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Articulating the Ineffable: Explorations into the Spiritual Lives of Old Women

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Abstract

Research suggests that spirituality is important to a large percentage of the older adult population. Against the backdrop of a dramatic increase in the number of individuals living longer, particularly older women, it is vital that researchers explore the intersection of spirituality, gender, and aging. In this qualitative study of 16 women aged 82 and older, I explore using in-depth interviews experiences of spirituality over the lifecourse. A narrative analysis of the interviews was performed and provided insights into the nature of their spiritual experiences. The results are presented as an interpretation of the participants' perceptions of their spirituality and spiritual experiences. Additionally, a narrative analysis is used for the interpretation of the difficulty in describing these experiences and the opportunities and challenges the term "spirituality" provides for older adults and researchers. Five types of narratives that emerged from data are discussed. These common narratives include the narrative of: conflation, continuity, confidence, connection, and caring. Implications for understanding spirituality and the role it plays in the lives of older adults are considered.

Keywords

spirituality; old women; spiritual experiences; and narrative analysis

Introduction

The last half of the twentieth century witnessed a demographic transition, now understood as the longevity revolution, in which more people live much longer (Butler, 2008). This dramatic increase has prompted biomedical and social science scholars to investigate the opportunities and challenges of this differently aging population (Kimble, McFadden, Ellor, & Seeble, 1995). Ideally, gerontology is the nexus of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives resulting in a rich and complex understanding of aging and older adults. In actuality, gerontologists have remained loyal to their biomedical roots, focusing overwhelming attention on solutions to age-based problems with remarkably little focus on a humanistic understanding of aging persons (Kimble, McFadden, Ellor, & Seeber, 1995). Understanding the importance of spirituality for the lives of older adults is an essential part of developing a humanistic understanding of aging.

Older adults are more than a list of problems. Based on close attention to the lived experience of older adults (Dilthey, 1985), we know that the aging process is a complex and intricate process. This, in part, has to do with how older adults navigate the lifecourse and assign meaning to the aging process, a task that many confront through spirituality and religion. In the past two decades, gerontologists have transformed spirituality from an

obscure topic of scientific inquiry to a viable and necessary aspect of aging studies (Atchley, 2008; Glicksman & Glicksman, 2008; Moberg, 2005; McFadden, 2003; Nelson-Becker, 2003). As “spirituality” becomes established within gerontology, so does the need to explore the experiences of older adults for whom spirituality is relevant and meaningful. This study investigates how older women experience their spirituality and how they make meaning of life through their spirituality.

Review of the Literature

While gerontology has been criticized by scholars for paying little attention to the salience of spirituality in the lives of older adults (Atchley, 2009; Moberg, 2005; MacKinlay, 2006), other disciplines have considered the importance of this topic. Spirituality and religion have been part of the human experience throughout time, including concerns with a lengthening lifecourse and confronting mortality (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Researchers in history, religion, anthropology, sociology, and psychology have invested considerable effort investigating the spiritual aspects of human experience (Learn, 1996). Within gerontology, there have been explorations regarding the linkages between spirituality, religion, and aging. This has set the stage for understanding how older adults make meaning and experience opportunities and challenges associated with later life.

Spirituality, Aging, and Gender

The intersection of spirituality, religion, and aging received an upturn of interest in the 1990s, and continues in the early 21st century (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In particular, an interest in health emerged during this time, indicating a concentration on the functional aspects of spirituality and religion pertaining to aging. Understanding the relationship between “spirituality” and “religion,” including the extent, to which they can be disentangled, has been a central part of this spiritual turn in gerontology. The continuing interest in this debate is evidenced by the diversity of definitions and conceptualizations of “spirituality” and “religion” (Atchley, 2009; Johnson, 2009; McFadden, 2005; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005; Wink, 2003). For example, Wink (2003) examines “religious dwellers” and “spiritual seekers” over the lifecourse, arguing that spirituality and religion have enough intersecting qualities that they do not need to be split as constructs. This argument suggests that older adults can and do distinguish a difference is salient within scholarly debates, but to the extent these differences are relevant for the every day practice of spirituality is questionable. Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) define spirituality as the search for the sacred – - that which is special, set apart from the ordinary, and deserving of veneration. Religion refers to the search for significance in ways related to the sacred. The process of the search, or seeking, is important for their conceptualization of both spirituality and religion.

Despite these conceptual debates and differences, most scholars agree that spirituality and religion are related constructs. In this project, I use Atchley’s (2009, p. 2) definition of spirituality 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.”

Although considerable information exists about women’s spirituality outside of gerontology, in disciplines such as history, theology, psychology, anthropology, religious studies, and sociology (Learn, 1996), there is comparatively less attention paid within gerontology. The literature suggests that there is a male-dominated perspective evidenced in the world’s major religious traditions, particularly in the Western world (Learn, 1996; Manning, 2010; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Bynum (1986) argues that areas such as spirituality and religion cannot be investigated without an explicit concern for gender. Ray and McFadden (2001) consider gender in the discussion of spiritual development, asserting that women are more collective

in their spirituality than men, using web and quilt metaphors for how women relate to themselves and others spiritually.

Ray and McFadden (2001) point out that “much feminist research and theorizing suggests that individuation models do not adequately describe women’s experience” as it relates to spirituality and spiritual development (2001, p. 202). For example, Learn (1996) likens women’s spirituality in later life to a quilt, a gendered metaphor, in which women stitch together with others various sections, panels, and materials using a technique characterized by process to create spiritual identity in later life. The pioneering work of Carol Gilligan (1982) suggests that women’s development is fragmented and cyclical rather than individual and linear. This work further illustrates the well-established realities that spirituality is a gendered experience and can be characterized as relational. The women in this project pay close attention to the key people in their lives, illustrating how those connections and relational caring provide outlets for spiritual experiences.

This research illustrates the lack of clarity and consensus regarding definitions of spirituality. These findings challenge major assumptions regarding spirituality for the oldest-old, particularly women. This research also illustrates the gendered nature of spirituality for women. In our various attempts to understand the spiritual lives of older adults, we have created both confusion and complexity with our methodologies and operational definitions. The work I present here illustrates the spiritual experiences of a select group of older women and offers clarity that will better inform future investigations of spirituality and aging. Additionally, the findings presented here illuminate the experiences and voices of these women in later life. As the findings indicate, spirituality and religion are more than constructs for these women. Spirituality is a way of being in the world that affords the women in this study connection and meaning. Paying careful attention to our definitions as researchers is important, but perhaps what is more important is providing an understanding of a phenomenon and the meaning it may have for people. In other words, careful exploration is needed in discovering the meaning spirituality has for elders as it is told by the individuals living that experience. In a field muddled with confusion, it is helpful to return to the power of the lived experience evidenced through the stories of elders in helping us to understand the complex phenomenon of spirituality and the meaning it has for older adults.

Methods

Design and Sample

As part of the social sciences’ “narrative turn”, researchers have recognized the importance stories have for humans as they make sense of their lives and experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). As humans we are story-telling creatures, and we think about and describe our experiences as stories situated within a larger socio-cultural context. We use story to make sense of self-hood and identity (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). As with other qualitative approaches, the use of narrative is varied both in meaning and application. Narrative in the simplest understanding is a story created and told in a constructed intentional and formulaic format that illustrates the meaning of human experience (Creswell, 2003). These stories are often temporal and corporeal in nature. Narrative analysis encapsulates a variety of methodologies and techniques used by researchers to understand these stories in an effort to interpret human experience (Polkinghorne, 1983). We use stories to articulate what is most essential to our experience of being human. Narrative analysis is rooted in a thematic approach, wherein the focus is on the content of “what” is said (rather than “how” or “for what purposes”) (Riessman, 1993). I used a thematic narrative approach to analyze interviews about spirituality for the participants in this study.

Sampling for this research aligns with the basic tenets and assumptions of narrative inquiry. Participants were not randomly selected or predetermined during the initial planning stages of the project. Women were selected to participate in this study based on their firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest -- spirituality in advanced age. This study used a purposeful sampling approach, common in qualitative design (Corbin & Strauss, 1997; Lincoln & 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 spirituality.

I use a purposive sample of women ages 80 and older who were willing and able to discuss their experiences of spirituality. Women 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, three lived in assisted living facilities in independent apartments, and 13 lived in their own homes). Initially, I intended to interview nonagenarians and sampled accordingly. I attended a photography exhibit of nonagenarians on display at a local art gallery, which prompted me to contact the artist and request that she connect me with the women from her photography project. The artist agreed and provided me with names and mailing addresses of 15 women over the age of 90. I sent a letter explaining my study to these women, and seven responded by telephone to express their interest in being interviewed for this project. I scheduled interviews with these seven women and began data collection. A total of 16 women were interviewed; the additional nine came via snowball sampling from the first seven interviewees.

I contacted each participant by telephone, introduced myself, and explained the nature and intent of my study. As a brief introduction, each woman was informed that the interviews would focus on three topics of discussion: 1. their spiritual lives and experiences, 2. how they experience their spirituality in later life, and, 3. what is meaningful and valuable about their spirituality. Individual, in-depth interviews were used to gather narrative data to explore each woman's experience of spirituality. The interviews took place in the homes of the women and concentrated on core, or essential, spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices throughout the lifecourse, beginning with childhood, and the impact of those experiences on their lives. These interviews were narrative in the truest sense; I did little probing during the "story about spirituality" being told to me. Initial interviews lasted from one to two hours. The interviews consisted of a spiritual biography where I asked each woman to talk about major spiritual moments over the lifecourse, spiritual experiences, spiritual influences, and current spiritual beliefs and practices. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Following collection of basic demographic data, the interview opened with, "I'm interested in finding out about your core spiritual experiences (beliefs and practices) and how you have come to hold them. Start wherever you would like, but if it's easier to start from childhood and move forward, then please do." Although the interviews were not initially structured in the form of a traditional life story, when the participants described their spiritual experiences, they did so in a manner reflecting a timeline plot with a beginning, middle, and end. These interviews reflect a degree of interpretation in the moment, by the researcher and the women, regarding spirituality as a phenomenon.

Data Analysis

In a narrative analysis approach, researchers pay close attention to the structure of the transcripts, analyzing bounded units of meaning and marking the beginning and end of narrative segments (Riessman, 1993). It is important in a thematic narrative analysis to interpret the narratives or stories as they are told intact and are presented by participants using the transcripts. The narratives allow the participant to express through words their

occurrences with the material and immaterial worlds from their own realm of experience. I then analyzed their narratives paying careful attention to the stories in their entirety; that is, as a whole unit of analysis, including plot and content (Polkinghorne, 1983; Riessman, 1993). Additionally, this research compares and interprets spiritual biographies, as they are constituted in the interviews and transcripts. In this study, narrative is defined as the biography, or the “told” story as a whole, and specifically the story of spirituality as it unfolds over the course of an interview (Riessman, 1993), reflecting the constructed format that illustrates the meaning of spiritual experience (Creswell, 2003).

In this article I concentrate on the “full blown” story of the “self” and focus little on the context in which the narratives takes place, unless that context is relevant to the interpretation of the findings, such as when cohort issues are involved (Polkinghorne, 1983; Riessman, 1993). Lastly, regarding the analysis of language, it is important to note that I am not using a linguist frame of analysis to interpret the use of words by participants; however, I view language as a resource for understanding and not a topic of inquiry (Riessman, 1993).

Each transcript was coded line-by-line, similar to hermeneutic phenomenological and grounded theory approaches. Thematic analysis was used to reach the specific aims of my study or to understand the spiritual experiences of women in late life, and it is based upon the recommendations of Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves (2000). The text was representative of the experiences of the women in my study.

The thematic analysis was based upon the following steps, but in a non-linear fashion. Interview sections were grouped based upon key themes regarding the experience of spirituality as they emerged from the data. I then performed line-by-line coding and labeled narrative units or bounded phrases of the stories with code names. These were small pieces of information that related their perceptions of how spirituality is experienced and emerged from their narratives. Like code names from each area of the phenomenon were placed side by side for further analysis, and rules were made as to how they related. These codes were then arranged into categories. I then placed categories together for further analysis to describe the complex interrelations of the content drawn out from each element of the paradigm, and rules were made as to how they interrelated and were called themes (see Table 1). At that point, exemplars were chosen to represent the themes. Exemplar themes were connected based on emergent themes and experiences the women expressed during interviews and that emerged as salient aspects of the narratives. The exemplar themes were then compared across narratives to arrive at common narratives across interviews (Hemsley, Balandin, & Togher, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1983; Riessman, 1993). The main themes, or typologies, of these common narratives are presented in the following findings section.

Findings

Narrative reconstruction is a way to understand how people make sense of their humanness, their lives through the power of story. Stories are essentially narratives with soul. The common narratives that emerged during data collection and analysis reflect five main themes taken collectively from the 16 narratives: the narrative of conflation, the narrative of continuity, the narrative of confidence, the narrative of connection, and the narrative of caring.

The Narrative of Conflation: Religion and Spirituality as Indistinguishable Constructs

Spirituality and religion for these women are interchangeable terms used to describe major life events and parts of their personhood that are important to them. In other words, spirituality and religion are indistinguishable and conflated constructs. As women in this study discussed their spirituality, they narrated about God, their church attendance, and the

importance of prayer, all representations of religion and religious identity. The separation of the two constructs emerged as an artificial demarcation as the women described their faith, relationships with God, and religious experiences. Each woman was asked to describe her spirituality over the lifecourse, given the option to start at any point or starting from the beginning of their lives and moving to the present. These women, when asked to comment on life events and spiritual experiences, discussed their spiritual and religious experiences interchangeably and rooted them in the context of what they learned (or did not learn) spiritually during their childhood. When probed, the women could articulate conceptual differences between the two, but when asked about how spirituality and religion were experienced in their lives, the distinctions between the two terms blurred. Additionally, all 16 women had a difficult time with the term “spirituality.” For example, all of the participants wanted to know how I was defining spirituality and checked with me for accuracy as they told their spiritual biographies.

When asked about her core spiritual beliefs and practices and how she has come to hold them, Ruth responded:

Well, of course I was raised Catholic and I don't know that anything changes at least for me. I think you were just raised that way, you know. You studied, you had a catechism; you just did these things automatically. But if I didn't have my faith, the things that have happened to me, well, I don't know what I would do without my faith. I suppose I'm very spiritual. Well, I don't know what you mean by spiritual? For me, I know that there is a Lord. There is. And I think there are angels. After my husband died, I still feel he helps me. There are people up there that can help. No one could convince me otherwise because there are too many unusual things that have happened. And of course, I think the Blessed Mother is very good to me.

For Ruth, religion and spirituality are lived in the same manner, through an identification with and practice of Catholicism. The excerpt of her narrative above offers this insight. Also present in Ruth's narrative is an element of confusion regarding the term spirituality. This confusion is present in Minnie's narrative as well. When asked about her core spiritual beliefs and practices, Minnie explained:

It's according to what you think spiritual is. I always wanted to be a good person. And that's what I lived by as I was growing up: to do unto other as I wish to be done unto you. As I got older there was an inner being that was a connection to what I think is out there. To me, I call it God. Somebody else may call it something else, but they have all the same meaning. There's that connection that if I do something that is wrong I know I don't go Heaven, that someone there is looking over my shoulder. Therefore, I try to the best I can to treat people well and do the right thing. The Ten Commandments, believe it or not, even when I started out, I was baptized and came into the church when I was 12. I always thought the Ten Commandments were a living history, a way to live your life. Sometimes I mess up and don't do everything, but the belief is there. As long I stay within the realm of those Ten Commandments, I think I've done as much as I can do with this life.

For Minnie, spirituality is not only conflated with religion, but also tied to her morality. This linkage is absent from Ruth's above conceptualization of spirituality. Another participant, Anna, discussed Judaism, suggesting that for her the term “spirituality” renders experiences associated with her religion and need to identify with a Jewish community:

I don't know exactly what you mean by spirituality? For me it's about being Jewish and about doing the right thing. After surviving the labor camps during the Holocaust and making it to America, I felt like I needed to belong as a Jew. I was

raised as a Jew and it was important to me. When I got here I found a synagogue. It's the best temple because the people really care there -- caring is the most important thing.

Anna is conflating spirituality with her religion in her search for community. When I directly asked if spirituality and religion were different, these women expressed that they could distinguish between the two. For example, when asking Cora if she defined herself as a spiritual person, she explained:

Well, somewhat. I try to be and spiritual, but I don't know exactly what you mean by it. Do you mean religious person? Which to me is a little different. Do I believe in a power beyond the ordinary? I do. I can't prove it. I've decided there is God, but I don't know anything really about him but I do know there is one.

Lydia: So for you, is there a difference between spirituality and religion?

Cora: I think so. I would define spirituality as a belief in a God or existence beyond everyday life. Religion is sort of your practice of what you think is the right thing to do... going to Church, that sort of thing. For me, I am both. It is hard to talk about my spirituality without talking about my religion.

This exchange with Cora illustrates the difficulty women in this study experienced when articulating their spiritual experiences, core beliefs, and practices, as she has difficulty discussing her spirituality without situating her story within religion.

The excerpts from the narratives above suggest that spirituality and religion are constructs of conflation for the women in this study. When participants were asked to describe their spiritual experiences, and as a result narrated about their perceptions of spirituality, there was a considerable overlap. This implies that while disentangling spirituality and religion for purposes of measurement may prove useful for researchers, there is potentially minimal relevancy in the lives of older adults. What is more important, rather, is how spirituality impacts the quality of life for older adults who find these experiences relevant and meaningful.

The Narrative of Continuity

There was considerable consistency in how these women described and narrated their spiritual lives. This finding is supported by postulates of continuity theory (Atchley, 1999). Despite the varied cultural, religious, socio-economic, and political contexts that pepper this sample of participants, fifteen of the sixteen women maintained spiritual continuity over the lifecourse. All but one woman was acculturated into a certain faith or belief framework and maintained it over the lifecourse. The one woman who deviated did so within a denominational Christian context, meaning she converted from Catholicism to Methodist to Unitarian Universalist.

This theme of continuity in the context of spirituality is also tied closely to family for the women in this study, particularly family of orientation. The women talked about their parents, mainly in the past tense. The relationships the women had with their parents and siblings are salient in how they make sense of their spirituality, in the present and at the end of life. The women are very clear about how their spiritual identity began with what they were taught as a child and how they were raised, reacting to a presence of religion or lack of religiosity in their homes. Consider Cora's reflection on how the religious foundations she acquired through family of orientation are significant to her spirituality:

Well, I accepted and believed what was told to me as a child. I didn't have any question about what they said. My parents didn't go to church much, maybe once and a while, but they sent my sister and me to Sunday school. Which was a little

church down the street we could go to without crossing the street. It was I think a little Christian church and they chose it because it was close by, not because it was a particular church. Most of my family was not religious. My grandparents were. When I was a child I just accepted what they said, and didn't have any questions about it. I came to understand it better as I grew older. My religion has always been a part of my life. I went to a Methodist college and then found a Methodist church after getting married and moving here. We've been there ever since. I am the oldest member in the congregation.

Another participant, Minnie, discussed early life influences in the church. She described what she was exposed to as a child and how spirituality was infused into her at a young age:

My daddy was the deacon of the church. He was the Sunday school superintendent. My mother was a teacher. I grew up in the Baptist church. That has always been a part of my life. When I was growing up I used to wonder we didn't move our bedrooms into the church because we were always there. But as I grew older I understood that was their way of life and they enjoyed that so and me being the only child, when they went I had to go with them. I do have a sister. I'm 19 years older than she, but growing up I was the only child. When my mother had to go to church I had to go with her. That was bred into me -- I'm going to the Church. So, we went every day of the week. Church has always been a part of my life and it still is.

Betty narrated a similar experience as Minnie. She described what she was taught as a child:

I grew up with religion surrounding me. I was born on Sunday morning, my mother said while the church bells were ringing. And it was just a few doors away. We went to Sunday school all the time and church. She talked about when I was little and before I could really talk, I'd say, "There's the honey call bell and we better be going." I always have felt that I was just born into my religion. It still is so very much a part of my life.

Even for women in this study who are not religious, who don't adhere to a religious tradition or practice, and who are hesitant about discussing their spirituality, maintain continuity in their belief framework, meaning they maintain a consistent repertoire of beliefs and practices over the lifecourse. For example, Louise explained:

It hasn't changed it much. When I was little I didn't believe in anything and I also did not begin to believe when I started to learn about humanistic Judaism, of which I am a part now. According to humanistic philosophy, we are in our control of our lives and we make our decisions. I've always made my own decisions. I changed jobs a number of times, but not religions. No one ever told me to or not to. I feel I've always been a humanist in my ways. My father ran away from home because his father wanted him to be a rabbi and came to this country when he was 14 and slept on benches until he could find some kind of work to do. And so, I was brought up without religion. Neither of my parents attended any synagogue. What we observed of holidays was very minor. We did observe the Passover in that my mother used the good set of dishes for the holiday, but she didn't go to any religious process or observe Passover or whatever you're supposed to do.

The Narrative of Confidence

A predominant theme in the spirituality and aging literature reflects a theoretical framework that involves seeking or searching for the sacred (Pargament, 1997; Wink, 2003). In other words, part of what makes us most human is the need to make meaning of our lives. Part of this meaning making is done in the context of our search for what we identify as sacred,

particularly in later life. Various researchers articulate this searching process as instrumental in development work resulting in a sense of purpose, belonging, and ultimately wellbeing as we move throughout our lives (James, 1908; Pargament, 1997; Moberg, 2005; Moody & Carroll, 1997). The literature regarding spirituality and aging suggests this spiritual seeking continues over the lifecourse and into advanced age. For example, Moody & Carroll (1997) describe the spiritual quest that elders embark on in later life to help them make meaning and embrace spirituality. The task of making sense of one's life and understanding existentially who they are in this world is important, but for the women in this study that task is not expressed in the form of seeking or searching for the sacred. For these women, the search for the sacred or for God or a higher power or a larger purpose outside the self was experienced earlier in the lifecourse. They are no longer seeking, but have arrived at a conceptualization of the sacred. For each participant, that spiritual journey, moment, or event happened at various times earlier in their lives; for some it was an event in their childhood and for others it was losing an adult child later in life. Regardless, for the women in this study (all in their 80s and 90s), the seeking is complete, and these women have arrived at a place of spiritual confidence. While they recognize the great mysteries in life and that no individual is certain about what happens after death, the women in this study have spiritual frameworks in place that provide a sense of confidence about their spiritual thoughts, knowledge, and beliefs. Additionally, this spiritual confidence opens a space for them to have a sense of calmness and acceptance regarding their finiteness. Furthermore, their spiritual confidence is essential to their happiness evidenced in how they discuss their old age and life as they approach death; they are confident, accepting, and happy. For example, Florence, when asked if there was anything she was seeking spiritually explained:

Seeking is a big word. I don't think so. Not really. No. Other than I guess my looking towards our children and grandchildren and so on. I wonder about their world and what they'll be doing. They have been very successful, but I worry... especially right now with Earth Day. I worry by the time our great-grandchildren come, what will come of our future. I don't know, there are a lot of question marks there. But that's more about my family. There is nothing spiritually that I seek. I've already done all that work.

Another participant, Rose, describes a process of longing for people, rather than searching when asked if there was anything spiritually she was still seeking:

I look for answers in people because I think God sends them into my life for a reason or because they have something important to say -- messengers almost. I really do. I want to hear what they have to say. Most of them can say something if you give them a little minute. That's what I look for: the people. God, well, I found him a long time ago. I long to go to church again to see more of these people. I long for Sundays.

Another participant, Agnes, is confident that she no longer is seeking. When asked if there is anything she is still seeking in terms of her spirituality, she replied:

No. I mean, in terms of spiritually seeking. Desire, that's different. I would like to have \$20,000 more a year so I could give it away. I enjoy giving money away. That's a spiritual act. So, no, I don't have any place I want to get. I don't expect to see the face of God. Don't tell my reverend that I don't expect to see His face, although she knows that I do not believe in an afterlife.

Ruby, when asked if there is anything she is still seeking spiritually, describes an intrigue with life after death. She is more than certain of her spiritual beliefs and is unwavering in her descriptions about her spirituality and religion throughout the course of the interview. Her reflections on her own mortality reflect a degree of hopefulness about what she now remains so certain about in terms of her spirituality. She explained:

As I get closer to death, I just hope that there is a Heaven. We've been told for years that there is a place up there and that when we go, if when we've done our good deeds down here, then there's a place up there where we get to and where we will enjoy, milk and honey and all the good things like that. So, I would like to think that when I die that's where I will go. I'd like to go. If I can't get there, I'd like to at least look at it. We don't know how we going to be judged. We try to do our best, but none of us know exactly what's going to happen because no one has been there and come back to tell us. We have to surmise that when we get there, we'll be part of that. That's what I am trying so hard for.

The excerpts from the narratives above illustrate that these women are steadfast in and committed to their spirituality. They have a spiritual core comprised of beliefs, practices, and ultimately, experiences. Their narratives suggest that while earlier in the lifecourse a seeking and searching process was present, as they came of age and matured spiritually they found their way to a comfortable place of believing and faith. In later life and as they approach the end of their lifecourse, they are no longer in a seeking or searching process; rather they are confident in who they are as spiritual older women. In addition to spiritual confidence, the women interviewed for this study also exude a tremendous degree of happiness and contentment. The women are at peace with their lives, where they have gone, what they have done, and the meaningfulness they accordingly have attributed to these experiences. In the process of data analysis, I understand this happiness to be directly in their spiritual confidence and faith. A narrative analysis indicates that these women have a diminished sense of anxiety as they begin, and for some complete, the last chapter of their lives.

The Narrative of Connection

The narrative of connection implies that for the women in this study, their experience of spirituality is commonly and congruently experienced in the context of connection, meaning connectivity with others or in the form of relationships present (or once present) in their lives. The women in this study experience meaningful relationships with various important individuals over their lifecourse. When asked to describe their spirituality, women told stories about people: connection, community, family, and friends. The women talked about these connections, describing their importance to them as they discussed their spiritual experiences. The women here describe the key figures and important people in their lives, illustrating how these relationships provide outlets for spiritual experiences. These women are living their spirituality through their relationships with other people, mainly family members (both family of orientation and family of procreation) and close friends. For example, Betty explained:

I certainly have a spiritual relationship with the lady who reads to me on Monday and Friday. We can talk about anything together. She belongs to the same church as I do. When she comes in she'll say 'you are looking sad today, what's going on?' and that triggers some thoughts. We sit here and talk for quite a while before we begin to read. We've been reading together for more than a year. I've bonded with her. It certainly is a spiritual experience.

Another woman, Agnes, when asked about whether or not she identified herself as a spiritual person narrated about relationships and connections with her family. She explained:

It's hard for me to separate spirituality from religiousness. But I think about the people in my life that I love. Looking at the faces of my grandchildren and thinking "ah"... Love is a spiritual thing to me. And there are several people I love. I love my daughters and I love my grandchildren. The love I have for my children is sacred and the love I had for my late husband as well.

When asked about her spiritual experiences, Betty narrates about her friendships. These friendships are important to her and they are what come to mind when she expresses what spirituality means to her:

My friends are spiritual to me and my spiritual friends accept me and don't bug me. That's probably a weakness on their part because they probably should. But they don't. They accept me for who I am and all my imperfections. People are an important part of my spirituality. Family is important. I experience my spirituality through people, even as simple as being nice to others. I feel like God puts us all here for a reason, and maybe it's just to be there for one another.

Louise, when asked about her spirituality and how she makes meaning of her life, narrates about the importance of her friends:

I have many friends and good relationships with them. Most of my friends from way back have died since I'm so old, but I've found since that since I've moved here I've made a whole batch of new friends and that's really very comforting, as you can talk about anything with your friends.

Another woman, Beatrice, talks about the importance of her friends and how they form a spiritual community for her:

My best friends are people I've met through church. Although they started out as friendships through the church, they have become much more than that. Then there were my babies and when my husband died. They are my community. Our connection speaks to the ethos of the church and the people there. I pay attention to my friends when they have troubles and when they need something I believe I'm right there to help. I have two or three very close women friends and I sit with them in the hospital if need be, I cook meals for them. I do whatever they need.

The findings above illustrate the salience of connection for these women regarding their spirituality. These women experience their spirituality through the cultivation of connections and relationships with other people.

The Narrative of Caring

The narrative of caring was present with every woman in this project. Each woman was articulate about the importance of caring for other people and contributing in a manner that improved the lives of other people. Caring is a fundamental aspect of spirituality for these women. An integral part of how these women live their spirituality in a way that provides them with ultimate purpose is related to their values and in a sense their morality, specifically their strict adherence to doing good in the world, or the importance of caring for others. Throughout the many and multiple interviews, each woman articulated repeatedly "actions speak louder than words," and to be a spiritual person means that one is aware and cares about more than just themselves as an individual. The women in this study discussed often the importance of "doing the right thing" and indicating that in terms of spirituality "talk is cheap" and "actions speak louder than words" regarding the ethical treatment of the people in their lives, or people with whom they are in a relationship. In their words, "according to the Golden Rule" people should be treated accordingly. For example, Minnie explained:

Being a good person and doing the right thing should be instinct. It should be something you don't have to think about. Treat someone as though you want to be treated. It's something, I know everybody doesn't have it... it's not you get me, I'm going to get you back. But, it's not hard. Do the right thing. So, if it's in your heart you feel that it's right.... Believing the right thing, it eventually comes out. I don't think that just because you did something good that it's coming back to you... but

doing not good, it eventually catches up with you. I don't know. I try to put myself in someone else's shoes when something happens. Would I do the same thing or would I do something different? And not being perfect, but sometimes we slip up and do what we shouldn't have done. If you think about it, it'll come to you -- what's right and wrong. In most cases you'll back off and do what you think is right, or at least you should.

This awareness and ethic of care are manifested in how one lives, in the treatment of others, and the good works one performs. An example of a good work provided by one woman had to do with serving children in need and providing them with clothes. This narrative of care is an essential aspect to the women's lived experience of spirituality. This assertion supports the foundational work of Gilligan (1982), suggesting that women's morality is gendered and for women caring is an important part of expressing goodness. Gloria describes the importance of doing good in the world and links this to her connection with God and her spirituality:

My whole life is kind of spiritual to me... the good spirit and the bad spirit. I remember telling my children as they grew up, at church and learning some of these things. Good is God.... The word God is short for good. For doing good in life. Evil is the devil or doing bad in life. That's a simple way to explain to children. And I believe that.... Kind of simple answer, but an answer nonetheless.

Vivienne, in a reflexive moment about the importance of doing service for others, wishes she had the motivation to do more in terms of caring for people. She conceptualizes service as the linchpin to being a good person and living her spirituality. She explained:

I think I live my spirituality through other people in a way, through some of my church friends. I think probably I do quite a lot as a matter of fact. I often think about, I don't know if it is spirituality or not, but I often think about what is the kind thing to do? What is the generous thing to do? If I'm angry with someone and want to chew him or her out, I think no, that isn't the way to behave. I don't know if that's spirituality or not, but it's generous. They need it more than I do. I'm not as good a person as I would like to be. I'm terrible about going to visit people who are sick. I just don't do it and I just feel terrible but I just don't do it. It is important to live that way, to live your spirituality by helping others.

Another participant, Betty, understands her spiritual experience as it is defined by service to others and to being what she describes as a "good person." Betty participated in service to the community throughout her lifecourse and continues to engage in charitable acts and civic engagement in her nineties. She relates this value to her spirituality, an ethic of goodness, and being a good person:

Well, I pray that the Lord will help me reach out to my sisters and brothers along the way and to lend a helping hand wherever I can and I try to do that. I look for situations where I can be helpful and I try doing it. I remember one of our efforts was to teach the children about other people in the community like doctors and policemen. So, they would understand part of where they fit into the whole big puzzle. We would have a ranger come and get acquainted with the children. We didn't want them to be afraid of them because they were law people. That's one of the thing we taught. I'd tried to reach out to people.

Another participant, June, discusses how important it is to leave the world in a better than shape than when you found it. Her spirituality and religiosity are intertwined and she identifies with the religion and culture of Judaism. She thinks that being a spiritual person means that you are a good person, or at least being a good person is a goal worth striving for:

A spiritual person is somebody who wants to make the world a better place than when he left it than when he came into the world. It means more than just talking about your religion or talking about being spiritual or a good person. To me it means doing something with your life that adds and that improves the life of someone either individually or as a people or as a group. I think of myself as a spiritual person and I believe in helping people.

The women in this study make meaning of their spirituality through their good works for others, and feel that is paramount to the lived experience of spirituality. This belief manifested into action may also account for why they exhibit a profound sense of happiness and contentment with their lives.

Discussion

This exposition of women's spirituality provides a unique insight into how the women in this study experience their spirituality in a storied fashion or as narrative. Additionally, it provides an understanding of the language women use to narrate about this ineffable phenomenon and also sheds light on how spirituality is experienced in their lives. The narratives of these 16 women illustrate that spirituality has meaning and is significant in their lives. Some women resonate more completely with the term "spirituality" while others acquiesced, eventually recognizing it as a meaningful construct. Despite these differences, as their stories unfolded, a lived experience of spirituality was evidenced. During a thematic narrative analysis, five common narratives emerged: the narrative of conflation, the narrative of continuity, the narrative of confidence, the narrative of connection, and the narrative of caring. These common narratives, or over-arching themes, illustrate the most salient aspects of spirituality for the participants that are present throughout each intact story, or spiritual biography.

The narrative of conflation provides evidence for the on-going debate in the field of gerontology: whether spirituality and religion are distinct constructs or simply synonymous representations of the same phenomenon. For the women in this study, the two constructs were comparable and many of the participants had a difficult time discussing their spirituality without conflating their description of spirituality with religion. The work here supports previous efforts to disentangle and define the two constructs. For example, Nelson-Becker (2003) investigated how older adults think about religion and spirituality as spheres of meaning. Findings, similar to the findings presented here, indicate that for some of the older women in her study spirituality and religion overlap and for others they are different, but in the context of their daily lives the two constructs are conflated. Additionally, difficulty was expressed understanding "spirituality" and articulating ineffable qualities of the phenomenon. For example, several of the participants would explain, "my spirituality feels good to me, it's hard to explain, like when I'm sitting through good worship and I break out in bumps or when I hear a good song. Words can't describe it." Spirituality and religion as constructs were indistinguishable for the women when they were asked to describe their experiences, although with careful consideration arbitrary differences could be made. Intellectually, the two can be separated, but when considering the lived experiences of these women the distinctions blur.

The narrative of continuity is also a predominant and emergent theme resulting from this thematic narrative analysis. The narrative of continuity implies that as the women moved throughout the lifecourse and developed spiritually, there was minimal spiritual or religious deviation from initial and formational spiritual roots acquired during childhood. Their belief frameworks developed early and have remained consistent over the lifecourse. The narratives unfold in a manner reflecting modest mobility concerning the women's spiritual trajectories. The majority of these participants acquired a belief framework rooted in a

Judeo-Christian ethos. Their narratives of spiritual experiences strongly reflect continuity and maintenance of belief in a Judeo-Christian God and the various spiritual and religious principles associated with this belief framework. Using the metaphor of a ship is useful in understanding this narrative of confidence. These women were born on a boat of belief, acquiring a belief framework that padded their spiritual beginnings. As the ship set sail they continued to grow and develop; they moved from a place of believing what they were told to considering what they thought about their spirituality and relationships with the Transcendent. As they continued to sail through life, many of them chose, with agency, to remain on their ship of origination. With continued growth and movement they acquired spiritual experiences and as these experiences accumulated, they arrived at a place of assuredness and knowing concerning their spirituality.

The narrative of continuity suggests that these women are “dwellers,” supporting Wink’s research (2003). Wink (2003) postulated that earlier adulthood is characterized with a dwelling behavior as people enter into middle adulthood they begin their seeking process, the search for meaning regarding their spirituality, and for some religion. My findings, although complementary to Wink, suggest an additional component to this trajectory -- an informed dwelling. By this I mean that these women have maintained continuity over their lifecourse concerning their spirituality (Atchley, 1999), but to imply they have done no spiritual seeking is erroneous. These women have returned, informed and confident to a place of dwelling regarding their spirituality.

Concerning the narrative themes of conflation and continuity that emerged while exploring how these women understand and describe their spiritual experiences, it is important to take the issue of cohort into consideration. All of the women in this study were well into mid-life and early later adulthood when the term “spirituality” gained popularity; most were spiritually matured and comfortably situated in a belief framework. Additionally, these women came of age during a time when self-expression and religious exploration were seen as deviant for women. This historical context is another variable helpful in our understanding of how or why these women rarely deviated from belief frameworks that were modeled for them as children. Issues of cohort and historical context have implications for meaning and language particularly surrounding such a complex phenomenon as spirituality. Assessing the magnitude to which cohort and historical context shapes these experiences is beyond the scope of this study; however, it is important that we, as gerontologists, consider these issues when investigating spirituality and religion in late life.

The narrative of confidence encapsulates how the women experience their spirituality. Pargament (1997) examined how individuals made meaning of the sacred and posited spirituality as a process of searching and seeking for the sacred. Referenced frequently in the literature, this conceptual framework is pervasive within spirituality and aging research. This searching and seeking framework is useful in understanding the spirituality of individuals earlier in their lifecourse, but the findings of this study suggest this seeking and searching process may not be applicable when applied to individuals in late-late life. My participants articulated a sense of arrival when probed about their seeking process; their narratives reflect a spiritual confidence. Seeking and searching are no longer a part of their spiritual experiences, because for some that work happened at previous junctures in the lifecourse, when faced with tragedy or loss. Catalysts aside, presently in the last decades of their lives these women are sure, steadfast, and solid in what they believe spiritually. This sense of assuredness provides them with a sense of peace and tranquility; this is evident in their narratives.

The narrative of connection reflects a gendered expression of spirituality and aging. The narratives of these women suggest that they have what Ray and McFadden describe as

“heavily populated narratives” (2001, p. 202). These heavily populated narratives or life stories filled with relationships and meaningful interactions with people in a social context accurately describe spiritual development for women over the lifecourse, indicating that spirituality is a gendered experience (or accumulation of experiences) and reflects the complexity of the lifecourse for women. Relationships are important avenues for women to make meaning of their lives and provide outlets from their spirituality. Additionally, the findings presented here illustrate the importance of the interplay between family and aging over the lifecourse, particularly in relation to spiritual formation and development. The connections and relationships evidenced in these narratives formulated in earlier life remain salient over the lifecourse and into old age. If these relationships are important to the aging individual and are a part of their spiritual development, then it is crucial for gerontologists to further understand this interplay and to explore how and to what extent these relationships have to do with spiritual development. This finding supports the usefulness of spiritual life reviews, and having spirituality be part of reminiscence work we are encouraged to do with older adults. It is important for us as gerontologists and providers to offer a space for people to be “spiritual,” whatever that may mean to them. Additionally, we need to translate the very basic need to make meaning of life or to connect with something greater than the self in our work with elders. This will promote resilience or satisfaction in later life.

The narrative of caring exemplifies a theme suggesting that for these women the caring for people is significant to their lived experience of spirituality. The way these women care for others is directly linked to their spirituality. Their narratives are dense with spiritual experiences in the context of relationships and acts of goodness, kindness, and service to others (Learn, 1996; Ray & McFadden, 2001). This finding is congruent with other research on women’s spiritual experiences (Gilligan, 1982; Learn, 1996; Ray & McFadden, 2001). Additionally, the need for meaningful connections with others that provide outlets for caring to be expressed is well documented (Ryff, 1989; Settersten, 2001). The spiritual experiences of these women support this documentation. For the women in this study, spirituality is multi-faceted, complex, and meaningful.

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Table 1

Selected Examples of Codes and Conceptual Definitions for Thematic Narrative Analysis of Spiritual Biographies.

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning
Do I identify as a spiritual person? It's hard for me to separate spirituality from religiousness, particularly in my living each day.	Spirituality is difficult to describe
Spirituality is as a belief in a God or existence beyond everyday life. Religion is sort of your practice of what you think is the right thing to do - going to Church, that sort of thing. I'm not quite sure what you mean by spirituality.	Spirituality as loaded and conflated; hard to define and distinguish from religion. Intuitive separation of constructs, but difficult to do. Distinctions blur in the every day lived experience (ex Church).
Seeking is a big word. No. I'm not spiritually seeking. Other than I guess my looking towards, our children and grandchildren and so on. But that's family.	Not spiritually seeking. Engaged in search for meaning earlier. Confident
Nothing for me has changed. I think you were just raised that way, you know. You studied, you had a catechism; you just did these things automatically.	Maintaining continuity over the lifecourse with spirituality, religion and faith.