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Life satisfaction among the black elderly: a re-examination of psychosocial contributors

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LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG THE BLACK ELDERLY: A RE-EXAMINATION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTRIBUTORS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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ATLANTA, GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT

SOCIOLOGY

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LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG THE BLACK ELDERLY: A RE-EXAMINATION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTRIBUTORS

Advisor: Sandra E. Taylor, Ph.D.

Thesis dated July, 1997

This study was designed to discern factors which influence life satisfaction among the black elderly at a multi-purpose self-help program for senior citizens.

A questionnaire was designed to collect data on perceptions measuring psychological well-being among a group of black elderly persons. The sample consisted of fifty black elderly persons, aged 61 to 86, attending a senior citizens facility in the Southeastern United States.

The chi-square test of independence was used to test the hypotheses. The results of this test indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between life satisfaction and the variables being researched (family interaction, friendship bond, church attendance, and marital status). Although significance was not found, the data indicate that the independent variables are important in the lives of this group.

An important implication of the study is the need for more research that explores specific aspects of what constitutes satisfaction. The existing body of literature on the black elderly and life satisfaction could well be challenged through increased studies of extraneous variables that impact black elderly persons' life satisfaction.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking God for allowing me the opportunity to pursue this Master's Degree in Sociology. I would like to thank my parents, Cecil and Sandra Smith, my grandparents, Cecil and Cora Lee Smith, and my brothers Greg and Marc Smith for all of the support, guidance, and prayers that they have offered during this time. I would like to thank with the most sincerity my professors from Grambling State University, Dr. Frances Staten and Dr. Ronnie Davis for their support throughout this endeavor. Also, I would like to thank Senior Citizens Today (a pseudonym) for allowing me to conduct my research at their facility. Due to confidentiality, I cannot acknowledge persons by name, but I am sure that they know the importance of their cooperation in this effort. Finally, I would like to thank the Clark Atlanta University Department of Sociology, especially Dr. Sandra Taylor, for challenging me to the fullest and for teaching me many of life's important lessons.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The proportion of the total population of the United States over the age of 65 has been increasing rapidly. Clavon and Smith estimate that by the year 2030 nearly one-fifth of the total population of the United States will be over 65.\(^1\) Dillard, Campbell, and Chisolm provided an even higher estimate for the same time frame, suggesting that by 2030 approximately one American in four would be a senior citizen. In terms of absolute numbers, it is estimated that in 2030 there will be over 50 million elderly individuals in the United States. Blacks will constitute approximately one-fifth of this huge population of elderly Americans. Over the past two decades, the number of blacks who are over the age of 65 has increased by approximately 25 percent, more than double the rate of growth of the overall black population.\(^2\) Thus, over the next few decades, older persons in general and older blacks in particular will represent a considerably larger segment of American society.

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In assisting the black elderly, it is important to determine factors pertaining to their life satisfaction. Several significant factors have contributed to the increased life expectancy, namely advances in medicine, medical technology, and a better educated population regarding the influences of nutrition and exercise. The actual increase in the proportion of blacks who are 65 or older rose from three percent to nine between 1910 and 1975. The total population of black Americans in 1990 was 29 million, representing a 25 percent increase since 1976, which indicates that there has been a significant number of older blacks living past the age of 65.

Although problems for the elderly are very serious, they are more serious for the black elderly because of their limited access to resources in their pre-elderly days. A major concern of all people is satisfaction with life. Philosophically, it is said that the purpose of human life is to achieve an optimal level of happiness or satisfaction through whatever endeavors one chooses. Old age should be a time in life when one can reap the harvest of his or her efforts. The elderly should find satisfaction in their achievements as they reminisce and enjoy the harvest of their labor. It follows that life satisfaction is a major goal in all human functioning. A closer look at this important human condition is in order.

As the baby boom generation reaches its senior years, more research is being done on life satisfaction in the elderly population. However, little research has been focused on the black elderly and what contributes to their life satisfaction. Krause points out that

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perhaps no other construct in social gerontology has been examined as frequently as life satisfaction, but only recently has this construct been investigated by race.4

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to examine how selected factors are related to life satisfaction among the black elderly. For the purpose of this study, life satisfaction is defined as the state or feeling of being satisfied, fulfilled or content. Although previous research has examined subjective well being among the aged population, little attention has been given to the black elderly. Aging is defined as a process of changes that takes place as a person becomes older. This study examines the relationship between structural and social psychological variables and satisfaction among the black elderly. The thesis will examine the factors which influence life satisfaction for a sample of black elderly persons residing in a large southeastern city.

Few studies have been done which focus specifically on the black elderly. This research seeks to provide data on this population and thereby illuminate a neglected area of sociological research.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the literature is inconsistent, there is reason to believe that social class rather than race is responsible for shaping feelings of life satisfaction.

George contends that elderly people compare their goals or aspirations with their actual accomplishments in life to develop a sense of life satisfaction.¹ Increasingly, investigators are finding that there are racial differences in developing this sense of life satisfaction. Krause summarized a review of the literature and found that financial security and material success are significant factors leading to greater life satisfaction.² Elderly people generally prefer to be economically independent and usually only turn to family members for assistance when pressed to do so or out of necessity. Family members are an important source of financial assistance for the elderly, but family members also play an important role in providing other forms of assistance.

Past research indicates that the black elderly are much more reluctant to use the formal social service system than whites are. Part of this is due to the fact that many black elderly do not know how to "work the system." Another contributing factor is that black


² Krause, 235.
elderly are often suspicious of the system and choose not to participate in it.\(^3\) The role of an informal care system, based on friendships and church relationships, will be examined to determine how black elderly are provided assistance and the role of friendship in their lives.

The black church plays an important role in enhancing the lives of elderly black individuals. When social services were unavailable in the past, black churches were not only a source of spiritual assistance, but a major source of economic assistance. The church often provided food, clothing, and money, as well as educational and employment opportunities.\(^4\) Black churches continue to play a major role in formal and informal sources of support for the black elderly. The multiple roles of the black church in contributing to the life satisfaction of the black elderly are reviewed in this section.

Although the literature is inconsistent on whether marital status positively contributes to life satisfaction, there are indications that multiple role involvement contributes to greater life satisfaction.\(^5\) An important role is marital status. For black elderly persons, the literature indicates that marital status contributes significantly to life satisfaction, but this factor is highly correlated with the role of parent and grandparent.


Historically, the black elderly have been portrayed as the "mainstay of kin networks." The kin network—kinkeeper role assumed by many black elderly persons involves visiting, telephoning, letter writing, sharing a mutual aid system, and maintaining a sense of family through psychological support.

However, a number of historical changes have redefined the relationships of elderly blacks and their families. Burton and Dilworth-Anderson summarize the traditional family roles of the black elderly as a means of survival amid the social, political, and economic adversities blacks have experienced throughout American history. The roots of black family life come from the age-graded family systems of West African culture. The roles elderly blacks have assumed range from providing material and spiritual support to kin to being the transmitters of family history and folklore to rearing grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Burton and Dilworth-Anderson believe that the changes in the intergenerational family life of elderly blacks can be attributed to the effects of three demographic trends: (1) Declines in mortality—the life expectancy for black males and females at birth has increased approximately 20 and 30 years, respectively, in the last century; (2) declines in fertility—the number of children born per black female has decreased from 4.5 in 1940 to 2.2 in 1984; the rate of teenage childbearing among blacks has also declined but continues to remain high relative to other racial groups; the number

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of black women who delay childbearing or remain childless has increased slightly, and (3) the dramatic increase in single-parent female headed households—at present, half of black families with children are maintained by single women.7

Burton and Dilworth-Anderson note that the interaction of these trends influences the context of the family structure and the black elderly in particular. As structures change, roles change. The authors note that to date, no empirical study had been done to examine the family roles of black elderly in the context of changing intergenerational family forms. They believe that at least three types of intergenerational family structures exist within the black elderly population. The first is the verticalized intergenerational family. It is produced by declining mortality and fertility and characterized by intergenerational extension. As the number of living generations within the lineage increases and with intragenerational contraction, there is a steady decrease in the number of members within each generation. The second form is an age-condensed structure which is found among families with consistent patterns of teenage childbearing. The age distance between generations is 12-17 years. Teenage childbearing creates a context which increases the workload of older women in the family. Many young grandmothers refuse to care for their grandchildren placing the burden upon great grandmothers who may also have to care for her own mother and the adolescent mother of the great-grandchild. The third form of intergenerational family is the substitution structure which

occurs when there has been delayed childbearing or childlessness and black elderly become part of a support network of fictive or remote kin.

Although the role of grandparenthood has been studied in white populations, it has not been systematically studied among blacks. Burton and Dilworth-Anderson found that black elderly usually perform the roles of surrogate parents and co-parents to their grandchildren. This role was often enacted by older blacks in response to family needs. For example, during the 'great migration' of young adult blacks from the South to urban centers in the North and West, grandparents kept their grandchildren until the parents were financially able to take care of them.⁸

The discussion of the role of the family and the black elderly is important because many of the variables associated with greater life satisfaction relate to economic independence and family support. Krause found in his study of race differences in life satisfaction among men and women that life satisfaction was lower for the black participants than the white participants. Much of this difference could be attributable to the interplay among educational attainment, economic plans for retirement, current financial difficulties, and economic dependence on family members.⁹ Current financial problems experienced by older people negatively affect their feelings of life satisfaction. Financial strain as well as economic dependence on family members contribute to this negative feeling. What cannot be ascertained from Krause's study is the extent to which

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⁸ Ibid., 320.

⁹ Krause, 243.
the black elderly in his study were caring for kin. He does note that the effects of race on life satisfaction are complex. His study found that although economic factors contribute to a negative life satisfaction, black elderly appear to have other sources of resilience that counterbalance these economic disadvantages. He surmised that these sources may be religiosity and intergenerational support which both serve as coping resources.

Intergenerational support is viewed as an important factor contributing to a positive feeling of life satisfaction. Contact with their children provides the elderly with rewarding interactions and assistance when needed. For instance, the black mother-daughter bond has been found to be particularly salient. Spitze and Miner studied the gender differences in the levels of contact with children among black middle-aged and elderly persons. They wanted to study contact by children--especially if black daughters were more likely than sons to have contact. They also wanted to know if there would be differences in contact between parent and child by gender. The authors found that there was some evidence of a strong bond between black mothers and daughters, but sons also maintained high levels of contact with their parents. The only exception included men who were divorced/separated and lived alone. They had one-third fewer contacts with both sons and daughters. This was found to be particularly salient since black men are not as actively involved in church as black women and they tend to have fewer informal support groups to rely on.


11 Ibid., 214.
The literature suggests that the culture and kinship patterns of many black families create an environment that is naturally supportive of needy family members, especially the impaired elderly. These patterns of kinship and loyalty are considered strengths among black families in America.\textsuperscript{12}

Watson's study of family relations, found that elderly black persons with children tended to show less agitation and more positive attitudes toward their own aging than their childless counterparts.\textsuperscript{13} Although this relationship was not statistically significant, the observed pattern in the data was consistent with previous findings that elderly persons who saw their children often showed greater signs of life satisfaction than those elderly who saw their children infrequently. Additionally, this study found that ninety-six percent of the visits received by the elderly in the sample were made by their children.\textsuperscript{14}

Taylor and Chatters studied the extent of family networks among older black Americans. The literature indicates that blacks are more likely to reside in extended households than their white counterparts. Family proximity can have a direct and immediate impact on the support and economic well-being of family members in these households. By pooling limited resources and sharing limited resources, older blacks can improve their economic situation. Taylor and Chatters also found that interaction with


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 59.
supportive relationships had an impact on how much companionship the black elderly had. Their findings indicated that the black elderly in their study had a high degree of proximity to their immediate family members and relatives. Three percent indicated that they lived with their immediate family, 6.3% lived in the same neighborhood, 33.8% in the same city, 6.3% in the same county, and 15.9% in the same state. The remainder lived outside the respondent's state. This same sample revealed that approximately 75% were very satisfied with their family life, 24.1% were somewhat satisfied, 4.3% were somewhat dissatisfied, and 0.7% were very dissatisfied. Surprisingly, the proximity of the family and family satisfaction were not related. In addition, two out of three felt their families were very close, 24.9% said their families were somewhat close, and 4.9% not too close. It should not be surprising, then, that a majority of this sample reported fairly frequent contact with family members—36% were in contact every day, 25.1% at least once a week, 17.1% a few times a month, 6.8% at least once a year, 4.2% hardly ever, and 3.5% never. Older women reported more frequent contact with family than did older men. And respondents who indicated that their families were close, and whose immediate family and other relatives were located close to them, interacted with their family members on a more frequent basis.

Taylor and Chatters conclude that the nearness of the immediate family and relatives were strong predictors of satisfaction with family life and frequency of contact. They also found a strong link between the nearness of kin and feelings of family closeness and satisfaction. These findings suggest that, notwithstanding the extensive levels of family closeness and satisfaction, affective relations within families are promoted by the
presence of relatives in the proximal environment. Further, the fact that proximity of relatives (and not proximity of immediate family) emerges as a determinant of family closeness suggests that relations outside of the nuclear family are significant for perceptions of affective solidarity among older black adults. The present findings, that a proximal group of relatives is positively associated with frequency kinship interaction and the maintenance of affective familial bonds, substantiate the importance of extended family relationships among older blacks.\textsuperscript{15}

Friendship Bond

Besides family and the church, other informal support systems include friends of the black elderly. There is typically a crossover between friends and church involvement since many social contacts are made within the formal church setting. To better understand the relationship between informal support services and the black elderly, Spence reviewed four models used to explain the relationship between informal and formal assistance provided to the elderly.\textsuperscript{16} The substitute model suggests that the formal support system replaces the informal structure when informal caregivers are unavailable or unable to meet the service needs of the elderly. This model is proposed because of the concern that shifting demographics and changing work and residential trends will leave many


\textsuperscript{16} Spence, 152.
elderly without the help they need by informal caregivers. The complement model suggests that both informal and formal systems are structured to provide certain types of services which respond to different needs of the black elderly. The informal structure, which provides services such as personal care, is nontechnical, nonroutine, and unpredictable. The formal system, which provides such services as health care, is technical, routine, and predictable in the type of service they provided. The kin independent model does not recognize the formal service delivery system and views the informal system as the sole provider of services to the elderly. Oftentimes, the beliefs and cultural values of the elderly prevent formal service use. The elderly may see it as a form of charity and display skepticism toward a system that has historically used discriminatory practices. Other factors include the fact that many formal service systems lack adequate ethnic representation within the service system and the absence of community-based services. The supplement model finds that the informal system is augmented by the formal system on an as-needed basis. The care provided informally is only supplemented by the formal system because of a critical need.

Spence found in her survey of black elderly that formal service use was low, with only 34% of the sample reporting use of one or more of six services (transportation, homemaker/chore, congregate or group meals, home-delivered meals, day care, and counseling).\textsuperscript{17} Informal assistance was measured by asking the respondents if they had received any of the above six services from family members, friends, neighbors, and/or

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 153.
other individuals not identified with the formal social service delivery system. All respondents received some type of informal assistance. Family ranked first in providing the greatest number of selected services; neighbors and individuals ranked second and third respectively. Friends were listed fourth. Accordingly, there may be two factors accounting for these findings: first, the similarity between informal and formal assistance and the positive relationship between these sources may be viewed in relation to the need factor. Respondents who received a greater degree of informal assistance perhaps were in greater need of additional help, a view similar to that reported by Mindel and Wright. Second, these respondents might have been more aware of formal services because of their interactions with informal caregivers and formal service providers in general.¹⁸

Spence and Atherton make the following recommendations to insure that black elderly use formal support services more extensively: more outreach effort to black churches, newspapers, radio stations, and more black staff as administrators, supervisors, and case managers within the system.¹⁹ Their findings also indicate that respondents who lived alone were more likely to use services such as transportation, homemaker/chore, (i.e., house cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, household repairs, and yard work), home delivered meals, day care, and counseling than those who lived with others. They surmised that these respondents were less likely to have the same level of informal support

¹⁸ Ibid., 155.

from family, friends, or others as those who resided with individuals. Another plausible explanation is that those who lived alone were more identifiable by service providers in terms of having a “need” for services than those who resided with others.20

The value of friends and a social support network was studied by Husaini, Moore, and Castor.21 By observing black elderly who lived in high rise apartments, the authors measured the respondents' isolation, stressors, and social supports. They note that black elderly persons living in these apartments are more prone to health problems, depression, and social isolation. Although high rise apartments may be responsive to the physical needs of the elderly, they may not be responsive to their social needs. Because social support is thought to enhance both physical and mental health, these high rise apartments were expected to meet the needs of the elderly by age-segregating them. Social support in this study was measured by five dimensions: 1) number of relatives and friends nearby; 2) frequency of contact with relatives and friends; 3) changes in confidant networks during past five years; 4) frequency of confidant use for personal and emotional problems, and 5) perceived social support.22 Frequency of contact was measured by asking respondents how often they talked to or saw friends and relatives. Husaini et al. found that elderly black living in these apartments had weaker support systems than those living in the

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20 Ibid., 31.


22 Ibid., 62.
community. They had fewer relatives living near them, fewer helpers who provided small favors, and fewer friends living near them. The "high rise" respondents also had fewer confidants with whom they discussed personal advice. Overall, the authors found these elderly persons to be older, less educated, to have lower incomes, and to be less likely to be married than those in community housing. They had smaller social networks, that is, fewer friends and relatives and somewhat fewer friends living nearby. In addition, the elderly in the high rise apartments experienced higher levels of chronic stress and saw physicians more often than did the community housing group. The authors suggested that these elderly could use intervention that would help them build support networks. Such interventions could address several of the shared problems and needs of the high-rise elderly for example, in light of the significantly lower levels of social support among the high-risers as compared to community dwellers, social work intervention might assist high-rise residents in developing the social skills and mechanisms necessary to achieve stronger mutual interdependence and closer helping relationships with other residents.\(^{23}\)

Ellison and Gay found that friendships are not as closely related to life satisfaction as are affective bonds among family members. They believe this confirms the centrality of the extended family in contemporary black society and raised questions concerning the supportiveness and durability of the informal social ties and friendships of blacks.\(^{24}\)

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 73.

Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson studied the support networks of black elderly to determine who uses what kind of informal support. The most frequently chosen helper was daughter (41.5%), followed by son (37.2%), spouse (32.8%), sister (28.7%), brother (20%), friend (19.6%), and neighbor (11.9%). If the respondent indicated a close family relationship, "family" was more often chosen before friends. And, vice versa, a distant family relationship was correlated with "friend" being chosen more often. Divorced persons were more likely to choose sister; separated and widowed chose friend, and separated and never married chose neighbor. Married spouses were much more likely to rely on each other. Families that were closer were more likely to have siblings who felt obligated to help. Additionally, family closeness affected the amount of assistance received from non-kin (i.e., friends and neighbors).

The study by Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson also confirmed the importance of friends and neighbors as informal helpers. For particular groups of older black adults (i.e., persons in the South and those who report that their families are not affectively close) the choice of non-kin was made irrespective of the presence of other potential helpers. Membership in certain sociodemographic subgroups may modify the basic structure of the support relationships that are established between elderly adults and nonimmediate family and non-kin. These types of non-kin relationships may be more prevalent in Southern black communities and among older adults who characterize themselves as not being

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affectively close to their families. A friend or neighbor who is thus regarded would likely feel greater commitment and obligation to an elderly person in need of assistance.26 The authors concluded that these black elderly made choices for support not by apparent need but within the context of interpersonal relationships.

Allen and Chin-Sang examined the leisure activities of retired elderly black women. The researchers posited that these women, who suffered from what has been called the "quadruple jeopardy" of being old, poor, female, and of minority status, would have a different perspective on leisure and retirement than the typical retiree (i.e., white middle class males) and that a study of their leisure activities would provide rich material because of the stereotypes so often associated with them.27 The authors believe that stereotypes such as the "kintenders" or matriarch of the family distorts much of what really happens in their lives. The alternative family and social networks they create have not been systematically studied.

All of the women who participated in the study by Allen and Chin-Sang had worked most of their adult lives and some from childhood. In their later years, they interpreted leisure as freedom from time constraints, relaxing, having time for church and the Bible, not working, and having nothing to do. The church and senior center were important centers of their leisure time. Their voluntary activities allowed them to use

26 Ibid., 100.

skills and talents developed in previous work and caregiving experiences. The church was viewed as a shelter or refuge and a place to be connected to others. The senior center was a place for leisure and service. Because many of these women did not have enough involvement with family members, either through neglect or death, they created their own community. Through the senior center, they created "fictive kin relationships" and formed alternative family arrangements with other women at the center. The most important aspect of their leisure time was that they now had the freedom to do what they wanted—something lacking during their working lives. The women in this study also described leisure as both freedom from the constraint of needing to work in order to survive and a form of self-expression, whether active or passive, solitary or affiliative. What had been missing during their working years was time just to relax or to have the freedom to work with and for others as they chose. Now with free time, these self-reliant strategists incorporated important community institutions—the church and senior center—into their daily experience of work, leisure, and service.²⁸

Because of the dearth of information about black elderly leisure activities, Allen and Chin-Sang point out that their experiences cannot be studied from a white middle class male perspective of retirement. For these women, the inclusion of service as part of their later years was an important aspect of their lives that differs significantly from white male perspectives. The extension of work and providing services was a continuous expression of their lives with the difference being that in later life they chose how they would spend their time.

²⁸ Ibid., 739.
Adelmann reiterates the need to look at women's later years differently from that of men. She found that participation in do-it-yourself projects and volunteer activities were linked to lower depression and higher self-esteem in older women. Such activities likely provide concrete and social rewards as well as personal feelings of accomplishment, all of which may be of benefit to older women's well-being. From Adelmann's findings, one might conclude that black elderly women derive significant benefits from their participation in community activities, with friends and kin, and in church-related activities, as is reviewed in the following section.

Church Attendance

Walls and Zarit point out that the black church is the only institution that has been and continues to be owned, financed, and controlled by black people. They found that black churches not only provide religious activities, but they also play a major role in socialization, political mobilization, and supportive functions among black Americans. Elderly blacks are able to remain socially integrated in their communities through their churches. In addition, black churches function as surrogate families for those elderly who


30 Ibid., 208.

31 Walls and Zarit, 490.
do not have family members nearby, and the churches contribute to their emotional security.

Taylor and Chatters note that both historically and contemporaneously, the black church has been an omnipresent and important institution in the black community. Blacks are associated with the church at young ages and the church is integrally associated with such important life transitions as marriage, births, and deaths over the entire life course. Similarly, Ellison and Gay discuss the importance of religion in black life by noting that the southern church has been the symbolic and institutional center of black life. They discuss black churches as providing social contacts, various types of mutual aide (e.g., burial societies), locations for meetings and gatherings concerning collective issues and problems, and settings for the development of black leadership. Among southern blacks, institutional religious commitment has served as both an emblem of legitimacy and a "gateway" to full membership and participation in the black community.

Because socioeconomic factors are not as highly related to life satisfaction for blacks as they are for whites, other factors such as religiosity have been given greater importance. Ellison and Gay found that religion may contribute to subjective well-being for blacks in three ways: 1) as a source of ideational coherence and meaning; 2) as a force for social cohesion; and 3) as the basis of distinctive religious subcultures within the black population. Ideational coherence refers to using private religious experience to help one

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33 Ellison and Gay, 126.
get through the day and to cope with difficult crises. Use of private religious experience may help foster self-esteem and a sense of personal efficacy. It may also increase the sense of orderliness and predictability to interpret daily events and potential stressors. Participating in religious activities may promote social cohesion. Churches provide regular opportunities for social intercourse between individuals of like minds and values and nurture friendships and social ties. There may be subcultural differences in the type of religious affiliation due to distinctive doctrines, religious experiences, social solidarity, organizational environments, or lifestyles.

Although Ellison and Gay's study looked at religious affiliation of blacks for all age groups, their findings are important in our understanding of the correlation between religious affiliation and life satisfaction among the elderly. Blacks affiliated with all denominations reported higher levels of well-being than unaffiliated individuals. Their findings were similar to other researchers in that socioeconomic status is not significantly related to life satisfaction among black Americans. They surmised that this was due to two factors: 1) a lowering of expectations by the dispossessed to that which is attainable and 2) the existence of cultural values stressing non-economic dimensions of personal identity and experience.34

Another variable studied by Ellison and Gay was affiliation to particular denominations. They found that southern black Catholics reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, although they could not explain why this was so. Baptist

34 Ibid., 133.
affiliation proved to have a significant positive effect for blacks. The authors surmised two reasons for this: 1) the democratic style of organization which initially attracted black members and pastors may foster distinctive congregational climates and identities and 2) the historic involvement of black Baptist churches in campaigns for social and political change may promote a strong sense of institutional identity, as well as feelings of individual, collective, and racial self-esteem and empowerment. The authors believe that their research confirms the importance of religious participation in the personal lives of many black Americans.

A number of studies indicate that religious beliefs and activities tend to be positively related to personal and social adjustment in the later years of life. Watson found that the greater the participation of individuals in church activities, ranging from church leaders to nonmembers, the higher the personal-adjustment scores. According to Watson, those elderly persons who frequently read the Bible, attended church frequently, were church leaders rather than followers, and frequently listened to religious broadcasts were more likely than their less-committed counterparts to be well adjusted to the difficulties of everyday life. In Watson's study of elderly black males and females undergoing involuntary relocation from one place of residence to another, those individuals who showed high degrees of religious involvement for example, in the importance assigned to their religious beliefs, church attendance, and Bible reading before residential change had

35 Ibid., 134.
significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, higher overall morale, and lower levels of perceived agitation than their less involved counterparts four months after relocation.36

Nye collected forty-three life stories from elderly black individuals in the Roanoke and New River Valleys. Although these stories produced themes such as kinship, work, and the values and skills necessary to succeed as a racial minority in a hostile world, the most notable and common theme was that of religion. Nye lists six functions provided by the black church:

1. An expressive function or as an outlet for one's deepest emotions. This was found in the way in which many respondents couched their deepest concerns in religious terms and references;
2. A status function, or religious participation confers recognition which may be lacking or denied in the wider, white-dominated world;
3. A meaning function or a source of order and understanding for one's life. This function is particularly important in maintaining continuity;
4. A refuge function as a haven in an oftentimes hostile world;
5. A cathartic function or as an avenue for the release of pent-up emotions and frustrations felt by an oppressed minority;
6. An other worldly orientation function, so named because it orients the person, self, and activities toward eventual fulfillment in the next life. This function is

at least equal to the meaning function in maintaining continuity.\textsuperscript{37}

Nye notes that religion was not the only common theme discovered in these life stories he collected. Work, kinship, and dealing with being a minority in a society dominated by whites were other prominent themes. However, none of them matched the strength of religion as a binding force of continuous identity.\textsuperscript{38}

There are several reasons why the black church is used for informal support for black elderly, as explained by Walls and Zarit. In their review of the literature, they found that black churches are able to organize people within the community and the structure and function of black churches enhance their ability to provide a range of formal and informal services. Black elderly turn to their churches for assistance more often than do white elderly. Their study examined the perceptions of the amount and type of support available to black elderly from their families and churches, and whether church support may supplement or complement family support. They also studied the contributions of church-based support and religiosity to well-being. The results of their study confirmed that black churches play an important role in enhancing the lives of elderly blacks. The results showed that the elderly in this study perceived more support was provided overall from the family than from church members, but church support contributed to feelings of well-being. These analyses further revealed that both the church and family networks


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 113.
were important predictors of well-being. These findings are consistent with the historical importance of black churches and underscores their ability to function as supportive communities.\(^{39}\)

The family and church network are usually thought of as two distinct networks, but Walls and Zarit argue that they should not be thought of that way. They are not mutually exclusive because the largest percentage of people in the networks were family or friends who attended the same church as their respondents. The authors believe that the critical mechanism may be the informal social components of black churches that provide support to black elderly, supplementing the support from the family.

As was previously discussed, elderly blacks use the formal social service delivery system only infrequently. They do not have the emotional attachment to these formal agencies as they do to their church. Black churches do serve the function of getting black elderly to participate more fully in the formal social service delivery system. This can include psychosocial and medical interventions. Through the black churches, formal social service delivery systems can enhance the well-being of black elderly in a way that is culturally sensitive and cognizant of their needs.

The most prevalent types of assistance provided by church members to black elderly were help during illness, help in a spiritual manner, companionship, advice and encouragement, and instrumental aid (e.g., financial help), according to Taylor and Chatters. The authors were interested in examining the private, nonorganized forms of

\(^{39}\)Walls and Zarit, 493.
religious involvement among the black elderly. Research has traditionally focused on the extent of organizational behavior, but has done little investigating of private religious activities. As the authors point out, distinctions between private versus public religious involvement and religious attitudes/beliefs versus behaviors are important because they reflect basic differences in the underlying nature of and motivations for religious involvement. Private behaviors are seen as having intrinsic value while organized behavior such as church attendance has extrinsic value.

Taylor and Chatters found that church attendance and church membership were significant predictors of the frequency and amount of social support provided by church members, but subjective religiosity was unrelated to assistance. Church-based assistance can be categorized as instrumental (material aid), emotional (empathy and caring), and appraisal (information about the self). They studied the extent to which black elderly used informal support within the church and concluded that church attendance may function as a general indicator of one's level of involvement in church activities and integration in this social organization. Similarly, findings for the perceived importance of church and frequency of aid parallel those for church attendance. Older persons who report frequent attendance and endorse the importance of church likely have a history of extensive participation and have acted as a support provider to others. As a consequence, they currently reap the benefits in the form of more frequent and increased levels of

assistance. For elderly persons with children, the level of assistance did not decrease. In fact, adult children appear to be important for facilitating linkages to church support networks for their elderly parents. Perhaps adult children make their parents' need known or actively mobilize support on their behalf.

Some other important findings in the study by Taylor and Chatters are that church members may be a more integral component of the support networks of elderly blacks than has been previously thought. What was unexpected was the type of assistance church members provided—not only prayers, but financial support, goods and services. More important was the nature of the social relationships and obligations, as well as social integration, which predicted assistance. Taylor and Chatters concluded that the black church plays not only a spiritual role but an important role in the material and psychological sustenance of black Americans, and older blacks in particular.

There have been several explanations as to why women are more likely to report higher levels of formal and nonorganizational religious involvement than men. The deprivation-compensation model of religiosity posits that people who occupy lower status group positions (i.e., women, minorities, the poor, unmarried, and older persons) use religious involvement as a means to adapt to the constraints, barriers, and stresses they encounter since they lack the social and financial resources to effect change. Thus, black elderly women and their high levels of religiosity have been traditionally explained through this model. However, Taylor and Chatters refute this model as an explanation. They

41 Taylor and Chatters, Church-based Informal Support Among Elderly Blacks, 640.
found that higher socioeconomic status and married blacks generally displayed higher levels of religious participation than their poorer and unmarried counterparts. Another conclusion is that socioeconomic status is positively associated with organizational religious participation.

However, as Allen and Chin-Sang note, little is known about the meaning and context of church-related activities for African-American women. Their study of black elderly women and leisure time indicated that these women defined church not as work, but as leisure or service, suggesting that church-related activities were unique among their other activities. Many of these women saw themselves as the backbone of the church and spent a good deal of time maintaining it. The researchers also noted that some women were ambivalent about the church and found it a mixed blessing. This was discussed, in particular as a potential source of exploitation.

Taylor and Chatters posited that nonorganized religious activities would be higher in black elderly for two reasons: 1) their health limitations pose a potential impediment to participation in formally organized activities (e.g., attending church) so nonorganizational behaviors could be an important outlet of religious expression, and 2) older persons used religious strategies to cope with stressful life experiences, the most common being health concerns. Their findings indicated that a majority of their sample of black elderly participated in a variety of nonorganizational religious activities and behaviors such as daily prayer, reading religious materials, watching or listening to religious programs on a weekly basis, and requesting prayer on their behalf several times a month. Private prayer was cited most often, followed by reading religious books, watching or listening to
religious programs, and asking others for prayer. Coupled with high levels of church
attendance and church membership, this group exhibited a high degree of religiosity.

Consistent with other findings, Taylor and Chatters found that women reported
these behaviors more often than men. This is also consistent with higher levels of
organized formal religious participation among women. Notable, there was no difference
between men and women when it came to the more passive behavior of watching or
listening to religious programs. The other behaviors, which required a more proactive
approach, all displayed a large gender difference with women more active than men.

Marital Status

As women constitute an increasing proportion of the older population, the
"feminization" of old age presents an increasing problem of elderly women. According to
U.S. Census Bureau, there were 846,000 black men and 1.24 million black women over
the age of sixty-five in 1980. Elderly black men constituted 6.8% and elderly black
women 8.9% of the total population of blacks. Elderly men who become widowed are
more likely to marry quickly while more widows end up living alone, in nursing homes,
and become more dependent on their children. Widowhood is more prevalent among
older black women than white women. However, more white widows live alone than

42 Kyriakos S. Markides, “Consequences of Gender Differentials in Life
Expectancy for Black and Hispanic Americans,” International Journal of Aging and
black widows. Markides also notes that high poverty rates correlate highly with marital status. Although the employment rates for minority women have increased, the types of jobs they are likely to work at usually are of a lower status and few provide a private pension.

Much of the literature on old age has largely ignored minority populations. Markides contends that minority elderly have been misunderstood and stereotyped more than other elderly. The larger society has romanticized their position in their extended family and communities. The author points out that it is widely believed that the minority elderly enjoy certain advantages because of the greater status they are accorded within the family. One reason may be that in previous generations, so few lived long enough to be given this status. The scarcity of this population translated into higher social status within the family and community. However, as this population has increased because of longevity, and as their rates of disability, infirmity, and dependency increase, this group will experience a lowering of their status. The author speculates that increasing dependency and disability will have negative consequences on intergenerational relations. Black men can look forward to their wives' support when impaired or disabled, older women will become increasingly dependent on their children. In addition, as the labor force participation rises for black women, and as younger blacks adopt the values of the larger society regarding support of aged parents, it can be assumed that higher rates of institutionalization among older black women will occur.
Tran, Wright, and Chatters studied subjective well-being in black elderly and found marital status significantly contributed to the subjective well-being of this population. Married black elderly reported a higher sense of well-being than nonmarried counterparts. Ellison and Gay found that previously married blacks were significantly less satisfied with their lives than currently married respondents, while there were no significant differences between married and never married individuals. The authors believe this indicates that the importance of the state of marriage is declining within the black population. Creighton-Zollar and Williams also cite this declining interest in marriage for blacks noting that the rate of marriage for blacks has fallen from 64% in 1970 to 46.7% in 1988. Creighton-Zollar and Williams reviewed the small amount of literature related specifically to elderly blacks and marital satisfaction and found no significant relationships between marital status and life satisfaction. However, their analysis of data collected by the General Social Surveys between 1972 and 1984 revealed that under all conditions, married persons reported higher global happiness than did unmarried persons. For married males, global happiness was highest among persons 60 and over and those who had completed less than a high school education. Married females who were between the ages of 40 and 59, had attended college, and were raised by both parents reported higher global happiness than


females in other conditions. The strongest associations between marital status and global happiness for males were found under the conditions of 40-59 years of age, high school graduates, and raised by both parents. For females, the strongest associations were among persons 40-59 years of age, having attended some college, and raised by other than both parents.\textsuperscript{45}

Furthermore, the authors found that as age increases, marital happiness increases for both males and females. In all age categories, females are at least three times more likely than males to report that their marriage was not too happy. However, marital happiness made a greater contribution to the overall happiness of black wives than it did to the overall happiness of black husbands.

Taylor and Chatters, in their study of extended family networks among older blacks, found that there were marital status differences in how respondents felt about their families. Divorced persons did not feel as close to their family as did married people. Because of this, divorced people are more likely to have an informal network of distant relatives, friends, and neighbors, rather than their immediate family.

Several researchers have studied the correlation between marital status and religiosity. Taylor and Chatters found that there was no relationship between marital status and nonorganized religious behavior. They did find that divorced people were less likely to ask others to pray for them. The authors surmised that divorce still carries a

certain stigma with it that also includes social isolation and ostracism, especially within the structure of the church.

Another aspect of marriage that has been studied is the relationship between one’s number of roles and a person’s psychological well-being. The literature indicates that overall multiple roles are associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. The role enhancement hypothesis proposes that multiple roles may promote well-being because one role may buffer the stress experienced in another role. However, the role strain hypothesis proposes that too many incompatible demands between roles cause strain. Adelmann notes that most of adulthood is characterized by role accretion, in which new roles are added to those already held, and role succession, in which lost roles are replaced by new ones. Late life is characterized by role losses, but is unique in that such losses are often irreversible and not amenable to substitution. The roles of elderly persons become tenuous not just through loss, but through attrition or shrinkage within roles (as in what the emptying nest does to the parent role). Aged persons are essentially rendered “roleless,” by which their lives are devalued, unstructured, and deprived of social identity. Rosow argues that as adults move into late life, formal roles decline and tenuous roles increase, resulting in a “role deficit” that threatens social identity and individual well-being.46

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Adelmann studied the role occupancy of older adults and its relation to well-being. Eight roles including spouse, parent, employee, homemaker, volunteer, student, grandparent, and caregiver were included in the study.

Adelmann's findings supported the role enhancement theory of earlier research. Those adults with more multiple roles experienced higher levels of psychological well-being than those with fewer roles. The author reported that there was a strong link between roles and self-efficacy for black older men in comparison to other groups. She surmised that older black men may have experienced discontinuous employment through their adult years which may have led to a limited involvement in their family. When they reach late life, these roles may take on greater importance.

The Review in Summary

A review of the literature on black elderly and life satisfaction finds a mixed summary of how satisfying life is for this population. Although this subject has been ignored by researchers in the past, more research has been done in recent years. One reason is that this is a group which is growing in size and living longer. How this will affect their life satisfaction is unknown. Although the black family is traditionally thought of as close with the black elderly holding an important role in the kin family, the social dynamics of the black family are changing. Marriage rates are declining for black men and women. The black elderly have traditionally been suspicious of formal social service
delivery systems and have relied on family, friends, and church communities to provide assistance. This can be expected to change as there will be fewer kin to assist the elderly.

Friends and the church-related community play a significant role in the lives of the black elderly and contribute to their sense of well-being. It appears that church provides a locus which other support systems revolve around. Church is also a place where other activities take place such as social functions and activities. The lack of a support network and the potential for harm it can cause was demonstrated by the study of the black elderly in high rise apartments. Isolation and lack of involvement in social networks are especially destructive to those elderly who have little or no contact with family members.

Marital status appears to play a significant role in the well-being of elderly blacks. As they age, these elderly associated greater happiness with being married, not less. For the most part, the black elderly associate being married with greater well-being. As previously noted, the fact that the rate of marriage is declining for blacks may be a significant factor in the years to come. Remaining active and maintaining several roles while in later life also contribute to life satisfaction. Similarly, remaining associated with a church appears to be conducive to the lifestyle of the black elderly.

Theoretical Framework

The structural functional theory in sociology and the activity theory in social gerontology can be useful to understanding variation or differences in levels of life satisfaction among the elderly. The structural functional theory can make statements
about changes which are prerequisites for the maintenance stability of the system and
about corrective changes, in which deviations from the system's state of equilibrium are
followed by attempts to restore it. This theory explores the factors that hold social units
together, but is not adequate to handle the forces of disruption and change. Functionalists
see much confusion in the institutions and agencies that are supposed to meet the needs of
our oldest citizens. In the past, death came at an early age, and there were relatively few
elderly people. Most of the people who did grow old were cared for by their families.
However, with the improvements in sanitation, medical care, and food supplies brought
about by industrialization, the percentage of elderly people in the population has increased
everseously. At the same time, economic changes caused a breakdown within the family,
leaving many older people isolated, alone, and without the financial means to support
themselves. As functionalists emphasize, the family institution is a universal one because it
performs vital functions in all societies. Throughout human history families have provided
basic food and shelter and emotional comfort for their members. They have also supplied
social placement, replacement of members, socialization, and care and protection.47

From the functionalist perspective, it is necessary to reorganize the social
institutions that traditionally cared for the elderly or to develop new agencies that can do
so more effectively. In order to obtain life satisfaction, the family needs to be able to
properly function. The structural functionalist theory views society as a system of
interrelated parts that work together. The interrelated parts are the family, friends,

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church, school, and other institutions. All of the parts of the system must function on balance in order to obtain stability, including life satisfaction.

The debate between disengagement and activity theories of aging highlights two general explanations of life satisfaction. Disengagement theory proposes that with advancing age the individual must accept lower status, gradually giving up positions in work, leadership, and other areas of social activity so that social equilibrium can be maintained in the society. In other instances those who withdraw or disengage themselves from activities as they become increasingly older are more likely to adjust satisfactorily to old age. Although most current evidence supports the activity theory, it is also well recognized that the heterogeneity of the aged allows for a modified version of both theories, depending upon the particular aged person being investigated.48 Cumming and Henry, who developed the concept, originally contended that disengagement was both functional for society, providing a process by which power can transfer from older to younger members and functional for individuals, initiating a less active and, therefore, more satisfying life style.49 A later analysis indicated that disengagement becomes a satisfying outcome only if the person willingly reduces role commitment and maintains high self-esteem in the process.50


The notion that activity promotes life satisfaction has a long historical tradition and has been most recently and widely popularized by gerontologists. This study of the black elderly is influenced by the activity theory.

The activity theory argues that successful aging requires older people to remain active and involved in community life. Havighurst and other proponents maintain that normal aging involves maintaining as long as possible the activities and attitudes of middle age. For those activities and roles which the individual is forced to give up at the time of retirement, substitutes should be found. Examples "include" participation in senior citizen activities or centers, meetings, community service, sports, traveling and exercising. Most senior citizens are willing to make adaptive changes as they age if these changes permit a sense of continuity in self-image and personally significant activities.51

The activity theory assumes that the relationship between the social system and the personality system remains fairly stable as an individual passes from the status of middle age to that of old age.52 According to activity theorists, any exhibition of behavior by older persons that would not be appropriate in middle aged persons is considered maladjustment. Activity theory emphasizes the stability of personality system orientations as an individual ages. It ignores the need for societal-structured alternatives to compensate for losses that the individual experiences as part of the aging process. Thus, the activity theory suggests the following hypotheses: (1) that there is a positive relation


between social activity and life satisfaction in old age, and (2) that the role losses such as widowhood and retirement are inversely related to life satisfaction.\textsuperscript{53}

In summary, the activity theory essentially holds that to be happy in old age, individuals need to keep active. It also posits that happiness is achieved by defying the onset of old age and by maintaining the middle-aged way of life, values, and beliefs for as long as possible. Finally, the activity theory argues that the more roles or relationships that an individual loses or does not or cannot replace, the greater the drop in the level of life satisfaction.

This study rejects disengagement theory (rooted in structural functionalism) in favor of activity theory. It proceeds with the conceptualization that life satisfaction is enhanced by family interaction, friendship bond, church attendance, and marriage.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 34.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Hypotheses

This study focused on two main components of life satisfaction—social psychological and structural variables. The theoretical framework suggests the following hypotheses: (1) elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong family support network are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not, (2) elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong friendship bond are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not, (3) elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong church attendance are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not, and (4) married elderly people are more likely to be satisfied with life than single people.

Design and Sample

The population sample for this study included persons aged 60 and older. Data for the study were collected at Senior Citizens Today (SCT) during the spring of 1997.¹ Senior Citizens Today is a multi-purpose self-help program consisting of 1,500 “seniors helping seniors” to remain independent and productive community members. The mission

¹ Senior Citizens Today (SCT) is a pseudonym for the actual center studied.
envisioned is to ensure that seniors gain greater accessibility to the services necessary to maintain and lead meaningful dignified lives, with an emphasis on independence. Through its array of programs, SCT seeks to further define the role of seniors, and to empower this growing population through a variety of educational and recreational activities.

I chose to collect my data at SCT, in part, because of time and fiscal limitations. I also chose this sample because of curiosity regarding the elderly's independent functioning. As I visited the facility, I observed that the black elderly in attendance were very independent.

The questionnaire was designed to collect perceptions of psychological well-being of the black elderly. A non-probability sample was used to collect my data. In this paper, I used a purposive sample (which is defined as a type of non-probability sampling method in which the researcher uses his or her own judgment in the selection of the sample). More females were chosen in the sample because women constitute the majority in the elderly population as well as at SCT. This sample allowed me to study a small subset of a larger population in which many members of the subset are easily identified. Since an attempt toward surveying all of the seniors at SCT would have been virtually impossible given the aforementioned constraints of time and fiscal resources, this technique was appropriate for my purposes. To obtain the survey data, a questionnaire was administered to this target population at Senior Citizens Today.
Measurements and Data Analysis

The selection of variables was governed by an attempt to retain similarity to the work of others who have studied this research problem. The demographic characteristics studied were 1) age in years; 2) sex coded as 1 = male, 2 = female; 3) education completed (1 = less than high school, 2 = high school, 3 = some college/associate degree, 4 = college); 4) total annual income (1 = less than $10,000, 2 = $10,000 - $19,999, 3 = $20,000 - $29,999, 4 = $30,000 - $39,999, 5 = $40,000 and more); and 5) marital status (1 = married, 2 = never married, 3 = separated, 4 = widowed, 5 = divorced).

Two items indicating family ties (or interaction) were measured: "How often do you see, write, or talk on the telephone with family or relatives who do not live with you?" Categories of this variable included: 1 = nearly every day; 2 = at least once a week; 3 = a few times a month; 4 = at least once a month; 5 = a few times a year; 6 = hardly ever; and "How satisfied are you with your family life, that is, the time you spend and the things you do with members of your family?" Categories of this second variable used to measure family ties included: 1 = very satisfied; 2 = somewhat satisfied; 3 = somewhat dissatisfied; 4 = very dissatisfied.

One item indicating friendship ties was measured: "How many of all your friends live in your community?" Categories included: 1 = none; 2 = half or less; 3 = most; 4 = all.

Three items indicating religion were measured: "How often do you usually attend religious services?" 1 = nearly everyday; 2 = at least once a week; 3 = a few times a month; 4 = a few times a year; 5 = less than once a year; "How important is going to
church or a place of worship to you?” 1 = very important; 2 = fairly important; 3 = not too important; 4 = not important at all; and “How religious would you say you are?” 1 = very religious; 2 = fairly religious; 3 = not too religious; 4 = not religious at all.

One item indicating marital ties was measured: “If you are married, taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?” 1 = very happy; 2 = pretty happy; 3 = not too happy.

The dependent variable, life satisfaction, was operationalized by scores on the “Diener Satisfaction with Life Scale.” This is a measure of global life satisfaction or subjective well-being. It is ideal for use with older populations and in research situations where time of administration is an important factor, because the scale contains only five items. The scale is typically administered using a seven point Likert-type response format, with response options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” For ease of administration, this was modified to a five-point Likert-type format with the same poles.

In addition to the foregoing closed-ended questions, one open-ended question was included to tap qualitative responses. This open-ended question “What makes life satisfying to you?” was used to gather specific responses about life satisfaction pertaining to this sample of black elderly persons.

After reviewing the data and due to the size of the sample and the responses, the independent and dependent variables were recoded. The question that measured family interaction “How often do you see, write, or talk on the telephone with family or relatives who do not live with you?” was recoded 1 = nearly every day; 2 = at least once a week or less. The second variable friendship interaction “How many of all your friends live in your
community?" was recoded 1 = half or more, 2 = most. The third variable church attendance "How often do you attend religious services?" was recoded 1 = at least a week or more; 2 = a few times a month or less. The last variable marital status "What is your marital status?" was recoded 1 = married; 2 = not married. The dependent variable life satisfaction "I am satisfied with my life?" was recoded 1 = disagree; 2 = no opinion; 3 = agree.

Frequency tables were used to exhibit information pertaining to the sample relative to gender, age, educational status, income, and marital status.

The chi-square test of independence was used to test the previously stated hypotheses. Hence, the research sought to determine any relationship between the independent variables, 1) family and kinship interaction, 2) friendship bond, 3) church attendance, 4) and marital status, and the dependent variable, life satisfaction, among the black elderly.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

This chapter examines the influence of selected variables on the life satisfaction of the black elderly. The variables selected were family and kinship interaction, friendship bond, church attendance, and marital status. The sample consisted of 50 subjects. Table 1 shows the number of subjects by gender and their mean age. The sample consisted of 13 males and 37 females.

The respondents ranged in age from 61 to 86 years, with a mean of 71.7 years. As shown in Table 1, the mean ages of the males and females are fairly close.

Table 1. Number and % of Subjects by Gender and Mean Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Educational Status

The amount of education completed by most subjects in the sample (n=50) was "high school graduate" (50%, n=25). Table 2 summarizes the educational status of the group. As in the general population of African Americans, black females in the sample had received more education than the black elderly males.

Future projections regarding levels of educational attainment by the elderly show that by the year 2000, the median number of school years completed by the future elderly cohorts will be twelve years. The implication of this trend suggests that the elderly are becoming more educated.

Table 2. Educational Status by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational status</th>
<th>Total n (%)</th>
<th>Male n (%)</th>
<th>Female n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>less than high school</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school graduate</td>
<td>25 (50)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
<td>18 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some college/associate degree</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college graduate</td>
<td>11 (22)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Socioeconomic Status

The income of older Americans consistently falls below that of other age groups in the adult population. In 1993, the elderly had the lowest incomes of all age groups; the income for those 65 and older was $17,751. The black elderly had an even lower income at $11,926.²

The median income of this sample falls within a range of $10,000-$19,999 (see Table 3). Given that this represents a lower income than average, it appears that this finding is consistent with the literature indicating that as one gets older, the amount of income decreases. However, since data were not collected on this sample’s previous income, we cannot definitively state this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic status</th>
<th>Total n (%)</th>
<th>Male n (%)</th>
<th>Female n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000-$19,999</td>
<td>16 (32)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000-$29,999</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$39,999</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 and more</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marital status

Marital status has been shown to be an important factor in life satisfaction among the elderly. Table 4 summarizes the marital status of the subjects. Among the subjects 38% (n=19) are married. Thirty-four percent and 22% indicated that they are widowed and divorced, respectively. Two percent indicated that they are separated. Only four percent indicated that they were never married. Of the seventeen elderly persons who are widowed, all are women. This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that older women are more often left without a spouse than older men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Total n (%)</th>
<th>Male n (%)</th>
<th>Female n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>married</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>8 (16)</td>
<td>11 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never married</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>separated</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>widowed</td>
<td>17 (34)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>17 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>11 (22)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tests of the Hypotheses

The chi-square test of independence was computed to examine the relationship between life satisfaction and the four independent variables (family interaction, friendship bond, church attendance, and marital status). Shown in Table 5 are the chi-square results between family interaction and satisfaction with life. The majority of the respondents (64%, n=32) who stated that they communicate or interact with family and relatives everyday or more often, agreed they are satisfied with life. In contrast, 38% (n=19) of the respondents who communicate with family and relatives once a week or less agreed they are satisfied with life. Eighteen percent (n=9) of these elderly individuals had no opinion on this item. Although greater interaction with family members was related to a higher level of life satisfaction, the relationship was not significant. As shown in this table, the chi-square yielded an observed value of 1.48, with two degrees of freedom (df), and probability (p) .476. Thus, the first null hypothesis was not rejected and it was concluded that there was no significant relationship between family support and life satisfaction for this sample.
Table 5. Chi-square Results Regarding the Relationship between Family Interaction and Satisfaction with Life
(Percentages are in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family interaction</th>
<th>Disagree (not satisfied)</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree (satisfied)</th>
<th>Row Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction everyday or more often</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
<td>18 (36)</td>
<td>31 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction once a week or less</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>14 (28)</td>
<td>20 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
<td>50 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$x^2 = 1.48, df = 2, p = .476$

Table 6 shows the chi-square of independent results between friendship bond and satisfaction with life. The majority of the respondents (68%, n=34) who indicated that half or none of their friends live in their community, agreed they are satisfied with life. Thirty-two percent (n=16) of the respondents who noted that most of their friends live in their community, agreed they are satisfied with life. Eighteen percent (n=9) of these elderly individuals had no opinion on this item. As revealed in this table, the chi-square analysis yielded an observed value of 5.34, df=2, p=.069. Therefore, the null hypothesis for the second test was not rejected, and it was concluded that there was no significant relationship between friendship interaction and life satisfaction.
Table 6. Chi-square Results Regarding the Relationship between Friendship Bond and Satisfaction with Life  
(Percentages are in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of friends residing in community (friendship interaction)</th>
<th>Disagree (not satisfied)</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree (satisfied)</th>
<th>Row Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>half or none</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>34 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>most</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
<td>16 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
<td>50 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = 5.34, df = 2, p = .069 \]

Table 7 shows the chi-square of independent results between church attendance and satisfaction with life. The majority of the respondents (76%, n=38) who stated they attend church at least once a week or more, agreed they were satisfied with life. Twenty-four percent (n=12) of the respondents who reported they attend church a few times a month or less, agreed they are satisfied with life. Eighteen percent (n=9) of these elderly individuals had no opinion on this item. Although those elderly persons who attended church regularly were more likely to indicate satisfaction with life than those who attended less frequently, this relationship was not significant (p > .05). As depicted in this table, the chi-square analysis yielded an observed value of .525, df=2, p=.769. Consequently, the null hypothesis for the third test was not rejected, and it was concluded that there was no significant relationship between church attendance and life satisfaction.
Table 7. Chi-square Results Regarding the Relationship between Church Attendance and Satisfaction with Life
(Percentages are in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Disagree (not satisfied)</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Agree (satisfied)</th>
<th>Row Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least once a week or more</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
<td>25 (50)</td>
<td>38 (76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times a month or less</td>
<td>3 (6)</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
<td>12 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
<td>50 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = 0.525, \text{ df } = 2, \text{ p } = 0.769 \]

Table 8 shows the chi-square of independent results between marital status and satisfaction with life. The majority of the respondents (60%, n=30) who stated they were not married, agreed they were satisfied with life. Forty percent (n=20) of married persons indicated that they are satisfied with life. Eighteen percent (n=9) of these elderly individuals had no opinion on this item. As shown in this table, the computed chi-square yielded an observed value of 1.45, df=2, p=.485. Therefore, the null hypothesis for test four was not rejected and it was concluded that there was no significant relationship between marital status and life satisfaction.
Table 8. Chi-square Results Regarding the Relationship between Marital Status and Satisfaction with Life  
(Percentages are in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Disagree (not satisfied)</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree (satisfied)</th>
<th>Row Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>married</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>4 (8)</td>
<td>14 (28)</td>
<td>20 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not married</td>
<td>7 (14)</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
<td>18 (36)</td>
<td>30 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>9 (18)</td>
<td>32 (64)</td>
<td>50 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ x^2 = 1.45, \, df = 2, \, p = .485 \]
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Review of the Study

This study examined selected variables which may influence the life satisfaction of the black elderly. The results of this study will be discussed in two sections. In the first section, each hypothesis as stated in Chapter 2 will be addressed. The implications for future research will be discussed in the second section.

Hypothesis 1

Elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong family support network are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not.

This hypothesis was not supported by the sample, resulting in the finding that there is no significant relationship between life satisfaction and family interaction. These findings are inconsistent with those of Taylor and Chatters who found that family interaction and proximity lead to life satisfaction.¹ Their findings indicate that the black elderly have a high degree of proximity to their immediate family members and relatives.

¹ Taylor and Chatters, Extended Family Networks of Older Black Adults, 212.
In their study, 3% indicated that they lived with their immediate family, 6.3% lived in the same neighborhood, 33.8% in the same city, 6.3 in the same county, and 15.9% in the same state. The remainder lived outside the respondent’s state. This same sample revealed that approximately 75% were very satisfied with their family life, 24.1% were somewhat satisfied, 4.3% were somewhat dissatisfied, and 0.7% were very dissatisfied. In addition two out of three felt their families were very close, 24.9% said their families were somewhat close, and 4.9% not too close. A majority of this sample reported fairly frequent contact with family members: 36% were in contact every day, 25.1% at least once a week, 17.1% a few times a month, 6.8% at least once a year, 4.2% hardly ever, and 3.5% never. Respondents who indicated their families were close and whose immediate family and other relatives were located closer to them interacted with their family members on a more frequent basis. Taylor and Chatters conclude that the nearness of the immediate family and relatives were strong predictors of life satisfaction with family life and frequency of contact.

Hypothesis 2

Elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong friendship bond are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not.

This hypothesis was not supported by the data in this study. There was no significant relationship found between friendship interaction and life satisfaction.
Although a larger number of persons with regular interactions with friends indicated satisfaction, this relationship was not significant ($p > .05$). These findings are inconsistent with those of Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson who confirmed the importance of friends as informal helpers. For particular groups of older black adults (i.e., those who report that their families are not affectively close) the choice of non-kin was made irrespective of the presence of other potential helpers. In their study, if the respondent indicated a close family relationship, then the family was more often chosen before friends. If the respondent indicated a distant family relationship, then the friend was chosen. Therefore, elderly who receive help from their friends characterize themselves as not being affectively close to their families. The authors concluded that these black elderly made choices for support, not by apparent need, but within the context of interpersonal relationships. Friends provide the black elderly with goods, services, transportation and companionship and many other duties. Therefore, having this type of assistance provides the black elderly with a heightened degree of life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3

Elderly people who perceive themselves as having a strong church attendance are more likely to be satisfied with life than those who do not.

As with the two previous hypotheses this hypothesis was not supported. Findings

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2 Chatters, Taylor, and Jackson, 94.
from this study revealed that there is no significant relationship between church attendance and life satisfaction. Although those elderly persons who attended church once a week or more often were more likely to indicate satisfaction with their lives (in comparison to those who attended less often), this relationship was not statistically significant. These results are not consistent with those of Ellison and Gay who reviewed the literature and found that religion may contribute to life satisfaction in three ways: 1) to help one get through the day and to cope with difficult crises, 2) to provide regular opportunities for social intercourse between individuals of like minds and values and nurture friendships and social ties, and 3) as the basis of distinctive religious subcultures within the black population. Walls and Zarit found that black churches play a very important role in enhancing the lives of the black elderly. They found that black churches are able to organize people within the community, and that the structure and function of black churches enhance their ability to provide a range of formal and informal services.

According to Taylor and Chatters, the church provides various types of assistance to the elderly, therefore improving their life satisfaction through service as a needed support system.

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3 Ellison and Gay, 124.

4 Walls and Zarit, 490.

5 Taylor and Chatters, Church-based Informal Support Among Elderly Blacks, 637.
Hypothesis 4

Married elderly people are more likely to be satisfied with life than single people.

Again, as with the preceding three hypotheses, this particular hypothesis was not supported by the data for this thesis. The findings of this study revealed that there is no statistically significant relationship between marital status and life satisfaction. It was found that older married individuals did not have higher levels of life satisfaction than older single persons. These results are inconsistent with those of Tran, Wright, and Chatters who studied subjective well-being in the black elderly and found that marital status significantly contributed to the subjective well-being of this population.6 Married black elderly persons reported a higher sense of life satisfaction than nonmarried counterparts. Creighton-Zollar and Williams found that previously married blacks were significantly less satisfied with their lives than currently married respondents.7 They reviewed the small body of literature related specifically to elderly blacks and marital satisfaction and found no significant relationships between marital status and life satisfaction. However, their analysis of data collected by the General Social Surveys between 1972 and 1984 revealed that under all conditions, married persons reported higher global happiness than did unmarried persons. Furthermore, the authors found that as age increases, marital happiness increases for both males and females. In all age

6 Tran, Wright, and Chatters, 105.

7 Creighton-Zollar and Williams, 89.
categories, females are at least three times more likely than males to report that their marriage was not too happy. However, marital happiness made a greater contribution to the overall happiness of black wives than it did to the overall happiness of black husbands. These findings suggest that the companionship which marriage provides is important to life satisfaction in that it may reduce loneliness and isolation.

Although none of the findings in this study was statistically significant, the cell percentages moved in the expected direction. Furthermore, responses to the qualitative question "What makes life satisfying to you?" were consistent with the findings in the literature. The responses to this question that were most common in this sample of black elderly persons included God, family, health, and friends. Therefore, the variables family interaction, friendship interaction, religion and church attendance did surface (albeit qualitatively) as relevant factors for life satisfaction among the black elderly in this sample.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is that the chi-square test of independence is not applicable to tables with small expected frequencies. Findings should be interpreted cautiously given the study’s sample size. Additionally, generalizability is precluded due to the sampling technique.

Still another limitation is that respondents were recruited from only one site; future research might consider multiple senior citizen centers in other communities.
Implications and Conclusion

As evidenced by the void in the literature on the black elderly and life satisfaction, the few studies available obscure our knowledge on this topic. This existing body of literature on the black elderly and life satisfaction suggests that much more research is needed before we are able to fully understand this problem. In order to help the black elderly obtain a heightened degree of life satisfaction, and in order for researchers to more fully understand this issue, more investigation of these variables and other extraneous ones is important. Sociologists, psychologists, social workers, physicians, politicians, and other professionals who impact the black elderly in some way could benefit from knowledge on the factors that are associated with this population and satisfaction with life. Hence, an increased understanding of this issue will illuminate factors which reflect the subjective well-being of elderly black persons.8

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that there is no significant relationship between life satisfaction among the black elderly and the variables examined. However, the majority of the responses obtained indicate that the elderly studied are satisfied with their lives than dissatisfied. Despite the fact that the elderly individuals studied are relatively poor and have relatively low levels of education, they still indicate high levels of

life satisfaction. Given this and the study’s results showing a lack of significance, more studies on this research problem are clearly in order.
APPENDIX A

Letter to Members of Senior Citizens Today

To members of Senior Citizens Today¹

I am a graduate student in the department of Sociology at Clark Atlanta
University. I am conducting a research project and I would like your help with it. The
purpose of the study is to learn more about life satisfaction among the black elderly.

If you participate in this research project, you will be asked to answer questions
from a research questionnaire. The survey will take about fifteen minutes to complete.

All the answers that you give on these questionnaires will be kept completely
confidential. This means that your name will not be used and no one will be able to
identify the senior citizen center. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary
and you have the right to withdraw at any time, if you so desire. You may ask any
questions during or immediately following the completion of the questionnaire.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION.

¹ This name represents a pseudonym for the actual facility that participated in the study.
Life Satisfaction and the Black Elderly Questionnaire

This is a brief questionnaire about how happy you are with life. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire. Please answer all questions honestly.

1. What is your gender?
   1. Male
   2. Female

2. What is your age? ____________

3. What is your level of education completed?
   1. less than high school
   2. high school
   3. some college / associate degree
   4. college

4. What is your total annual income?
   1. less than $10,000
   2. $10,000 - $19,999
   3. $20,000 - 29,999
   4. $30,000 - $39,999
   5. $40,000 and more

5. What is your marital status?
   1. married
   2. never married
   3. separated
   4. widowed
   5. divorced
6. How often do you see, write, or talk on the telephone with family or relatives who do not live with you?

1. nearly every day  
2. at least once a week  
3. a few times a month  
4. at least once a month  
5. a few times a year  
6. hardly ever

7. If you have children how often do you see any of your children?

1. once a day or more  
2. one to six times a week  
3. one to three times a month  
4. less than once a month  
5. I have no living children  
6. I have no children

8. How satisfied are you with your family life, that is, the time you spend and the things you do with members of your family?

1. very satisfied  
2. somewhat satisfied  
3. somewhat dissatisfied  
4. very dissatisfied

9. How many of all your friends live in your community?

1. none  
2. half or less  
3. most  
4. all

10. How often do you usually attend religious services?

1. nearly everyday  
2. at least once a week  
3. a few times a month  
4. a few times a year  
5. less than once a year
11. How important is going to church or a place of worship to you?

1. very important 3. not too important
2. fairly important 4. not important at all

12. How religious would you say you are?

1. very religious 3. not too religious
2. fairly religious 4. not religious at all

13. If you are married, taking things all together, how would you describe your marriage?

1. very happy 3. not too happy
2. pretty happy 4. not married

14. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

(a) In most ways my life is close to ideal:

1. strongly disagree 4. agree
2. disagree 5. strongly agree
3. neither agree nor disagree

(b) The conditions of my life are excellent:

1. strongly disagree 4. agree
2. disagree 5. strongly agree
3. neither agree nor disagree
(c) I am satisfied with my life:
1. strongly disagree 4. agree
2. disagree 5. strongly agree
3. neither agree nor disagree

(d) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life:
1. strongly disagree 4. agree
2. disagree 5. strongly agree
3. neither agree nor disagree

(e) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing:
1. strongly disagree 4. agree
2. disagree 5. strongly agree
3. neither agree nor disagree

What makes life satisfying to you?

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
REFERENCES


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