

Chapter 3

Dimensions of Spiritual Well-Being: A Delphi Study

3.1 Introduction

Based on a thorough literature review, and a qualitative inquiry incorporating focus groups and in-depth interviews, a conceptual framework of spiritual well-being for Chinese older adults has been proposed in Chaps. 1 and 2. According to this framework, spiritual well-being has six core elements: (1) meaning of life; (2) spiritual well-being (positive and negative); (3) transcendence; (4) harmonious relationships with self, others, and the world; (5) spiritual coping; and (6) contextual factors (such as class and gender). The meaning of life is constructed through building harmonious relationships (with self, others, the environment, and the concepts of life and death themselves), and the process of transcendence enables one to achieve a sense of spiritual well-being and meaning. Coping strategies, class, and gender are factors that may be associated with relationship harmony and a sense of life's meaning (Maselko and Kubzansky 2006; Urcuyo et al. 2005; Wink and Dillon 2008).

While this framework has a solid theoretical and empirical basis, this work is a pioneering attempt to define spiritual well-being in a nonreligious context. It is therefore essential to exclude the possibility of bias due to the influences of researchers' and informants' values and perceptions. After I had brought the research team together in the middle of 2009, we worked very closely on reviewing the literature and examining the interview and focus group transcripts. Even though we tried our very best throughout the coding and discussion process to keep an open mind, it is always possible that our interpretation may have excluded important themes embedded in the data. Moreover, our informants

were drawn from three nursing homes managed by a single service agency in Hong Kong and one nursing home in Shanghai. It is therefore possible that their values and expectations had been constrained by the vision and mission of these agencies.

The team therefore decided to conduct a Delphi study with the aim of reaching an expert consensus on the defining core components of spiritual well-being among Chinese older adults. We presented a set of 124 items drawn from the thematic framework to a panel of academics and health-and social care professionals with expertise across three different Chinese communities and four disciplines. In order to obtain the detailed views of panel members, we further differentiated the 6 themes into 10 domains: the meaning of life, spiritual well-being (positive), spiritual well-being (negative), transcendence, relationship with oneself, relationships with family, relationships with others, relationships with life and death, spiritual coping, and contextual factors (class and gender) (Chan et al. 2010).

3.2 Methods

3.2.1 Design

The Delphi method is a systematic and interactive forecasting method which relies on a panel of experts. It has been used frequently with expert panels and is especially useful as a tool for governing effective communication within a group of people unconstrained by group dynamics, and assessing consensus about an issue efficiently (Hsu and Sandford 2007). The Delphi process adopted in this study was characterized by four features: (1) All data analyses and feedback were based on aggregated findings so as to minimize the pressure for conformity; (2) panel members were encouraged to make verbal comments on each of the domains to express their views; (3) the results of the first round were provided to panel members for their second assessment; and (4) statistical methods were used to facilitate decision making in regard to including or excluding a certain item and/or changing the wording of a certain item.

3.2.2 Panel Composition

The team sought to invite experts with rich experience in studying or working with older adults, drawn from multidisciplinary training backgrounds and diverse sociocultural contexts. A total of 20 experts were nominated for invitation. The

Table 3.1 Professional background and expertise of panel members

Case No.	Professional background	Area of expertise
01	Nurse	Grief and bereavement counseling and training
02	Nurse	Grief and bereavement counseling and training
03	Nurse	Grief and bereavement counseling and training
04	Doctor	Geriatrician in rehabilitation hospital, palliative care
05	Doctor	Geriatrician in nursing home, palliative care
06	Social worker	Medical social work, hospice
07	Social worker	District elderly service, day care service
08	Social worker	Nursing home
09	Social worker	Community-based death and dying service
10	Professor	Human development and spirituality in Chinese societies
11	Professor	Geriatric nursing, nursing home dementia care
12	Professor	Behavioral health, body–mind–spirit interventions
13	Professor	Grief and bereavement intervention, end of life care
14	Professor	Population study, gerontology
15	Professor	Psychology and human development
16	Professor	Loss and grief
17	Professor	Nursing, death education
18	Professor	Death education and counseling
19	Doctor	Geriatrician in hospice
20	Social worker	Medical social work in hospice

final panel was made up of 16 individuals drawn from three Chinese communities (mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). They came from varied professional backgrounds including medicine, nursing, social work, and academia. Table 3.1 gives details of the professional backgrounds and expertise of the panel members.

3.3 Procedures

The Delphi study was carried out from March to October 2010. Potential panel members were identified and selected by the members of the research project team. An initial invitation letter was sent to each of them explaining the objective of the study and the work involved. Their participation and informed consent were sought.

The study process consisted of four steps (see Fig. 3.1). Step 1 involved developing a preliminary conceptual framework of spiritual well-being for

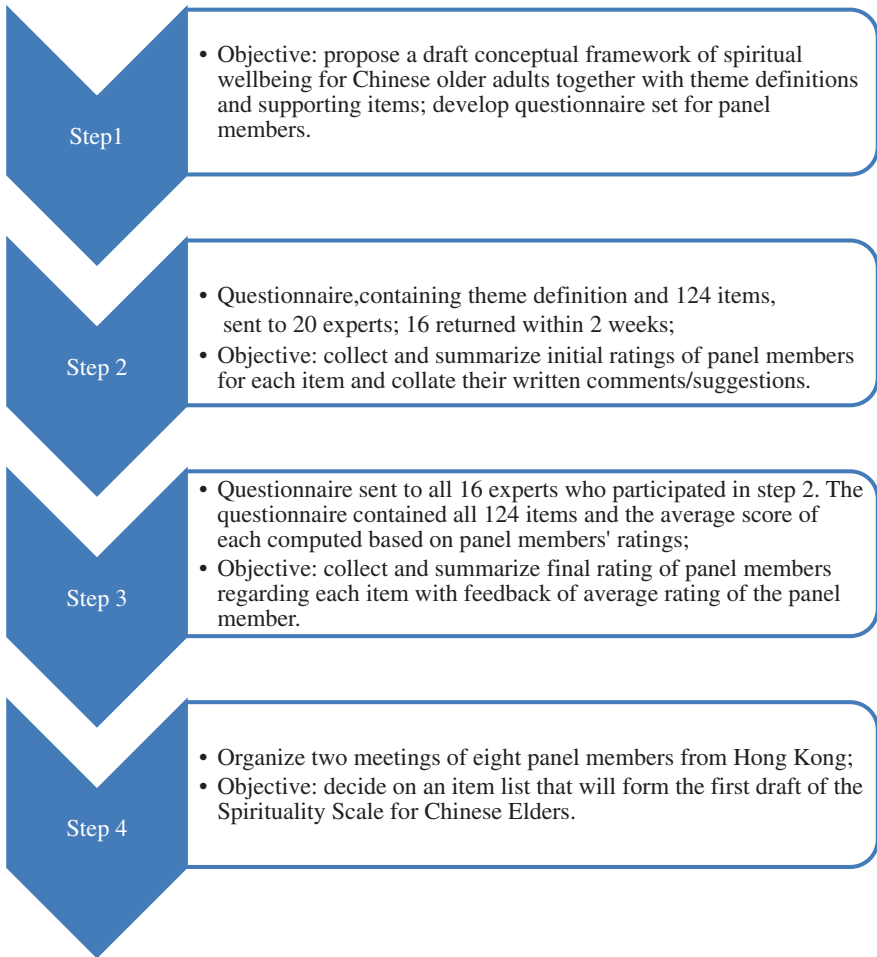


Fig. 3.1 Four stages of the Delphi study

Chinese older adults and finalizing a 124-item list. Items with similar meanings were eliminated based on the interview and focus group data and the literature review. A questionnaire was then developed containing a brief description of the draft conceptual framework, its themes and their definitions, and all 124 supporting items. In step 2, each panel member was invited to rate the degree of relevance of each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale from not relevant at all to very much relevant. They were also encouraged to provide written comments and suggestions. The questionnaire was sent to panel members by e-mail or fax and two weeks were allowed for its return. An e-mailed reminder was sent three

days before the deadline. After receiving each panel member's ratings, mean and standard deviation scores were computed for each item and added to the second round of questionnaires. In step 3, each panel member was invited to review the mean and standard deviation scores from all 16 participants generated in the first round of ratings and then rated the degree of relevance of each item a second time. Sixteen out of 20 experts returned the first round questionnaire, giving a response rate of 80 %. In the second round, all 16 returned their ratings. Finally, at step 4, eight panel members from Hong Kong were invited to take part in two meetings. During the meetings, the research team reported back on the aggregated ratings of the items and presented a summary of the written comments and suggestions. The domains of spiritual well-being were discussed as well as the items belonging to each domain.

3.3.1 Data Analysis

The means and standard deviations of the two rounds of rating were computed using SPSS version 18.0 for Windows. Both rounds were reviewed in the two panel meetings. All items with a mean score of 3–5 in both rounds were included in this review.

3.4 Findings

Over 60 % of the panel members (ranged from 63 to 100 %) ranked the 10 domains of spiritual well-being as the most or second most relevant to Chinese older adults. Over 80 % of items received a mean score higher than 3.0 in both rounds. Frequency distribution analysis of the two rounds of rating showed that the mean scores for 100 items ranged from 3 to 5, while 24 items were ranked below 3 in one or both rounds. These 24 items were discussed in the two panel meetings and excluded one by one. Table 3.2 summarizes the range of item means of the 100 items included within the 10 domains.

3.5 Discussion

The findings, based on two rounds of ratings, indicate that there was consensus among the panel members that all 10 domains proposed by the research team were relevant to the spiritual well-being of Chinese older adults. This consensus was

Table 3.2 Range of mean scores in the 10 domains

	Number of items included (excluded)	First round (min, max)		Second round (min, max)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Meaning of life	6 (0)	3.56, 4.13	0.72, 1.63	3.50, 4.19	1.03, 1.35
Spiritual well-being (positive)	12 (2)	3.13, 4.00	0.68, 1.34	3.25, 4.06	0.73, 1.24
Spiritual well-being (negative)	12 (5)	3.06, 3.94	0.75, 1.59	3.13, 4.06	0.68, 1.03
Transcendence	7 (1)	3.19, 3.63	0.97, 1.56	3.06, 3.75	0.89, 1.42
Relationship with self	13 (6)	3.13, 4.00	1.09, 1.46	3.06, 3.88	1.09, 1.27
Relationship with others	28 (2)	3.25, 4.13	0.68, 1.48	3.06, 4.06	0.62, 1.15
Relationship with the environment	4 (1)	3.44, 4.38	0.72, 1.32	3.56, 4.44	0.63, 1.09
Relationship with death	2 (0)	4.13, 4.25	1.09, 1.18	4.13, 4.19	0.98, 1.03
Spiritual coping	11 (3)	3.14, 4.14	0.36, 1.17	3.13, 4.20	0.99, 1.35
Class and gender	5 (4)	3.20, 3.44	1.24, 1.52	3.38, 3.50	1.15, 1.36

confirmed in the two subsequent panel meetings where eight panelists critically reviewed both rounds of ratings and written comments.

However, the panel meeting also drew four concerns to the attention of the research team. The first refers to understanding of the term spiritual well-being in Chinese—*Ling Xin Jian Kang*. The panel members felt that even though a brief description of the first draft conceptual framework of spiritual well-being and the definitions of its themes had been provided, understanding spiritual well-being from a nonreligious context is still considered a new and pioneering activity in Chinese cultures. The Chinese word *Ling* is often associated with life after death and has mysterious meanings, such as *Jing Ling* (intermediate existence), *Ling Yi* (alternative existence), and *Gu Ling Jing Guai* (strange and rare). Therefore, even though *Ling Xin Jian Kang* is considered to be a proper translation, the term meaning of life could be a more desirable one to minimize misunderstanding and misinterpretation for the purpose of developing an intervention protocol.

The second concern refers to possible complications in the domain of relationship with others. In a Chinese context, the roles and responsibilities of interpersonal

relationships differ between insiders and outsiders (Hwang 1987; Leung and Chan 2003). To put it simply, family members, including close relatives, are considered to be closest to the person. Mutual support and lifetime exchange are essential ingredients for building and maintaining such relationships. Friends can be very close but also could be seen as general friends. Instant exchange and maximization of gains are expected from these interactions. Panel members therefore suggested that interpersonal relationships be differentiated into at least three types: family, friends, and others. Such a distinction was thought to have implications for developing intervention strategies in future.

The third concern was raised about the two domains of class and gender and spiritual coping. Panelists suggested that even though both are relevant to spiritual well-being, they are in fact associates with it. Therefore, it was recommended that these domains not be treated as core domains of the proposed spiritual well-being framework.

Finally, panel members queried potential subcultural differences in the phrasing of items. While mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan all use Chinese as the official language, dialect preferences in selecting words and slang terms could introduce misunderstanding. For example, one of the original items was phrased as *Ni Shui Lao Kai Men Kou, Guo De Zi Ji Guo De Ren* (泥水佬開口, 過得自己過得人). Panel members from Hong Kong shared that they understood this slang term to mean “being flexible and considerate to others.” However, panel members from mainland China and Taiwan had difficulty understanding it. During the panel meeting, the team agreed to use formal language in drafting the scale to minimize such potential misunderstandings.

3.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the ratings and comments on the 10 key themes and items were given by 16 panel members who could have been biased in terms of their subjective experiences and professional backgrounds. They came from three Chinese communities (e.g., Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) with diverse social and cultural features, and from a range of professional backgrounds working with older adults. Secondly, after both rounds of rating and discussion, panel members recommended using formal language for the items to minimize potential misunderstanding and controversies. However, this meant that some items with a strong subcultural or slang meanings were reframed or even excluded, which could have an impact on a localized or contextualized construction of the concept of the meaning of life.

3.7 Conclusion

After two rounds of the Delphi process and two panel meetings, the consensus reached by the panel members confirmed that the 10 preliminary core elements proposed by the research team were all relevant to studying the meaning of life among Chinese older adults. Of the ten core elements, spiritual coping and class and gender could be treated as independent constructs associated with spiritual well-being, while the remaining eight elements are treated as defining elements. The team agreed that at this exploratory stage, it was important to focus on the core defining elements and study spiritual coping and the influence of class and gender in a separate project.

Moreover, the Delphi process confirmed that the proposed framework, with its emphasis on harmonious relationships between oneself and others and the environment, truly reflected the collectivist Chinese cultural context that values family, responsibility, and interdependency. This is therefore a meaningful expansion of the existing literature on defining spirituality and paves a solid foundation for developing a culturally sensitive measure of spiritual well-being in a nonreligious context. On this basis, the research team revised the framework of spiritual well-being to contain eight core elements: (1) meaning of life, (2) spiritual affect (positive and negative), (3) transcendence, (4) relationship with self, (5) relationship with family, (6) relationship with friends and others, (7) relationship with environment, and (8) relationship with life and death. The corresponding items were further reviewed by the research team that had contributed to the first draft of the Spirituality Scale for Chinese Elders (SSCE). This was then tested in a validation study that will be described in Chap. 4.

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