The Lived Experience of Aging in Faith Communities: Exploring the Perceptions of Support for Older Adults

Research Abstract
We investigated the experiences of older adults and those serving them in various communities of faith. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 older adults ranging in age from 65 to 95 years of age. Grounded Theory coding techniques were applied to identify themes. What emerged from the narratives about seeking support were accounts of people feeling both supported and failed in their faith community. The results are presented as an interpretation of the participants' perceptions of their experience of growing older concerning being promoted in the community of faith. This presentation considers the culture of support and how communities of faith may need to reconsider traditional ways of meeting the needs of people as they age.

Bolstering Spiritual Supports for People Aging in Communities of Faith

It is well established it the scientific literature that there is a positive correlation between religion and health, wellbeing and life satisfaction in later life. It is also well established that religious participation in communities of faith results in people living into older adulthood with supports, connections, and outlets for social integration. Many assume that communities of faith are places where older adults can seek and find supports of most all kind. Additionally, we expect that communities of faith embody a culture that bolsters the spirituality of people as they age. In working with older adults through various community partnerships and outlets in a faith-based university, I find that many of these assumptions are inaccurate.

While many of the participants that I have interviewed over the years feel supported and included in their communities of faith, a fair amount of them do not. Conversely, many of many adults that I work and engage with describe feeling neglected, excluded, and in many ways failed by their faith communities. As a gerontologist and scholar interested in understanding of spirituality and resilience, I find this troubling. Faith communities and those serving in them can do better. When interfacing with clergy and laypersons in diverse faith communities, I have come to understand that the lack of perceived support regarding aging and older adults has more to do with a lack of education and awareness rather than intention. We need age-friendly as well as dementia friendly communities of faith and spiritual spaces where people, as they age, can be celebrated, bolstered and supported. Creating gerontologically and spiritually sound communities of faith require that we as practitioners and participators in the field develop and hone our spiritual as well as gerontological competencies.

Anthropologists have been stressing the importance of cultural awareness and appreciation for many decades. As social scientists working to understand the ways the integrated pattern of human behavior, including thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group, it is vital we build a process where researchers and practitioners can respond to all differences in a respectful, mindful and effective manner. *Cultural competence* is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate settings to increase the quality of interactions between people. I contend that gerontology has a great deal to learn from other disciplines actively engaging in culturally competent work.

The cultural competency perspective is useful when applied to the work of gerontology in general, but particularly when applied to the area of spirituality and aging. It is essential that we work to not only understand the role spirituality plays in the lives of elders but also that we achieve sophisticated levels of spiritual competency in the field of gerontology. Our society, including the aging population, grows more pluralistic and diverse each day. We need to integrate methods in gerontology that embrace this complexity and need to adopt a multi-faith/religion perspective and explore the richness of spirituality for all older adults. Anderson (2004) provides five useful steps to facilitate spiritual competency; these can be quickly adopted by gerontology: 1. Maintaining self-awareness (or the ability to know and explain one's spiritual groundedness); 2. Bounding personal experiences (identify and learn about "otherness" by recognizing your own); 3. Moving across boundaries (or the setting aside of your spirituality to effectively communicate and relate to those with differing spiritual frameworks); 4, identifying the barriers (attempting to utilize skills and language to diffuse potential barriers to spiritual communication) and 5 and demonstrating respect and willingness to learn (treating individuals with different spiritual frameworks as teachers). It is important to note that while developing spiritual competency is a complex and continuous process, it needs to be implemented for continued growth and evolution – for individuals and academic disciplines. I believe that this model would be useful for those serving older adults in communities of faith. Perhaps people would feel more supported and included in these spiritual spaces and places if this model served as a foundation of practice.

To bolster spiritual supports for people as they age in communities of faith, creating faith communities filled with well-educated leaders is essential to provide information and support to those ministering, supporting, and/or witnessing their spiritual journeys as they move throughout life. As an academic gerontologist, educator, and advocate, I have looked for models and examples of this type of education or training program. I am curious about the tools out there being developed and disseminated to those working to serve elders in communities of faith. In a cursory review of programs, certifications, and opportunities for training related to spiritual and aging, I come up short with a list of viable and thriving programs. My colleagues reflect fondly about The Center on Aging, Religion, and

Spirituality (CARS) which was associated with Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota) from 1994 until 2007. McFadden, Kimble, Ellor, Seeber, and Rost (2011), explained that the center it provided an ecumenical, interdisciplinary continuing education program for clergy, chaplains, lay leaders, and others interested in pastoral care and ministry with older persons and that the work at the center illustrated the need for immanent and transcendent meaning in later life. The article details the inception and history of the CARS and concludes that while such centers are difficult to fund with the support of the university and institutional dollars, the types of programming and education needed in for clergy, laypersons and those serving in communities of faith remains vitally needed and essential.

McFadden et al. (2011) reflect on the need of CARS-type models of education and programming and explain, "we believe there continues to be a need for professional development for clergy, chaplains, and others who work with older adults. Given the technological advances of the last ten years, many of these programs will probably take place online, but even so, they will be costly, both in time and resources" (p.72). In hosting the 7th International Conference on Ageing and Spirituality at Concordia University Chicago in June 2017, the emergent and overarching theme of the meeting were striking to me: we need more programs that help people ministering to and serving older adults in faith settings. Similar to McFadden et al., (2011), seven years later I am asking related questions: are these types of programs needed, how do we create and sustain them given the changing landscapes of religion and higher education, where we do go from here? Looking forward I do think we need to do a better job of promoting and bolstering spiritual and gerontological competency. If you are reading this blog post and agree and wish to start a dialogue about how to resurrect the work of Dr. Melvin Kimble and CARS while creating a more global network and presence, please contact me. There remains a need to pay attention to the religiousness and spirituality of aging.

References
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Biography
Dr. Lydia K. Manning is a gerontologist, educator, and entrepreneur with a wide range of experience in the field of aging. She is an Associate Professor of Gerontology at Concordia University Chicago in the College of Graduate Studies. Dr. Manning received her Ph.D. in social gerontology from the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at Miami University in Oxford, OH (USA). Her expertise lies in complex issues related to aging, health, and well-being. Her research focuses on resilience with additional interests in religion and gender.