

# Enduring as Lived Experience: Exploring the Essence of Spiritual Resilience for Women in Late Life

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**Abstract** The purpose of this study was to explore spirituality and its relationship to resilience for women in late life. Over thirty interviews with six women aged 80 and older provide a dataset allowing for the phenomenological investigation of spiritual resilience. Themes emerged illustrating the components of spiritual resilience. The components of spiritual resilience are having divine support, maintaining purpose, and expressing gratitude. These factors are essential to the women's resilience and act as mechanisms that promote high levels of subjective well-being and an overall good quality of life. Essentially, participants articulate how their experiences of enduring hardships are informed by spiritual resilience.

**Keywords** Spirituality · Resilience · Lived experience · Phenomenology · Gratitude

## Introduction

Movement across the life course assures that a human will encounter a multitude of life events, and for some individuals, these life events will be sources of hardship, stress, or trauma. What determines whether people flourish or languish, thrive or survive when encountering these events (Sarkisian and Lachs 1996)? What circumstances increase the likelihood of having resilience, or the capacity to maneuver through adversity in a manner that protects health and well-being? In some cases, resilience is that capacity not only to handle these adversities, but also to learn, grow, and be positively transformed by them. The work presented here furthers our knowledge about the ways in which older adults are resilient, and how individuals develop and sustain resilience within a spiritual context over the life course.

Examining resilience considers how individuals recover from distressing events and persist through extreme adversities, while negotiating everyday aspirations and challenges

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in life (Maluccio 2002; Zraly and Nyirazinyoye 2010). These everyday aspirations and challenges are rich with complexity. Aging and the experience of being an older adult reveal and expose such aspirations, challenges, and complexities. Although aging affords many opportunities for growth and advancement, growing older also presents inherent challenges. It is the resilient individuals who can effectively and efficiently navigate adversity. There are several pathways to resilience and these vary according to the individual. For some, spirituality is a pathway to resilience (Faigin and Pargament 2010).

Moberg (2005) asserts that humans have a spiritual dimension by nature of being human, and therefore, each person has the capacity for spirituality. In essence, spirituality in late life consists of finding core meaning in life, responding to meaning, and being in relationship with God/Other. For many people, as they grow older, these contemplations are translated into the search for life-meaning (MacKinlay 2006). Essentially, spirituality involves an intense awareness of the present moment, a belief in a Supreme Being or higher power, and/or the transcendence of self (Atchley 2009). This construct of spirituality represents my understanding as a scholar. As the women in this study are interviewed, their own conceptualizations of spirituality and its relationship to resilience emerged as they described for me how they experience stress and hardship, while enduring adversity over the life course.

The purpose of this study was to explore spirituality and its relationship to resilience for women in late life. My hope is that this study points to essential components of spiritual resilience and provides strategies for understanding spiritual patterns in later life. In addition, I hope this work contributes to our understanding of how spirituality informs living well into advanced age with high levels of subjective well-being and life satisfaction. The findings from this study illustrate the components of spiritual resilience, or the ability to move through adversity, stress, and trauma by using spiritual resources, for these participants. These factors are essential to the women's spiritual resilience.

## Literature Review

The study of resilience as both process and trait has been largely concentrated at the earlier stages of the life course. This work is important in that it provides a crucial foundation for needed longitudinal studies of resilience across the life course and in late life (Zautra et al. 2010). It is time, as notable researchers have stated that the study of resilience be shifted to the realities of later life. Older adults are increasing in number and living longer and into advanced age. The nature of how older adults are living in advanced age and the extent to which they are resilient is considerably complex and heterogeneous. It is important that scholars explore the process of resilience and how it both shapes and is shaped by aging. Additionally, it is crucial for us to understand how resilience intersects with spirituality in later life. While remaining sensitive to the consequences of problematizing aging and reifying old age as pathology, it remains inevitable that older adults experience aspects of decline and loss over the life course, some more severely than others. In other words, adversity is inescapable at certain points across the life course, especially as we age. These adversities provide the opportunity for resilience, making it central to aging (Resnick et al. 2010). With the inevitability of challenges comes the diversity in responses. The work presented here explores the connections between spirituality and resilience for women in late life.

The concept of resilience is multifaceted and multi-dimensional (Clark et al. 2010). Across research and practice, however, there is considerable debate regarding the definition and measurement of this concept. There is "no consensus among researchers regarding a singular definition of resilience," (Arrington and Wilson 2000, 224). In the broadest terms,

resilience has been described as a fluid and dynamic process. Previous work on resilience suggests that this process is not fully understood (Clark et al. 2010). Additionally, Reich et al. (2010) provide a useful resilience framework. They conceptualize resilience as a process and assume that resilience is an outcome of successful adaptation to adversity, more specifically understanding resilience as the process of recovery (how well individuals are able to bounce back from adversity), sustainability (the capacity to continue to move forward in the face of adversity), and growth (the ability to further develop as a response to adversity). I adopt this definition of resilience in the research presented here and further modify the process of resilience to encapsulate spirituality as growth and development.

### Spirituality and Aging

Focusing on older adults' spiritual experiences is part of this larger understanding. As McFadden (2005, p. 172) points out, "for many, but certainly not all older people, faith communities, spiritual and religious experiences and beliefs concerning the sacred will contribute to life quality and meaning." Spirituality provides a framework that guides individuals through painful and joyful events, often facilitating positive discoveries amidst negative experiences (Ardelt et al. 2008). Consequently, spirituality is a powerful resource in late life providing older adults with the ability to adapt to changing individual needs. Pargament and Cummings (2010) describe this as an aspect of resilience. Spirituality has the potential to be a major resource for older adults as they age and as they expand their consciousness. For the purpose of this study, spirituality as conceptualized as a "realm of human experience encapsulating an intense awareness of the present; transcendence of the personal self; and/or a feeling of connection with all of life, the Universe or a Supreme Being" (Atchley 2009, p. 2).

As larger numbers of older adults continue to age, it becomes increasingly important to understand how older adults are responding to both late life challenges and opportunities. As McFadden (2005, p. 172) points out, "for many, but certainly not all older people, faith communities, religious beliefs and experiences of the sacred will contribute to life quality and meaning." Spirituality often provides a personal framework that guides individuals through painful events, often facilitating the discovery of the positive from the negative (Ardelt et al. 2008). Spirituality is also a powerful coping mechanism providing older adults with the ability to adapt to changing individual needs. This, in turn, is an important and unique feature of resilience (Faigin and Pargament 2010). A key aspect of understanding resilience and how people respond to challenge and adversity is articulating and identifying the underlying components of our abilities to overcome the greatest odds (Faigin and Pargament 2010; Pargament and Cummings 2010). Identifying and articulating the components of our abilities to overcome such great odds may very well result in our ability to explain how spirituality potentially serves as a pathway to resilience.

Religion and spirituality are important to a large proportion of the older adult population. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that for 69 % of adults 65 and older religion is "very important," compared to 45 % of individuals 30 and younger. This suggests that religion is important to current cohorts of older adults, and religion as source of meaning and grounding may become more important as people move throughout the life course. Reed (1987) suggests that older adults draw on their religion and faith when confronted with challenges associated with aging, illness, and various other life challenges.

A multitude of work exists demonstrating the protective nature that religion and spirituality have for people regarding how they cope with the adversarial nature of life. Research indicates that religion and spirituality provide people with a source of hope,

comfort, and resilience in the face of adversity (Faigin and Pargament 2010; Koenig 2002; Schwarz and Cottrell 2007). It is essential that we explore these pathways to resilience and identify the mechanisms that shape the process of resilience for individuals as they age and experience later life, particularly how these pathways relate to religion and spirituality. The research presented here explores these critical resources and their relevancy for women in late life.

## Methods

### Design and Sample

This phenomenological inquiry, using models presented by Van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994), utilizes a person-centered approach in the gathering and collecting of data. Moustakas, influenced heavily by the scholarship of Van Manen's approach to phenomenology, adheres to a procedural analysis of a phenomenon. Hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology is the specific type of phenomenology used in this study. In hermeneutic phenomenology, a particular phenomenon that is meaningfully experienced by an individual or group of individuals is investigated, in this case resilience. This approach considers how the phenomenon is experienced and what it means to the person within a specific context (Moustakas 1994; Van Manen 1990). A key component to hermeneutic phenomenology is not only describing the phenomenon under investigation, but also interpreting the meaningful experiences of those being studied.

I interviewed six women multiple times to understand how they conceptualized and described their ability to overcome hardship and how this ability was influenced by their spirituality. Sampling for this research aligns with the basic tenets and assumptions of hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology. Sampling for this research aligns with the basic tenets and assumptions of phenomenological inquiry. Women were selected to participate in this study based on their firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest—surviving into advanced age while enduring hardships and adversities over the life course. In addition, I sampled for women for whom spirituality as an experience resonated. This study used a purposeful sampling approach, common in qualitative design (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Lincoln and Guba 1985). I relied on a non-probability, purposeful sample of older women for this research. More specifically, a snowball sampling technique was used to capture the richness and detail (both commonalities and disparities) regarding how the women in this study experience resilience. Participants were sought based on a variety of settings and living arrangements. The women resided in the Midwestern region of the United States and were mostly community dwelling (none were institutionalized, one lived in an assisted living facility in an independent apartment, and the remaining five lived in their own homes). All but one of the women identified as Christian, the other as Unitarian Universalist (she self-identified as Christian) with a belief in God. Five of the women were white and one woman was African-American. Education ranged in attainment from high school completion to two of the women having graduate degrees. All six women were retired and widowed. I recruited women through word of mouth and snowball sampling strategies (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Individual, in-depth interviews were used to gather data to explore each woman's experience of dealing with hardships and adversity and how these experiences were informed by their spirituality. The interviews took place in the homes of the women and lasted from one to 2 h. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask each woman to

talk about experiences of hardship over the life course. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview opened with, “I’m interested in finding out about how deal with tough times and hardships, now and in the past. And how is this ability impacted by your spirituality?” These interviews reflect a degree of interpretation in the moment, by the researcher and the women, regarding resilience and spirituality as phenomena.

### Data Analysis

As the in-depth interviews were being conducted to gather the lived experience of resilience for the women in my study, I was able to engage in phenomenological reflection, or engaging in dialogue with each woman about her transcript, particularly in the follow-up interviews that occurred with each participant (Van Manen 1990). Subsequently, because data collection and analysis occur simultaneously and are ongoing, I was able to adjust my phenomenological investigation according to data emerging from the investigation. This process afforded me the opportunity to adjust my interview guides and manage the process of idea generation.

Central to a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation is the technique of phenomenological reduction, or the process of reflecting and writing in a manner that facilitates the researcher’s understanding of the essential structures of a specific phenomenon (Moustakas 1994; Van Manen 1990). This process of reduction in a phenomenological investigation involves identifying a phenomenon that ignites motivation on behalf of the researcher, suspending pre-existing assumptions and biases, then discarding pre-existing scientific knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, and lastly being able to see beyond the descriptions of the lived experience to interpret the larger essence or universal aspects of the experience (Van Manen 1990). The process of reduction or arriving at the essence of an experience involves reflection and writing. The methods used, encouraged by the work of Van Manen, of phenomenological reflection and writing as they are used for the purposes of data analysis are discussed below.

According to Van Manen (1990), the process of arriving at an understanding of the lived experience is to conduct a thematic analysis and to determine incidents of that experience and essential themes; these two steps are part of the phenomenological reflection process. After the data had been transcribed and checked for accuracy, I read and reread each transcript from each phase of the study. This process is known as a naïve reading of the text, or the reading of the whole text to become familiar with the text and to allow initial thoughts and perceptions to emerge (Moustakas 1994). This immersion within the data with reading and rereading assisted me in creating initial interpretations, which were also entered into field notes for analysis. This continued before and after each interview. This process indicated a cyclical interpretation of the meaning of the experience, which is consistent with the hermeneutic circle, or the process of understanding a text hermeneutically and for the purposes of interpretation.

The findings discussed below illustrate the most essential components of spiritual resilience for the women in this study. These factors are essential to the women’s experience of spiritual resilience, or how the participants deal with stress, hardship, and adversity while relying on their spirituality over the life course in a manner that facilitated their enduring of such experiences that resulted in possessing an overall positive sense of subjective well-being in later life.

## Findings

Many of the women have endured considerable personal hardship and adversity over the life course. In addition, they have experienced stressful societal events and lived through substantial cultural change. Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on these experiences of hardship. As I collected and interpreted narratives of women recounting past and more present adversities, three essential components of spiritual resilience emerged. These findings reflect the experiences of these six women. While these findings are not intended to be generalized to the larger population, their experiences of resilience as rooted in their spirituality contributes to our understanding of how older people deal with and overcome adversity over the life course.

### A Web of Divine Support

The women attribute their relationship with and belief in God as a resource for support resulting in strength and the ability to bounce back from adversity. This personal relationship with God, understood as “divine support” (George et al. 2002), is demonstrated in the literature to be beneficial (Pollner 1989). As data collection continued and I began doing interviews with participants, spending time with them and building relationships, I realized that each of the women elucidated strength and buoyancy; this was rooted in their spirituality and stemmed from their relationship with God. The participants exhibited strength in several ways: having the capacity to practice self-control and self-determination, experiencing a sense of mastery, positive self-concept, and psychological well-being (Nygren et al. 2007). These attributes are evidenced as common themes of qualitative research conducted on women (Dingley et al. 2003; Lundman et al. 2010). Specifically, the women in this study demonstrated the ability to sustain this strength over the life course and when asked, articulated how their spirituality served as a mechanism for coping in the face of challenges. They openly talked about how they maintained subjective well-being and this ability was reliant on their relationship with God. In other words, their personal relationship with God is a key mechanism for these outcomes. These themes are explored below. A personal relationship with God as a key resource for support is a theme captured in the experiences of Minnie as she discussed the origins of her strength and sources of support:

I get my strength from the Lord, my belief, and faith. Sometimes there is someone who thinks that if I say, “I’ve got the Lord,” and they don’t believe me. They think you’re there by yourself, and I can do all things. But, yeah, I can do all things through Him and that strengthens me. God is always with me.

One woman, Emma, comes to understand her ability to deal with hardship through the process of talking about it. At first, when asked to “describe for me how you deal with hardship,” she explains:

I’ve watched loved ones die and nursed them in their sickness. That is hard and it takes strength. I am able to do that because of God. He helps me handle what at times I think I cannot deal with.

As she continued to talk, she concluded that her strength results from her connection with God, her community, and her spirituality through ritual. She explained:

My strength comes from my serenity. I’m on my knees every Sunday morning. I feel a sense of serenity when I am there worshipping among people and talking to God.

The reminder that there is something greater than myself, something that I can be a part of that's greater and better than myself. This gives me strength.

Another component of spiritual resilience is demonstrated in the women's sense of purpose. This, too, is rooted in spirituality. These women exude an ease and confidence in themselves, their ability to deal with the unknown, and their spirituality. Giving up the need for control, these women are surrendering to the messiness of life. This is also how they cope with uncertainty in the face of adversity.

### Having a Purpose

The women in this study are products in one way or another of the longevity revolution, meaning that they have surpassed their average life expectancy rates and are living into advanced age. They are living in what Johnson and Barer (1997) describe as an aura of survival. Surviving great odds and challenges, these women are living to be old and for them that is surprising. In certain ways, they are in disbelief that they have lived this long. For example, Emma reflected:

I keep wondering why I'm living so long. I'm ready to die any time, but I trust that God has a purpose for me being here.

Another participant, Gloria, describes how she never intended to live so long and would rather not live to see her 100th birthday. Her longevity is a surprise and she credits it to being part of a larger plan. She explained:

Longevity was never part of my plan. I was always the frail one, not the strong and healthy one, but I am in my 90s and could very well make it to 100. I wish to not make it to 100, but I guess we'll see. My longevity is a mystery, but somehow I've made it. Living so long is spiritual to me. I figure there is a reason for it all and I trust that it is all in God's plan.

In spite of surprise or disbelief, the women make meaning of living to be old. They do so in the context of their ability to overcome hardship and adversity, and I argue that having purpose is a factor of spiritual resilience. When asked about how and why they have lived so long, they reflect on their abilities to just keep going while pushing forward. This meaning making is unique to each woman, and for the women in this study, their spirituality and a belief in God was a critical component of how they dealt with life's hardships.

Five of the women in this study are Christian and rely on doctrine that informs their belief in an afterlife; one woman simply understands her spirituality as a belief in something greater than herself and do not necessarily associate with a strong Christian doctrine or attachment to the afterlife. These representations and understandings vary according to each woman, but the essential piece of their spiritual resilience is that they are not alone in this world, in their human experience, or in their old age. Each has a strong sense of purpose, which is essential to their spiritual resilience. The women believe in the Transcendent. This belief gives them meaning and helps them make sense of who they are as old women. The women suggest as they experienced adversities and challenges throughout their lives, spirituality provided them with a way to understand and withstand adversity and hardship (Faigin and Pargament 2010). In addition to articulating a sense of purpose, participants evidenced the ability to re-frame their hardships from being that of an obstacle to an opportunity to practice gratitude. Their gratitude was expressed in connection with their spirituality and personal relationship with God.

## Being Profoundly Grateful

As the women discussed their deep connection with the Transcendent or God, they also reflected on their ability to practice being grateful. This relationship was of paramount importance to them and resulted in their abundance of gratitude. The participants express considerable gratitude, a thankful acknowledgement between a giver and a receiver. For most of the women, this expression of gratitude is grounded in their gratitude for God, but also the women in this study are grateful for most everything—the good and the bad they have witnessed in their lives, their family and friends, and their longevity and survival. This profound sense of gratitude is expressed in the following excerpts:

Thank you, Lord, for another day; yes I'm thanking you for another day. My days are numbered with all the ailments I have going on in my life and every day I wake up and that's another day. That's what happens with me on a day-to-day basis – I am thankful and I let Him know.

Another participant, Gloria, is grateful for her family and friends. She recognizes her spirituality in this gratitude. She explains:

It was my birthday last Saturday and we had a family get-together with my daughter's family. I haven't seen them in a whole year since my last birthday and it was such a delight to see how much these great-grandchildren have grown and see them happy and splashing in the pool. All I could do was just sit there and watch and enjoy and be thankful. That's spirituality to me. I am also grateful for my friends, for their contact and even for you.

Rose is grateful for her father and the teachings he instilled in her as a young child. She credits those experiences as helping her be the woman she is now and appreciates her father's dedication and determination for making her attend church as a small child. In addition, she is thankful to be here another day:

But I don't know my mother or anything like that, but I am very grateful for my father because he did treat us right; made us mind. He also made us go to church. We never missed and we walked. I've had to rely on those beliefs a lot throughout years. I'm still relying on them today. I feel grateful for everything that happened back then and now. I am happy to be here today and I feel pretty blessed.

Taken further, these women are all extremely grateful for who and what they are, and for all that life has shown them. Some of the participants are grateful for God, while others are simply grateful for life. This expression of gratitude is an essential factor in the spiritual resilience for the women in this study. Their expressions of gratitude illustrate their abilities to re-frame adversity, shifting attention away from the hardship and to a place of appreciation. This re-framing is an essential factor of their spiritual resilience. The women in this study rely on their spirituality as an aspect of their ability to endure hardships over the life course and are openly and insightfully aware that it is an aspect of their spiritual resilience.

## Discussion

While maintaining “divine support” as a component of their spiritual resilience (George et al. 2002), the women in this study demonstrate a solid proficiency in their ability to cope

with life's circumstances, challenges, and hardships. They articulate how important spirituality is for them as a part of their action and thought process related to the hardships and stress they have experienced throughout their lives and in old age. Living in a specific time period and belonging to a certain cohort, the women have all lived through challenging times of change and hardship. They discussed stress and hardship and directly explain how their spirituality and their relationship with God help them deal with these stresses. Participants articulated how various hardships (i.e., health challenges, loss of loved ones, childhood adversities, and declines related to aging) presented them with opportunities for overcoming the struggles they have endured. The experiences of overcoming and enduring were mediated by their spiritual resilience (Clarke and Cardman 2002). In other words, spiritual resilience for these women is a process where the mechanisms of divine support, purpose, and gratitude, work together to create experiences of enduring hardships over the life course.

The narratives reveal that for these women, a relationship with God is paramount in their lives, helping them to maintain a spiritual resilience. This relationship with God provided them with strength, particularly in late life. In many ways, this connection and relationship with God demonstrated by these women is supported by existing research (Krause 2006; MacKinlay 2006; Ramsey and Blieszner 1999). For example, William James suggested the importance of divine connection and relationship with God as the crux of religious life (1908). Philosophers and theologians have been considering this connection considerably longer, but what these findings suggest is that this relationship is complex and may provide significant outcomes for dealing with the challenges associated with later life (Krause 2006; Schieman et al. 2010).

We as researchers recognize the importance of spirituality and religion to people in their later years, but have offered little to understanding the relationships old people have with God (in the broadest sense); however, positive psychology, while in its infancy, is attempting to make inroads regarding the nature and outcomes of this complex relationship (Krause 2006). Research suggests that for individuals who believe in a God that is a source of control, a God who listens and knows, and a God who makes things ultimately good are likely to parallel these beliefs in their relationships with others (Pollner 1989). Research also suggests that for believers God represents a secure base, an ultimate friend, and a source of support, especially for older adults (Cicirelli 2004; Kirkpatrick 1998). Schieman et al. (2010) suggest this relationship with God or the Transcendent is likely to be more important than bonds with people for older adults. This assertion proves relevant for some of the women in this study. These women rely on their divine support; this is part of their spiritual resilience. This relationship intensifies over the life course and has positive effects for the women. These connections and the implications they have for other older adults are in need of further exploration.

This analysis examined narratives of these women and their most essential components of spiritual resilience. In addition, I investigated how experiences of hardship and adversity provided opportunities for spiritual resilience and created opportunities for connection, served as sources of strength, and provided pathways for thriving in advanced old age—all of which were most salient for the participants. Essentially, I treated their experiences of adversity as an avenue for arriving at an understanding of how these women demonstrated spiritual resilience, and how their spirituality serves as an integral part of their resilience. The experiences of these women add to our understanding and knowledge concerning the spiritual lives of people as they age and in late life. While some of my findings support existing research on spirituality, resilience, and aging, they also offer a needed depth of understanding into the individual lived experiences of spirituality, particularly for women

in the oldest–oldest segment of the population. My findings are consistent with various past research concerning spirituality and aging, but in addition suggest that a phenomenological approach or other qualitative methodologies are essential for discovering the intricacy regarding the interconnectedness of spirituality, resilience, and aging (Blieszner and Ramsey 2003).

No study is without limitations, and I should note mine. There are limitations regarding sample population and methods for this study. Ideally, older women would have been interviewed from various other regions and faith backgrounds and maximum-variation would have been the sampling technique used to recruit participants. Given the nature and scope of this project, I as the researcher find this sample population to be appropriate. Additionally, this study could have possibly benefited from employing an inter-coder reliability approach. However, I returned to each participant in an effort to conduct joint-analysis and member checking regarding these findings (Van Manen 1990).

Future work is needed to explore the linkages between spirituality and resilience, and the impact spiritual resilience has on health outcomes in later life. Additionally, it is important to understand components of spiritual resilience for all types of spirituality, not just those rooted within Judeo-Christian perspectives. Resilience research is rooted in psychology, specifically looking at the experiences of youth and adolescence (Windle et al. 2008). Within these perspectives, resilience is treated as a list of factors or traits. More work is needed to understand the mechanistic properties of resilience, particularly of spiritual resilience. In other words, it is vital we understand the most essential components of spiritual resilience and how do they interact to promote opportunities for overcoming stress, hardship and adversity over the life course.

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