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Article

Religious/Spiritual Struggles and Spiritual Resilience in Marginalised Older Adults

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Abstract: Spiritual and religious struggles emerge in times where life meaning is unclear, has changed or is challenged. Resilience has been addressed in terms of psychological, social, emotional and physical capacity or competence related to struggle. However, there is a relatively sparse literature defining and addressing spiritual resilience, both what it is and how it is demonstrated. This is especially true of the oppressive and marginalised experiences of diverse older persons. This paper asks how older persons have responded to life challenge and spiritual struggle through spiritually resilient responses. It provides a foundation for the discussion of spiritual resilience in older people through examples from two different community studies: 55 LGBTQ older dyads across several nations, and 75 older Black and Jewish persons residing in Chicago, IL. The first study highlights same-sex couples, discussing the complex relationship of sexuality and religion and how resilience is achieved. The second study addresses religious/spiritual struggle using a life course perspective to note where spiritual resilience has been an outcome. Spiritual resilience is at the heart of posttraumatic and stress-related growth and often emerges through a process of lived transformation leading to greater self-awareness and self-understanding in a revised construction of identity.

Keywords: spirituality; religion; resilience; older people; marginalised groups; struggle; life challenge; sexuality; LGBTQ; ethnic diversity

1. Introduction

The experience of aging is often stereotyped and stigmatised (Bugental and Hehman 2007; Busso et al. 2019; Simpson 2016). It is sundered into polarities of disease and well-being, poverty and wealth, loneliness and depression versus companionship and contentment. Butler coined the term ageism, “a psychosocial disease” in 1968 (Achenbaum 2015). About 30 years later and two years before his own death, Butler signaled the importance of breaking through fears of aging, dependency and death while re-orienting to the richness embedded in studying the length of the life course (Butler 2008). Homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia can also be framed in this way, as they are maintained through stereotyping, othering and stigmatisation. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (Crenshaw 1991) work on intersectionality reminds us that identity and experience in later life are likely to be marked by the intersections between ageism, sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. This adds further layers, and potentially resources for, the quest for spiritual resilience in later life, since this suggests that spiritual resilience may arise in response to any of these experiences. This may occur directly as individuals address marginalisation and loss of power or indirectly as they seek to make meaning of their lives in a broader context.

Resilience is a discourse that acknowledges life challenges, but also accepts the capacity of older people to refuse to be defined by their limits. Resilience brings older people back to balance, helping them locate their own still point. Stories of resilience in aging are important because they combat

discouraging normative stereotypes and reflect a more accurate depiction of aging. However, as has happened in the United Kingdom (Nelson-Becker et al. 2020), we must be wary of misusing resilience as a factor in individualising blame and agency in relation to personal troubles.

1.1. Resilience Background

Resilience has gained currency in the mental health literature (Masten 2001; Newman 2004). It is viewed as the capacity to manage significant difficulty and stress and is both a process and an outcome. At times it is seen as a maintenance function, a “bouncing back” to an earlier capacity level through overcoming barriers aided by facilitative factors such as personality characteristics and environmental supports. At other times, it is seen as an ability to integrate life learning and expand coping repertoires (Nelson-Becker 2004, 2006, 2013), reaching a new understanding that encompasses what came before but also moves beyond it. Resilience is the ability to access one’s inner wisdom and strength enhanced by time and experience. Resilience has also become a key concept in public policy contexts, driving community responses to adverse events, such as environmental disasters. In the United Kingdom, for example, local resilience forums are multi-agency partnerships mandated with coordinating first responses in public emergencies (United Kingdom, Civil Contingencies Secretariat 2013). There is also likely to be an increasing focus on personal, community, national and global resilience as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold.

Spiritual or religious (r/s) struggle refers to conflict and distress around religion and spirituality and relates to coping that addresses issues of human meaning and purpose (Magyar-Russell et al. 2014; Pargament et al. 2005). Struggle is the substance against which resilience either forms or is absent. Resilience has been addressed in terms of psychological, social, emotional, and physical capacity or competence, but, though resilience research overall has expanded, the literature remains generally silent or minimalist in regard to spiritual resources for resilience (Titus 2011). This matters because the spiritual domain is part of the totality of human experience. In fact, for some, it is the lens through which all is viewed. Spiritual experience as expressed in James ([1902] 1961) cannot be adequately captured through language, and so spiritual resilience as well can carry different meaning nuances across culture and mental health professions.

Spirituality broadly addresses theistic and nontheistic components (Canda et al. 2020), connections expressed through nature, development of spiritual or sacred relationships with others or the self (Puchalski et al. 2009), living with significance (Pargament 1997), a sense of wholeness, an innate human quality (Faiver et al. 2001) and ultimately a process of transformation of self and/or community (Rothberg 2000). When combined with resilience, it implies a strength of spirit depicted in the ancient virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Resilience was discussed as early as the 13th century virtue philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, and corresponds to courage and magnanimity (Titus 2006). It demands internal knowledge and experience. Prudence à la Aquinas is resilient action in complex situations. It is thus both a character trait and engagement as it calculates multiple courses of action and chooses a best course, acknowledging that this must be done under conditions of social ignorance, especially in regard to a state of not knowing what will transpire in the future. Flourishing in the view of Aquinas is not ego-centric, but community-based—“other-centric and God-centric”—an outcome of spiritual resilience (Titus 2011).

Spiritual resilience differs from other forms of resilience. There are few quantitative empirical studies addressing spiritual resilience since, though it can be articulated, spirituality does not carry a singular definition accepted across disciplines (Canda et al. 2020; Nelson-Becker 2018). Further, the term spirituality—though it does hold multidimensional meaning from connections to whatever is deemed sacred to motivations for acts of social justice—is difficult to measure (Moberg 2010). Levels of spiritual significance cannot be compared nor assessed through traditional measures of religious service attendance or use of prayer. Spirituality can be known through religious, spiritual and existential forms of struggle.

This kind of resilience under stress is enduring and transformational, willing to find the learning in the midst of pain. Spiritual resilience understands existential questions can only be answered by heeding the past while stretching to explore current lived experience reflexively. Spiritual resilience may embolden and empower resilience manifested in all of its other biopsychosocial emotional forms. That is why, though somewhat difficult to define, it is a concept worth exploring.

1.2. Resilience Properties in Aging Framework

The Resilience Properties in Aging framework (Table 1) illustrates several life areas where resilience is constructed (Nelson-Becker 2013). These shift from past, present, to future time horizons, acknowledging areas of variability by vulnerability and place, and contexts for planned, serendipitous or tragic life span rearrangement and growth. As an example, tragedy may lead to anguished change when one's path is forcibly altered by accident, disease or death of a significant other. One unplanned mid-life change may occur, for example, where an individual served in a war or experienced an accident and lost a limb, thus altering a dream of becoming a gymnast or dancer. Another may be when one is widowed at a young age and then never re-marries, aging without children as support.

Table 1. Resilience Properties in Aging.

Framework	Resilience Element
Past History-Personal and Social	Resilience capacity in older ages is based on interactive styles learned and practiced in earlier life stages, including social participation as benefit and social contribution functions.
Present-Environmental Assets	Resilience involves effective use of current available resources in multiple environments and contexts including local communities and larger sociopolitical societies.
Future-Formulating Hope	Resilience contains a component of hope in the future and the ability to envision that preferred future with active imagination.
Variability by Vulnerability	Resilience is not constant, but varies according to areas of vulnerability and unprocessed/unhealed loss.
Variability by Place	Resilience is context-specific, reflecting different interpretive meanings according to geography and culture.
Growth Capacity	Resilience is the ability to achieve post traumatic or stress-related growth from adverse events or conditions.
Transcending Limits or Transilience (from Canda et al. 2020)	Resilience acknowledges limits, but finds ways to move beyond them or step outside of them. Canda offers the concept of transilience to identify a commitment to a life of transformational possibility, to "purpose, excitement, and vitality" (p. 53). It is at this larger level where spirituality will often make itself known in reflection and discernment that connects past experience in a revelatory manner.

Adapted from (Nelson-Becker 2013).

Interstitial limit leaping also called transcending boundaries forms the last property of the framework. The latter element acknowledges limits but also makes room for creative paths to achieve ongoing goals or desires as in Baltes' (1993) model of selective compensation with optimisation. We have added transilience to the current iteration of the model. Transilience is a concept developed by Canda et al. (2020) that addresses the capacity to transcend ego and body-bound limits as we encounter new experiences. This element considers the drive to connect with self (the ground of being) and other beings as we are sometimes stretched to breaking, but also benefit from sacred inspiration and remain open to beauty, compassion, wisdom and perceptiveness. Based on this framework, resilience in older ages is defined as the ability to achieve growth through life challenges based on personal history and environmental assets, a capacity for generating hope and the ability to transcend boundaries in optimal and transilient ways.

1.3. Resilience and the Narrative Frame

A narrative lens offers a social constructionist approach to make sense of the added value of spirituality and meaning systems (Kenyon et al. 2011). What are the personal stories, myths or themes individuals forge to empower themselves and others? The particular ways older adults story their lives at different times and for different audiences reveal meaning in the making. They tell their tales, enlarging where support is needed or new insight runs at the edges, ready to emerge into visibility. Other parts are minimised: what is dealt with already or too painful to share may remain in the shadows. Ultimately, more of the self comes into being, nurtured by social interaction and spiritual connection. “Spiritual resilience is an ability to be nurtured by one’s inner spiritual self, outer spiritual relationships, and other social relationships and to live with ambiguity, trusting the goodness of the universe when that goodness is only faintly perceived”, especially in the midst of struggle (Nelson-Becker 2013, p. 351). The concept of what constitutes spiritual resilience has only been addressed in a few studies as described below. Thus, there is scope for further exploration especially in older people who have the advantage of a long time horizon which synthesises experience, response and resilient or nonresilient responses in individual reflection. This paper describes two studies of older people that demonstrated spiritually resilient responses.

1.4. Empirical Research on Spiritual Resilience

Several small studies attempt to capture aspects of spiritual resilience without offering a clear definition or rationale for that definition. Instead, the term is used pragmatically to summarise coping responses. Integration of sexual orientation and faith was explored in 27 lesbian and gay (LG) Christians (Foster et al. 2015). Resilience was expressed through three pathways: widening of theological and philosophical views, finding a safe-enough congregation or finding an affirming congregation. Social justice was a motivation for many to transform faith communities from within, recognising the disempowerment that would accrue to congregations if LG members left (Foster et al. 2015). Spiritual resiliency is identified through life narrative interviews of eight older men in a book by Ramsey and Blieszner (2012) that parallels their earlier interviews of eight women. Many of the respondents have a strong religious affiliation and are religious leaders, primarily from Christian traditions. These interviews identify hope, healthy relationships and “spirited” creativity. Finally, six women selected purposively were repeatedly interviewed by Manning (2013, 2014). They identified purpose, gratitude and divine support as mechanisms that fostered spiritual resilience. Most of these small studies do not actively explore the term spiritual resilience, but allow the meaning to speak through the interpretative experiences of their participants. Two of the above studies are authored by LG researchers. One of the two studies presented here also uses a sample of LGBQ older people, and focuses on marriage and other forms of recognition as providing new and relatively unexplored opportunities for LGBQ people to engage with spirituality.

2. Methods

The following section of the paper illustrates examples from two different studies: LGBQ older adult spousal narratives collected in the UK, US and Canada and highlights from a study of religion and spirituality among older Black and Jewish people from Chicago in the US. Both studies found elements of spiritually resilient approaches to religious and sexual microaggressions and/or macroaggressions.

2.1. LGBQ Spouses

The data on LGBQ couples presented here are drawn from two separate studies of married and civil partner same-sex couples in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom during the 2010s. Data collection for the studies was approved by the ethical review boards in the UK on the basis of informed consent, voluntary participation and maintaining the anonymity of participants. No financial compensation was provided to participants. A convenience sample was used for these

qualitative studies and recruitment of participants was carried out via advertisements on social media supplemented by snowball sampling. Data were gathered from narrative dyad interviews with 21 couples in the UK, 11 Canadian couples and 18 US couples, drawing on a topic guide covering motivations to marry, wedding and civil partnership ceremonies and evaluation of the impact of this new recognition. Data were analysed using a Labovian framework (Labov 1972), with a particular focus on evaluative statements contained within couples' narratives of their personal experience.

2.2. Jewish and Black Community-Dwelling Older Persons

The stories of spiritual resilience emerged from interviews with 75 low-income community-dwelling older persons, of whom 41 were from two low-income housing sites on the south side of Chicago and 34 were from two low-income housing sites on the north side of the same city. The larger study explored life challenge and struggle as well as spiritual and religious understandings and problem-solving styles (Nelson-Becker 2004). The study was approved by the University of Chicago institutional review board and informed consent procedures were followed. Analysis was done using grounded theory, a constant comparative method where initial concept coding leads to axial coding to begin to link categories. Finally, selective coding is one process whereby already collected data are analysed or re-analysed, and that was used here. Trustworthiness was established through transcript coding checks by raters external to the study and member checking with some respondents at the time of the interviews.

3. Examples of Spiritual Resilience

3.1. LGBQ Spouses

This section of the paper investigates the struggles and complexities LGBQ spouses encounter in reconciling their sexuality with their sense of spirituality, often interpreted as religious belief or affiliation. We consider some of the barriers to LGBQ engagement with religion and how some same-sex couples try to overcome them: whether through rejection of religion, individualising religious belief and practice or engaging with wider forms of spirituality as an aid to their resilience.

For older lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) people, the interplay between resilience and spirituality may be particularly complex. On the one hand, social stigma and marginalisation might motivate some to seek sanctuary or find existential meaning through engaging with spirituality. But the potential of spirituality as a resource for resilience is undermined by the exclusion of LGBQ people from most organised religious faiths. Spiritual resilience may be accessible to LGBQ people as a concept, though interaction with mainstream religious bodies is often something that *demand*s resilience rather than supports it.

Marriage, civil unions, civil partnerships (as they are known in the United Kingdom) and other forms of legal and social recognition for LGBQ couples provide an interesting context for understanding spiritual resilience. This key life-event provides a context for same-sex couples to engage with the meanings they make about their lives and their dyad relationship, as well as calling on others to bear witness to these meanings. For many couples in the research sample, this entailed a struggle with their sense of spirituality that in itself demanded resilience and creativity. The implacable opposition of many organised religious denominations to accept the validity of same-sex marriages has underlined the marginalisation of LGBQ people from important sources of spiritual resilience. Although organised religion and LGBQ communities have long been cast as opponents in the culture wars that continue to be played out in the United States and elsewhere, many LGBQ people are bewildered, if unsurprised, at the refusal of religious faiths to embrace or bear witness to the commitment that same-sex spouses demonstrate.

Despite the moral entrepreneurship of faith groups (Becker 1963) in opposing same-sex marriage, this and other forms of legal recognition are an increasingly common feature of public policy across Europe, the Americas and parts of Africa and the Asia Pacific region. Alongside liberalisation of

legislation on adoption, parenting and access to reproductive technologies, this can be seen as the culmination of a social-legal process whereby some same-sex couple relationships are reframed as normal and valid (Weeks 2008).

3.1.1. Rejecting Religion as Part of Their Lives

If we consider religion as fundamental to understanding the self, as a socio-historical and cultural force, and as a foundation for family and community life (O'Brien 2014), then it becomes impossible to airbrush religion from our understanding of LGBQ marriage and its impact. Whether as the elephant in the room or spectre at the feast, religious connotations are notable in LGBQ couples' accounts of their marriages, even if this is sometimes by their omission or exclusion. For example, some LGBQ spouses acknowledged that a lifetime of exclusion and stigmatisation had led them to reject religion and even the notion of marriage altogether:

Marriage is a religious exercise. We're not interested.

(Bill, 80s, suburban London, UK)

This statement appears to frame marriage as the exclusive preserve of religion rather than as a civil matter. Later in the same interview, Bill explained his preference for civil partnership over marriage and was able to contextualise his rejection of religion in more detail:

All they're concerned about is what goes on in the bedroom. They're blinkered. And they've got three lines from Leviticus and a couple in a letter by St. John and we've been pilloried ever since. Come on!

There is a tangible sense of exasperation here, arising from what appears to be a hyper-sexualisation of LGBQ identities, based on a narrow and highly selective reading of scripture. For other research participants, there was a pervasive sense of trauma stemming from their attempts to reconcile their sexuality with religious dogma. In a Canadian city, Marty, in his fifties at the time of the interview, spoke of the lingering impact of his difficult journey from being a candidate for a Christian religious ministry in his twenties to living as a married, gay man:

I was very very angry for a very very long time. Very bitter. Hated the church. Hated religion. And made some terrible mistakes because of that, you know, alienating people because of my attitude and that sort of thing ... and I'm still here, like this is, so this intense feeling of fear and guilt and mind control, self-loathing, these things take a long, long, long time, you know, to, to undo.

This seems a clear example of religious faith *necessitating* rather than promoting resilience, and the lifelong impact of this formative experience as a gay Christian is laid bare.

3.1.2. Claiming a Religious Identity, but as An Outcast

For LGBQ spouses with spiritual or religious affiliations, the experience of a civil wedding sometimes served to reinforce their sense of exclusion from their religious faith. Giovanna, a woman in her late 60s living in suburban England, spoke of the struggle of reconciling these different aspects of her identity:

One thing I have to come to terms with myself, I'm a Roman Catholic and that is bothering me. And listening to the Pope as well only the other day, oh my god, we're absolute outcasts, aren't we? And I'm fighting a little bit with my conscience ... they'll never have it, not the Roman Catholics.

There is a clear sense of marginalisation here, as Giovanna speaks of being an "absolute outcast" and she acknowledges the psychological labour involved in resolving this conflict between her sexuality and her religious faith. There is also a feeling of resignation in her evaluation that the Roman Catholic church would never accept same-sex marriage. Although she identifies as a Roman Catholic, she refers to her church as "they", as if she somehow stands outside it.

Other participants seemed more ambivalent about religious organisations, and were able to distinguish between the divine nature of their own faith and the inevitably flawed conduct of earthly faith groups. Iwan, a married Scottish gay man in his sixties who identified as a Roman Catholic, made this distinction clear:

I might have had a blessing if it had been a really lovely priest. Because I became a Catholic thanks to this man [partner]. The trouble is, we're up against these hypocrites in the church. They're not being honest. I mean, you know as well as I do, crikey, the number of gay guys that are priests. And it's so sad for them. They should be allowed to have a partnership and marriage and whatever they want to do.

Interestingly, Iwan is able to find empathy for those who are enforcing the marginalisation of LGBTQ people from his church, though this is expressed in a pitying way.

3.1.3. Finding Accommodations Among Sexuality, Religious Faith and Spirituality

Some research participants, although not actively practising religion, saw their sexuality as god-given and were able to engage with a sense of spirituality without the intermediary of a faith group:

Roger: You know, I am exactly as god intends me to be, he loves me exactly how I am and I wouldn't take a pill to change it now or ever. That's just how it is in my world.

Roger's comment about being exactly as god intended him to be evokes a sense of being at peace with his own sense of spirituality as well as his sexuality, and of a direct engagement with his interpretation of a more inclusive deity. A sense of being loved by god for who you are comes across as a striking example of spiritual resilience. This recalls distinctions that LGBTQ people sometimes draw between spirituality as providing a direct link to a deity and religion as a more problematic, communal venture (Halkitis et al. 2009).

Some British couples with religious affiliations sought creative ways around the separation in British tradition between civil and religious marriage. At the time Gwen, a Welsh woman in her sixties, was first able to marry her wife, religious denominations were barred from conducting same-sex civil weddings. She and her spouse approached this process in a creative way, finding opportunities to subvert the secular restrictions of a civil ceremony whilst working with an affirmative minister to organise a separate, religious ceremony:

We'd already had a religious service ourselves with just the two of us at home six years earlier, where basically the two of us made vows before god, and we'd had rings made and we'd exchanged rings when we'd had that service of blessing together, which was us private. Even if it can have no legal status, there's no legal recognition within the Christian church, it still doesn't deny the reality that what he's doing is marrying us before god.

Once again, the direct link to god is striking and clearly, spirituality was an important factor in this couple's life together, so much so that they had devised a means of incorporating this into their wedding in a very private way. This was important to this couple in that they saw marriage primarily as a religious rite rather than as a civil matter. For couples who did not identify with a religious faith, the wedding ceremony was still an opportunity to make meanings linked to spirituality. In the following excerpt, Duncan and Ed, a male couple in their 50s living in London, England, contrasted their humanist ceremony with religious weddings they had attended:

Duncan: It was a really nice humanist ceremony. The celebrant was very good in making everyone feel they were involved in it. She had everyone standing up and saying stuff to us and supporting us and wishing us well and actually that meant a lot and it was really nice that she did that. Asking them basically, 'Will you support them and help them in their lives, and then they all sort of in unison chant at you,' 'We will ...'

Ed: Sometimes they can feel a bit impersonal, you know, if you're in a religious ceremony, and you're hearing yet again the story of Jesus going to the wedding and changing water into wine, or even in a civil ceremony. So we were lucky I think to have an excellent celebrant and to be able to play around with things a bit more easily.

There is a clear sense of a tailor-made ceremony here, with the couple's preferences taking centre stage. The involvement of all present in making vows provides an interesting twist on the idea of witnessing and supporting the couple in their married life. There is a sense here of *queering* the wedding ceremony: taking a tradition and tweaking or subverting it to suit different needs. This idea of queering is brought out more explicitly later in the same interview:

Ed: I certainly had felt that the whole thing was that we could take what we wanted from the traditional wedding experience but do whatever the hell else we wanted because we were already upsetting all the major traditions for marriage so we could do, you know, we could change any of the other ones without that seeming quite so much of a big deal.

Another couple in the United Kingdom who had opted for a humanist wedding spoke of the deep impact their wedding had had for them. Alastair, a gay man in his sixties from London, reflected on their ceremony:

Getting married drew us closer, it was very spiritually transformative. It really gave me an appreciation of the power of ritual in a way that I maybe hadn't previously. I was obviously exposed to lots of weddings, lots of rituals, what have you, but you know, as a gay person you go through a better portion of your adult life, and most of your friends aren't having weddings, so, how can you understand what it really means to stand up in front of all of the people you know and love and characterise why you love this person and are committed to them?

There is a strong sense here of a contribution to resilience: the wedding was "transformative" and was experienced by Alastair as a powerful ritual. There is also a feeling of taking part in a wedding from the inside for the first time, having previously been cast in the role of outsider or spectator. Once again, the importance of witnessing and declaring their love for each other as life partners is foregrounded in these reminiscences of their wedding day. This can be understood as putting right a historical wrong, as such a public declaration would not have been possible at the time they became a couple.

3.1.4. Following a Different Trajectory as LGBQ Couples

It is important to note that the trajectory of same-sex couple relationships has not followed the traditional heterosexual model of *meet-fall in love-marry-live together*. This is reflected in the following account from Tom, a Thai-American man in his sixties who had been with his spouse for almost thirty years by the time they were eventually permitted to marry:

From an emotional point of view, we were married from the first time we decided to start the journey together back in 1986. So for me, from that point of view, we're partners in life, someone to share my life with and to share everything we have, the good and bad. Then there is this other issue, that we couldn't get married, and the process, so, so in a way we're partners in the struggle, and that's something that gives you strength.

Tom's account of his history shows that LGBQ couples may assemble and gather meanings about their lives and relationships in qualitatively different ways to heterosexuals. In the absence of external validation, this couple, in common with countless others, were able to find their own way through the challenges of a lifetime together. Because same-sex relationships went unrecognised for so long in law, marriage came much later in their lives and adds a new layer of meaning rather than laying a foundation to their relationship. Rather than look back on the struggle to achieve recognition as

a same-sex couple with bitterness or regret, Tom seems to value the insight that they were part of a struggle that affected not only themselves but is having a truly global impact. This illustrates the breadth of meaning that same-sex couples are able to generate from their experience of marriage and civil partnerships, and to integrate their personal experience with wider social and political movements. This ability to find meaning in adversity and draw strength from it illustrates the potential for same-sex marriage to act as a resource for spiritual resilience.

This section of the paper has presented research data conveying the different meanings LGBTQ couples make around marriage and civil partnership. Religion was a common and often problematic topic in the interviews, in that getting married or entering a civil partnership or civil union brought their sense of exclusion from mainstream religious denominations to the fore. Despite this, couples' accounts reflected three of the pathways to spiritual resilience mentioned by Foster et al. (2015) in their study of LGBTQ Christians. Some looked beyond denominational orthodoxy, for example, embracing humanistic and other philosophical views. Others were able to reach an accommodation within a safe-enough congregation, even if this meant playing down aspects of their identity. A further response to exclusion was to gravitate towards a more affirming congregation, whereas others rejected organised religion altogether in favour of their own, individual sense of spirituality.

3.2. *Struggle and Spiritual Resilience of Jewish and Black Older Persons*

Chicago is a city that has been racially segregated and this study showed a similar pattern with one respondent in the southern sites who was Jewish and one in the northern sites who was Black. Median age in the Jewish group was 81 years and 75 years in the Black group, with an age range of 58–92 years. Eighty-six percent of the sample was unmarried. Church attendance differed markedly with 3% of Jewish respondents attending synagogue/church weekly or more and 51% of Black respondents doing so. At the same time, 59% of Jewish participants never attended church and only 15% of older Black respondents did not attend church. In older age cohorts, it is important to remember that sometimes mobility restrictions may alter former participation levels.

An open-ended question about the three most difficult life challenges faced by individuals was posed. Of all the challenges or struggles mentioned, adjusting to the deaths of close family members was most often identified, 76% across both groups, and health was the second, mentioned by 44% in both groups. Historical and societal challenges such as World War II, the Great Depression of the 1930s, emigration and discrimination were mentioned by 33% of Jewish respondents but interestingly by none of the Black respondents. Discrimination did later emerge in the stories they told about challenges and coping, including tales of betrayal and injustice. The primary coping mechanism in an open-ended response was the use of religious resources such as a church community, prayer, strengthening through relationship to God, inspirational texts and faith, but solely by Black respondents at 83%. None of these were mentioned at this point in the interview by Jewish respondents, though spiritual resources were mentioned in answer to specific questions. All participant remarks in the next sections use pseudonyms. The following five themes denote spiritual resilience: (1) spiritual resilience through meditation and prayer; (2) spiritual resilience through shifts in cognition; (3) spiritual resilience in the context of discrimination; (4) spiritual resilience through deeper connections with the self, and (5) spiritual resilience through practical philosophies. The themes are illustrated through a few of the accounts that corresponded to the category.

3.2.1. *Spiritual Resilience through Meditation and Prayer*

Use of meditation and prayer were two active responses to life challenge that participants described. The church in Black communities has served a number of functions, including reinforcing religious participation and social support. These lengthy accounts did address religion both positively and specifically, and were often the base from which spiritual practices emerged. What made these resilient approaches was the high level of integration with daily life.

Genevieve, a Black participant, was left a widow at age 18 with five young children, four of whom were her brother's children given to her to raise. Then, she experienced a diagnosis of cancer. Her lifetime approach to resiliency was encapsulated in the following comment:

I don't move too fast. I make the attempt to get an answer about what to do about a situation. I don't worry myself. It's like a touch on the shoulder, you're my child. You don't have to worry. It's going to be alright. Then I adjust my mind to accept whichever way it turns out. In the end I find that to be the best.

Her resilient response was to reflect on what to do, seeking inspiration, and to act from that felt sense. Beyond that, when she had done all she could, rather than succumb to worry, she reached toward acceptance.

Carol, also a Black study participant, spoke about going to an employment office when she needed a job and being immediately matched as a housekeeper. She often found that when she urgently needed a new position, it came about easily. This may or may not have been the case, but showed her ability to maintain equanimity. *I pray a lot; prayer is my biggest way to solve problems.* When her husband died, her friends at the church supported her. *It helped me to be around them. That was a big help in life. My sister, too. Everyone put their arms around me. I never had a hard way to go.* She also spoke about a philosophy of reciprocity: *If you want to be loved, you have to love. You hear people say, I hate Whites, but that's not right in life. People are people and god made us all. That's the way I feel.* Although her life was not more privileged than others, losing two husbands, she felt confident in her ability to manage assisted by her relationship with god.

Katharine, a Black older woman, experienced intimate partner violence from an unfaithful spouse over 18 years. She finally found the strength to leave the marriage. One of his actions was to try to cut off her friendships with other women and over time she developed heart problems and diabetes. Even though she sometimes had trouble paying bills, she was satisfied with her life: *I depend on god talking to me. When I talk to god, he talks back! I can ask god and he heals me. He reveals things I didn't know. I try not to ask god for unnecessary things.* Through these difficult experiences, she developed a sense of assurance about her life and a deep faith that she could handle what came.

Joyce was a Black respondent whose major difficulty was the deaths of many family members: an aunt and uncle, nephews, cousins and then her sister, whom she had come to Chicago to care for while on vacation and never left. She also fell, and with metal already in her kneecap, tore a cartilage, ending her work life. As we discussed those experiences and family deaths, she responded,

You say lost; I didn't lose them [family]; they're still with me. They changed houses, but they're still with me. I talk to them just like I'm talking with you. I couldn't believe a thing, and teach a thing and not use a thing. Like I said I live alone, but I'm not lonesome and I don't feel lonesome. Life itself is a challenge. Working with other people's problems doesn't give me time to have any. . . . What we learn today, we shouldn't have to be challenged by that tomorrow. I had that lesson already. If I failed, then I got to take it over. If you don't want to take it over, do all you can not to fail the lesson of the day. I believe in this . . . God didn't send me here unequipped. I am fully equipped for whatever demand the world makes of me.

In response to my question about Joyce's spiritual practice, she replied: *I meditate. When I get through meditating, I pray, When I get through praying, somehow the decision comes that I am to do. I accept it as god speaking to me. He comes through ideas, hunches, thoughts impressions.* Joyce did not diminish the life struggles she had faced, including giving up some of her independence to care for family. Even though her life had been hard economically and practically, in another sense she developed a relationship with god that brought her direct revelation to enable a felt sense of purpose for her own life.

3.2.2. Spiritual Resilience through Shifts in Cognition

Some study participants described a resilient approach, such as the one below that developed after a stroke when a friend returned Ellen, a Black participant, to what she knew at her core as she struggled to recover:

In the hospital someone said to me, 'You've got a truth, why don't you use it?' I started chanting [Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism]. I started chanting before every meal and I straightened my body out and came out of the hospital. We have a saying called cause and effect. You see people and say 'Good morning.' They say, 'What's so damn good about it?' You may not say anything, but the next morning you see the same person and say 'Good morning.' They say the same thing and you say, 'You can see the sun, you can go to the bathroom, you can brush your teeth, you walk. It's a good morning.' Buddhism says never give up.

Ellen found that when she returned to what she knew and believed, she could apply it in her own life and benefit others as well. That mind shift enabled her to recover. She talked about being signed out of the hospital and returning home by bus, to everyone's surprise. Her recovery was swift.

David, whose mother was Jewish and father was Italian Catholic, lived in a largely Black community. He spoke of giving his mother a lot of heartache and not turning out *exactly like she wanted me to be. The main thing is we had a talk near the end and ironed things out before she passed. I said I was sorry for all the things I did and I loved her.* His mother remarried when he was four and he did not get along with his step-dad:

I realise now he was a pretty decent man. I could have tried harder. I didn't say I had to like him, I could have tried harder to get along and give him less problems as I could. I don't go to church, but I do read the Bible, so every time I come up against a problem, I try to say, well, what is Christ's teaching on that. That's how I try to live my life. I said try. I don't always succeed. There's good and bad in all sides of us.

David had disagreed with his step-dad about many things, including care of his mother. However, after her death he had understood the events differently and released his resentment toward his step-dad. This change in his thinking demonstrated a resilient approach that developed over time.

3.2.3. Spiritual Resilience in the Context of Discrimination

This form of resilience either led to religion or away from it. Ultimately, these accounts detail a pathway of change and increasing understanding about what mattered in life.

Celia was a Black participant who spoke about the changing demographics of neighborhoods and the difficulties getting into the area where she and her husband hoped to safely live. After the original residents moved out, the people in the building she moved into came together and she and her husband would take the children to a large park with responsibility to give them freedom, but also watch them. Her husband had been mistreated on the railroad because he was Black, and thus tried to keep their daughter from going away to a Black college. *I said, 'She didn't come into this world by herself and she's got to learn to live with and get along with other people.' Of course she did.* Celia's own wish had been to go to college, but that did not happen, although an older brother went. Though her life had been constrained by gender and race, low-income and health challenges, she demonstrated a resilient approach:

But I don't feel it hampered my living too much. Since I've gotten older, I've done a lot of thinking over those years. There are times when I'm down in spirit. I tell my daughter, sometimes, 'Oh how I wish I could be here when you are 90 and see how you take all these things.' But I'm grateful for my life. I have a lot to be grateful for.

Abigail, an older Russian émigré, discussed the difficulty finding work in Russia due to anti-Semitism. *People denied us jobs because we were Jewish.* Her daughter was unable to get into

the university during the day, but was permitted to attend night time classes. Later when she and her husband first applied to immigrate, they were refused. Although they were not religious at the time, they began to question their relationship to religion and think about their roots as they waited for permission. As they studied their ancestry, they realised religion was important to them and are now active after secular childhoods and young adulthoods. *Religion is my soul*, she eloquently remarked.

One notable point evident in many of the accounts, including this one, was the experience of negative societal conditions highlighted by prejudice and discriminatory acts. Even so, study participants refrained from resentment and bitterness.

3.2.4. Spiritual Resilience through Deeper Connections with the Self

Helen, a Jewish participant, spoke about family difficulties when they emigrated from Russia. Her father had been educated as a Rabbi, but made a living as a junk man, then a peddler and finally a food store. By living in the back of the store, they were able to manage financially. When she married her husband, he had a Jekyll and Hyde personality and would lose his temper and anger easily. She kept a kosher home but never felt appreciated. Now legally blind, she received help from neighbours who brought her meals on wheels, but felt stigmatised when she would go out and need help or feel people staring. *I think it's important to settle things yourself, without relying on god. My own hardiness has gotten me through.*

Jana, also Jewish, lost an adult daughter who had very young children to cancer. She was able to help parent them and this gave her much joy. After 30 years, her husband left her unexpectedly. *He was a traveling salesman and I never saw him.* Financially it was very difficult. *He turned out to be a millionaire and I'm living here, barely making ends meet. It was hard, but I'm a survivor. I'm a strong person. My peasant heritage has made me strong.* She mused about why she had a bad marriage, and then surmised, *you really don't have much to say about your life. Fate is fate—its already written out.* Jana spoke about family members who always complained, but indicated she was now content and proud of her self-reliance.

3.2.5. Spiritual Resilience through Practical Philosophies

Practical philosophies represented more than a shift in thinking, but a reasoned way of living altered by time and experience. These philosophies went beyond religious routine to whole-life meaning forged through difficult life events.

Roger was a Black respondent who complained of arthritis since age seven and a recent stroke. When he and his wife separated, he had not seen it coming and it was a shock. Lastly, his son was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in 1969.

I had a hard time to get myself adjusted. It took me four to five years. To this day, I don't think my wife is still over it. He was going to graduate in June. The first thing that helped me was the man upstairs. Then my friends and family, then my job. He said, 'Dad, I'll be right back.' He was going out, some kind of way my dryer wasn't working. I don't blame my dryer He was going to the laundromat to dry something because my dryer wasn't working. He went next door to get a bag of potato chips and when he came out, they started shooting.

Roger experienced further tragedies including the sudden death of his mother and his niece raped and killed. However, his workplace was supportive. *My job was like a little family. Everybody had some kind of problems, you know what I mean? Everybody just getting to help one another out through their crisis.* He did not go to church, but would sometimes watch church on T.V. *I believe in Jesus Christ. I couldn't have got this far without him.* He had many struggles, but also found support in the workplace and in his personal belief:

You can have a religion of some practice that you faithfully, regularly, routinely. It's not your gut feeling but you do that because you do it regularly as a habit. And spirituality is embedded in your

being, in your soul. You feel this way. It's good for you. I see other people practicing a religion which is expected by society. What some people call religion is society.

Sarah was a Jewish war refugee. *My greatest problem was caused by the war and the effects of the war. I was running—always a step ahead of the Nazis.* Her family was also hidden from her and she found herself alone. She survived by making strategic decisions and doing waitressing where she could blend in. In one camp in France, she recalled sleeping on straw and feeling rats run over her at night. *I lived for the day. When I saw an opportunity, I took it. You couldn't make plans.* What was especially difficult was adapting to a normal life after the war in Belgium which was devastated. *I didn't know how not to run. I was on the run for five years. I tried all kinds of jobs.* Later, she benefited from a wonderful marriage, but when her husband died, she wanted to die by suicide. What brought her back to herself was when she understood how her thoughts affected her son.

Then I realized I had to pull myself out and I did it by myself. I didn't want him to suffer. Let me tell you something about strong. The strong ones can be felled in one swoop while the weak ones go on. The weak ones are able to cope better. I was alone in a strange city and my husband had just died. That was one of the hardest things. . . . Spirituality is more being in touch with nature, the soul, the better part of a human being. Being whole and not necessarily having a religious belief, being in tune with nature. Nature gives me a lift. What I see out my window [Lake Michigan] gives me a sense of eternity and my place in it. During the war, where was god then? How could he do this to innocents. People lose faith.

Sarah shared her impactful story, a history stamped by the decisive events of her early years where there was little on which she could rely. Though her experience caused her to question whether there was a higher power or the nature of god should god exist, she was able to develop spiritual resilience over time and came to find nurture through daily connection to the natural world in a manner that was deeply spiritual.

This section of the paper has considered some of the life stories and struggles shared by study participants. Both Black and Jewish participants in this study identified a mix of personal struggles, as well as struggles amplified by marginalisation in the larger society. They described how their religious or spiritual worldviews helped them cope and build spiritual resilience.

4. Discussion

Resilience in aging has been investigated more widely than spiritual resilience and has emerged out of the paradox of old age and ageism (Edwards et al. 2015). The paradox of old age is that while older people experience losses, difficult health conditions and many other kinds of challenges including parenting and grandparenting families which are stressed, they report feeling more content with their lives than younger age groups. This is the case even though others looking in from the outside cannot always understand this state of contentment. Recovery to a balanced state, different from what they knew before, new or sustained purpose and growth are general outcomes of resilience. Resilience is both a dynamic process and a generative and regenerative capacity as evidenced in the accounts of the older Black and Jewish study respondents.

Spiritual resilience implies a growing hardiness through progressive self-awareness that facilitates inner transformation. Sometimes those who profess spirituality, at least as interpreted by some religious denominations, are the source of oppression. This is the case where an individual or couple feels rejected from the community because of beliefs or characteristics. This was true of LGBTQ respondents who were moved to abandon or dismiss a personal religious faith because they felt a sense of exclusion linked to a stigmatised sexuality. Rather than teach religious affiliates resilience, these religions have done the opposite. These same institutions have suffered a great loss of invisible proportions where people have been thwarted in sharing their skills, abilities and sensitivities with the very groups who most need to hear and benefit from them.

At other points, the source of oppression is the wider society which acts in exclusionary ways when families struggle to find jobs paying a living wage, for instance. Many individuals interviewed in the second study seemed to note oppression as a given, or as a White researcher, perhaps they did not feel comfortable to say it. (However, as word seemed to spread through the facilities about our conversations, more people approached to ask for interviews in this convenience sample than could be completed.) Rather than actively contest it, the focus centred on individual challenges and struggles they faced with death and loss, health and mental health problems, intimate partner violence and absent family members. The religious community was a central support in the Black community. Although the synagogue was important to some in the Jewish community, more participants considered themselves cultural Jews. Partly this was due to a conflicted sense of who god was and a worrisome perceived lack of response during the Holocaust.

Affirmative elements of [Coley's \(2020\)](#) typology of strategies for LGBTQ people trying to reconcile their sexuality with conservative religious views parallel some of the varied responses delineated in example one. Some LGBTQ respondents in the studies reported here seemed able to maintain a personal affiliation with, for example, the Roman Catholic Church, while accepting their exclusion from the denomination. Others sought out a more affirmative pastor within their faith group, or developed a more bespoke solution to their need to express their spirituality, for example, by devising a humanist wedding ceremony. Coley's typology reflects the welcome evolution of scholarship on LGBTQ spirituality beyond the confines of a binary choice between sexuality and religion/spirituality ([Avishai 2020](#)) and to include more diverse faiths where intersections between sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity are relevant ([Kumpasoglu et al. 2020](#)).

As the data from the couple studies reported here demonstrate, some LGBTQ people see themselves as excluded from mainstream religious faiths. This perception appears to be borne out in recent survey data from the United States showing correlations between religiosity and anti-LGBTQ attitudes ([Baker et al. 2020](#)). Other research indicates that reconciling religion and sexuality continues to be a source of trauma for LGBTQ people ([Sumerau et al. 2018](#)). [Lampe et al. \(2019\)](#) make a strong case for shifting the focus of scholarship from reconciling individual LGBTQ-religious identities to investigating how faith groups continue to respond to the challenge of becoming more inclusive. This is particularly urgent in light of the increasing role of religious organisations in providing community and social care services ([Scroggs and McKnight 2020](#)). It is essential that we frame LGBTQ awareness as a form of cultural competence in human services ([Holman et al. 2020](#)) and spiritual resilience as a desired outcome for faith denominations as well. In this context, it is possible to imagine a more inclusive understanding of spirituality as reinforcing the resilience of faith groups themselves. The contribution of LGBTQ people to faith groups and other organisations engaged in promoting spirituality merits further scholarship, in particular looking beyond Western, Judeo-Christian framings of religion and spirituality.

The ongoing struggle for LGBTQ couples to secure social and legal esteem can be interpreted as an example of "positive marginality" ([Unger 2000](#)). This involves resisting exclusionary stereotypes and turning a negative characteristic into a positive force for social and personal change. LGBTQ Pride movements and, latterly, the fight for marriage equality can be seen as positive forms of resistance to negative stereotypes about LGBTQ identities. However, we must neither romanticise exclusion or overlook the often traumatic nature of this marginality. The ability of married LGBTQ couples to reconcile religious, sexual and gendered aspects of identity to reach a sense of a "dignified self" ([Loseke and Cavendish 2001](#)) can also be seen as a factor in spiritual resilience in later life.

5. Conclusions

Although marginalised study participants did and are successfully navigating societal and personal barriers, it is important not to suggest that it is only through stigmatised identity, including ageism and other intersections, that identity forms and reforms. Individuals do not only grow from struggling against outgrown beliefs, institutional discrimination and challenges which may have origins in those discriminatory attitudes (e.g., early death due to unhealthy diets and lack of supports).

Instead, if all of those situations could be reversed, we believe that spiritual resilience would continue to triumph as individuals leap their own limits and show transilience in their commitment to a life of transformational possibility (Canda et al. 2020).

The narrative frame presented earlier in this paper provides scope for LGBTQ couples and those from ethnic and cultural minority groups to tell new stories about their lives and the meanings they make, even if these are not always entirely positive (Thomas 2014). Furthermore, Nelson-Becker's (2013) framework of Resilience Properties in Ageing can be expanded to include the sense of an integrated dignified self and an acknowledgement of the strengths and capacities that enable LGBTQ older people and older adults from minority backgrounds to deal with, and in some cases overcome, marginalisation. People are resilient because they often have few other choices, except to despair and isolate. Their tenacity in claiming a personal sense of spirituality and finding meaning in adverse situations is testament to this resilience.

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