentecostal, and two as religiously unaffiliated. Nevertheless, within this

<sup>1</sup> The items are as follows:

Item 22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.  
Item 27. I've been praying or meditating.

diversity certain commonalities emerged. All the women shared the common experiences of raising young children, a history of depression, and living with limited financial resources in a city whose median rent in 2013 was the third highest in the nation (Capperis et al. 2015).

Additionally, as the interviews and subsequent trauma questionnaires revealed, experiences of loss and violence were extremely common within the group. The SLESQ trauma screen is scored on a scale from 0 to 13, based on 13 primary questions that cover sexual assault and molestation, emotional and physical abuse, and other traumas. Each response of “yes” counts as one point—as one type of trauma that may have occurred many times in a woman’s life. In our study, only two mothers reported scores of 0; the median was 4, and scores reached as high as 9. Stories told during the interviews bore out these quantitative results. Although women tended to avoid describing their own experiences of violence, they did characterize violent or deeply unjust events as the fundamental sources of their sadness—a best friend shot in the head and killed, frustration over an inability to move out of substandard housing, a daughter in the grip of heroin addiction. Often, women had experienced more than one of such events, leading them to view struggle as a likely, if unjust, long-term reality. In contrast, despite a general familiarity among the women with therapy and pop-psychological language—they said little to nothing about chemical imbalances or off-kilter internal emotional regulation. Thus, within a diverse group of women, a common experience emerged in which depression was viewed as situational and chronic, originating outside of oneself rather than from within.

## Asking About “Spirituality”

Our thematic analysis yielded more general descriptions of, and perspectives on, religious or spiritual practices that the participants said helped when they were down, depressed, or stressed. These included small social support networks in a hostile world; unending battles in everyday life; and rich framing narratives. We will discuss these themes in greater depth in another publication; for this paper, we will instead focus on how the participants in this study conceived of the “spiritual” and “religious” as they coped with stress and depression.

The perspectives of two mothers illustrate the fluidity of the terms “religious” and “spiritual.” Sandra, who chronicled her struggles with drug addiction, violence, and major depression, explained that “the difference in NA and the church: the church is religion, and the meetings is spiritual. So if you go to both of those places, you’re gonna get something.” She describes church as “more of rules and regulations,” while NA spirituality is about becoming “more calm, cool, collect, um, more um, aware of your surroundings, more aware of your internal needs and stuff.” For others like Rose, “spirituality” means having values, or orienting oneself toward the good. She asserts, “sometimes the biggest part of being spiritual is how you’re raised. It’s not what you get from church.... I think that’s, sometimes those values I think give you a better, you know, more comfort than seeking just being spiritual through religion.”

Two important themes emerge in Rose’s stories: surviving and passing on good values to her son. Rose’s current living situation threatens both. She begins by saying she has “no family here,” and explains her living situation and the central conflict with the mother of her baby’s father as a counterpoint to real family. Her excursus on the religion of her

grandmother, a “religion” Rose rejects, ends with “church can be like family” (even though she does not go). She eventually returns to the theme of “how you were raised” as more important than spirituality or religion, remarking that as a mother, she is “turning into my grandfather,” whom she describes as “most generous.” She concludes that “it’s good to help people.”

Sandra, whose church/NA dialectic we recounted earlier, agrees:

I just grew up in believing, you know, feed your mind spiritual things, because it helps me to look at a situation through a set of spiritual eyes, rather than just my eyes ...like, sometimes you say, “what would God do in a case like this?” God’s loving and caring, patience, understanding. Sometimes things happen and we don’t understand it, but you know I believe that everything is done in this world for a reason; even if you don’t understand right now, later on you will.

She sums up, “it’s important to do good, and not bad and evil, because bad and evil is gonna come back at you.” Sandra relates this sense of evil that comes back to getting “a spiritual beating”:

Once you know the word, once you’ve been put in a place, ... and you still continue to do some stuff, ... spiritually, you’ll get bankrupt, because so many, like negative things will happen to you, and even though you’re alive you’ll still feel dead. ...And I don’t ever, ever, ever, ever want to feel like that again, ‘cause I’ve been there. Like feeling like the world is over.

Here, we see her explanatory model for depression, as a consequence of “doing bad,” whereas “spirituality” orients one’s life toward God and good values.

While Sandra relies on NA to meet some of her spiritual needs, she also turns to “Gospel music,” which “seems to soothe my soul and my spirit, and it makes me feel like everything is gonna be okay.” Similarly, Erica finds that Gospel music provides a spiritual orientation, which she describes as not wanting “to live in fairy tale, I want to live in reality. I want to live happy. I want to live spiritually. I want to live righteous—you know what I’m saying? Like I don’t want to live, like for the cars, for the money. I want happiness, I want, you know, the love.” Living spiritually, for these two women, means to live by a set of “righteous” and positive values.

Our thematic codes for spirituality also captured the sense of God’s role in leading or guiding the individual in relation to both stress and peace. For instance, Angelica describes feeling like “I need an answer from God.” She continues, “When you’re looking for an answer, the way that he gives you an answer is just like, when you make a decision and you feel peace, that’s what you should do. Whenever, you know like, if I’m trying to make a decision and I’m waiting for an answer from God, I’m getting like fatigued about it or stressed about it, that’s not the right thing for me to do.” Spirituality thus refers to a sensitivity to God’s leading and an affective sense of “peace.” In a slightly different way, Mary explains that both Bible studies and baptism brought her a similar sense of peace. “With the depression it helped me even better because the Bible would bring me to certain chapters that would identify with me,” she says. Deciding to baptize her children after the last one was born, she was then baptized herself:

So I baptized them, and then I went in the water, and I told, I said to my mother, it’s like I couldn’t explain it, I was waiting for that testimony, and then there it came. When I went in that water, it felt like everything that was bothering me went in that

water when I raised up. So like it could've been like arguing with my husband, it could be things wasn't right in my life, when I got in that water all of it went away.

Mary continues to explain the feeling, “My mother-in-law said some people when they get baptized they feel fire. Some people say they feel cool. I felt, I felt like I had like a ton of bricks on me, and when I got out I just felt light, I felt like a feather. And I felt at peace, so I must've felt wind, ‘cause I felt that peace.”

In sum, the term “spiritual” or “spirituality” encompasses a range of meanings. From awareness of internal needs to friendship with God and a few close friends, from an orientation toward good and righteous values to a sense of God’s leading or peace amid the stress of everyday life and the larger “battles” these women confront, from Bible study and prayer to soothing Gospel music, these forms of religion and spirituality seem more conventional, aligned with dominant, though diverse, American Protestant traditions of spirituality. These were our “expected answers,” those for which the widely used spirituality measuring instruments were designed.

## Spirits in Spirituality

Only four of 13 women in our study spoke explicitly about ghosts, spirits, magic, and relationships with the dead. However, those who did consistently brought up these forces when asked about “spirituality” or “spiritual ways of dealing …” with depression and stress. Moreover, they did so unsolicited. These somewhat “unexpected” answers lead us to present a fuller, narrative analysis of the encounters with spirits that these four women described.

### Raya

Raya, a Latina in her late twenties, has had five children, including one who died shortly after birth. Her score on the SLESQ was 6. She was raised Catholic but considers herself to be in the process of converting to “Christianity.” A prevalent theme throughout Raya’s interview is connection. Her sense of connection extends to those around her and loved ones who have died: both permeate her experiences of the everyday. Yet, this sense of connection is held in ambiguous tension with a sense of being alone, conveyed through the uniqueness of her struggles and the fact that others do not share her sense of connection with those who have passed away.

Raya is a community advocate and organizer, with meetings and classes where she gets some time away from her kids. At the time of the interview, she had recently lost a close friend to cervical cancer, her oldest son was struggling with “severe ADHD” and “bipolar,” and she had heard from one psychiatrist that he might be developing “schizophrenia” (which she said in a whisper). She felt alone in her struggles, unable to take a break or take care of herself and without alternatives: “this is just the hand I’ve been dealt; so what else is there for me to do?” All these troubles provided a prelude to her discussion of spirituality, part of which involves learning not only to “*really* read the Bible,” but also to ask forgiveness and cultivate gratitude to God.

Several other stories, however, emerge after she explains her growing comfort with church and how she wants people to “see the brighter side in life.” She sets the stage with an early experience with death.

My mom says I'm a different type of breed because I've always ... had some kind of contact with God... There was a time that I, I died when I was little—because I have asthma, and I also have CP.... I was 2, and I died on the table; my mom has told me. But I remember being in this place, with a lot of people that I haven't ever met in this life. And [afterward] I was able to, you know, point out pictures of relatives that I had never met that passed, that my mother never met. And that's how my mom was kinda like, whoa, there is a place, there is a place, I know there is! And I so wanna go back there.

Raya connects this event with a special gift:

And then I see a lot of things. I see a lot of people before they pass, and I see people when they pass. I was able to tell about some family members in my family before they passed, that they were gonna pass, and within the next day they passed. Because, like I tell everybody, there's a light. And, some people see the light, and some people don't. I've never met anybody that sees the light; so far, it's only me, and everybody looks at me like I'm crazy.

By way of example, Raya relates six stories, beginning with her ex-father-in-law's passing. Her children slept over at his house one night, but when she picked them up, he wanted to keep them one more night. She saw a light around him and noticed a warm stillness. The next morning, she saw "little floaties" of light when his wife called to report, "He had a heart attack" and died. The next day, the whole family slept in their living room, and Raya saw a mirror moving around; she responded, "I see you having fun!" Her three-year-old son went into his bedroom and said, "Get outta my room, Grandpa! I don't want to play with you right now." Subsequently, this father-in-law spoke to her in a dream, warning of a gas leak in his house. Raya called his wife at 3 a.m., so she could turn off the gas.

Each of these passages ends with a proclamation of Raya's "weirdness" by women in the family. Her mother had a similar reaction when Raya saw a light around her grandfather:

When I told my mom, you know, he had the light, my mom smacked me in my face. She's like, "Don't say that! Don't say that! Why would you say that about your grandfather?" But...It was true.

He came to me too, full force standing up—'cause my grandfather had a amputation. When he got sick, I was there with him, 24/7 ... So I went to the hospital every day, after I dropped off the kids at school, stayed there for 4 h, changed him, you know fed him, spoke to him. I could tell he was deteriorating, but she still wanted me to be there with him.

So, the day my grandfather died, I had just gotten my oldest ready ...It was summer time. He was going to Camp Joy. And there again, I felt the light, the warmth, saw the light, felt the white, the warmth, and the little speckles, and I said, "Oh gosh, what now?"

I said that aloud and my phone rang. And it was my grandfather's neighbor. She's like, "Hey, Raya," she's like, "It's Gina," I'm like, "Hey Gina." She's like, "Is your grandfather home?" I'm like, "No, he's still in the hospital." She's like, "Well, I see footsteps at the bottom of his door." 'Cause she's older, so she, you know, she's like a nosy neighbor she's like "I see, like, foot movements at the bottom of his door."

I'm like, "Oh, I don't know, but, he's still at the hospital." And then I turn around, and he's standing in my doorway. With a fishing bucket, and our dog that died ... that he loved and adored. I—ugh, that dog!

So, I yelled, I covered my head, and I yelled, and I said, "Gina, my grandfather's right here." She's like, "What?" I'm like, "He's right here, he just stood up at me at the doorway and just looked at me!" And I covered my head, and I was like, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!" 'cause he was so close to me like ... I got scared.

At this point, her sister called to relay the hospital's message about her grandfather's death, but he was standing right in front of her. When they went to pick up her mother, "My mom looked at my face, she said I have this look on my face, and then she just collapsed. And started screaming, 'No, no, no!' I'm like, 'Yeah.'"

Raya's third story, which begins with "Everyone comes to me," concerns her mother's death and resuscitation. Her mother was in the hospital, but she appeared at the door of their house to Raya and her grandmother, with a "warm light." Raya adds, "And my grandmother knew about my gift too because she has it." Her grandmother lit candles, while Raya screamed at her mother to "go back!" and ran to give her a hug, but she disappeared. Just then, the hospital called to report that her mother's heart had stopped for 5 min, but they brought her back: "My mom is perfectly fine, she's a pain in my butt. She made it."

Raya's fourth and fifth stories are sandwiched together. She tells the story of her friend's recent death succinctly, remarking that she had felt guilty for being out of touch with her for about a year prior. The fifth story recounts her memory of seeing the light and feeling the warmth around herself when pregnant. She thought that she was the one who was going to die. Instead, the baby she bore died after only a couple of hours. She says that she talks about him often, so that the other children know they have another brother in the family.

Raya's final story in the interview was about her Auntie, who died in the hospital while Raya was pregnant with her daughter. As the family prayed around her aunt, Raya felt "that warm air" and saw "that light that's shining over her ... and I saw she was at peace 'cause I saw the floaties, and the warmness." The lights flickered at the funeral, but only Raya could see this. Raya's daughter was born prematurely on her aunt's birthday. When her aunt was dying, Raya told her, "I'll see you soon," and "Here my daughter is, looking and acting just like her."

Tinged with grief, each of these stories attests not only to Raya's "gifts" of both "knowing" and "seeing" what others do not, but also to her close relationships with relatives before and after their deaths. The only exception to the latter is the recently deceased friend, with whom she had been out of touch for a year.

Yet Raya's gift is not altogether unusual in her world as she portrays it. Her three-year-old son, her grandmother, and a nosy elderly neighbor see evidence of spirits, even though her mother and her baby's father—the latter whom she presents as negative, rage-filled, and hypocritically Christian—cannot. She attributes her own gift to her childhood experience of "death on the table," her developing "spirituality" and "faith," and perhaps to her heritage (the grandmother).

The presence of light, warmth, and "floaties" seems to provoke surprise, foreboding, and comfort for Raya. The appearance of spirits brings amusement (the moving mirror), fear (covering her head and screaming), and resistance (urging her mother to go back). When asked explicitly by the interviewer, "What kind of function do they have when

you're kind of walking with them?" she replies simply, "They're always with me. I talk to them." Raya carries mementos of these people in her life who have passed: the friend's sweater, her baby's ashes in a necklace, her father-in-law's photos, and her grandfather's ring. The presence of spirits enables Raya to talk with someone when she is confused or troubled, to carry reminders of presence, and to be reassured that her departed family and friends are in a "good place."

## Lauren

Lauren is the mother of a five-year-old, in her mid-twenties; she identifies as multiracial (African-American, Caribbean, Native American) and as a mainline Protestant Christian. Her SLESQ score was 3. Listening to her whole interview, a single, coherent theme emerges: the desire for connection. And yet this theme is nearly subsumed by how negatively Lauren speaks about the majority of the people and communities in her life—descriptions that dominate large portions of the interview. Her child's father is abusive. Her mother has Multiple Sclerosis. Her best friend is shot in the head and killed. The managers at her job are abusive and discriminatory. The interviewer left the interview with an overall impression that Lauren felt so hurt by so many people in her life that she could "trust no one."

A closer look at Lauren's narrative reveals that, despite her loneliness and anger, she craves positive connection: with God, with her family, and with men who could nurture and affirm her. Talking about her daughter's religious training during one of these reflections then leads to an in-depth discussion of important tools that Lauren uses for navigating connections and relationships in her untrustworthy world: her understanding of dark magic and her clairvoyance.

Lauren explains generational misfortune in her family through a curse. Her mother's aunt practiced "black magic," she says, "and it left her with a curse that kind of... They, the women in my family feel like it kind of bounced onto the women in our family." She notes that most of the women in her family are single: "It just doesn't work out with men. It's not working out with me, with my daughter's father." Lauren notes, "I did have something that was really, something good to me, and he died." Her great aunt had similar experiences: "Every time she was in a relationship with a man, they died, and that's all they ever talked about. Some lady over in Barbados put like a curse on her, and stuff, so it's just like it flipped onto the women in the family."

Though "black magic" and curses are quite different than experiencing spirits and ghosts, Lauren herself draws a connection as she struggles to explain the death of her friend. She says, "I don't want to believe it, but that stuff does happen." She then reveals, "I'm clairvoyant too. I have dreams and stuff like that. I've seen things." Lauren says that these experiences do not bother her, because "I wish one day I could see my friend. I miss him so much. It really breaks my heart that I don't get to see him anymore. Talk to him. But sometimes I feel like he's around." Lauren continues her commentary, noting that she and her mother have "experienced certain things after he died," like hearing his voice or feeling a presence, but "It's just hard 'cause I don't get to talk to him."

She explains that some people may reincarnate as animals or people. She relates a story of her friend's appearance at his gravesite, when she visited with a staff member as part of a hospital-based program for people affected by street violence: She took me, and she's my witness, she's my witness. It was very gray that day, very gray ... It was cool, it was cold. And me and her, we was like looking, and looking,

and looking, but every time we would go to a certain site it got very hot and warm. The sun came out. But then every time we would go to the other side, it'd just, you know, get dark all over again. Then this guy helped us find [my friend's grave], and once we found it, I started crying. You know, setting up, just talking, and the sun just got so bright. It got really hot, and these bumblebees just started swarming around the flowers, and like these geeses came out of nowhere. She was like, "What the heck is going on?!" And she was like, "I think he's here." And it stayed so bright until we left the cemetery; then it got dark again.

She concludes by saying that she misses that feeling, "because I just, you know I know he was right there. He was probably right next to me; he was right in front of me."

When asked whether she connects these experiences to prayer, Lauren says, "I know he's up there with God. I know God, you know how it's like—I don't know if you've ever seen *The Preacher's Wife*, that movie?" Recalling Denzel Washington's guardian angel role, "that's kind of how I feel, like somebody's like an angel, like God sent them here to work. ... That's his spirit ... that sometimes it's time for him to go back.... And that's how I feel like he was. And I feel like he still watches over me." Her partner and best friend who was murdered becomes her guardian angel, whose presence she knows and feels. This Hollywood version of angels helps her to make sense of her experience.

While Lauren feels connected to God, she does not connect easily to a faith community. In fact, while she prays for protection from abusive family members and for her mother's healing from multiple sclerosis, she hesitates to ask others for prayer on her behalf:

Well, my mom always taught me, you can't always have people pray for you. 'Cause people could pray things bad against you, stuff like that, so, I am, I try not to really get close with people like that. 'Cause there's always somebody that believes in the devil sitting right there in church.

Lauren's deep suspicion of those who wish her harm and her sense that her deceased boyfriend watches over her like an angel are consistent with her portrait of a hostile and dangerous world.

Lauren wants her daughter to know about God and prayer, she says, so she doesn't become someone who is "into demons, and all that stuff"—like the child's father, who claims to be "the devil." Throughout this discussion, it is easy as an outsider to get distracted by the seemingly exotic elements of Lauren's stories: curses, magic, dreams. And yet, when she talks about how the curse on the women in her family has resulted in a pattern of broken relationships, it seems clear that, for her, magic explains a core problem, rather than being the core problem itself. Some apparently powerful force, which she construes as "black magic," has resulted in a systematic lack of connection in Lauren's family and her own life.

Yet Lauren also details how other supernatural phenomena are actually a tool for connection with lost loved ones and with God. Seeking relationship thus becomes a supernatural exercise. Lauren turns to such fleeting glimpses of care and connection, at the same time as these things are not often evident among the physical, living people in her life.

In her final reflections, Lauren reaffirms the conflicted theme she has drawn out over the course of her narrative. Rather than providing a satisfying ending; instead, she leaves us with an honest portrayal of her frustration as she seeks connection and relationship in a world that has continually denied these to her. Her distrust is deep and unrelenting, but her desire for connection seems—at least for now—to match it.

## Lisa

Lisa, in her late thirties, has two adult children and a toddler. She identifies as multiracial and Catholic. Lisa's SLESQ score was 5. Her interview is framed by two stories of being an advocate and a fighter to get her young son (who has sensory integration issues) what he needs. Lisa attributes her independence and ability to deal with stress to her mother's influence on her personality, her own experience as a runaway and teenage mother, and her lack of family and community support. The unexpected and serial nature of her stresses and losses (child, mother, job, housing; multiple medical appointments all over town) seem to threaten her sense of control over events. She has developed strategies to avoid, prepare, plan, and manage her son's tantrums and everyday stresses. She does turn for help to professionals like a behavioral specialist and to a friend whose son likewise struggles with a disability.

Two key phrases surface in her narrative: "Depression strikes like a cat, raging and lashing" and "I fought them high and low." She portrays herself as "learning to deal," on her own, with three levels of "stress": real problems, tiny problems, and everyday parenting problems. Some real problems (illness, death, loss) demand "spirituality," while others (getting her son services, organizing life) demand actively taking responsibility and fighting. Tiny problems (mostly what other people have) demand that one "relax" and not let them become overwhelming. Everyday parenting problems (e.g., tantrums) demand planning and organization.

Lisa's initial summary statement on spirituality and depression begins with having her children and experiencing loss:

So, I have two older, and one little one. Had a baby that passed away in between the two older ones. So, you say stress every day. I lost my mom, I lost my dad. You know what I mean? So it's something I've learned to cope with over the years of knowing who I am, and knowing my feelings, and knowing my spirituality, and having faith in what I know I can do. Having faith that it honestly, if I can't somehow, a certain way, he'll help me out. Because he has this far. So, that's how I manage to get over it. I don't just sit back, and, you get emotional talking about ... you don't have time for all that. You gotta keep it going, you gotta keep it strong because of the kids.

Though abandoned by family, Lisa is sustained by what she calls her "faith." She explains how her brothers do not want to have a relationship with her and her children, then immediately explains her "spirituality" in terms of her Catholic heritage:

I...am Catholic. Pray to St. Jude and St. Anthony. I believe in, they're my life savers. Um, so when things get really bad ... I sit down and light my candles.... I'll go sit up at the Madonna, you know what I mean? When I really feel, you say, I don't wanna say depressed, but emotionally down and out ... you know, those are the times that I kinda lean more toward my spirituality aspect of life, times like that.

Though her friends mock her for praying to saints, Lisa explains to the (non-Catholic) interviewer that St. Jude is a patron saint and St. Anthony is a protector, and that she learned to pray to these saints from her mother and from Catholic school. She feels alienated from local Catholic churches and is suspicious of other churches as "cults." Lisa also complained that her nominally Catholic older children do not have "faith" and that they call her prayers to saints "doing voodoo."

The interviewer then asks, “And what about the baby, do you, how are you thinking about spirituality with him?” Lisa’s immediate reply is, “Him! To tell you the truth, he scares me, because he’s like 3 years old, and all he does is talk about seeing ghosts no matter where he is, and especially like in his room, is always talking about seeing ghosts.” She reasons, “They say babies see spirits,” and “the guy that did live here passed away here” but she is not sure what to do with this. She explains that she does not talk about ghosts or watch scary movies, but sometimes, her son will:

...literally like full-blown come crying out of that room, screaming bloody blue murder, like somebody hurt him. And he’ll tell you, ‘the ghost.’ What ghost? So I mean...spirituality? I think God’s playing the space game with me. Like, I [laughing], it makes you spooked out to be here, don’t it?

To be clear, she does not see the ghosts herself, but concludes by saying that her downstairs neighbor reported that her (the neighbor’s) sister used to see a ghost in the same corner of their apartment. The interviewer then changes the subject.

We find it striking that this story of “seeing ghosts” comes up in response to a question about the spirituality of her children, specifically after she has noted that her older children neither have faith nor understand her practice of praying to the saints. We interpret this as an indication that Lisa considers spirituality, faith, praying to saints, and seeing ghosts as occurring along a continuum. Her speculation that God is “playing the space game” leads us to wonder whether she conceptualizes these experiences as interruptions between spaces that are normally separated, something like veils being lifted to see another dimension of reality.

In the next section of her narrative, Lisa points to the blessing of her youngest child, born later in her life, while she was undergoing treatment for cervical cancer, a period when she “wasn’t supposed to have him.” She contrasts it with the curse of her mother, “I wish you’d have another baby just to see what I went through when I went through it.” She then circles back to the notion that the child is God’s “little reminder, your mother’s still here.”

In this narrative, as in Raya’s, we see the influence of elder relatives emerging, not only in the personality of the mother but also in the birth of a child, who is a “reminder” of the elder’s presence. While perhaps not reflecting a fully developed theory of reincarnation, these stories do reflect the continuity of personae beyond death. When coupled with prayer to saints and the presence of ghosts, we see the range of meanings within “spiritual coping” expand in complex ways in the struggles for survival that these mothers relate.

## Naomi

Naomi identifies as Catholic and Black. She is in her mid-twenties with a preschool-aged child. Her SLESQ score was 0. She begins her interview by discussing the primary dilemma she currently faces: If her mother moves to another state, does she go with her or stay in New England? This decision is made more difficult because Naomi’s daughter is so connected to Naomi’s mother that Naomi frames her choice as ‘my mom and daughter versus my fiancé.’ She is trying to manage a “ball of yarn”—different stressful situations that are all bound together: “My daughter, her school work, my school work, me finding a job, me looking for a place, trying to figure out if my mom’s really gonna move or not, what’s my boyfriend gonna do if I do decide to leave, like, I don’t know.” As becomes

apparent through the rest of the stories, this dilemma is also shaded with grief from the sudden, unexpected deaths of Naomi's father and twin sister some years before. The stories of their deaths dominate the rest of the interview.

Naomi was 14 when her father died. He had asked his wife to come home from work to fix some soup. He was eating the soup when Naomi stepped out to go to her job, and minutes later, he was dead. She explains that his death confused her so deeply that she could not cry. She turned to writing journals and poetry to express her feelings: "that's the only way I feel like I can get it out without having to express it with crying. 'Cause I didn't cry when my dad died, and that still affects me." She explains:

It became a heartache, because my mom, it was her husband. It was my dad, but I was, I didn't cry, wasn't emotional, didn't grieve. Then we got to the burial, and I seen them putting him in the ground ... I guess that affected me, and I became rebellious. 'Cause now, I'm really rebellious. And I have these tensions of screaming, and yelling at people, and just like going outrageous, and I don't know why. So they think that it's from that.

The grief surfaced 8 years later:

The thing that brought, that made me turn back on my humanity and my emotions, was when my twin sister passed away. That had to be the most hardest thing in the world I had to go through. That was so hard, that like as you know—I don't cry for nobody. ...When I got a phone call that my sister passed away, I kid you not, I almost died. ... I ended up breaking down in front of my 5-year-old. I broke down, in my mother's doorway, of her room.

Naomi learned of her sister's death through a phone call from a friend who had seen it reported on Facebook. And she "realized that something was, something, a part of me, was gone."

Her funeral, I just, it just tore me apart. Because, that's my twin sister. We look identical. I had to look myself in the face, in a casket. After I seen that vision, and I seen that in person, I broke all my mirrors in my house. Literally. I didn't, for like, for a whole 3 months, I didn't look in a mirror, I wouldn't even look at any glass, or anything. 'Cause it affected me so bad, that I never understood, what was death. I never got taught: what's death? So I didn't understand. But that hit me, that brought the emotions from my dad passing away, my nephew passing away, my sister, and it's like all that hit me, and I became very emotional. That was like, that was a breaker for me. I couldn't deal with it no more. And I told my mom that.

Immediately after explaining how she became emotional, though, Naomi shifts the narrative to an unexpected resolution: "But then, my sister's death date became a miracle. My niece went into labor, had both of her sons ... on my sister's death date. I was like, I lost one angel, and gained two miracles."

After this story, the interviewer transitions to the question, "Do you feel like you have any sort of spirituality, or—any of that kind of working in there?" And Naomi replies,

I think we do, I think we do. ... It's like, I still see my dad. He, he's at the house, like people think I'm crazy but my mom has seen it too. And, it's like, we know him and my sister is there. 'Cause I remember my last words to him was, "Dad, if you're

gone, you're not gone. Let— give me a sign that you're here. You're still here with me." Said the same thing to my twin sister.

Every now and then, I see a shadow go from my kitchen to the bathroom, from my dining room to my bedroom. My mom and them, my mom told me, she was like, "You know, I see shadows." And I'm like, at first be like, "You're senile. There's something wrong with you." But, I started seeing them too, and I'm like, okay, my boyfriend was like, "the damn house is haunted." I was like, "No it's not. The house is not haunted."

...So I went in my room, and I seen, I see my blinds, they kept moving. And I'm like, "Why're these moving? The window's not up." So I was like, "Okay, that's [my sister], 'cause she likes to flick with blinds. She likes to take a pencil and flick up the blinds. But all you could do was see it moving, but that was it.

Naomi's mother confirms her ability to see spirits, and she claims this affirmation as her "spiritual" moment:

So my mom was like, "Yeah, you got the spirits following you around." I'm like, "No, they don't follow me around; they're only in the house." My mom was like, "No, they're everywhere with you!" I'm like, I was like, "You're creeping me out now, stop telling me that." So I was like, I understood that. That was my spiritual moment, for like figuring out like, okay, there's no such thing as ghosts, but there is such thing as spirits.

Naomi relates this connection to spirits to the family's history of Catholicism: "My niece—we're all Catholic—my niece sees her Nana Gloria all the time. But nobody else sees her. Like, they say if you're Catholic, you still believe in the spirits. So, that's what we still see." The interviewer asked whether this ability to see spirits was related to meditation or prayer in times of emotional turmoil, to which Naomi responded, "No, not really. ... It's like seeing." When asked whether the spirits give her signs, Naomi affirms, "I did tell them, like, let me know that you're here. So they do. And, I understand that, and I see that." Naomi remembers her mother asking her as a child whether she *knows* about spirits. In a long section in which she explains her young daughter's curiosity and her own parenting style, Naomi tells the interviewer that she does not need to teach her daughter about spirits, because she already sees them: "She'll be telling me, 'Mommy, I see Auntie Hope, I see Auntie Hope.'" Naomi explains that her daughter is "like a baby; if they smile up at the sky, they see the person who died."

Naomi's "spirituality" is thus informed by the experience of "spirits" (which she distinguishes from ghosts) that are felt, seen, and known. In her case, "seeing" involves shadows and moving objects that may disturb (haunt) others, but which give her a sense of comfort and continuity, a way to live with intense grief and pain. Her young daughter's "seeing" seems more literal, though we have few details about what she sees. And yet her mother "sees" or "knows" that spirits follow Naomi "everywhere," which is "creeping her out," but ultimately accepted as part of her "knowledge" of life. While not as explicit as other narrators who articulate subtle theories of reincarnation, Naomi does juxtapose her sister's death—"I lost one angel"—and the birth of her niece's twins—"I gained two miracles."

## Discussion

One of the striking elements of these ghost, spirit, and magic stories is how intimately they relate to the death of loved ones. Despite her “trauma score” reported at 0, for instance, Naomi has experienced several untimely deaths in her family, to which she traces her rebellious behavior, stress, and depression. The emotional load of grief is palpable in most of these women’s stories, not only the four whose narratives we have examined here most closely. As the interviewer struggled to make sense of these stories of spirits, ghosts, and magic, we return to our central question, “What are we asking when we ask about spirituality in health research?”

Connection and community are two themes that seem woven into the stories these women have told about experiences of ghosts, spirits, and magic. In Lisa’s case, St. Jude and St. Anthony are the extreme end of her “social support system,” which extends through a friend with a similarly disabled child and a behavioral health specialist; the “ghost” in her story is merely an indicator of her child’s spiritual sensitivity, but the spirit of her mother is evident in her child as well. The inheritance of spirits through miraculously timed or unusual births is but one form of connection between generations. Other forms are continued relationship through protection, visitation in dreams, presence in homes and gravesites, and conversation. Managing these relationships between the living and the dead adds another dimension to the social *and* spiritual lives of these mothers, and these relationships may be integral to their mental and overall “health.”

These accounts cease to be surprising or unusual if we extend our focus from conventional measures of spirituality to more global and lived religious accounts of illness and healing. In African-descended (e.g., Yoruba, Vodun, and Santeria), Asian (e.g., Chinese, Tibetan, Buddhist and Shinto) and Latin American cultural traditions (*espiritismo*, *curanderismo*) and Pentecostal traditions, interaction between the living and the dead is more common than in the cultures and religious traditions that are normatively assumed in much religion, spirituality and health scholarship (Campesino and Schwartz 2006; Barnes 1998; Csordas 1988; Mitchem 2007). Experiences of spirits in the environment or in one’s body are found in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions throughout the world as well. Contemporary trauma studies also suggest that conceptions of “haunting” and memory deserve further exploration for the relationship between spirituality and mental health (Gordon 2008; Cho 2008).

As anthropologist Irving Hallowell reminded us long ago, for many cultures, such experiences are not “supernatural,” but an expected part of human experience (Hallowell 1960, 28). Janis Jenkins, in *Extraordinary Conditions* (2015), discusses the struggles of a Salvadoran woman in Boston who frames her struggles in terms of white, black, and red magic—of *mal de ojo*, dreams and visions of the dead as a means of communication, and the blending of African, Latin American, Catholic, and *espiritista* modes of healing in her neighborhood. Jenkins notes, “From the ground level of the everyday lifeworld, far more salient is the religious and spiritual lay of the land in the sense of what ideas and practices actually exist and where one stands pragmatically in relation to them.”

We find it significant that attempts to measure spirituality and religiosity over the course of spirituality and health studies continue to carry forward mainline Protestant associations that link the individual, emotional, inward, dynamic, and flexible. These measures do capture dimensions of what we would recognize as spirituality. Many have been cross-culturally validated, with strong reliability and statistical validity; so we cannot argue that they simply miss the point. What we can argue, however, is that they risk too

circumscribed an assessment of “spirituality” among the global majority. If trying to identify Piedmont’s universal transcendent perspective, they also risk missing what our interviewees mean by spirituality. We therefore offer not a new definition, but rather an expanded focus that points to what also inhabits the category of spirituality for many people in the world. Speaking to the dead may count as a “search for the sacred,” but it is not the typical form of how this search has been academically construed.

While several women in our study responded with more conventional narratives, these experiences with spirits of “others” challenge the cross-cultural relevance of universalizing categories like “religion” and “spirituality.” We suggest that a cross-cultural psychological–anthropological investigation would help to expand our measures of spirituality and our understanding of spiritual coping and spirituality–health connections. Methodologically, we argue that empirical studies should account for these “alternative” interpretations of “spirituality,” especially within marginalized ethnic and religious communities.

We recognize that our study sample is small and that its participants are not representative of any one tradition, ethnic or socioeconomic group. Our intention was simply to explore what lay behind selected answers to survey questions about the place of spirituality and religion in coping with depression. We opened up the box and found that the contents exceeded expectation. Other scholars may question whether experiences of warmth, light, floaties, ghosts, moving objects, spirits, angels, black magic, curses, and miraculous births belong in the same categories as prayer, meditation, church attendance, scripture reading, ritual purification, sense of transcendence, and social support. For the mothers in our study, however, these experiences are phenomenologically related to spirituality. We have many unanswered questions, but these questions have led us to reexamine our expectations and the measures that these expectations might produce.

## Conclusion

Researchers need to allow for mystery and be comfortable asking questions, not only of their participants, but of themselves. Jenkins also cautions researchers that they need to appreciate degrees of belief and skepticism (in themselves and their participants) about spirits, ghosts, magic, witchcraft, and the activity of saints. With regard to magic and witchcraft, many of her participants claimed, “*no hay que creer ni dejar que creer*” (it does not matter whether you believe or disbelieve). Jenkins notes in regard to two patients engaged in psychotherapy, that “the existential significance and interpersonal meaning of their circumstance goes well beyond clinical understanding” (Jenkins 2015).

How can we as researchers maintain awareness of the existential and interpersonal, as well as the cultural and hyperdiverse community contexts (Good and Hannah 2015), when we account for the influence of spirituality and religion on mental well-being? If “spirituality” or “religious belief” may denote simply “I meditate or pray to a loving God when I have a problem” (though one might find that such prayer and meditation is not so simple or transparent, as well) and “I see my dead twin sister playing with the blinds in my apartment,” or “the women in my family were cursed by a woman in Barbados,” then what are we measuring, and how do we account for the “effects” on health? While some may be willing to lump these statements into the larger categories of “positive and negative religious coping,” what do we lose in doing so? If we miss these aspects of

spirituality, then we risk missing the complex ways people encounter spirit and spirits that help them to deal with trauma, stress, and depression.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** All authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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