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THE CONTRIBUTION OF INFORMAL LEARNING TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATER LIFE

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2019

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

<u>ABSTRACT</u>

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<u>THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY</u>

THE CONTRIBUTION OF INFORMAL LEARNING TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATER LIFE

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This thesis concerns the spiritual learning and development that can take place in older age. It proposes that informal learning is integral to an experience of ageing involving a spiritual dimension. The research areas in which this gerontological study is located are multi-disciplinary, adding the novel perspective of adult lifelong learning to the growing subject of spirituality and ageing. Research questions investigated the *nature of spiritual learning and its development in later life* and the *ways in which older people saw spiritual development as related to being older*. I aim to offer an account of the various ways in which spiritual learning and development occur, and how they relate to the experience of ageing.

An interpretive, qualitative methodology was adopted to give primacy to older people's accounts of their spiritual learning and development, involving a two-stage design of 3 focus groups and 23 individual interviews with respondents aged 60 to 92. Research participants were independent, community dwelling members of networks that offered spiritual and religious engagement in a 30-mile area within Hampshire, Surrey and West Sussex. Transcribed interview material was the subject of thematic and narrative analysis.

Findings based on older people's understanding and meaning of their spirituality indicate that spiritual change and development takes place in later life through informal learning, for which I propose a process model as an alternative to stage-models of later-life development. By interpreting spiritual development as a kind of adult learning and seeing this phenomenon in a life-course context, I am able to apply my findings to various ways of being spiritual to today's changing cultures of ageing and spirituality. This application includes a re-consideration of spiritual 'dwelling' and 'seeking' as ways in which spiritual learners build their spiritual narratives and express them in spiritual practice. Spiritual ageing was recognised in three main ways, in terms of later life as continuity, as a new life-course phase, and as an episode in life-as-story.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of authorship

Print name: JOANNA KATE WALKER

Title of thesis: The Contribution of Informal Learning to Spiritual Development in Later Life

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:

Walker, J.K (2016) 'Spiritual Development in Later Life: A Learning Experience?'. In Johnson, M.L and Walker, J.K. *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Chapter 15, pp. 249-269.

Walker, J. (2018) 'Perspectives on Spiritual Learning and Development in Later Life' *International Journal of Education and Ageing* 4(2): 133-144.

Signature: ....Date:

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Peter Coleman and Elisabeth Schroeder-Butterfill for their exemplary assistance, support and encouragement throughout this PhD journey.

A chorus of friends and family members has also backed me up at all times, for which I am most grateful. I would like to thank Caroline, Deb, Diana, Kathryn, Peter, Pat and Sue who have played particular parts.

I thank Anne Jamieson, Malcolm Johnson, Keith Percy and James Woodward for their advice and interest at key times. I acknowledge the inspiration received from Bob Atchley, Elizabeth MacKinlay and Ron Manheimer, whose work helped me take the plunge to research this fascinating field myself.

Last, I thank all focus group members and interviewees for their time and enthusiastic participation in the study. Their willingness to share thoughts and experiences has been invaluable.

Chapter 1   Introduction

Growing older can involve a greater interest in spirituality, especially around existential questions of meaning and purpose in life. This is widely recognised in public and academic discourse (Atchley 2009; Moody 2005). Health and caring professions sometimes regard a mature spirituality as a resource for wellbeing and resilience in older age (Cowlinshaw *et al* 2013; Reutter and Bigatti 2014). However, little is known about the views and understandings older people have of their spirituality and how they regard it responding to the circumstances of later life. In this thesis, spirituality is seen as the search for significance, meaning or purpose in ways related to the sacred, where the sacred often but not invariably involves a transcendent dimension (see Section 2.3.1). My research concerns the spiritual learning and development that can take place in older age and proposes that informal learning is integral to an experience of ageing that involves a spiritual dimension (see Chapter 2). I am not primarily concerned with the *content* of spiritual beliefs or practices, but with the *processes* of how spiritual learning is recognised and pursued in later life. The research areas in which this study is located are broad and multi-disciplinary (see Section 2.2). My perspective of adult lifelong learning adds a particular and hitherto neglected dimension to the growing academic field of study of spirituality and ageing. I aim to offer an account of the ways in which spiritual learning and development occur, and how they relate to the experience of ageing.

1.1   What is spiritual learning in later life and why research it?

As gerontological scholarship attests, our understanding of human ageing and of the experiences and meanings of growing old have changed considerably over time.

> 'The balance between chronological, bodily, social, *spiritual*, medical and other means of understanding old age have changed and will continue to do so' (Vincent, Phillipson and Downs 2006:2, my emphasis).

In the twenty-first century, understanding spirituality has become increasingly uncoupled from religion and questions have emerged about appropriate approaches to generating and applying social-scientific knowledge concerning spirituality. Doubts about the applicability of positivist, theory driven methodologies meant that the relatively new and contested concept of spirituality could be legitimately studied through an emerging interpretivist paradigm (Bryman 2012; Ritchie and Lewis 2003). These two factors - the emergence of spirituality as a focus within and beyond

the study of religion, and acceptable means of researching it - account for the significant growth in the field of spirituality and ageing (Moberg 2008; Hornborg 2012).

The addition of a learning perspective to this burgeoning and diverse field is still rare, but the connections between social gerontology and accounts of the later phases of adult development seem worthy of pursuit (Tisdell 1999; Merriam 2012). Adult learning, like social gerontology, is a multi-disciplinary field of study, encompassing psycho-social aspects among many others. Educational gerontology represents an established, if specialised, sub-field to which I wish to add an exploration of spiritual learning and development (Walker 2010; Findsen and Formosa 2011). From the conjunction of social and educational gerontology I draw two basic ideas: that spiritual learning and development *can continue into late life* in support of older people's spirituality; and that recognising and attending to a spiritual perspective *is socially significant* in the lived experience of older people (Walker 2014). However, learning resources and opportunities concerning spirituality that have been designed for older adults are few. With evidence from social gerontology increasingly pointing to the significance in later life of sustaining meaning and purpose (Moody 2006; Jewell 2010), and greater numbers of older people wishing to make sense of their lives (Johnson 2013), the contribution of adult learning to spiritual meaning-making demands investigation.

One of my starting assumptions, then, is that spirituality is amenable to learning, rather than just being an innate process of maturation. As part of enquiring into the nature of spiritual learning in later life, I am further assuming that older people rely for their development on informal learning. This mostly comprises learning from experience (incidental learning) and by gathering such learning resources as they can, either opportunistically or through more purposeful searching (self-directed learning) (Section 2.5.1). Another basic stance I have adopted is that researching later life spirituality through interpretive, qualitative methodologies gives primacy to older people's accounts in preference to responses on questionnaires, scales or other kinds of measure.

I have therefore pursued older people's understandings and meanings of their spirituality as a key to accounting for change and development in later life. I argue that such understandings build up over the life-course to form a spiritual meaning system that interprets experience and frames a person's spiritual outlook. I anticipate that the period of later life contains features which additionally prompt the kinds of reflection that fuel further learning (see Chapter 6). A further assumption is that, since the current social context features a rapidly changing understanding of religion and spirituality, today's older people are grappling with significant challenges to their adult spiritual meaning systems. This is mainly because their spirituality would have mostly been formed within religious world-views, but the contemporary context is increasingly geared towards

a language and practice of spirituality (Coleman, Mills and Speck 2006). Despite retaining the 'closely connected understandings of religion and spirituality into which they were socialised' (Coleman *et al* 2016:577) older people in Western societies must continue to make sense of their spiritual identities in a period of rapid change in religion, spirituality and belief.

Social surveys show that older generations report greater religiosity, compared with younger adults, on several measures such as belief and participation in meetings (British Social Attitudes 2012). In the 2011 Census, Christianity was the largest religious group at 59 percent of the population (England and Wales), representing 33.2 million people (Office for National Statistics 2013). However, this represents a significant decline in Christian affiliation - of 12 percent since the previous Census - particularly within Anglicanism which has halved since 1983 (British Social Attitudes 2012). In fact, both Protestant and Catholic Churches no longer have their historic cultural monopoly, whilst newer forms such as evangelical, independent and black majority churches have grown. So also have new spiritual communities such as new-age, and neo-pagan 'alternative' spiritual groupings (Woodhead 2009). A significant change has been the rise of those reporting no religious affiliation – the so-called 'nones' – now representing fifty-two percent of the public (British Social Attitudes 2018: Woodhead 2017). People professing no religion have a younger profile, with four in five aged under 50, compared with less than one in three at over 65 (ONS 2013). Commentators increasingly point out that the larger numbers of older people reporting aspects of religious participation and belief are not an ageing effect, but a generational one (Crockett and Voas 2006; Coleman *et al* 2015).

> 'This change – which is likely to continue – can be explained by generational replacement, with older, more religious generations dying out and being replaced by less religious generations. There is little evidence that substantial numbers find religion as they get older' (British Social Attitudes 2012:173).

Below the headline of the overall decline of religion in Western Europe, explanations and implications are less clear. In Britain, religious identity appears stable within each cohort, neither increasing nor decreasing over time (Voas 2015). However, at the individual level, Voas suggests that varying measures in different surveys are picking up conflicting religious labels that people accept or offer. As well as measurement imprecision, he supposes that there is a 'fuzzy' area between what people understand as religious affiliation, identity and practice (ibid:8). An idea about 'believing without belonging' (Voas and Crockett 2005:11) as a mitigating factor in ongoing secularisation has been superseded by debates about 'spiritual but not religious' (Ibid:25), to account for the rise of different forms of non-standard beliefs and self-descriptions of religious or spiritual identities. Within this increasingly imprecise picture of today's spiritual 'context of

complexity and change' (Malone and Dadswell 2018:30) we need to look for more sensitive indicators and ideas about changing experiences of religion and spirituality, including in later life. In this way, 'development in religious and spiritual belief and practice with advanced age may become apparent … despite the strong evidence for stability of basic religious disposition across adulthood' (Coleman *et al* 2016:3).

The research gaps that my thesis addresses include issues at different levels. At the most general, I note that educational gerontology takes little interest in spiritual development, and social gerontology is not much concerned with learning (see Section 3.4). On the large topic of spirituality's relationship with ageing, Atchley (2008) comments that 'a mountain of work is needed to explore adequately how spirituality interacts with adult development and ageing' in order to enhance an existing 'mild confidence' in their being linked (ibid:16). So, in exploring spiritual development as a type of adult learning and locating such a phenomenon in a life-course context, I hope to chip away at Atchley's 'mountain' in a small way. Indeed, the relationship of spirituality and ageing is a field that up to recently has lacked empirical research compared to secondary reviews and syntheses (see Section 2.3).

In particular, I hope to address a missing element of existing models and theories concerning adult (spiritual) development, namely the process by which (some) people move through a set of developmental stages as proposed by various theorists (see Section 2.4). Marcoen (2005:369) acknowledges this gap concerning spiritual learning when he calls for research to 'detect and explain different trajectories that elderly people may follow in their search (for self-development) with an awareness of ... transcendent reality'. In pursuing adult learning as a process for development, I will further seek to illuminate its character in the later life-course.

If we accept that meaning-making is the goal or outcome of spiritual searching, more needs to be said about what prompts and produces spiritual meaning, both on a small and larger scale. Thomas and Cohen (2006:66) list as a gap the 'linking (of) spiritual turning points with how diverse older adults use critical life events to make meaning in their lives'. I hope to address this by studying the processes involved in informal adult spiritual learning within a life-course context.

1.2   Research questions

Following a rigorous study of existing literature, two major questions were formulated:

i. What is the nature of spiritual learning and its development in later life?

- How do older people recognise spiritual learning and development within their life experience?
- What forms of spiritual learning and development operate in older people's lives?

ii. In what ways do older people see spiritual development as related to ageing or being older?

- What are the spiritual questions that engage them at this period of life; are there changing perspectives regarding spirituality?
- What significance do they attribute to having a spiritual dimension in later life?

The first question addresses the 'how' and 'what' of participants' perceptions of their spirituality and its development in later life. My aim is to grasp ideas, explanations and stories that people have arrived at in maturity concerning their spiritual outlook. The second question intends to elicit reflections on the relationship of people's ageing to their spiritual outlooks, practices and development. Both research questions were pursued through the complementary methods of focus group discussion and individual interviewing, in order to produce accounts of later life spirituality grounded in people's narrated experience. In my research, I have been reflexively aware of my own background and perspectives, and the limitations of the situations I created in order to generate the data (as discussed in Section 4.2.3). I accept that interview data are co-constructed narratives rather than direct insights into participants' worlds and should be treated and interpreted as such (Silverman 2014).

This thesis argues that today's greater recognition of spirituality, regarded as part of the field of study of religion (see Section 2.3.1), enables an updated consideration of a spiritual dimension to later life. I apply the idea of spiritual 'search' to an adult learning model to produce an account of how spiritual development responds to older age through the processing of a long-accumulated body of individual experience. Later life spiritual development is seen as the fruit of both incremental and episodic types of learning that can be triggered by the individual and social circumstances of older age. The later life journey provides novelty and challenge to a person's existing meaning frame, thus initiating a re-vision and re-integration of new understandings. A person's spirituality, as an ongoing search for meaning, continually interrogates the experiences offered by later life, producing spiritual interpretations to integrate into a growing spiritual outlook. This overall understanding of how ageing relates to spirituality is discussed in terms of the gerontological approaches of continuity and the life-course perspective, as well as a more recent appreciation of narrativity (see Chapter 7).

1.3   Overview of thesis

Following this Introduction, the literature review is reported over two chapters, but addressing four major themes. The first theme, *spiritual learning and development,* defines and discusses the kinds of spiritual learning that can take place in later life and the ways this has been theorised.

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The second theme reviews *lifelong human development theories and models* that have been employed in understanding spiritual development. The third theme describes *the kinds of adult learning involved* in older people's spiritual development. These first, second and third literature themes are all in Chapter 2. The fourth theme, *spiritual development's relationship with ageing,* is in Chapter 3 and discusses the ways in which spirituality interacts with older age and the changing cultural contexts for later life spiritual development among today's older cohorts. Chapter 3 concludes with a conceptual framework by drawing together the main themes of the literature review and relating them to my research questions. I explain the ideas and concepts that appear to best address these questions and are capable of driving a research process that sheds light on these issues. As indicated above, I have employed theoretical approaches from both educational and social gerontology, combining them within an interpretive methodological framework and a constructive realist stance. In Chapter 3 I describe key concepts (such as spirituality, informal learning, spiritual learning and development, adult life course development). Employing concepts within a framework shows which relationships are likely to be meaningful within my research.

The methodology chapter (Chapter 4) describes the philosophical and methodological basis for my study. It provides an overview of research design and links research questions with the stages of data collection. I describe how particular methods assist in addressing my research questions, highlighting their strengths while noting their limitations. The ethical dimensions of the research are discussed within an overall consideration of quality in research. The data collection, including sample design and recruitment, and data analysis and interpretation for two stages of research, are also described. Research findings on the *nature of spirituality and its development in later life* (RQ1) are reported in Chapter 5; and on *spirituality, ageing and experience* (RQ2) in Chapter 6. The two findings chapters discuss analyses from both research stages: focus group and individual interview data.

In the Discussion (Chapter 7) I re-engage with the earlier literature review and conceptual framework in order to contextualise and critically reflect on the research and its findings. Key discussion topics include later life spirituality as an informal learning experience; two styles of spiritual learning response (dwelling and seeking); the expression of both dwelling and seeking in spiritual practice; and an analysis of how spirituality is seen as relating to ageing and later life. Last, I highlight implications of my findings for how spiritual learning and development can be supported. The Conclusion (Chapter 8) summarises and synthesises findings in terms of how they address research questions. Limitations of the research are noted as part of an assessment of trustworthiness and generalisabilty. My contributions to knowledge are outlined so that the impact and relevance of the study can be linked to a wider context and assessed in relation to research gaps identified earlier.

Chapter 2 Spiritual learning and development in later life: literature review

2.1 Introduction

The following two chapters (2 and 3) present the results of a literature review to assess evidence on the nature of spiritual learning and development during later life and its relationship with ageing. In particular, I was interested in shedding light on how an older person's spirituality might develop, so that gaps in the literature could assist the formulation of research questions. I used the following search strategy, drawing on major bibliographic and data-base resources, utilising a variety of combinations of search terms: older adults, ag(e)ing, later life, spirituality, spiritual development, older adult learning, lifelong adult development. Where particular journals re-occurred as sources, these were further searched for related material. For example: Ageing and Society; Generations; International Journal of Education and Ageing; International Journal for Psychology of Religion; Journal of Adult Development; Journal of Adult Theological Education; Journal of Gerontological Social Work; Journal of Lifelong Learning; Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging; Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion; Journal for the Study of Spirituality; New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education; The Gerontologist.

In addition to articles, a large number of books and book chapters were identified, exploring particular concepts and theoretical approaches. From these I have extracted conceptualisations and theoretical approaches to spiritual learning and development in relation to ageing and later life. For the literature review, the selection of articles and books (representing both primary and secondary research) was based on published items' contribution to the literature search question: ***What is the nature of spiritual learning and development in later life?*** Following analysis of material found, and in order to generate researchable questions, I identified the following themes:

Spiritual learning and development in later life (this Chapter, Section 2.3);

Lifelong human development theories and models (this Chapter, Section 2.4);

Adult learning in spiritual learning and development (this Chapter, Section 2.5);

Spirituality's relationship with ageing (see Chapter 3, Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3).

2.2 Introductory observations on literature

Before presenting findings related to these themes, let me make some introductory observations concerning the literature on ageing, spirituality and learning, as this was found distributed across many disciplines. The academic literature on spirituality and ageing is dominated by North America, with a well-developed theoretical and practice base, and many established centres of research and scholarship (such as the Duke University Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, North Carolina). Interest is growing in Australia (MacKinlay 2010) and New Zealand (such as the Selwyn Centre for Ageing and Spirituality, Aukland). Commentators note that the main referents of the literature have been largely Judeo-Christian due to the dominance of western Europe and the US, but that this is changing (Edmonson and von Kondratowitz 2009; MacKinlay 2010; Coleman, Koleva and Bornat 2013; Oman, Duggal and Misra 2018). Furthermore, whilst the use of multi-faith and comparative perspectives is increasing, a shift of focus from religion to spirituality is opening up research possibilities that are not bounded by particular faiths or cultures (Giordan and Pace 2012; Hornborg 2012; Wacks 2011). The study of human ageing is highly multi-disciplinary and social gerontology has, among other things, sought to extend our understanding of the meaning and significance of senescence. This has included, for instance, study of the integration of the self in terms of past, present and future (Erikson 1982 and 1986; Levinson 1986), of adaptation and continued life-span development (as summarised by Coleman and O'Hanlon 2004) and, more recently, gerotranscendence (Tornstam 1996).

In the UK and Europe, research on ageing and spirituality is still emerging particularly as an interest within professional practice. During most of the twentieth century, the caring professions had been careful in 'keeping religion out of it' (Nelson-Becker and Canda 2008; Walker 2010:182). With the emergence of spirituality as a concept separate from religion, there is greater recognition of the part it plays in the lives of many older clients and patients (Ortiz and Langer 2002; Xu 2016). There is often an instrumental element to research that emphasises the benefits of a spiritual dimension to later life, where a link is proposed between the older person's developed spirituality and their better health, wellbeing, recovery, coping, inclusion and so on. Spirituality is increasingly of interest in situations where social, health and other therapeutic interventions apply (Mowat and O'Neill 2013; Mohan 2001). Despite its importance to later life, this pragmatic arena is not where my research is located.

A resurgence of research in religion is adding to the recognition of spirituality as a separate, but none-the-less related topic *within* religion. Public research programmes, such as the ESRC's *Religion and Society* (2007-11), were hailed by Davie (2011) as evidence of a renewed and systematic approach to the study of religion. Ongoing data collections, such as British Social

Attitudes surveys and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (Voas 2015b), have published several series of papers and reports on the nature of religious participation and expression in the UK. Internationally, the Association of Religion Data Archives publishes research and papers on historical and current trends in religion (for example, Voas and Day 2010; Davie 2011). Whilst publications of these kinds imply a life-long application of religion / spirituality they have not necessarily included particular analyses of the experience of older adults (with few exceptions, such as Coleman *et al* 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Furthermore, there is little overt linkage in the literature between spirituality or religion and adult learning, let alone learning in later life, apart from in psychological literature on adult development. As Tisdell (1999) notes, spiritual development hardly features in mainstream academic adult education, except in the sub-field of adult religious education – itself a small area compared with child religious education. Children and young people's religious and spiritual development is of public and professional interest through its inclusion in school curricula. There is very little discussion of spiritual learning concerning adults, however, because their spiritual education is neither compulsory nor significantly addressed through formal or higher level provision. (See Section 2.5 for a discussion of adult informal learning and spirituality.)

As a short note on provision, where adult learning opportunities on spirituality do exist these tend to be for general interest rather than qualification. Significantly, these are often attended by mature and older adults. There is a niche market of short courses on spirituality within a few colleges and universities that can make a going concern of it. However, a large amount of informal learning is available from voluntary and commercial providers, including a growing presence on-line. In contrast, adult religious education is located mostly within faith communities, or within educational institutions that have been contracted to supply education and training programmes for churches (Elias 2006; Findsen 2012). As with the caring professions, a fringe of interest in spirituality is shown by educational practitioners, who are located mostly within the informal and community sectors of learning. For instance, the motivations of adult educators to empower or emancipate through their practice, or their ability to contribute to 'soulful' aspects of curricula (such as how meaning is created and the connection between individual and social transformation), are occasionally discussed in literature (English 2000; Hunt 2009).

To conclude initial observations, the challenge for this literature review is that it involves engagement with several large interdisciplinary bodies of literature on several major themes: spirituality and religion in relation to ageing, adult developmental and learning theories, and their associated empirical literatures. Within the range of literature available, the issue of how spirituality is conceptualised is a significant topic and the starting place for many who seek to conduct and report research. I have addressed the challenge by exploring both educational and

gerontological literature, with a view to answering my literature review question: *What is the nature of spiritual learning and development in later life?* The overall tenor of literature in these domains indicates that older people's spiritual learning and development are a) possible, or even likely, and b) do have a bearing on later life. These observations are further explored below.

2.3 Spiritual learning and development in later life

My first literature review theme discusses literature on the kinds of spiritual learning and development that take place in later life. It starts by defining spirituality, since this is a prime concern within the literature, especially its differentiation from religion. I then review how spirituality has been researched in relation to a number of significant topics that have relevance for learning: meaning and purpose; spiritual 'ways of being'; and 'spiritualities of practice'. The dominance of lifelong human development models and theories is subsequently discussed, especially where these have been applied to spiritual development. I focus on their learning aspects, giving examples and critiques, and describe two particularly influential models.

The conceptualisation of spirituality is important if its relationship with ageing is to be understood. This is illustrated by the large amount of literature that is devoted to exploring concepts of spirituality in later life. Much of this is secondary research, reviewing, relating and synthesising existing notions of spirituality (Marcoen 2005; Moberg 2008; Wacks 2011). Sometimes this takes the form of listing elements or components that together describe and define 'spirituality' or 'the spiritual' in later life, or proposing new definitional schemas or typologies based on data (King 2011; Sadler *et al* 2013). This first section highlights where learning elements are either overtly featured or implied within the concepts and ideas discussed.

So, any attempt to review literature in this field needs to start with defining and differentiating spirituality and religion. Although both religion and spirituality are now less likely to be seen as static characteristics that can be operationalised as fixed variables, spirituality is seen to lend itself more naturally to a flexible and developmental interpretation (McFadden *et al* 2003; Nelson-Becker 2011) and therefore to be of greater relevance to enquiry about how people learn and change. In the following section, I identify the differentiation of religion and spirituality within literature in order to link them more meaningfully with ageing and to explore their various learning implications. I further explore some common literature topics through which developmental issues can be pursued, namely: the search for meaning and purpose; ways of being spiritual; and the growth of 'spiritualities of practice'.

2.3.1   Religion and spirituality

A common understanding is that the relationship between concepts of religion and spirituality has changed significantly over the last four decades, and is still changing (Schlehofer *et al* 2008; Ellor and McGregor 2011; Paloutzian and Park 2013). Throughout the literature, a picture emerges of the two terms' increasing differentiation as the prevalence of spirituality increases, with contrasting definitions of religion and spirituality sometimes blossoming into full polarities. Basic differences are proposed: religion as an institution with associated practices and communities; spirituality as a lived consciousness that is personal (relating to a higher power) and functional (relating to experience). Religiosity is seen as a shared experience of believers or members, and oriented to others; spirituality is individual, autonomous, and oriented to the self. Religion offers organised beliefs and spiritual practices, tried and tested over time and within a tradition, and conducted in a specialised location as a focus for gathering (Schlehofer 2008). Spirituality offers the so-called 'spiritual supermarket' of choices regarding all of these elements and has taken over what used to be seen as the interior aspects of religion (Seifert 2002; Roof 2001; Walach 2017).

Whilst the emergence of spirituality as a concept and a field of study has been rapid (Oman 2013:24), there is more recently a sense of re-balancing (Hornborg 2013) and a re-negotiation of the place of both religion and spirituality in a post-secular world (Davie 2011; Giordan and Pace 2012; Ammerman 2014). Thus, the bodies of knowledge available from the study of religion need not be disregarded or misrepresented within the new paradigm of spirituality (Hill *et al* 2000; Seifert 2002; Kartupelis 2017). Furthermore, as the concept of spirituality matures, its commonalities with religion as well as their enduring differences can be appreciated, so that both can continue to enrich a growing field (Ammerman 2013; Schlehofer 2008; Groen 2018). Clearer conceptualisation aids research and helps application to other fields – such as to gerontology and adult learning.

In order to come to an understanding of spirituality for my own studies, I turn first to key ideas offered by Pargament (1999) concerning whether religion and spirituality should be regarded as separate phenomena (for instance, see Hill *et al* 2000; Wink and Dillon 2003). He proposed that religion is a search for significance, which is constituted from whatever people value in their lives. The search is life-long in that it includes not only identifying and finding one's sources of significance, but also conserving them or transforming them where necessary. Of course, not every search for significance is religious, but religion uniquely refers to '*the search for significance in ways related to the sacred*' (1999:12).

Spirituality, which Pargament defines as a *search for the sacred*, is therefore the central function *within* religion. It has to do with 'however people think, feel, act, or interrelate in their efforts to

find, conserve and if necessary transform the sacred in their lives' (1999:12). Since his definitions of both religion and spirituality revolve around the term 'sacred', some further clarity on this is needed. Pargament draws on a classic sociological understanding: 'sacred' describes things (and notions of things) that are set apart and worthy of reverence, and relies on the human ability to sanctify secular objects (Durkheim 1915; Berger 1967). The sacred traditionally includes concepts of divinity and transcendence, but also includes objects, attributes or qualities that become sanctified by our representations of them as 'holy'. If so, 'then there is no agreement on what essential ingredients of the sacred are' (Paloutzian and Park 2013:9). Although Murphy (2017) agrees that the breadth of what can be viewed as sacred is a definitional problem, sacralisation nonetheless does describe 'objects and ideas that are considered sacred within particular cultural contexts' (ibid:7). Noting this limitation, I conclude that meaning-making with regard to the sacred can be definitional of religion and spirituality. 'The search for meaning, community, self, or a better world are likely to be transformed when they are invested with a sacred character.' (Pargament 1999:12)

I furthermore conclude that there is a link from Pargament's position to more contemporary discussions of spirituality. With or without God or other transcendent power, the human capacity to regard a large range of phenomena as sacred enables spirituality to be defined quite widely but still function within the larger framework of religion. Usefully, in defining spirituality as the search for the sacred, some boundaries are maintained. It avoids the danger of including *any* path or goal in search of meaning being defined as spiritual, and helps delineate the social sciences' approach to religion and spirituality from other disciplines that are also interested in meaning and purpose (such as philosophy and theology).

> 'As much as we value connectedness, authenticity, meaning in life, holism and many other processes so often associated with spirituality, these goals and values do not fall within the spiritual realm unless they are somehow connected to the sacred.'
> (Pargament 1999:13)

Pargament's view that spirituality forms part of what he calls the 'broadband construct' of religion (ibid:13) has been helpful to this review in contextualising aspects of spirituality that feature in the wider literature. I conclude that the case for spirituality and religion being distinct but interrelated seems strong. Oman (2013:29) describes them as having 'family resemblance'. It is not helpful to constitute their differences as polarities, although some authors tend to express them as such to draw distinctions. Neither does spirituality succeed or replace religion as a term or a field of study. In 2002, Zinnbauer and Pargament concluded that recognising that spirituality and religion are appropriate subjects for scientific research, they should be studied together

because of growing consensus about their interrelationship. In 2008, Schlehofer and colleagues investigated older adults' own understandings of religion and spirituality based on Hill's (2000) non-polarised approach. Both religion and spirituality included a concept of and a search for the sacred, but religion additionally offers legitimised ways of conducting the search and a sense of community that comes from participating in a religious group (similar to the idea of dwelling) (Schlehofer *et al* 2008:412). Ammerman (2013) considers spirituality to be neither infinitely variable (that is, whatever anyone wants it to mean) nor a clearly differentiated domain in contrast to religion.

> 'Future research on spirituality should neither presume it to be primarily an extra-institutional phenomenon, nor presume that a single umbrella designator can describe the varieties of spiritualities present in (…) culture' (ibid:276).

Research can theorise, model and test out the 'sanctification' processes and how religious and spiritual meaning comes about, and then follow the implications of such sanctifications (or constructions, as we might say today) for how people live their lives. For example, responses to life events may become imbued with spiritual meaning or even herald a transformed way of living. Having established that spirituality can be regarded as the *search for the sacred,* as the central aspect of the *search for significance in ways related to the sacred* (religion), this leaves the search for significance that is *unrelated* to the sacred as the province of the existential rather than the spiritual. I will use this position as a point of orientation around which to discuss some key topics I have identified from the literature that have a bearing on later life spiritual development[1]: namely, the search for meaning and purpose, ways of being spiritual and spiritualities of practice.

2.3.2   The search for meaning and purpose

For many commentators, the search for meaning and purpose refers to a human drive for searching and re-creating spiritual understandings over the life-course (Jewell 2010; Culliford 2014; Humphrey 2015). The question of meaning in life tends to include *how and why* things happen (making sense), their *significance* (what is more or most important) as well as *purpose* in life (clarifying goals and personal missions). Similarly, Manning (2019:60) notes that a spiritual or

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[1] To remind the reader, I argue that the study of religion includes spirituality, which itself takes religious and non-religious forms. So my use of the term 'spirituality' will include what is broadly referred to in literature as religion as well as spirituality; I am not ignoring religion in favour of a different phenomenon called spirituality.

religious outlook can offer people an explanatory framework of order and purpose for otherwise random events, and steps (practices) to exert some influence over their lives. For my study, meaning is expressed spiritually where the search includes elements of the sacred: perceptions or goals that people have construed as such. For instance, reflection in later life may produce changed understandings of previous events because spiritual meanings have been attributed later; or a developing spiritual outlook may enable an older person's sense of purpose to change in later life compared to earlier goals (Josey 2013). A wide range of objects and understandings of significance can become constructed as spiritual ('sanctified') by people's own interpretations of their experience (Eisenhandler 2003; Walach 2017). Snodgrass and Sorajjakool (2011) argue that life's experiences and circumstances offer older adults in particular the opportunity for greater 'interiority and introspection' (reflection) which impacts on their spirituality. The authors explore the ways in which spirituality interacts with *meaning-making, adverse experiences and changed orientations to the past.* However, the relationship between older adulthood and these factors is held to be co-relational rather than causational.

Spiritual development, then, is a means of increasing the ways in which sense, significance and purpose are arrived at. 'The notion of spiritual growth and development accurately conveys the prospect that the spiritual context can continue to expand throughout a lifetime' (Atchley 2009:14[2]). Atchley (2008) argues that a person's propensity to attribute spiritual meaning to life experiences is the means by which a spiritual dimension to life can develop over the life-course. His definition of spirituality recognises 'sacred' elements, such as: the individual's experience of being; a transcending of the personal self; a connection with the sacred (2009:2). He notes that this connection with the sacred can be construed and experienced deistically (with reference to a personified God), non-deistically (to an ultimate reality or ground of being) and naturalistically (to the earth or cosmos). Ammerman (2014:19) describes 'common discourses about spirituality' between holders of outlooks that are theistic (recognising the divine), extra-theistic (naturalistic but transcendent); and ethical (compassionate lifestyle). These reported categorisations support my basic position, namely, that spirituality includes phenomena that would be recognised as both 'religious' and 'spiritual'.

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[2] Atchley's reflections on thirty years of field research on these matters are brought together in his 2009 text *Spirituality and Aging,* but recent empirical research that addresses the nature of later life spiritual development is relatively rare.

2.3.3 Ways of being spiritual

The place of spirituality as a motivational and emotional foundation for an innate and lifelong search for meaning is confirmed by Sadler and Biggs (2006) and Sadler *et al* (2013). They identify a typology of 'spiritual ways of being' in later life, on the basis of interview data. Older people express this search as a range of responses, such as a movement towards the transcendent, and especially towards connection with others and with nature. Citing literature on nursing they note that key themes of spirituality and ageing include *transcendent belief* in a higher power, a *sense of connection* (to self and others), and the ability to draw on *inner resources* (such as strength or peace). Within social work literature, they identify issues of *connecting with others*, relating to a *transcendent presence*, *meaning making* and various *expressions of spirituality*. Whilst tending to see 'spiritual' as more separate from 'religion' than part of it, Sadler *et al* (2013) nevertheless distinguish life-course spiritual development from existential drives for meaning. Three of their four spiritual later life 'types' would be consistent with the idea of spirituality as the search for the sacred (the fourth being existential rather than spiritual, as described in Section 2.3.1 above).

Empirical studies on spirituality and age that are based on comprehensive longitudinal data are few. Wink and Dillon (2002) and Wink (2003) reported on aspects of their data obtained on 130 older adults who had been part of the Berkeley Institute of Human Development Study. Initiated in 1928, this study interviewed subjects several times in childhood and adolescence, and then four times in adulthood. The latest wave of interviews of survivors took place between 1997 and 2000, thus yielding data that had antecedents of about seventy years. A fuller consideration of the study was published in 2007 as Dillon and Wink's *In the course of a lifetime; tracing religious belief, practice and change.* Wink and Dillon's use of the term 'religion' or 'religious' in a series of article and book titles implies their general acceptance that

> 'the quest for the sacred associated with spirituality is also the hallmark of religion and therefore spirituality becomes subsumed under a religiousness that emphasizes both personal and institutional concerns' (Wink 2003:102).

In their work, Wink and Dillon draw on the sociological research of Wuthnow (1998) who identified *'religious dwellers'*, whose search for the sacred was based within established religious institutions. A dwelling kind of spirituality could draw on a tradition that provided the security of an external authority. In contrast, *'spiritual seekers'* explored in order to create their own space, albeit with resources often borrowed from existing religious traditions. A seeking kind of spirituality thus emphasised freedom to combine various religious and non-religious strands of belief and practice, and to focus on personal growth and wholeness (healing), often finding the sacred in everyday life. A dwelling kind of spirituality, on the other hand, drew on existing,

communally held frameworks but exercised freedom of conscience within them, and could move around within different traditions. These types of spirituality are relevant to my study because a key finding from Dillon and Wink (2007) proposes how they relate to ageing and to growth and development over the life-course[3]. The persistence and continuity of spiritual development was also described by Eisenhandler (2005) as a function of community membership, in both what she calls 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' styles, which I see as similar to dwelling and seeking. Dwelling and seeking are useful typologies for the dynamic mix of the personal and communal elements of an adult's spiritual quest for meaning that plays out over the life-course, and ones which I will return to frequently in this thesis.

2.3.4   Spiritualities of practice

A further way of being spiritual combines dwelling with seeking and was envisaged by Wuthnow (1998). This involved people developing what he termed 'spiritualities of practice'. These emerge when spiritual seeking engages with some forms of discipline or commitment more usually associated with religious dwelling; or dwellers express their spiritual searching in less orthodox ways more associated with seeking. In this way, spiritualities of practice gain the benefits of both styles. This is a fruitful way of exploring older people's spirituality which I will adopt, given that older cohorts will demonstrate both dwelling and seeking styles. It acknowledges that in real life, older people's context and generational location will have already offered the chance to generate some form of religious 'dwelling' (whether adopted or inherited) which they may or may not have retained. For instance, if they are currently 'seeking', their spiritual quest may be pursued from a less religiously anchored place. The idea of spiritualities of practice thus prompts such questions as to what modes of activities people will adopt to further their development and respond to their ageing.

Although Atchley takes a broader and more separate view of spirituality vis-a-vis religion, he also relies on Wuthnow's notion of spiritualities of practice as a central idea in his understanding of older people's spiritual learning (Atchley 2009). The openness of seeking can be practised within the security of some aspects of dwelling (such as recognised structures, whether traditional or not). For instance, most people find environments for their seeking in which they feel nourished

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[3] A major finding of Wink and Dillon's longitudinal work is that participants from their older cohorts (broadly 60+ and 70+), significantly increased in their spirituality (seeking style) between their mid 50s/early 60s and older adulthood (mid-70s). Spirituality had been measured by attributing a scale point to an analysis of responses to open interview questions: that is, devising and applying a measure to qualitative data. The authors note 'there thus appears to be a general tendency for individuals to become more concerned with issues of spirituality in older age' (Wink 2003:91).

and nurtured, and which usually involve the company of kindred spirits. A 'practice-oriented life' comes about when habits of mind are established that support the development of spirituality:

> 'Spiritual practices are things we do on a regular basis to celebrate, appreciate, nurture and act on our experiences of presence, transcending the personal self and connecting with the sacred. Many types of meditational prayer, devotional rituals and music, inspirational reading and reflection and movement-oriented disciplines (such as … yoga) can be mixed and matched to support a (…) practice-oriented spirituality' (Atchley 2009:4).

Along with Wink and Dillon, Atchley claims 'considerable evidence' that spiritual issues and development become more important for people from middle-age and into later life. Quoting his own longitudinal study of ageing and adaptation, Atchley (1999:9) reflects that a large majority said that by age 70 their inner life had become more important than it had been since they were 50; that spirituality was a capacity that continued to develop; that it was also an important resource for coping with the challenges of ageing (ibid:9). Also, along with Wuthnow (1998 and Roof (1999), Atchley is keen to recognise the part played by the recent changes in culture and therefore the operation of cohort effects on research into spiritual development. Part of the reason the notion of spirituality has become widely taken up and so broadly defined has been the recent cultural shift from authority and tradition to personal responsibility and choice (Hornborg 2012; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). A significant number of older people may wish to move beyond other people's notions of spirituality that have become organised into religious institutions and traditions, and to develop independent, direct forms of spiritual insight themselves. Spiritualities of practice enable both dwellers and seekers to respond to such cultural change.

In order to address the first theme of my literature review, on what kinds of spiritual learning and development take place in later life, I have tried to define the contested concept of spirituality with regard to them. I started by discussing the distinctiveness or otherwise of religion and spirituality, since the kinds of learning and development involved in their pursuit might differ; and because the meanings of these terms have been changing over the last thirty years or so. I have used Pargament's (1999) proposition, that spirituality should remain as a major topic of study within the field of religion, as a position from which to further discuss related literature themes regarding later life spirituality. Themes discussed so far include the search for meaning and purpose and 'ways of being spiritual' identified by empirical research (such as dwelling and seeking, and spiritualities of practice). These imply that learning and developing are also functions of one's location in society and history, as part of individual interpretations of experience. I

reiterate that my use of the term spirituality in this thesis includes both religious and non-religious meanings, forms and expressions. We shall now continue to discuss more formalised concepts about spirituality, in the form of theories and models of development.

2.4   Lifelong human development theories and models

This section addresses my second theme of literature review, exploring models and theories of lifelong human development that seek to explain the processes involved in 'developing greater religious or spiritual sensitivity with age' (Coleman 2011:60). They are included in this review because of their dominance and enduring status within the research literature. They are mostly found within psychological and educational literature and involve more formalised versions of the concepts of spirituality discussed above. I was initially interested in them because they claim to offer accounts of the ways that people move through the developmental process envisaged by the theory / model. Most have been based on some empirical work, but the question is whether they can be generalised and developed into explanatory schema to the extent that they have been.

The proposed development processes vary in nature from active to passive, but are often described as life stages, phases or seasons (Vogel 1995). In focusing on the learning processes involved in various models and theories, two broad categories of explanation or description of spiritual development can be seen: those that see spiritual development as an outcome of naturally occurring maturational processes, similar to physical growth (as explained by Boydell 2016); and those that see it as a result of experience – people's interaction with life and their location in time and place (Wink and Dillon 2002). Even within those who favour maturational processes (mostly referred to as stage theorists), some propose more structure/stages than others. These contend that the process of ageing 'contains substantive and incrementally ordered changes in the meaning of the self and identity' and that that such changes represent 'the psychic work to be completed in each stage' (as summarised by Eisenhandler 2003:7). For others, life stages can be seen as more fluid, non-hierarchical and a-temporal – i.e. paths along which some patterns may be identified. Atchley's five non-specific stages of spiritual learning would be an example: awakening of interest; inquiry; endeavour; integration; new intention (2009:44). In similar vein, others have proposed patterns that are iterative over the life-course rather than sequential. These include, for example, Moody and Caroll's 'Five Stages of the Soul' (1997); McLaren's (2011) seasonal phases of spiritual development; MacKinlay's (2001; 2010) spiritual tasks of later life; Ray and McFaddens' (2001) metaphors of spiritual development as 'the web and the quilt'.

Patterns and sequences are less important in models where experience (rather than maturation) is the primary driver of development and change. Here, the context of people's actions and reactions becomes more significant. Rather than the supposed contours of ageing, it is the cohort or generational experience that shapes the possibilities of development for individuals (Eisenhandler 2003) by placing their experience within a context. This perspective is shared by Riley *et al* (1999), who consider that each ageing cohort 'has its different development conditions, depending on the developmental trends of the society, culture and era in which they live' (Coleman and O'Hanlon 2004:36). Models that ground people's experience in the life-course include Fisher and Simmons (2007) and Culliford (2014), who identify the kinds of life events and transitions that feature in twenty-first century older age, such as retirement and dependency. Ageing effects might actually be better understood as generational differences, and developmental stages more linked to socio-historical change than intrinsic processes (Coleman and O'Hanlon 2004). Nonetheless, despite their contested aspirations to explain and predict growth and change, even the more structured human developmental models (Erikson *et al* 1986; Fowler 1981) have added much to gerontological thinking and study, and continue to be inspirational to scholars and practitioners (Murphy 2017). My concern is to explore these various concepts of adult lifelong development as ways into understanding spiritual learning and development in later life.

2.4.1   Examples of theories and models of human development

Psychologists of the psychodynamic tradition have been the main suppliers of theoretical approaches to adult lifelong development, starting with Carl Jung who had an innovative focus on the second half of life, as discussed by Campbell (1976) and Bianchi (1984). In Jung's view, mature adults faced a transition to a different life perspective, involving new values and goals, since their ways of being in the first half of life would no longer serve them well in the latter half. Change and growth came from attending to an inner-driven process that he termed individuation – a maturing of the personality, including previously underdeveloped aspects of the self. New visions for later life and an increased self-understanding would be based on life experience, but the growing readiness to engage with change came essentially from inner promptings.

Erik Erikson's theory of development over the lifespan has been highly influential and, like Jung, he perceived that maturity involved a synthesis of experience and cultural influences within the developing mind (as discussed by Murphy 2017). Erikson was one of the first to differentiate older age from adult maturity and take a particular interest in later life. Writing from the 1950s onwards, Erikson's stage theory of human development provided an eight-part framework describing the steps by which an infant progresses to adulthood and old age (Erikson 1982). The

steps represent challenges or turning points in life where choices about moving on are made. Each stage has its associated task through which a kind of adaptive strength can be achieved, sufficient to progress to the next. These stages were thought by Erikson to be critically timed, in the context of the life-course, although he did not prescribe ages or time periods for them.

Two stages in Erikson's scheme refer to later life: *Middle adulthood (stage 7)* is associated with the developmental task to develop generativity and avoid stagnation. Generativity is understood as an outward looking concern to support and guide the next generation – including one's own family but also through wider concerns that address the welfare of society (from local to global). The opposing dynamic is towards stagnation, where the sense of self fails to grasp or address concerns beyond its own self-interest. The life strengths emerging from the development of generativity are demonstrated by such outcomes as caring and productivity. The *last phase of life (stage 8)* involves a task to attain what Erikson termed 'ego integrity' whereby a sense of meaning and purpose can be perceived in one's life, along with an acceptance of all that has contributed to one's experience so far. This self-understanding and acceptance is framed within a lifelong and universal perspective (a sense of one's place in the scheme of things), having dealt with regrets about other possibilities for the life lived. Failure to sufficiently grasp such a self-understanding, according to Erikson, leaves people in this stage open to despair. This can include a sense that time and opportunity to change past things or find another route to integrity are limited.

The imagination and attractiveness of Erikson's general scheme have inspired other researchers and practitioners to apply it in particular circumstances in the pursuit of theory and evidence. Examples of more empirically based theories, influenced by Jung and Erikson, and emerging mostly in the 1970s, include Havighurst (1972), Levinson (1978) and Gould (1978). They proposed sets of stages for adult development based on research in the late twentieth century and the shape of the life-course that then prevailed.

A first critique of formalising developmental change into a theorised sequence is that the pattern then becomes viewed as prescribed and predictable, despite being essentially descriptive. A second detraction is the implied universality of developmental processes for all times and in all places. According to a different approach to development, represented by the life-course perspective in gerontology, the arc of life described is very much situated within a historical time and place, rather than portrayed as a de-contextualised abstract process (McFadden 1999; Black and Hannum 2015). A third area of critique is that the abstractness of some models leads to their dealing mainly in the area of cognitive change. There is a sense that understanding one's experience of life calls for a wider range of mental operations (Sinnott 1994) than those implied by the need to solve the tasks associated with models' stages. Furthermore, topics that have

become integral to current understandings of spirituality, such as spiritualities of practice, involve more than rational thought. They also incorporate emotional and intuitive responses to life experience and to being part of spiritual communities. Concurring with these critiques encourages me to propose alternative accounts of how older people move on in their spiritual development, based on my research.

Since the 1970s and 80s, however, the recognition of greater fluidity and flexibility in the adult life course has become a more dominant idea, and structured models of development have proved less popular (Coleman and O'Hanlon 2004). The evolving self and the unfolding of the life-course are now more familiar perspectives than concerns about whether specific life-course changes are normative or non-normative (see Grenier 2012:127 on 'rethinking transition'). In literature about later life spirituality, however, the life-stage developmental models are still the frequent starting point of discussion. Whilst acknowledging them as theoretical background within a conceptual framework, I wish to construct a relationship of ideas about spiritual development from the life-worlds of older people themselves, rather than stages conceptualised by others.

2.4.2   Influential models of spiritual development

I now turn from more general models of adult development that have been applied to spirituality to developmental ideas that address it more directly. The theory of gerotranscendence is a more recent approach to spiritual development in later life compared to the stage models. The work of its author, Lars Tornstam (1996; 1999) has become influential in the literature and hailed as an updated approach to disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1971). This is because gerotranscendence theorises a particular kind of qualitative, potentially transformative spiritual change in later life that includes an inward turn. Gerotranscendence is said to enable an older person to transform materialistic and rationalistic values into more humanistic, less self-centred ones (Jewell 2014). This release of previous concerns, according to Tornstam, leads to 'wider and deeper frames of meaning, transcendent visions for life and greater life satisfaction' (Tornstam 1999:178).

In particular, Tornstam proposed that gerotranscendence is recognisable in three dimensions of later life thought and behaviour. In what he calls the *cosmic dimension*, people's concepts of life, death, space and time become transformed and seen against a backdrop of infinity and mystery. In a *self-transcendent dimension*, the self shifts away from the centre of attention, accompanied by an acceptance of the self and its history. In a third *dimension of social selectivity*, energy is reserved for close friends and family and less spent on less meaningful connections, such as those associated with social roles or obligations. This can lead to a reduction in social interaction but

also to the development of a more thoughtful, contemplative stance towards one's lifestyle and less concern with social conformity (Tornstam 1997).

Gerotranscendence has been seen as a critique of activity and productivity as routes to flourishing in later life. 'Successful' or 'productive' ageing was defined as people's ability to continue (rather than change) their engagement in society, extending their existing middle-aged skills, values and capacities (Rowe and Kahn 1997). However, as Atchley (2006) has been keen to point out, continued development from mid to later life is both desirable and possible, as long as adaptation and change can be encouraged and facilitated. That is, there are different routes to flourishing in the third and fourth ages which people can learn, and which do not rely on 'staying young'. The significance of Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence, then, is that it *does* envisage later life change - a qualitative shift in older people's development, as expressed in a transformed outlook on one's life and engagement in the world.

Tornstam (1994 and 1999) identified his work as a contribution to ideas about late life development, based on interviews with 50 participants aged 52-97 in Sweden who volunteered for semi-structured interviews, having heard a lecture on gerotranscendence (Tornstam 1999). Analysis generated the three main themes of gerotrancendent change, in cosmic, personal and social relations. He distinguishes gerotranscendence from both individuation (Jung (Campbell 1976) and Erikson 1982) and disengagement (Cumming and Henry 1961). The difference, in his view, is that gerotranscendence is a qualitative shift, not a progression within a model, and includes the implication of an altered state of consciousness (Tornstam 1999). As a concept, gerotranscendence is widely appreciated by many gerontologists because it offers an imaginative alternative to the busy-ness and 'success' orientation of productive ageing. It predicts that a positive, and qualitatively different state can be attained even in very late life, possibly amidst other less positive circumstances. For my purposes, it also points to spiritual learning being both relevant and achievable beyond the third age, when barriers to learning might be starting to operate. In these respects, gerotranscendence makes a useful and innovative contribution to current literature about later life spirituality (Ahmadi 2000; Yount 2009).

My main interest in this theory lies in the questions it raises about the kinds of learning involved: in particular, the process by which older people move to this gerotranscendent state and whether such transformative learning is commonly experienced in later life. Tornstam's claim to a new perspective on late life has been critiqued not only on the basis of the relative slenderness of his empirical work, but also for its ambition as a 'grand theory of ageing' because it claims a universal potential for gerotranscendence (Thorsen 1998:165; Ahmadi 2000:19). Tornstam's lack of clarity on the driving force of gerotranscendence is pointed out by Jewell (2014) who also criticises it on

grounds of cultural dependency and the conflicting results of further testing by others. For the purpose of my focus on spiritual development, it has little to say about how the learning that produces gerotranscendence might come about.

However, one suggestion as to how gerotranscendence might occur was identified in geriatric nursing literature (McCarthy *et al* 2015). This tested an educational intervention based on 'self-transcendence' involving community-dwelling older people in the US. The experimental program aimed to help people look both beyond and within themselves to make sense of life experience. A small shift was measured on various self-report scales towards the concept of self-transcendence that was employed. I question whether the identified learning effects were convincingly attributable to gerotranscendence rather than the educational value of the programme more generally. It also remains unclear as to whether the change was transformative, such as would lead to a gerotranscendent shift in perspective (Atchley 1997). The gap in Tornstam's theory points to a research question around how and why such a change occurs, meriting further investigation of the kinds of spiritual learning that older people can identify.

A second influential model of development that is relevant to my study is even more overtly related to spiritual development. Fowler's (1981) model of 'faith development' remains the starting place for many publications on lifelong spiritual development, despite pre-dating Tornstam. Based on empirical and theoretical work, Fowler's process of spiritual maturation envisages six stages of growth that take place over the lifetime, with mature adults mostly populating stages four and five. Described by Koenig (1994:87) as a 'structuralist theory of faith development', Fowler's model focuses not on the content of faith or belief, but on the changing shape of faith as dynamic ways of 'being and moving' (Vogel 1995). In fact, 'faith' for Fowler was a human attribute that transcended particular religious belief systems and referred to the patterns and processes of finding meaning in life. Faith encompasses 'our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives' (Fowler 1981:4). Since Fowler frequently frames his discussions in terms of the sacred, it would not be unreasonable to see correspondence between Fowler's use of the term *faith* for 'meaning search' and current uses of the term 'spirituality'. Following other developmental theorists, notably Erikson, Fowler's stages are broadly related to age periods, and each one integrates and carries forward the operations of previous stages. 'Faith' is an ongoing development in 'a person's way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a backdrop of shared meanings and purpose' (ibid:4).

Fowler's adult stages of spiritual development (stage numbers three, four, five and six) are Conventional faith, Reflective faith, Conjunctive faith and Universalising faith: *Conventional faith* is broadly conformist, based on the perspective of a community or group of significant others

whose expectations are important. It lacks the analysis that would contribute to a person's own faith stance but provides coherence and belonging. It is common in younger people yet to reach independence but may also be the chosen and appropriate stage for some adults. *Reflective faith* is the stage arrived at through a relocation of authority towards the self rather than the group, and a critical stance that constructs a faith perspective that is more 'owned' by the individual. This is the spiritual outlook of the young adult who has made updated sense of an earlier faith, on the basis of adequate evidence gathered rather than the authority of others. This is a common position of adults who have reflected on an inherited religious or spiritual understanding sufficiently to retain it as their own. However, with life experience, this understanding may be subject to review, leading or pitching the adult into *Conjunctive faith.* In this fifth stage, usually only accessed from mid-life onwards, development is in response to wider frames of reference for experience and encounter with other spiritual/religious expressions. This stage thus illustrates the conjunction of other world views with one's previously settled outlook, and their integration within a new openness. It also involves a recognition of mystery and paradox in response to ultimate questions and a humility about having answers to them. Fowler's last and sixth stage is *Universalising faith,* associated with later life but said to be rarely reached. Its outlook transcends previous faith positions and identifies with universal spiritual concepts such as love and unity, and its values are beyond those of self-interest.

Fowler's stage model is relevant to my study because of its wide influence on the understanding of spiritual development (MacKinlay 2001) and the significant amount of discussion and critique it has generated on the topic of such development. For my purposes, interest lies in the movement through the stages, which is more related to experience than age-related despite the model being perceived as age-based. Development is instigated through the interaction between the 'innovative subject' and his or her 'active, changing environment' (Koenig 1994:89). However, a case against a progression of stages, implying the moral superiority of later stages, has been made strongly by Streib (2001; 2005) who argues for a range of 'types of faith' (or spirituality as we would now term it), rather than increasing development. Whilst admitting Streib's types as a possible additional, cross-cutting element to his theory, Fowler (2001:167) stands by his life-stage model and, by implication, the progressive nature of development. A further critique of developmental progression is its implication of intellectual as well as moral superiority. Does everyone have a capability to develop fully, according to the model, or are some more limited? Why do relatively few seemingly reach stages five or six? Is this a failure of measurement or of understanding that many adults can develop to their satisfaction within an earlier stage (Boydell 2016:13)?

For my purposes, the most relevant criticism is that of the empirical basis of Fowler's work, as explored by Heywood (2008). He argues that weaknesses in Fowler's original research, based on large scale interviewing, are sufficient to undermine the formulation of the later stages, mostly due the narrowness of his selection of participants. This was especially true of his formulation of 'stage six' where Fowler actually had very few subjects in late life. He also cites the 'quintessentially modernist features' of Fowler's theory (Heywood 2008:265) as grounds for scepticism, and challenges Fowler's principal tenet (of sequential development stages) as 'an erroneous description of the rich complexity of personal knowing' (ibid:270).

Defence of Fowler's contribution to spiritual development theory relates less to the veracity of his model and more to what his theoretical attempt represents. For example, Day's 2010 overview of spiritual learning in adulthood observes that Fowler's conception is primarily a *model of meaning making* that encompasses the part played by religious concerns, beliefs and practices in shaping values, purpose and identity. Moreover, despite his empirical critique noted above, Heywood commends the central observation of Fowler's scheme as being the 'fruitful' one 'that people construct meaning for their lives in interaction with society and culture around them and significant others' (Heywood 2008:270). He acknowledges the positive reception by many who encounter Fowler's work for the first time. It appeals for describing ways in which people create (spiritual) meaning and also how this meaning-making changes over the course of the lifespan. It concurs with what has become commonplace post-modern thinking, despite its modernist roots, that our ways of knowing and constructing our life-worlds are based on beliefs, values, commitments and so on. For all these reasons, Fowler's basic approach to human development applied to spirituality has continuing relevance, especially his acceptance of the basic developmental dynamic of meaning-making (Murphy 2017).

The main concern that I wish to pursue from the developmental models is the development that takes place through the interaction of a person's spiritual perspective and their ageing. It is likely that the models proposed to describe this process were mostly applicable to the times and circumstances in which they arose, and thus prone to some of the criticisms observed here. However, this still leaves us with the question of whether the models outlined above are simply outdated, or whether the whole possibility of modelling spiritual development is out of the question in a post-modern secular age and irrelevant with the relative decline of positivist methodologies. I argue that, since literature seems increasingly to recognise the phenomenon of spirituality (in terms of search for the sacred within the quest for significance), the task of investigating spiritual development in later life is a valid one. A gap in the modelling appears to concern the 'how' of spiritual change and development with maturity, and the nature of late life spirituality. Both Fowler and Tornstam have attempted to address these questions from different

positions and eras, but have not fully succeeded in responding to them. This failure is the gap which I intend my research to address.

The rich source of ideas, concepts and relationships provided by the range of models of spiritual development discussed illustrates the eclectic nature of the field of study to which I wish to make a contribution. These models offer particular formulations of how development is said to take place. They form part of the theoretical background that I bring to my study because they have something to say about the general shape of learning and development processes that I am interested in. Models have described and codified the kinds of challenge and resolution that people experience regarding their spiritual understanding. I wish now to explore further the learning processes that are involved in moving development on.

2.5   Adult learning in spiritual learning and development

The rest of this chapter addresses the third theme of my literature review, focusing on the kinds of adult learning that feature in older people's spiritual development and change. The literature is found mostly within the fields of adult education, lifelong and continuing education and educational gerontology (see for example, Dench and Regan 2000; Withnall 2010). The study of older adults' learning is multi-disciplinary, including insights on ageing and learning available through psychology and sociology but also cultural studies, economics and demography (McNair 2010; Schuller and Watson 2009). I review the ways in which adult learning is seen as taking place and contributing to development, in order to apply this understanding to spiritual learning and development. My assumption is that spiritual learning in later life is chiefly informal in nature, rather than occurring through participation in formal programmes of education or training. I therefore focus on informal adult learning. From this literature, I discuss two main types that are most likely to contribute to spiritual development: incidental learning (derived from life experience) and self-directed learning (from engagement in learning opportunities as these arise or are sought out)[4]. I then review how spiritual learning and development are viewed from a life-course perspective. I consider key processes within adult learning, such as reflection and review, and the ways these are construed in literature, notably through the concepts of transition and transformation.

Throughout its history in the 20th century, adult learning was increasingly seen as being linked to experience, rather than a natural aspect of maturation. The connection between learning and life

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[4] Noting, of course, that these types of learning are likely to overlap in practice.

experience can be traced back to Dewey (1938) who observed that in order for experiences to be 'educational', they had to result from the engagement of the learner with his or her environment. The nature of adults' learning (andragogy), as opposed to the study of children's learning (pedagogy), is illustrated by Kolb (1984) who proposed a learning cycle by which adults adjust and develop their understanding by interaction with the world. This process necessarily involves perception, interpretation and integration of experience into an ongoing outlook or framework of meaning. Knowles' (1989) analysis of how adults learn describes a series of interactions and subsequent new linkages that contribute to growth (see also Clardy 2005 for a review of andragogy). Furthermore, as stated by Clark *et al* (2011:291), the conventional understanding of adult learning comes from a constructivist perspective in which reflection plays a key role. This defines adult learning as a meaning-making process, encompassing how people make sense of their lives. Such an approach helpfully aligns adult learning with spirituality, previously defined as a searching process for the sacred within the pursuit of meaning and significance (Section 2.3.1).

Adult learning can therefore be seen as bringing together experiences that create or enhance change in peoples' knowledge, skills or values (Cranton 2012). Thus Kolb (1984) defines adult learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the interpretation of experience. I take this to imply that over time, experiences may periodically add up to change in a person's overall outlook or perspective for interpreting the world. Applying this understanding of adult learning to spiritual learning and development, I am primarily interested in older people's perceptions of how they build up their spiritual perspective on life, what they consider their evolving body of knowledge and understanding regarding spirituality, and the role that experience plays in shaping that knowledge. Furthermore, as Findsen and Formosa (2011) argue, a rationale for learning that applies particularly to older adults is one of self-knowledge - also described as self-discovery (Russell 2008) or self-actualisation and 'becoming' (Hodkinson *et al* 2008):

> 'Late-life learning provides the opportunity to explore learning goals that people at earlier stages of the life-course are often too busy to pursue, such as developing a reflective mode of thinking, coming to terms with one's past … and the quest for self-fulfilment and spiritual advancement' (Findsen and Formosa 2011:98-99).

The opportunity that later life represents for self-fulfilment, and the chance to pursue life-styles less driven by material considerations, were associated in the 20th century with the rise of the idea of a 'third age' (Laslett 1989). Third age conceptualised a new stage of life that had emerged between work (a second age, following childhood and education / training) and old age (a fourth age of dependency). With the rise of earlier retirement, a cohort of newly released, relatively well off, healthy retirees had both resources and time to pursue their own agendas. Since then, the

idea that older age can have positive goals and experiences of its own has become commonplace (see for example Weiss and Bass 2002; Moody 2006) along with the recognition that spirituality can have an active part to play (Bianchi 1987; Seeber 1990; Schachter-Shalomi 1995). Educational gerontologists have been slow to fully explore the implications of the spiritual dimensions of such a later life, which is why my study intends to make more explicit links between older adult learning and spiritual development.

As with adult learning in general, later life learning can often result from engaging with other individuals and groups, including social institutions. As a product of daily life, older adult *learning* is distinguished in the literature from older adult *education* which exists in more systematised and located forms (Withnall 2010). A similar contrast could be drawn between spiritual *learning* resulting from how people search for significance and meaning in life (Section 2.3.2), and *education* that might be available within spiritual / faith communities or allied organisations. My study is focused on spiritual learning rather than education, although forms that spiritual learning take can sometimes include more formal elements. Since there is no 'curriculum' for spiritual learning as such, the ways in which people discern a path for their learning and development are a focus for my enquiry. Withnall's (2010) work on older people's own understanding of their learning identified it as 'expanding frameworks' rather than the acquisition of procedural knowledge. Walker (1998) identified an organic pattern of self-development as the prime characterisation of later life learning rather than any notion of progressive development. I will now further consider the literature on how people learn consciously from their life experience, such as through reflection and re-interpretation of the past in terms of the present.

2.5.1 Informal learning: incidental and self-directed

In this section I explain my understanding of informal learning as an iterative, ongoing process of interpreting everyday experience, which forms an interpretive framework for further learning. I concur with literature that notes that this process is not only cognitive in nature, but also involves emotions and intuitions, for example, that contribute to meaning-making (Merriam 2001a; Dirkx 2001). I establish a link between the two major modes of informal learning that I am discussing - incidental and self-directed learning – in people's propensity to find ways to meet the learning needs that their experience reveals. Further on in this section, I present a simple table of these theoretical relationships and discuss examples of how these processes can contribute to spiritual learning (See Table 1).

Informal learning describes the process by which people acquire knowledge, understanding and skills from everyday experiences, more or less deliberately (Jarvis 1985). Arguably, informal

learning is the primary form of spiritual learning (Atchley 2009). It includes the ways in which people learn increasingly to recognise and process spiritual experiences. Everyday experiential learning from life is described in the literature as *incidental learning*. It is seen as important for framing the context of each new learning experience, and is the starting point of an adult learning model proposed by Marsick and Watkins (2001). According to this model, the learning process is triggered by either internal or external stimuli that make the adult aware of dissatisfaction with current ways of being or thinking. Further stages then reflect on experience and evaluate possible interpretations in order to identify the lessons learned. Crucially, these elements of the learning are not linear but iterative in their pursuit of meaning-making, enabling learners to return repeatedly to earlier questions and insights.

The importance of informal learning within adult educational theory was helpfully set out in a review by Merriam (2001). Since the informal learning process is more than acquisition and storage of information but is essentially one of meaning-making, it also relies on imagination and intuition. Merriam also observes that twenty-first century thinking has amplified the importance of the context in which learning occurs, this having shaped people's conceptions of knowledge and truth in the first place (see also English 2014). These observations lend weight to my intention to hear about the life-worlds of participants, including their perceptions of the meaning frameworks that they bring to spiritual understanding. I anticipate that the link between incidental learning from life and the more purposive nature of self-directed learning is the propensity of adults to marshal learning resources to meet the learning needs that they have identified.

Theoretical models of development propose particular motivations for people seeking learning at particular times (often formulated as developmental tasks). For instance, retirement can be a stimulus to take up new roles or skills in order to give back to society as a volunteer. This would be an example of Erikson's psychosocial stage of 'generativity', or concern for the wider world (Erikson 1982). However, *self-directed learning* is the most obvious and on-going means by which people pursue growth and development (Merriam 2001b). Whilst self-directed learners are 'self-starters' they nonetheless often act as part of a group or community and gain access to an increasingly wide variety of learning resources, including those made possible by information technology. Such learning may be with or without a designated leader of the learning process, which is especially relevant in later life, where conformity to someone else's learning programme is perceived as less appropriate (Findsen and Formosa 2011).

An interesting example is provided by Luckie (2005) who analyses both incidental and self-directed learning within a creative learning programmes (art, music, poetry) in a faith-based

community. She cites findings from an informal survey of members of an Episcopal church in Texas whose informal spiritual learning had benefitted from the work of a 'spiritual formation program' designed by a Diocesan funded worker. A self-rated scale enquired about incidental learning and 'personal awakenings' that parishioners could identify from activities such as church art exhibitions, creative writing groups and musical performance. From their majority of replies recognising and appreciating various aspect of their learning, Luckie concluded that a community organisation can act as a vehicle for its members' learning (in this case, the church whose investigation she cites). Her work makes observations about how informal learning can be facilitated by spiritual communities of all kinds, especially if they listen to the voices of their members. This supports my general proposition about the informal nature of spiritual learning – that it can be incidental, such as from being part of a community, and also more consciously partaken, through self-directed choices of learning opportunities. In my fieldwork, I will therefore seek examples of learning opportunities accessed by older spiritual learners from various spiritual and faith traditions.

Self-directed learning has more of a sense of being consciously chosen, either opportunistically as chances to learn are seized, or as a result of active pursuit to find a way of furthering a particular interest (Jarvis 1987). Self-directed learning therefore includes any designed learning activity, such as attending a short course, undertaking independent or guided reading, actively following a broadcast or online learning programme, or travel and visits undertaken for learning purposes (such as retreats and pilgrimages). These are usually offered outside the more formal education sector, providing selected types of learning for particular purposes or to particular groups (Eisen 2005). Examples include institutional offerings of short courses for self-development (as distinct from career or vocational purposes), or programmes put on by social groups because they have an interest or expertise they wish to share. Providers of these kinds of learning opportunities are to be found in the public, commercial and voluntary sectors. Spiritual and religious learning is available in all of these locations and is often taken up by mature learners (English 2000; Leder 1999). These less formal kinds of learning that people choose to further their spiritual development will be a focus of my study because of what they illustrate about self-directed learning. However, the learning pathways taken by some may also lead to episodes of formal learning[5]. Table 1 summarises the two basic kinds of informal learning discussed.

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[5] In some circumstances, a person's self-directed learning may lead them to more formal learning, which cannot be logically grouped within my definition of informal learning (Findsen and McCulloch 2008; Phillipson 2010). Older students are now more visible on credit-bearing programmes within theology, religious studies, spirituality and ministry of various kinds, for example.

Table 1   Informal learning. Source: author's review of literature

INFORMAL LEARNING	Also known as:	Processes involved:	Pursued through:
Incidental learning	Experiential learning Everyday learning	Reflection initiates learning cycle	Life-review and reminiscence Re-framing of exper-ience
Self-directed learning	Non-formal learning Intentional learning	Learning cycle Learning paths	Learning programmes, usually non-formal but sometimes leading to formal

Table 1 describes the kinds of informal learning that spiritual learning in later life tends to adopt, and for which I have reviewed relevant literature. *Incidental learning* (also described as experiential learning or everyday learning from life) is the main way that adults make sense of their experience and integrate it into a meaning frame for the interpretation of ongoing experience. This iterative process is theorised as the learning cycle, of which reflection is the initial and onward dynamic. Adults can reflect more consciously on their accumulated understandings of experience through the activities of life-review or reminiscence, as opportunities arise or are triggered. Sometimes the outcome will be a re-framing of previous understandings of past experience in the light of new ones. Sometimes, particular learning needs can arise, such as in response to re-framed understandings or to some external change. *Self-directed learning* results from a more purposive pursuit of further understanding but the learning need for it may only become apparent when circumstances change or an opportunity to address it arises.

Looking back on someone's self-directed learning experiences can show a pathway of development that was not necessarily planned but which in fact has delivered growth and change (Boydell 2016). Self-directed learning opportunities can take many forms, as discussed above, and are broadly defined in the literature as 'non-formal'[6] (Jarvis 1985). That is, they are not formally designed, accredited, assessed or recognised as leading to learning of any particular educational

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[6] As examples of self-directed learning, non-formal learning programmes such as lecture series, retreats, conferences and short courses of many kinds, are part of what I am describing as informal learning.

standard or outcome. It is because of this lack of formality that self-directed learning tends to employ more of the social and emotional aspects of learning (such as meeting others, sharing thoughts and feelings), in addition to cognitive ones, according to Dirkx (2001). This can offer a closer match to older people's expressed motivations for later life learning. For example, prominent motives for participation were found by Withnall (2010) to include consolidating social relationships and networks, and sustaining self-identity. As Findsen and Formosa (2011) observe,

> 'the realms of socialisation and personal interests hold sway in what are invariably non-credit learning contexts. Hence the potentiality for fullest human expression is heightened when older adults learn in non-formal contexts, especially those outside the mainstream, such as in popular education and social movements' (ibid:146).

These observations fit the kinds of self-directed learning that take place in spiritual communities, which are outside the educational 'mainstream'. The communal dimension of spiritual learning enables socialisation within the community, whilst additionally enabling individuals to pursue particular spiritual goals. The heart of the matter lies in the initiative taken by learners, as Brookfield (1986) highlights in his understanding of self-directed learning: 'a process in which individuals take the initiative in designing learning experiences, diagnosing needs, locating resources and evaluating learning' (1986:40).

Such learning assists learners to engage in activity to change their understanding of their reality. Findsen and Formosa conclude that 'this conceptualisation of self-directedness has resonance for older adults who in later life need to continually adjust their assumptions of themselves and their capabilities' (2011:148). It is also supported by the general view of older adults as benefitting from greater opportunity for self-exploration, beyond the demands of career work or family rearing. In the light of both these aspects of later life (the need and the opportunity to change and develop), I seek through my research to explore the use of self-directed spiritual learning in later life (see Chapter 5).

2.5.2   A model for informal learning

Since learning from experience and self-direction are such broad concepts, Marsick and Watkins (2001) sought to further define informal learning; their observations and subsequent model applies well to spiritual learning. Some of its features include: control of learning resting principally with the learner (not based in the provider or the curriculum); often arising as a by-product of another activity; usually intentional but not highly structured. The model's central starting point is described as 'context' to denote that learning grows out of everyday encounters in given situations. Meaning-making activities are seen as taking place in people's contexts,

enabling interpretation of situations, choices, actions and their effects. These activities are more iterative than linear and progressive, denoting that new insights may provoke further questioning of earlier understandings. In seeking to account for incidental learning, which is seen as occurring constantly and not necessarily consciously, Marsick and Watson (2001) include the idea of a trigger or surprising experience that brings disjuncture to our attention and sets in motion the meaning-making process. The context, of course, is framed by our unique world-view that affects what we pay attention to and, therefore, what seems disjunctive. Moreover, the frame itself can be influenced by the new understandings generated by the learning cycle.

> 'Our model shows that people diagnose or frame a new experience that they encounter. They assess what is problematic or challenging about it. They compare the new experience with prior experience, identify similarities or differences and use their interpretation to make sense of the new challenge. People refine their diagnosis by interpreting the context' (ibid:30).

Whilst Marsick and Watkins' model has been largely derived from secondary research, by analysing and synthesising findings from literature, the notion of disjuncture is now commonly accepted as a trigger for learning within adult learning theory. Learning is 'the continuous attempt to establish harmony between our experience and our understanding of the world' (Jarvis 2009:133). Experiences that take people further out of their current understandings require deeper levels of reflection, which I discuss in more detail in the following section. Significant reflection may lead to a shift in a person's interpretive framework, affecting not only the issue in question but altering their interpretation of previous events and issues, and their outlook on the future. This is the kind of process at work when people reminisce or review their lives, making it relevant to understanding the spiritual development of older people. These changes are of key interest to my study and will be a focus within research design (See Chapter 4 Methodology).

2.5.3   Processes in informal adult learning

In this section, I discuss ideas from literature about reflection as the central dynamic in adult learning. How it operates is particularly relevant to the varying extent to which people process their experience as having spiritual significance. I then link this back to the role of reflection in the building of meaning systems and frameworks. The role of reflection, like that of disjuncture, is a key idea in adult learning because of its role in meaning-making (Marsick and Watkins 2001). Reflection can also operate on past actions, beliefs and values, but principally it is involved in the ongoing process of meaning-making. Moon (1999) analyses the contribution of reflective thinking to the learning process, observing that reflection is most active in the generation of *interpretive*

knowledge that is needed to understand one's social context and the behaviour of others, and in enabling interaction in the environment and social world. Furthermore, in her own scheme for understanding the stages of learning, progress is from 'surface' to 'deeper' understanding, as reflection plays an increasing part. Another key insight from Moon is that whilst learning itself cannot be observed, its results can be apprehended through what she terms the 'representation of learning'. I depict this in Figure 1 below:
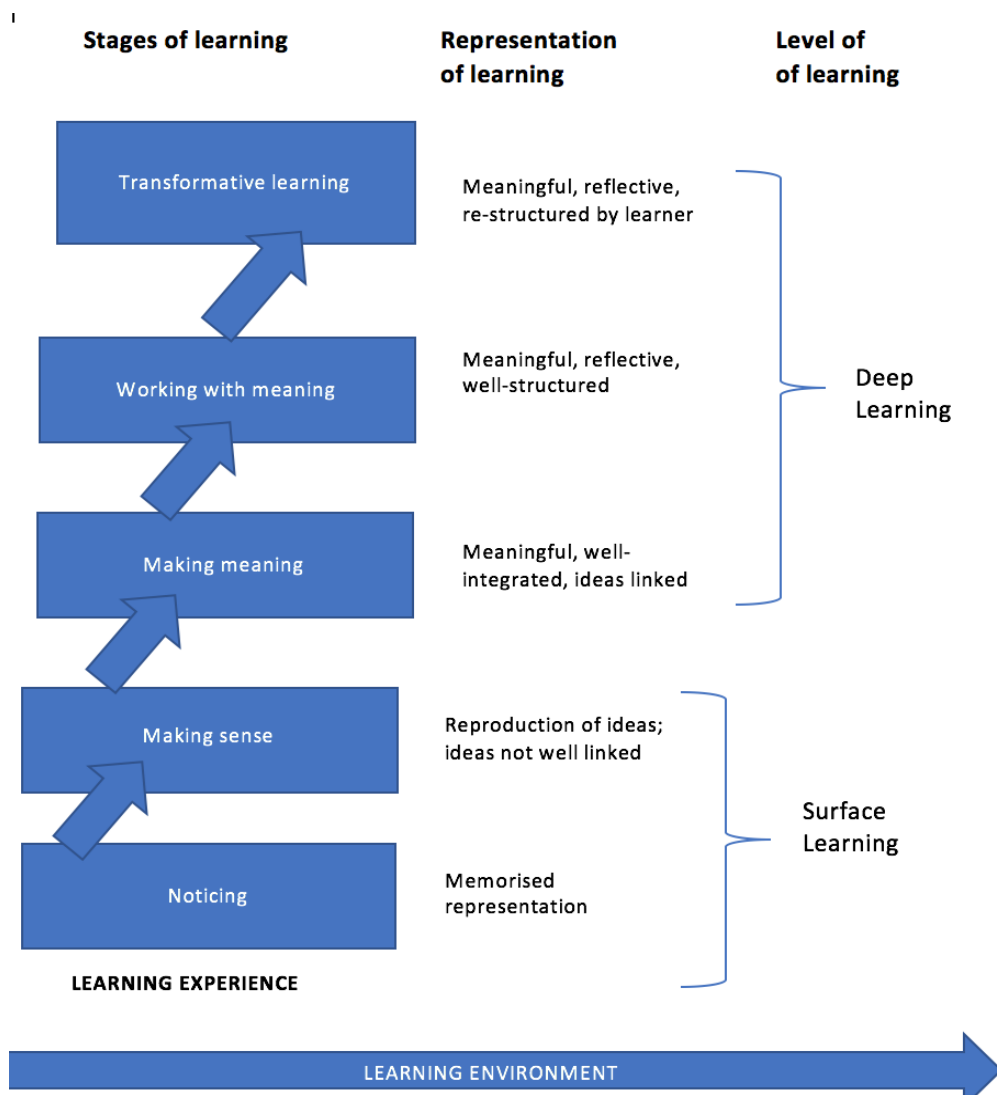
Figure 1   Reflection as an interpretive process in learning. Source: after Moon (1999), author's interpretation

In Moon's model of adult learning, the least detailed form of learning is *noticing*, which may be more or less conscious. A second level, of *making sense,* allows the learner to understand something in a coherent manner but only in relation to itself; representation of the learning is thus a competent reproduction, but is processed no further nor related to other ideas. Both these levels are seen by Moon as 'shallow' or unreflective, having not benefitted from any significant

reflection. Learning of this kind is present in some areas of everyday understanding and certainly in the taken-for-granted activities of daily living or habitual practice. It may also be present in areas of belief or attitudes that have been unconsciously acquired or not reflected upon lately.

Reflection itself begins to become more apparent at Moon's third level of learning, *meaning-making*, which is the start of a deeper approach. The learner has some sense of wider meaning of particular experiences or new information, but goes only a little way beyond the given input. Representation of ideas now shows them as integrated and well linked, with the development of a more holistic view. Next, the learner is *working with meaning,* creating a relationship between new material and existing understanding. Representation can now be said to be reflective, often well-structured and linked with other ideas that will probably change as a result (creating new inputs). Last, *transformative learning* shows evidence that new learning has changed current understandings, which are now represented as re-structured ideas and an ability to evaluate the process that has produced the learning.

In summary, Moon observes that reflection plays a vital role in learning as a means of representing new material (such as experience) to ourselves and then learning from the re-processing. It thus helps to 'upgrade' learning acquired at earlier levels, subjecting it to re-appraisal in order expand and integrate it with current understandings. Reflection has the effect of slowing down mental activity, giving time for processing and linking, and increasing the chances of understanding and deeper learning. Reflection also enables greater ownership of the new material that becomes part of someone's understanding through integration with their own world of thought - or with their *mental framework*, as in Marsick and Watson's (2001) model of adult learning; or with their developing *self-system*, as in Atchley's (2009) reflective self. I take the view that Moon's detailed consideration of reflection as a key process in learning has particular resonance for spiritual learning, as it offers an account of how people process experiences spiritually, to a greater or lesser degree. It may also describe the underlying processes involved in spiritual practices such as contemplation and meditation. My enquiries therefore need to ask not only about spiritual change but also how people arrived at different interpretations, employing different levels of reflection (see Section 5.5 for further discussion).

2.5.4   Informal learning in life-course context: transition and transformation

In my review of literature to date, spiritual learning and development have been considered as kinds of informal learning that are pursued and possibly intensified in later life. Unless they are consciously engaging with life review (Keynyon *et al* 2011), it is likely that older people continue to experience their learning as ongoing and adaptive in these ways. From a life-course

perspective, however, social scientists indicate that some periods and life circumstances appear to be more conducive for learning. Descriptions and theories have arisen about times of transition and transformation that could be particularly significant for learning and development. For instance, it is often the period that precedes or follows change in which learning is triggered, as challenges to existing understandings are experienced. A similar process of response to disjuncture appears in social gerontology, termed as transition (Grenier 2012). Learning from life-course transition is of particular interest to me, to be further explored by in-depth interviewing, where life-course data may be more forthcoming compared with focus group discussions. I now review some particular concepts and theories relating to transition and transformation with a view to their utility for my research.

Adults undertaking a transition are challenged to make sense of their lives and experiences in a new way and to accommodate (integrate) new understanding, possibly into several existing areas of their life at once. However large or small the impact, transitions offer opportunity for new ways of knowing and constructing meaning, often leading to further triggers for learning. The transitions of identity over the adult life-course have been expressed in structural terms in human developmental stage theories, most notably that of Levinson *et al* (1978), whose stages comprised periods of stability and change interspersed with transitions which were particularly relevant to social life in the late 20th century. A model involving two major later life transitions is offered by Fisher and Simmons (2007): these focus on the transitions to retirement and to fourth age dependency, which capture major markers in the life-course of today's older generations. Interview data eliciting respondents' reflections on their spiritual development in relation to life-course disjunctures will allow me to analyse the importance of transitions for spiritual development.

For a transition to be more significantly developmental, rather than just accommodated within existing understandings, the exit from the place of change needs to demonstrate new perceptions and possibly new elements within the self-system (Merriam 2005:12). Where new understanding involves a more significant re-structuring of previous assumptions, rather than just particular elements within them, Mezirow (2001) describes this as 'perspective transformation'. The developmental drive (the learning need) is to move to where life experience is congruent with one's current state of meaning-making. So, as Hoare (2011) observes, all learning produces change of some kind, but transformative learning can be identified by significant change that re-shapes people in ways that they and others can recognise. In the realm of spirituality, an example of a transformative change could be a conversion or apostasy (a gain or loss of faith). My view is that the concept of transformative learning should be reserved for describing such re-shaping outcomes, not just for meaning-frame adjustments. Sinnott (2005:27) observes that the

developing self favours stability over change because it constitutes 'a strong center of interactions'. In this way, adults manage to experience and understand inner change, yet still maintain a sense of continuity over time and through learning (a theme extensively argued by Atchley 2009).

In the third theme of my literature review, I have considered the basic principles of informal adult learning and how these can be applied to spiritual learning and development in later life. I have critically discussed literature on informal learning processes which I argue feature prominently in older people's spiritual development. Models of informal learning, constituted by incidental and self-directed learning, have been applied to spiritual learning, and the ways in which such learning takes place have been briefly reviewed. I have further sought to contextualise this understanding in the life-course, drawing on the literature of transition and transformation. I have proposed that transition and transformation are not kinds of adult learning but express ways that learning has become associated with the life-course. My research continues a critical development of these ideas, to see if an updated pattern of later life spiritual development can be formulated, which is rooted in older people's own perceptions of their learning.

I turn now, in Chapter 3, to a final literature review theme on the *relationship of ageing to spiritual development.* This complements Chapter 2, and concludes my survey of research knowledge relating to my study of spiritual learning and development in later life.

Chapter 3   Spiritual development's relationship with ageing: literature review and conceptual framework

3.1   Introduction

In this last literature review section, prior to describing an overall conceptual framework for my research, I will explore ways in which spirituality can be related to ageing. A range of features of adult learning has been discussed so far concerning older learners, for whom meaning and a continuing sense of self-identity are demonstrably important in later life. These can now be linked more explicitly with spirituality and spiritual development in later life (Foley 2000; Thomas and Cohen 2006; Manning 2012). The significance of later life spiritual learning and development is addressed by literature that is more concerned with the social forces of ageing than the models and processes of learning considered so far. Learning and development are seen on a broader canvas where spirituality may emerge or thrive, possibly in response to growing older. I initially review evidence for a relationship between spirituality and older age, including exploring the concept of a developed spirituality or spiritual dimension to ageing (Section 3.2). I then go on to discuss emerging ideas about the changing contexts of ageing and spirituality in which older people can, or may be expected to, develop their spirituality (Section 3.3). Last in this chapter, a conceptual framework is presented (Section 3.4), drawing on key ideas from the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) to inform and shape the design of my study.

3.2   Spirituality, development and ageing

In much of the scholarship already discussed, a core idea is that although spiritual development is a lifelong process it tends to ripen and bear fruit in the later years. It needs the nourishment of life experience together with the mature thinking and emotional skills of meaning-making to grow. In this sense there is a logical connection between spirituality and ageing, simply due to the passage of time that has provided experiential learning opportunities. Experiences gain meaning when they are reflectively placed in an interpretive framework that becomes a biography (as discussed in Chapter 2). Whilst recollections can orient us to particular places and times, the overall effect of ageing increases the awareness of our inability to repeat or re-write the past; that life's direction is irreversible, as is our development within it. The compensation, Manheimer (1999b) suggests, is the chance to become more fully oneself by developing a view on the totality of one's life. 'Recognising the rich, complex patterns of life – the truth of the whole - requires perspective that can only be gained through long experience enhanced by reflection' (1999b:17).

Any connection imputed between spirituality and ageing is tentative, however, not least because not everyone will develop a spiritual dimension or wish to draw on spiritual resources in later life. I have established within the first theme of this literature review that spiritual change and development are possible, through spiritual learning, but not universal. As long ago as 1968 Robert Butler observed that older age could open up sensibilities to both the reality of human existence and its transcendent possibilities. Noronha (2015) commends later life as a particular time when people can benefit from personal development, on the grounds that a spiritual orientation is important for meaning-making, and that psychological well-being may be positively affected by spiritual engagement. However, as Corbett (2013) observes, whilst spiritual concerns often do increase in later life, many older people are not interested to pursue them, perhaps because their philosophy of life is humanistic or materialistic. Even in Wink and Dillon's landmark longitudinal research (2002:92), the proportion of subjects who had a demonstrable spiritual or religious outlook within their community-dwelling sample was very small (with the average score on a five-point scale of spiritual interest and practice being between one and two). However, in Atchley's (2009) estimation, spiritual experiences were commonplace and a majority of older people reported having them. Dalby (2006) concluded that some older people who did not express a religious or spiritual identity nonetheless reported themselves as having spiritual experiences or reflections, but then had little context in which to place them. This lends support to the importance of the interpretation of the experience rather than the experience itself (see Chapter 2).

Dalby's 2006 review of spiritual change associated with ageing is, in fact, a rare attempt at comparing research in this area, although she describes her conclusions as tentative, demonstrating the challenge of establishing a connection between spirituality and ageing[7]. She nonetheless finds some evidence for an increase in spirituality with age, including aspects of gerotranscendence (ibid:10). Common themes from studies employing *qualitative* methods were: integrity, humanistic concern, changing relationships with others and concern for younger generations, relationship with a transcendent being or power, self-transcendence and coming to terms with death (ibid:11). Crucially, these were not necessarily related to age directly, but through the challenges that older age presents, such as responding to diminishment and finitude. In particular, the literature on gerotranscendence was found to highlight the complexity of the relationship between culture, life events, older age and a spiritual perspective. Dalby's concluding

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[7] A total of thirteen studies were selected from a search of psychological material (published 1985-2003) that explored ageing and spirituality, focusing on spirituality in later life from a developmental perspective. Within this sample there was a range of items that investigated a theory, sought to expand and comment on theory, or just discussed the issues.

remarks illustrate the difficulty of making connections between spirituality and later life in demonstrable ways. Her conclusion was based on

'a diverse body of literature that has highlighted the complexity of the question of spiritual development and ageing; --- fascinating data have been collected, contributing to our understanding of a dimension of life in old age that may be hard to fathom but certainly merits further enquiry.' (ibid:11).

A potential link between later life and learning are changes and challenges that can sometimes amount to adversity (James and Samuels 1999; Ai 2000; Wink and Dillon 2002; Randall *et al*. 2015). Such disjunctures can act as triggers for learning – with the possibility that the more significant the challenge, the greater the potential for spiritual growth. Although people adopt spiritual coping in stressful conditions at any age, the likelihood of greater limitations occurring in later life creates a more obvious link between learning from adversity and ageing (Xu 2016). Responding to stressful life events, as well as seeking meaning to life, were found to be linked to a 'high level of spirituality' as measured on a spiritual wellbeing scale by Foley (2000), who surveyed 201 women aged 60-100.

Another of the few *quantitative* empirical studies of ageing and spirituality, also featured in Dalby's review (and previously discussed in chapter 2), is the longitudinal project of Wink and Dillon (2002) on religion/spirituality over the adult life-course (see Section 2.3.3). They found support for an increase in spirituality between late middle age and older adulthood, irrespective of gender and cohort. On a life-course basis, spiritual involvement in older age was predicted by prior religious involvement and some personality characteristics in earlier adulthood, and subsequently by negative life events. They conclude:

'There appears to be a general tendency for individuals to become more concerned with issues of spirituality as older adults. Our findings of a turn towards spiritual interests and practices in older adulthood strongly support theories and findings reported by other researchers in this area' (2002:91)[8].

It is worth recalling that the notion of spirituality operationalised by Wink and Dillon was a sophisticated one involving elements of spiritual awareness and engagement in practice. A relationship between ageing and spirituality is also examined in Seifert's (2002) review of past

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[8] In Wink and Dillon's estimation of supporting evidence, coming from cross-sectional research, spiritual development related to older age had also been demonstrated by Bianchi (1987) who showed transformation of an earlier religious outlook into more personalised spirituality by mid-life; and Tornstam's empirical work (1994; 1999) which identified a self-perceived shift towards gerotranscendence.

research, wherein she describes a 'utilitarian approach' for assessing the relationship of spirituality to ageing (that is, whether having a spiritual life improves the quality of later life). However, Seifert concludes that 'current data are inferior to the task of drawing inferences about a direct relationship between aging and increased religiousness / spirituality, because they are replete with cohort and generation confounds' (Seifert 2002:64). She would, nonetheless, maintain that spirituality is 'yoked to age' through experience of life events and people's responses to them. Thus, any link between older age and spirituality should be sought in the later life contexts that provoke meaning-search and discovery.

Wink and Dillon (2002) conclude that, despite much common ground *and* diversity of ideas that link later life with spiritual learning and development, there is no clear-cut relationship. Their own empirical work provides evidence that spiritual development tends to increase in the second half of life, enhanced for those who have experienced disjuncture and adversity. This suggests, they say, that spiritual development occurs neither in a vacuum (that is, not only to do with maturation) nor is an undifferentiated process (taking similar predictable paths for everyone), as implied by stage-models of development. It is responsive, for instance, to the socio-historical context in which older lives are situated. Spiritual development in later life thus 'presents us with the paradox of a pattern of growth that appears to be both contingent and universal' (ibid:93). My concern is with the kind of patterns that may be discerned from the experience of older spiritual learners within today's later life-course.

I conclude that any relationship between spiritual development and ageing is a contested one, for which it is difficult to establish evidence, despite attempts to test theoretical and other kinds of assumptions that such a relationship exists. Since growing older and developing spiritually take place together over a period of time, they are difficult to separate. The idea of an adult's learning becoming part of a spiritual self or biography is a common thread in literature on spirituality and ageing (Rymanz 2009; Wallace and Bergeman 2002; Woodward 2011). As noted earlier, reflective processes operating throughout life are a key part of how this happens. Atchley (2009) emphasised the idea of experience being incorporated into the self. He argued that this kind of self-development also takes place in people's 'spiritual selves', contributing to a spiritual identity over the lifetime, and *becoming more apparent in later life* (ibid:46). Whilst agreeing with Atchley's overall stance on continuous development, I wish to pursue the possibility of identifying some patterns in contemporary spiritual development in later life, which might additionally recognise some episodic or transformational elements.

Gerontological literature on spirituality in older age is also framed within debates on the nature of later life and the locations of older people within cohorts and generations. Marcoen observed in

2005 that most older people had been raised in cultures where religion was a significant element in what he calls a 'religious atmosphere'(ibid:363). He further speculated that, more than fifty years on from their youth, some had adhered to their faith, others had lost or significantly adapted it, and others had sought new spiritual expressions and communities. Within the historical periods involved, the influence of traditional religion had waned and the search for significance in relation to the sacred had taken new paths. Coleman *et al.* (2006) agreed that the upbringing of today's older people was 'much more religiously informed' (p.127), and that changes in religious and spiritual understandings often lag behind wider social and cultural changes. Participants in spiritual and religious traditions then have the challenging task of re-interpreting the meaning of these traditions for their own times. However, not all older adults can, or wish to, change or adapt their spiritual understandings (Coleman 2006:127-8).

This section of my literature review has featured later life spiritual development as a phenomenon that can play various parts in the experience of ageing. The literature of social gerontology is also concerned with the value of spirituality as a component of wellbeing (see for instance Langer 2000); a key source of meaning-making (Jernigan 2001; Cowlinshaw *et al.* 2013); a contributor to identity and value formation (McCann-Mortimer *et al*. 2008; Corbett 2013); an element of coping strategies and 'successful ageing' (Crowther *et al.* 2002); and as part of meaningful activities that express an older adult's individual and community life (McFadden and Kosberg 2008). However, in this review, and in my study, I am more concerned with the self-awareness that older people might perceive and attribute to spirituality in their later lives, rather than any particular benefits that might accrue. I will be seeking their views on any connections between their spirituality and growing older that they can identify. For instance, it may be that simply having more time at one's disposal in later life is a connecting factor between developing spirituality and older age. Corbett (2013) speaks of the 'legitimate tempo' of later life during which significant psychological and spiritual development can take place. A spiritual dimension to life can recognise developmental possibilities instead of responding to pressure to perpetuate middle-age lifestyles.

3.2.1 Mature spirituality

In this last part of the literature review, I have so far explored the relationship of spiritual development to ageing in terms of its interaction with the experience of being older. Mature spirituality has featured in literature on the later stages of spiritual development models and as an outcome of lifelong informal spiritual learning (Chapter 2). My next concern is to explore a more contemporary understanding of this relationship, now that religious narratives which traditionally guided spiritual development hold less sway (Walach 2017), in Western industrialised

societies at least. Since spiritual development in its broadest sense is regarded by some as a 'necessary component of a healthy, effective life as a human being' (Young-Eisendrath and Miller 2000:5) there is a case for understanding its place in later life. The task is to describe and account for how older adults' spiritual development proceeds nowadays, both within and without religious traditions and narratives. The commonalities that I hope to pursue with older research participants will be sought from their interpretations of life experience and the larger meanings they have developed from spiritual engagement.

Three concepts in particular emerge as linked to mature spirituality: integrity, transcendence and wisdom. These feature in the work of Young-Eisendrath and Miller 2000, from their assessment of written pieces that they commissioned from professionals engaged in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, religious education and philosophy. The brief was to 'address spirituality … in terms of anything that seemed to enhance the sense of the sacred in human life … especially the complexity, nuance and integrity of what would seem to them a 'mature' spirituality' (ibid:3). An editorial process subsequently grouped and introduced the contributions according to the editors' analysis of the components of mature spiritualty. *Integrity* was seen by the professionals as a quality of life borne out of review and acceptance of one's life as a whole, in its context. A great strength and buffer against disappointment and despair, integrity is also named by Erikson (1982) as illustrative of the later stages of adult development. Dalby (2006) describes integrity as the bringing of meaning to one's past and present life.

Transcendence was identified as important because older people's relationship with whatever brings meaning is seen as key to transcending limitations and losses associated with ageing. A sense of self-transcendence enables older people to continue to be positively involved with life in the face of finitude. More directly to do with spirituality, it can mean expanding an ordinary sense of an autonomous self to include connection with a transcendent 'Other' or a higher self. Such a connection can be understood as symbolic, or as an extension of consciousness to a phenomenal reality (Young-Eisendrath and Miller 2000:4).

Similarly, *wisdom* was seen as emerging from a developed response to life experience (see also Corbett 2013), and can be defined as a mixture of knowledge, emotional maturity, mature judgement, discernment and insight into human nature (ibid:161). In Sinnott's (2011) model of the reconstruction of the self needed for later life, wisdom is the practical and pragmatic way to meet the challenge of 'creating a coherent concept of one's life in a failing body and mind' (ibid:251). Wisdom orchestrates the mind, supplying expert but often tacit knowledge of the

pragmatics of life as well as its meaning[9]. It brings three kinds of mental operation to bear (Ardelt 2003), which are cognitive, reflective and affective. Wisdom thereby 'helps create the new, larger meaning that is perceived as consistent with the past self' (Sinnott 2011:251).

In so far as integrity, transcendence and wisdom are seen as significant fruits of later life, they illustrate the potential of mature spirituality to extract nourishment from life's experiences for the present as well as for future. Stored and transformed meanings can support both coping and continued growth. These relate to the characteristics that Erikson termed integrity and generativity, which lead to the final outcome of his adult life stages, that of wisdom. In this last phase, wisdom conveys the 'fullness and integrity of life's experience and a sense of its having been worthwhile' and a 'detached yet active concern with life in the face of death' in response to the needs of oncoming generations (Corbett 2013:161). For Jung, for whom the second half of life was qualitatively different from the first (and not defined by deficit), wisdom is the natural goal of life when self and spiritual development have run their course. Wisdom is involved in achieving the wholeness of the personality since it has, from midlife, been able to bring more into consciousness the thoughts and feelings that contribute to realising a person's potential, whilst accepting their limitations and finitude. It will be interesting to hear whether these ideas about mature spirituality appear in my participants' responses about their later life spirituality.

3.2.2 Conscious ageing

In earlier discussions of the kinds of learning involved in adult development (Chapter 2), much was made of the ongoing 'differentiate and integrate' process that led to both growth and continuity of the self, as well as the more episodic transformations that could take place. Central to both of these types of change is the idea that adults have developed a perspective or conceptual frame for interpreting experience, which is itself also subject to change over time, through incremental or transformative learning. Gerontologists who explore the idea of 'conscious ageing' propose that in addition to these learning processes, spiritual growth and change can be brought about more consciously or deliberately. This can start with a recognition of the habitual mental outlook that frames our responses (Schlitz *et al.* 2011). People may then review their (previously unappreciated) attitudes and responses to ageing, and transform them in

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[9] Any review on learning, spirituality and ageing needs to refer to wisdom, since the three are inter-related (Walker 2010:190).The most obvious connections are with wisdom as an outcome of learning over the lifetime; with the pursuit of special expertise and vocation; with a kind of understanding more implicit or insightful than just knowledge; with emotional intelligences such as tolerance and openness; and with life-long moral or spiritual practice (Edmonson 2005; Baltes 2004; Ardelt 2004; Sternberg 1990).

ways that better support growth and wellbeing. The authors contrast conscious ageing, which implies a more complex, intentional process, with the less insightful adaptations people might make in response to perceived age-related losses (ibid:226).

Of course, insight into one's development and awareness of cultural drivers are not unique to later life, but later life liberation from second age norms and ambitions provides a helpful context for development (Cruikshank 2013). Spiritual learning that accompanies conscious ageing could help distinguish between competing paradigms for later life and enable older individuals forge different, more appropriate ones. Schlitz and colleagues feel that awareness of one's perspective may not suffice to make the positive shifts required to enhance later life experience; intentional practices might also be needed. Chief among these would be the skills of reflection and the development of an inner-life in order to increase self-awareness. They cite Tornstam's notion of gerotranscendence as an example of a perspective transformation that is especially associated with later life, *if chosen* (ibid:231). Other examples of consciously chosen paths for later life spiritual development include the 'sage-ing' recommended by Atchley (2009), Schachter-Shalomi (1995) and Moody (2003) and 'elderhood' as suggested by Wacks (2011). People not only need to become conscious of the possibility of different perspectives (meaning frameworks), and the range of practices available to grow a chosen outlook, but may also need to find a community of mutual support and encouragement (Atchley 2009). For Atchley, conscious ageing involved spiritual awareness concerning the nature and meaning of one's ageing – 'aging in a spiritually awakened state' (ibid:xi).

3.3   Contexts for spiritual learning and development: changing cultures

The recognition of spirituality in later life, and the learning that enables older people to benefit from mature spirituality, are grounded in the prevailing cultures of the twenty-first century. This section will first explore how culture relates to our understanding of ageing, through the relatively new field of cultural gerontology as well as the more established life-course perspective. The social meanings of ageing and later life are rapidly changing, shaped by socio-historic factors. The societal dynamics around older age are also being matched by fundamental changes in how religion and spirituality are understood, encountered and expressed (Coleman 2010; Bengtson and Silverstein 2019). Even between the various cohorts now considered old, there are significant differences in spiritual backgrounds and adult spiritual experiences, as well as global dimensions to social change in these matters (Coleman *et al*. 2006).

Cultural perspectives can be understood as meaning-making at the social as opposed to the individual level. They constitute the ways that societies experience and make sense of the world,

for instance affecting how social relations are conducted and meaningful actions are socially recognised. Brown and Lynch (2012) point out that any theory of culture should identify two elements: how culture acts as a frame or perspective through which social life is experienced, and its wider existence as a social force, beyond the conscious experience of individuals. Thus culture precedes people's thoughts, feelings and actions, and its structures are reproduced through the ordinary actions of the members of society. However, cultural structures are neither universal nor timeless 'but are linked to particular institutions, places and societies and are historically contingent; that is, they change over time as a result of particular historical actions and events' (ibid:330). The relevance to my studies of these observations lies in exploring older people's awareness of their own frames of reference concerning spirituality, and how these have been shaped by the culture in which they live.

3.3.1   Cultures of ageing

A cultural approach to the study of ageing is adopted by Twigg and Martin (2015b), who see culture as the primary way of explaining social relationships and identities in later life. 'Society can be seen as discursively constituted as a web of signs, so that the central feature of analysis becomes the interpretation and deconstruction of these' (ibid:353). Thus culture's concern is with meaning 'and the sense that the social world is constituted by such meanings' (ibid:354). The explanatory narrative is away from theories, models and structures and towards identity, agency and lifelong development of the individual, albeit within a socio-historic setting. The authors are concerned with how the nature of ageing has shifted with changing demography and the rise of a consumption culture, which are redefining the experience and representation of later life (see also Gilleard and Higgs 2013). They argue that a 'cultural gerontology' is emerging away from the previous dominant paradigm of social welfare and public policy that addressed frailty and burden. In their view, cultural gerontology presents a larger and more complex picture of later life, often focusing on older people's own accounts, and acknowledging a greater diversity of experience. In these respects, it appears a promising perspective for studying spiritual learning and development because these are also concerned with the diverse life-worlds of older people.

A major criticism of the approach, noted by Twigg and Martin themselves, is that 'the cultural turn threatens to dissolve all into discourse with a consequent loss of a sense of the social and its underlying reality … major forces continue to shape the lives of older people' (Twigg and Martin 2015a:6). As an example, they note that cultural gerontology's concern with consumerism and popular culture could overestimate the impact of these in later life whilst neglecting 'major structural forces that continue to shape the lives of older people'. The authors suggest examples of such social forces include poverty and ageism, to which I would add religion and spirituality.

The life-course approach also exhibits cultural understandings of later life in the way it links older people with their earlier lives, and with younger people with whom they share a generation that has lived through particular periods of history. A series of qualitative interviews with older women led Black and Hannum (2015) to conclude that older subjects' perceptions of ageing, time and spirituality were founded on their biographies in historical context, such that their 'place in time' had shaped their experiences of ageing (ibid:145). Citing the empirical work of Bengtson, Putney and Harris (2013) whose longitudinal study of intergenerational transfer of faith looks at the life-course experiences of several generations of older people, Black and Hannum (2015:145) note:

> 'those growing up during the cultural and social upheaval of the 1960s may have looked outside a traditional religion for their spirituality or sense of the sacred. Place in time, particularly the "times" in which persons came of age, influenced their beliefs and practices'.

Detailed accounts of particular generations in time and place are also offered by Armstrong and Crowther (2002) on spirituality among older African Americans, and by Eisenhandler (2003) on 60+aged community-dwellers in Connecticut. While recognising characteristics of particular cultural and historical backgrounds and influences, the main thrust of cultural gerontological approaches to ageing is, however, to identify diversity that evolves from life trajectories rather than patterns that arise from unseen social forces. This is relevant to the question of whether spirituality develops in response to experience alone (in the time and place that this is lived out) or whether there are deeper rhythms related to the contours of the life-course and the ageing of the human organism. According to Biggs (2007) there are good reasons for trying to re-imagine later life. Satisfying identities in older age need not require a continued second age lifestyle because 'there are a number of factors that suggest later life contains a unique set of qualities when compared to other parts of the life course' (ibid:111-2). Thus 'commonality and distinctiveness are rooted in the long game through which the life-course plays itself out in each of us' (ibid:112).

In the field of educational gerontology, the changing culture of ageing has been discussed by Manheimer (2000), who had documented his experiences of teaching philosophy to retirees (Manheimer 1999a). Becoming exposed more directly to older people's concerns and learning processes concerning ageing enabled him to appreciate the current cultural ambiguity that Biggs was later to describe. In contemplating their futures, the older students were 'rehearsing their aged selves'. At the same time, they realised that individuals bear responsibility to be makers of their own meaning and, therefore, their own spiritual questing. Manheimer sees the possibilities for current cohorts of older people to emancipate themselves from previously restrictive views of

later life (including spiritual / religious ones) as a response to changing culture, and as being part of a particular generation. Manheimer (2000:19) observes from his adult education experiences with seniors that

'The small shocks to our acceptance of ordinary life open what were previously hidden doorways inviting us to imagine other possible meanings.'

With changing cultural norms, both ageing and spirituality are domains that could be opened up for interpretation and choice, but is there then an increasing cultural expectation to 'become oneself' more fully, to reach one's potential? This new perspective on individualisation as a cultural and moral ideal is discussed by Laceulle (2012:97) as the promotion of 'self-realisation in later life'. Along with Manheimer, she notes that the pressurising task of 'becoming who you are' now has to be confronted by older people

'without the comforting presence of self-evident social, cultural, religious and moral frameworks to rely on … an outlook of facing existential anxieties and fading securities – all on your own' (Laceulle 2012:98).

Baars *et al*. (2013:2) similarly note that people in late modern societies are 'much less supported or guided by traditions or customs than before, and are burdened by the responsibility to make their own choices' which may in fact be limited by structural constraints. Laceulle and Baars (2014) go on to develop their concern that the ideal of self-realisation implies a moral imperative to live life in a self-determined way, according to one's own chosen values and meanings. In my mind this hints at a comparison with 'successful' ageing, whereby the striving for self-development takes on a moral tone about what should be possible, and therefore a responsibility, for ageing individuals. However, the chances of realising a good old age will 'depend deeply on the opportunities and restrictions offered by the structural societal arrangements regarding ageing, over which individuals have very limited power of control' (Laceulle 2012:115). A balance is therefore required

'between the active appropriation of one's own life and one's authentic self-development *and* the mindful awareness of those aspects of life that cannot be controlled and therefore require an attitude of acceptance' [my emphasis].

These arguments raise questions as to whether older people do feel disconnected from a peer group (if there is no commonality of ageing) and whether they sense they are facing a new view of later life on their own. For the purpose of my study on spiritual development, it will be interesting to see whether this trend may be reflected in a preference for seeking and working on one's own

spiritual narrative rather than dwelling in a more supervised and supported one, derived from an existing tradition (see Section 2.3.3).

However, the cultural context in which later lives are worked out should not be seen as overly deterministic, even if individual agency is limited. There is as much danger in assigning predetermined outcomes from people's contexts as there is in proposing universal processes for ageing in the form of theories and models, according to Gubrium and Holstein (2007). They suggest viewing the lifelong development of the self as a product of situated 'biographical work', recognising the many interpretive possibilities that are mediated, but not determined, by social, cultural and historical circumstances. The authors furthermore suggest that researching older people's own interpretations of their ageing is the best way to investigate how the self becomes shaped through time – explaining in their own way how life's contextual contours have been taken on. As indicated at several points, this will be my approach. The ordinary activity of assigning meaning to experience through time builds a narrative for understanding self and others, and of the self in society. The same process that is involved in developing a spiritual self has been discussed throughout this thesis.

3.3.2   Cultures of spirituality

The cultural imperative to shape one's own life has been shown to be a characteristic of late modern Western culture, which has changed our ideas about what constitutes a good older age (e.g. involving self-realisation). Ageing well has thus become a biographical task, requiring a greater consciousness about searching for and creating meanings from life experience. One of several traditional frameworks for doing this was religion (Coleman 2010). Although still very much available, religion now occupies a different space in the contemporary cultural landscape from previously (Arweck and Beckford 2012) (See Section 1.1). As late modernity has been accompanied by a cultural change in focus from 'grand narratives' to individual life stories and meaning (Twigg and Martin 2015a:1), cultural gerontology has introduced new approaches to meaning-making by emphasising the greater diversity of the ageing experience. Laceulle and Baars (2014) observe that a 'narrative turn' in gerontology presumes a relationship between people's sense of self and the stories they tell about their lives. Older people order their experiences and life events to create a narrative structure to aid meaning; look for a meaning *in* life as opposed to the meaning *of* life; and engage in re-interpretation to develop coherence and comprehensibility. Despite appearing an individual process, narrative understandings develop from several sources.

'Not only the intrapersonal sense of meaningful identity is at stake, but the meaning of a story is believed to be negotiated in interaction with a social, interpersonal dimension, a socio-cultural dimension and a structural dimension. … [P]ersonal stories are always situated in a context of larger stories transcending the scope of the individual lives' (Laceulle and Baars 2014:35).

The 'larger stories' of spiritual / religious narratives, and their sources, are of great relevance to the spiritual perspectives developed over the life-course. Higgs (2016) makes the argument that profound change in the way such narratives operate has been particularly part of third-agers' 'dispositions' towards greater autonomy and choice. Such dispositions are however part of wider social change (ibid:152). McAdams (2008) has been a major contributor to research on how narratives constitute the self over the life-course, bringing together experiences and establishing coherent connections among them. Kenyon et al (2011) offer a comprehensive account of the storying of later life. Evidence from such studies is important when seeking and interpreting older people's accounts of their spiritual lives, and considering how spiritual / religious narratives are adopted and worked out through adult life into older age. For instance, where gerontologists have discerned stages, tasks, transitions and transformations, older people's self-stories may appear to them more like continuous accounts of lives along which experience and events have been negotiated (Atchley 2009; Randall 2012).

As with the 'cultural turn' towards individualism, a related 'subjective turn' has been observed within spirituality and religion (Woodhead and Catto 2012). Spirituality is an example of an aspect of life that is sensitive to cultural forces over the lifetime and related to social institutions which embody cultural values. Brown and Lynch (2012) propose a cultural explanation of changes in religion and spirituality in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. Their explanatory narrative is less about a particular theory of spiritual change (such as secularisation) and more about changing meanings that people have adopted concerning, for example, moral responsibility, gender and the body, and the performance of religion. Notably, these are all issues where the authority for defining them has shifted more towards the individual and away from organisations and institutions. The authors propose that a new religious and spiritual culture has emerged that features various forms of 'non-religion' (as explored recently by Manning 2019), the consolidation of religious sub-cultures, and new cultural constructions of religion (including spirituality). Chief among the values expressed in these new forms, and doubts about older forms, is the desire for individualism and autonomy (Coleman 2019:105).

On the basis of a comprehensive secondary analysis of the social dimensions of religious change in Britain, Arweck and Beckford (2012) suggest that the values and cultural ideal of independent

individualism have grown with the changing fabric of British society. This has been shown through changes in employment, education, gender relations, family structures, leisure and personal morality. A complexity of social factors has led to a weaker identification with religious organisations, amounting to the reduction of religion as a means by which people construct their identities (Woodhead and Catto 2012). Subjectivity and individual authenticity are seen as less compatible with the collective beliefs and structures of organised religions, but may be conducive to new understandings and forms of spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The changing nature of measures in survey questions on matters of spiritual belief, practice and affiliation, and the ambiguity with which people reply where open responses are invited, are discussed in a report on the British Cohort Study of those born in 1970 (Voas 2015). These bear witness to the challenge posed by the growth of self-indicators of spirituality in place of more traditional indicators of spiritual affiliation. So whereas religion once offered most answers to a human search for meaning (McFadden and Kosberg 2008), both the cultural and spiritual 'turns' outlined here demonstrate that acceptable and credible answers are now being sought on other fronts (Coleman 2010). Indeed, Coleman suggests that, as religion is now also seen as limiting human exploration and explanation, the meaning-giving role of religion has been undermined. With baby-boomers identifying more with spirituality than religion as a term for their spiritual searching (ibid:168), we are witnessing generations above them on the cusp of these cultural changes. These older groups may continue to develop their spirituality in traditional ways but may also be possibly re-considering ideas and experiences from the largely religious world view of their upbringings.

The rest of this chapter will move on from reviewing literature to drawing from it, in order to develop a conceptual framework for my study. In this way, the themes of the literature that I have featured in both Chapter 2 and 3 will be related to a theoretical background for research questions and design.

3.4   Conceptual framework

In the rest of this chapter I will synthesise the key ideas and concepts that have emerged from literature and which shape my study and research design. My research questions about later life spirituality from an adult learning perspective concern how people learn and develop a spiritual aspect of their lives. Combining this with a social gerontology perspective adds a social dimension to how such development comes about. In choosing a life-course approach I can locate my study in a contemporary culture of ageing. Despite a large amount of literature in both fields – adult education and social gerontology - existing research does not address how older people themselves perceive and understand their experience of spiritual learning and development.

Educational literature has theories and models of lifelong learning and development, but very little applied to spiritual learning and no significant application attempted recently. Gerontology for the most part does not discuss learning aspects of ageing, and its interest in spirituality is related to benefits or outcomes for older people's wellbeing. In the following sections I draw out key lessons from the literature review to articulate a conceptual framework which will directly inform my study design. The framework includes conceptualisations of spirituality, spiritual development, mature spirituality and the spirituality of practice.

3.4.1   Spirituality and its development

As demonstrated in the first theme of my literature review (Chapter 2), the concepts of religion and spirituality are both used heavily in the literature, sometimes in an overlapping manner, sometimes to delineate phenomena (Ellor and McGregor 2011; Ammerman 2013). I adopt the view that religion is the overarching concept, referring to the human search for meaning and significance in relation to the sacred (Pargament 1999; Hill *et al*. 2000), see Section 2.3.1. Within this broad understanding of religion, spirituality refers to the *ways* people search for and connect with the sacred, in order to create meaning (Pargament 1999). 'Sacred' refers to the things we set apart and give respect to, or are a source of wonder, from a source perceived as other than ourselves (such as texts, places, artefacts, rituals or relationships). Developing practices and attitudes towards the sacred helps many people connect to the transcendent. Such a definition of spirituality distinguishes it from more existential or secular formulations, which share a focus on meaning and values but do not include a non-materialistic dimension[10] (Hornborg 2012; Humphrey 2015).

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[10] For example, in a Royal College of Psychiatrists guidance leaflet (2006), cited in Matthews (2010:284) 'spirituality is identified with experiencing a deep-seated sense of meaning and purpose in life, together with a sense of belonging. It is about acceptance, integration and wholeness'.
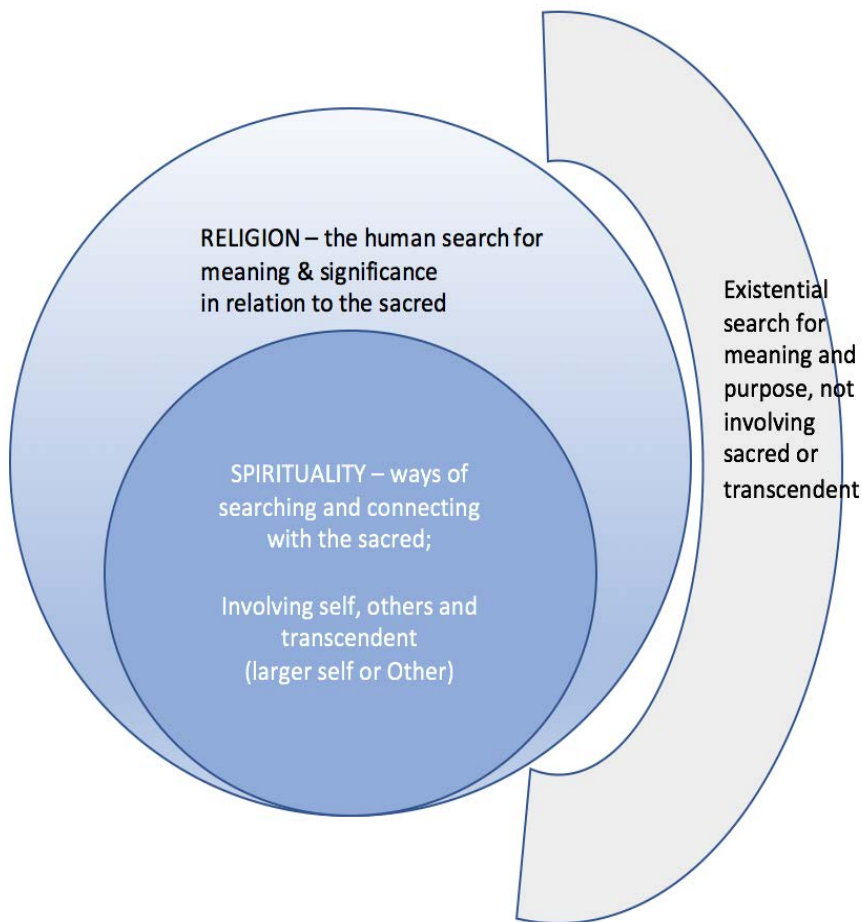
Figure 2 **Spirituality and religion. Source: author**

My understanding is that although learning to develop spiritually is essentially learning about oneself, this is done in relation to others (Marcoen 2005). These relationships are with other individuals and groups, with society and with an 'ultimate reality' or 'higher power', however this may be conceived (McFadden and Kozberg 2008:7). In my study, I define spirituality as including an element of the transcendent – a sense of something bigger or 'other' than oneself - but with which it is believed a connection can be pursued or practised. As an aspect of personal development which changes over the life-course, spirituality is seen as involving both individual and social processes (Vogel 1995; McFadden 1999; Atchley 2009). Spiritual learning is not principally about the content of beliefs or spiritual practices, although these may result from it. Spiritual learning is primarily about the human search for significance and meaning in life, for which religion and spirituality offer particular routes and kinds of support. These routes to meaning-making are the ones I am interested in for this study (Cohen, Thomas and Williamson 2008; Ammerman 2014; Edmonson 2015).

3.4.2   Conceptions of spiritual development

I am interested in understanding how spiritual meanings are attributed to life experiences (Sinnott 2002) and, furthermore, whether some of these reflections on experience also have power to change people's frameworks of meaning. The process of creating spiritual meaning in this way is a link that I hope to illuminate between spiritual development and a long experience of life (Thomas and Cohen 2006). How a spiritual perspective or interpretation of life is developed has been the subject of much academic interest (Miller and Thoresen 2003; Nelson-Becker 2011). Drawing on learning theories discussed in Chapter 2, I see reflection on experience as the key process for both growth and change in people's understanding of their life in the world (Atchley 1997; Pergakis *et al*. 2010). Literature thus suggests that development of later life spirituality is based on experience gathered over the lifetime. Alternative views, based on models of lifelong human development, are difficult to test out since they tend to feature abstract ideas rather than the expressed experience of older people. The extent to which reflection on life experience produces a sense of meaning, or its re-interpretation, is associated with later life (Marston 2010; Weiss and Bass 2002) will be something my study seeks to further illuminate.

In Chapter 2, the nature of human / spiritual development models was discussed, since they form a significant psycho-gerontological discourse concerning adult development (see Section 2.4). Twentieth century descriptions and explanations of spiritual development were mostly based on stage theories of adult lifelong development such as those formulated by Levinson (1986) and Fowler (1981). A major weakness proved to be their perception as universal and predictive, rather than recognition that they were products of their culture and times. Models that relate more to the contemporary life-course, such as Fisher and Simmons (2007), acknowledge their contextual limitations and respond to the current shape of later life rather than some notion of universal life stages. The context of the life-course will be an important element in my conception of later life development. The linking of spiritual development to the context in which ageing takes place is conceptualised as the life-course trajectory. But rather than constituting an age or life-stage response, spiritual learning could be seen as facilitated by ageing because of the greater opportunities for learning encountered. The overall tenor of the literature still supports the notion of an increased likelihood of spiritual learning in later life (Snodgrass and Sorajjakool 2011) and of a trajectory of development and change that operates over the life-course (Wink and Dillon 2002; Atchley 2009).

Educational gerontologists have seen development over the life-course trajectory as involving a basic pattern of 'formation and transformation' (Jarvis 2009:197), taking place in the first and second halves of life respectively. Spiritual development is also linked to a propensity in later life

for the 'reconstruction of the self' (Sinnott 2011:261). For instance, it is widely accepted that the circumstances of later life can act as prompts to deepen existential questions about meaning, purpose, loss and death, thus enabling a transformed or reconstructed spirituality to become an important personal resource in older age (McFadden and Kozberg 2008). These conceptions of spiritual development over the life-course are the theoretical understandings that underlie my research design.

3.4.3 Later life spirituality

In discussing the last theme of my literature review, on spirituality's relationship with ageing earlier in this chapter, I highlighted some particular ideas about mature spirituality rather than predicted changes that occur with age. Adopting Young-Eisendrath and Miller's (2000) tripartite concept of mature spirituality as integrity, transcendence and wisdom provides themes to look out for in participants' descriptions of their later spiritual lives. I also considered the wider perspective of cultural change in order to further contextualise today's experience of the later life-course. As cultural forces continue to shape views of both ageing and spirituality, newer understandings are needed. However, the very idea of discerning developmental patterns or making predictions about them seems increasingly problematic within the 'cultural turn' of gerontology (Twigg & Martin 2015b). From this perspective, ageing as a social phenomenon is increasingly viewed as less relevant than understanding the experiences of particular cohorts in particular times and places (Foley 2000; Biggs 2006). Whilst I agree with this general proposition, particularly the need to contextualise later lives, the approach underlying cultural gerontology will be treated with caution. Cultural gerontology has placed great emphasis on subjectivity and identity. In the place of norms and patterns of behaviour have come experiences and subjectivities of older people (Twigg & Martin 2015a:3; Baars *et al* 2013). This conceptualisation leads away from seeking patterns, norms and structures that have in the past helped generate needs-based social policy (Gilleard and Higgs 2013).

My working assumption for this study is that although universal, predictive models of development have been shown to be wanting, the other extreme of a pattern-less, cultural critique regarding ageing is also unsatisfactory. I take the view that patterns within the life-course can be discerned, whether these are attributed to processes of maturity and senescence or to social forces that are expressed differently over historic times and cultures. These patterns need to be regularly re-conceptualised and investigated in the context of social change. My study will seek to investigate whether life-course trajectories are perceived as having any relation to spiritual development by older adults. The particular life-course markers I propose as boundaries for my study are *retirement* (approximately aged 60+) and *dependency* (approximately aged 80+).

Insofar as third and fourth age are still recognisable concepts (Higgs 2016), I will focus research enquiries on those recently entering the third age via retirement, through to those approaching its exit to the fourth age of greater dependency. This period of later life will be the life-course location of the spiritual learning and development that I wish to study.

On the basis of the adult education literature discussed, an assumption of my study will be that iterative, ongoing development will be more recognisable by older people as interpretations of their experience than particular patterns of progression. This would accord with older people's general views of their learning as forming an organic and multi-directional pattern rather than a linear, step-like progression (Findsen and Formosa 2011; Walker 1998). It meets the cultural critique of ageing by recognising individualised life-course development, yet allows for the discernment of patterns of growth that emerge from contemporary conditions of growing older (see for example Marston 2010; Thomas and Cohen 2006).

3.4.4 Informal learning and spirituality

Key ideas from adult learning have been identified in the literature review (Chapter 2) as helpful for exploring reflection and life review in later life, and for understanding how spiritual learning operates. Since spiritual learning is mostly of an informal nature, rather than conducted within formal courses or institutions (Tisdell 2008), ideas about informal learning will be the most appropriate to employ in my study. Two particular forms of informal learning will be explored in relation to spiritual learning and development (Marsick and Watkins 2001). The first of these, *incidental learning,* describes the everyday, incremental learning from experience that continues throughout life, with more conscious episodes perhaps occurring in response to major life events or changes (McAdams 1994). Thus, incidental *spiritual* learning takes place as people interpret such experiences as having a spiritual dimension (Atchley 2009).

A second form of informal learning*, self-directed learning,* describes a more purposive kind of spiritual learning, where the learner is engaged in a project or programme of their own choosing, with varying degrees of conscious intent to develop spiritually, and adopting a range of methods for doing so. Within self-directed learning, literature has pointed to such features as: degrees of intentionality about learning, from opportunistic to plan-full; various forms of learning, from informal to more formal; and differing approaches such as individual projects or involvement in membership of groups and learning communities. My study assumes that these various expressions of self-directed learning will represent the major kinds of conscious learning about spirituality. Wishing to capture such learners in my study, I will be tapping into networks that may be enabling self-directed spiritual learning. As I explain in Chapter 4, I will approach a variety of

groups that can be thought of loosely as being 'spiritually engaged learners' rather than sampling from the general population of older people.

Within the forms of learning so far described (incidental and self-directed learning) differences are conceptualised in literature concerning the style of the learning that results. It can be *incremental* in nature, as implied by ongoing everyday learning from experience; or it can be characterised by more abrupt or radical changes in understanding, which have been described in literature as *transformative* (Ahmadi 2005). Arguably, either form (incidental or self-directed learning) could produce either style – incremental or transformative.

Table 2   Forms and styles of informal learning. Source: author's review of literature

INFORMAL LEARNING	Incremental	Transformative
Incidental learning (experiential)	Reflecting (at different levels) on everyday experience *Leading to:* Growth of understanding	Life events *Leading to:* Paradigm shifts
Self-directed learning (consciously chosen)	Purposeful learning *Leading to:* Learning outcomes	Realisations *Leading to:* Reframing

As depicted in Table 2, ongoing incidental learning can either simply add to general understanding, through reflection; or it can sometimes build up to a critical mass that then produces a paradigm shift, such as those predicted by stage-development models (Foote 2015). Likewise, a major life incident can prompt a deep reflection and significant change in outlook. The more purposive nature of self-directed learning may simply go on adding to people's understanding, assisting development through adjustment and adaptation; or it may produce a more 'disjunctive' enlightenment, provoking a qualitatively different understanding. Sudden or radical changes in understanding can have outlook-changing results, such as seeing something differently or much more clearly. In terms of spirituality, such changes would for instance characterise a conversion or disillusionment with faith. I anticipate that both of these learning styles (incremental and transformative) can illuminate aspects of spiritual development and may be discernible within participants' descriptions of informal learning (both incidental and self-

directed). I am aware in proposing this typology that its contents do not represent watertight categories, but attempt to describe certain distinctions that may operate (if not mutually exclusively) and thus suggest a pattern for spiritual learning that can be empirically illustrated.

3.4.5   Adult learning responses: modelling spiritual learning in later life

Inspection of literature on the processes involved in spiritual learning has helped identify a basic dynamic of development over the life-course. Development is widely seen as being a result of *differentiation* within existing understanding, where disjuncture – noticing a difference between a new experience and existing understanding – leads to reflection and eventual *integration* of a new understanding through adjustment or reframing of previous meaning structures (Jarvis 2009; Marsick and Watkins 2001). Applying this to spiritual development, I propose that experience interpreted as having a spiritual dimension prompts a challenge to existing spiritual understanding, followed by reflection, and then a possible re-adjustment of an existing meaning framework for the spiritual interpretation of one's experience. (Examples of challenges to existing understanding could be doubts about previously held tenets of faith.) If the disjunction is so large that accommodation cannot be made within existing structures of understanding, then change is made to the actual mental framework that has, hitherto, aided the interpretation of experience. This more significant degree of change is seen in literature as transformative learning (see Section 3.4.4 above and Section 2.5.4) and as a possible outcome of either / both incidental and self-directed learning. My study will be interested in the incidence of transformative learning of this kind, within people's estimations of their spiritual learning and development. By definition, stand-out moments of insight might be easier to identify when reflecting, but I am also interested in what other ways, and to what extent, spiritual learning has also been prompted.

In attempting to link educational ideas with gerontological ones, I have sought to contextualise these learning processes within the life-course, to be able to offer a more grounded account of later life spiritual development. Literature reviewing has revealed the relatively slender amount of longitudinal empirical research on the development of spirituality over the life-course and in relation to ageing. However, the key work of Wink and Dillon (2002) and Dillon and Wink (2007) addresses matters of change and adaptation, and the propensity towards developing spirituality with ageing. In particular, their application of Wuthnow's (1998) concepts of 'spirituality of dwelling' and 'spirituality of seeking' conceptualises the tendency to either persist with but adapt one's religious / spiritual life (dwelling), or to strike out beyond previously held systems of meaning and develop new ones (seeking). Wink and Dillon (2002) suggest that, in broad terms, people's forms of dwelling (such as affiliations to spiritual communities) may adapt but remain largely constant over the life-course, whereas spiritual seeking behaviours are responsive to

ageing, and tend to increase in later life (ibid:91). These two spiritual learning responses to development, of dwelling and seeking, come together in a 'spirituality of practice' which combines how people continue to relate to known structures and inherited understandings *together with* new ways of interpreting and reflecting them in spiritual practice (Wink 2003). The 'spirituality of practice' is therefore an important concept that will inform my understanding of the views and experiences of spiritually engaged older people from a range of religious and spiritual settings.

Spiritualities of practice imply a more subjectivised approach to spiritual development, featuring less adherence to particular institutional sets of beliefs and practices, but not necessarily abandonment of them (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). As well as applying to the spiritual lives of seekers, spirituality of practice describes dwellers in more traditional places who are exploring adaptations and extensions of orthodoxy. Spirituality of practice also offers a way of showing how new spiritual communities are built up, as seekers become more like dwellers in new structures they have helped establish. I am proposing that spirituality of practice is more in tune with a twenty-first century culture and life-course than earlier research concepts of religiosity based on items of belief or observable behaviour. Spirituality of practice thus provides a framework for asking about types of learning (incremental and transformative) and spiritual learners (dwellers and seekers) in the context of ageing.

3.4.6   Conclusions on literature review and conceptual framework

I initially took the view that current understanding concerning spiritual learning could be helpfully informed by existing developmental theories and models, if not actually explained or predicted by them. However, the changing nature of both spirituality and ageing today creates contexts that are significantly different from those pertaining to the latter half of the twentieth century, when the relevant models were developed. Researchers employing them tend to report that both contexts and individual factors limit their universality and explanatory power. A growing appreciation of contemporary approaches has helped me re-frame my understanding about spiritual learning and development. Both contexts and individual stories are now central to an understanding of this phenomenon that I wish to study, because they are part of lived experience - one that a spiritual perspective is helping people make sense of. In focusing on older people's own descriptions of their spiritual learning, rather than (possibly outdated) theoretical conceptions of these, I hope to revise or re-model an understanding of later life spiritual development as a learning process. As an anticipated contribution to knowledge, my account will have something to say about different types of spiritual learning, how they operate and are

recognised and developed in people's later lives. It is not likely to re-define age-related learning stages.

So although starting with abstract ideas of spiritual development embodied in theories and models because of their prevalence in literature, and for their value as concepts, this study will focus on asking about what older people *think* and *do* regarding spirituality, and in what circumstances – that is, their spirituality of practice. Such practice can be based within a faith or spiritual community setting, or operate as a solo quest, or as part of a looser network. Guiding the research are assumptions that:

- spiritual understanding is developed and learned informally through incidental and self-directed learning;
- these learning processes are mostly *incremental*, through differentiation and re-integration of understandings, but may be more *radical*, such that people's spiritual outlook itself is changed;
- learning can be more intense through episodic or transformative experiences that may or may not be anticipated in today's life-course, but are responsive to an individualised experience of growing older in biographical and historical time;
- the social dimension of spiritual learning is changing with the cultural contexts of ageing and spirituality, and in relation to the source of the spiritual narrative that is accessed.

Being open to the influence of a life-course trajectory of development, rather than attempting to test out particular proposed developmental stages, I will enquire about how older spiritually engaged people view the relationship of their ageing and their spiritual development (for example, see Miller 1999; Manning 2010). Regarding spiritual learning responses, my assumptions are that people's spirituality of practice can exemplify styles of both dwelling and seeking, in differing proportions and at different times in their spiritual journey. The challenge to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable will be addressed through the use of qualitative methods of enquiry. These will include participants talking and writing as ways of reporting their understandings of changes in their spirituality, especially in later life. Research methods that acknowledge the power of narrative will elicit how their current frames of meaning serve them, both in 're-storying' the past and providing an ongoing perspective on the future (Pfahl 2012; Randall 2012). Adult education sees both incremental and transformative learning as an unfolding story that is linked with further learning, particularly if the learner becomes aware of the reflective, critical assessment process they are engaged in (Foote 2015; Tisdell 2008). In order to engage with individual variance in learning styles, a range of methods - focus group discussions, individual interviews and written accounts - will seek to tap into people's stories of spiritual

development. In the following Chapter 4, I will describe how the ideas related in this conceptual

framework have been operationalised into my research design.

Chapter 4   Methodology

4.1   Introduction

This chapter explains the philosophical and methodological bases for my thesis. I reflect on the nature and strength of qualitative research methodologies and the epistemological and ontological implications of the general approach I adopt. I then describe the research design in broad terms, and how this has emerged from the literature review and subsequent conceptual framework for the study. I go on to review the methods and research activities carried out, including their ethical dimensions, and types of analyses employed to address research questions.

To remind the reader, the aim of this research is to investigate older people's perceptions of a spiritual dimension in their later life. I am particularly interested in understanding how spirituality might change in response to the experience of ageing and whether older people's awareness of this enables them to develop their spirituality more purposefully in support of mature identity. I am proposing that the ways they do this can be characterised as kinds of informal learning (incidental and self-directed). Among my purposes in completing this study is to be able to offer an evidence-based analysis of how spiritual learning could be better related to older people's actual interests and needs concerning their spiritual development. My basic study design is an in-depth, multi-method qualitative enquiry (Hesse-Biber *et al.* 2015). This involved two stages: the first featured three focus group discussions (FGDs) involving a total of 21 spiritually engaged, community-dwelling older people; the second comprised individual interviews of a further sample of 23 individuals who had broadly similar characteristics to the FGD participants. This phased design was in order to benefit from initial findings that could inform the later stage, both in terms of the broad concepts and themes found to be involved, and to take advantage of complementary methods (focus group and individual interviews) to elicit fuller answers to research questions.

Understanding of age-related spiritual development can best be arrived at through an in-depth qualitative approach which enables a subtle and complex phenomenon such as spirituality to be explored (Walach 2017). This requires an interpretive understanding of the social world of my research participants and, in particular, the meanings they attach to their experience of spirituality in the context of later life (McSherry *et al* 2016). The overall research design is, accordingly, not an experimental enquiry but involves collecting data that emerge from the interaction of researcher and participants (Flick 2007, Ritchie 2003) and the interview narratives that they co-produce (Silverman 2014). It involves systematic enquiry reflecting on both the

subjects and the conduct of the research, based on reasoning that moves between deduction and induction, to produce an emergent and interpretive account (Marshall and Rossman 2016).

4.2   Understanding social reality using qualitative methods

Qualitative research aims to understand, describe and account for social phenomena from the participants' viewpoint. Among a variety of forms taken by qualitative research (Marshall and Rossman 2016), I have chosen one that focuses on how people construct their social world and what is meaningful to them within their contexts and activities (Gibb 2007). From verbal interactions captured, the researcher can develop models and typologies or build theory to describe or possibly explain the issues under investigation (see for example MacKinlay 2014, Fisher 1993).

4.2.1   Ontology

Social enquiry raises key ontological questions about the nature of what can be known about the social world. The main features of how qualitative methods seek to understand social reality include: viewing social phenomena through the eyes of those who are being studied; an emphasis on accurate description and context of such phenomena; the grounding of concepts in data (Bryman 2012). This assumes, inter alia, that understanding behaviour from people's own frame of reference is both appropriate and scientifically acceptable. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) explain how the understanding and practice of qualitative methods can be applicable to topics such as spirituality, which have been less well served by methods where observation and the search for underlying 'laws' prove difficult. The ontological nature of any chosen method reflects the researcher's view of reality and *what* can be known.

> 'Within social research, key ontological questions concern: whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations; whether there is a common, shared, social reality or just multiple context-specific realities; and whether or not social behaviour is governed by 'laws' that can be seen as immutable or generalisable' (Ritchie and Lewis 2003:11).

These authors go on to identify three basic ontological positions, which they term realism, materialism and idealism. In terms of Ritchie and Lewis' typology I would place my own stance as

one of 'critical realism' (2003:16), which accepts the existence of an underlying objective reality but takes the view that reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings of the human mind (both individually and collectively)[11]. In accepting that the social world exists independently of its perception, this stance implies that it is only accessible to social enquiry through the responses of participants, which are then further interpreted by researchers. Gibb (2007:7) uses the term 'constructive realist' to acknowledge that researchers 'cannot say how the world is, only how some people see it.' Moreover, for the constructivist, 'data equally reflect the interplay of the researcher's and the participants' constructions' (ibid:7). My data gathering involves a range of different individual and group constructions, with the potential to create different kinds of understandings concerning spiritual experience. The effect of producing a variety of understandings serves to illustrate the diverse and multi-faceted nature of reality (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Bryman (2012) highlights a further aspect of critical realism, which is its acceptance of entities and processes that are not directly observable, but the effects of which are observable. Bryman's suggestion appears particularly relevant to my study of (unobservable) spiritual development, conceptualised as a form of informal adult learning, within the context of contemporary later life.

On the wider methodological scene, as shown in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, social science inquiry regarding spirituality and ageing can range considerably in nature from the positivist to the phenomenological (Moberg 2008, Jamieson 2002, Mason and Dale 2011). Ritchie and Lewis (2003) assert that qualitative methodologies have developed in response to perceived limitations of earlier social study methods adapted from natural science. They argue that, from 1970s onwards, positivism and the relevance of the 'scientific method' to social research were increasingly questioned regarding issues such as experimental design and control of variables; the need to disregard context and meaning of behaviours; the applicability of overarching theories; the emphasis on hypothesis testing and assumption of a supposedly neutral researcher (2003). Hogan, Donnelly and Dolan (2011) observe that the development of qualitative methods has been assisted by greater attention to aspects of life and experience that may have previously been overlooked, such as specific meanings, emotions and practices that emerge through the interaction and relationships between people. Qualitative methods are now seen as particularly relevant where research involves issues of people's experiences and their meaning. These

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[11] This eschews the less grounded position of 'relative idealism' where socially constructed meanings point to nothing beyond the existence of alternative social accounts. A similar position to constructive realism is described by Hammersley as 'subtle realism' in his 1992 discussion of ethnography.

elements are readily apparent within a definition of qualitative research offered by Hammersley (2013:12):

> 'A form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasise the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis'.

The growth in acceptance and practice of interpretive research, using qualitative methods, has perhaps played a part in increasing scholarship on spirituality, to which such approaches and methods are well suited. In Reker's discussion of methodologies applicable to spirituality, he suggests: 'In psychology and gerontology, qualitative methods are most sensitive to the investigation of various types of *meaning in life* (personal, experiential, social, cultural) and *existential topics* that centre on spirituality and religiosity' (Reker 1995:578, my emphasis).

Moberg (2008) takes stock of the contribution of social research to spirituality and ageing by reviewing the application of various methodologies, concluding that the multi-faceted reality of spirituality in later life requires better attention to methods (2008). Although he identifies the detractions of a positivist stance – the myth of objective, value free methods, based on observations and causal theories or modelling, leading to discovery of inferable regularities – he does not seem fully to embrace the alternative stance of interpretivism. This is where the researcher and the social reality under investigation engage with each other; where value free approaches and the discovery of facts or laws are replaced by making one's assumptions known and exploring human agency and meaning to produce justifiable interpretations. Interpretivism requires the researcher to interpret the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman 2012). This position is similar to the approach I adopt, since my own assumptions will be available alongside the meanings of my participants, to be part of the interpretive research process.

In seeking to locate my study more precisely within the qualitative methodological scene, Flick's typology of research perspectives in relation to the goals of research (2007) has been useful. My theoretical points of reference are broadly constructivist because my interest is in everyday experience and the making of social reality. Understanding the viewpoint of the subject is for the purpose of describing the processes involved in producing the phenomenon under study – spiritual learning in later life. The qualitative research methods associated with this stance include those of hearing, reading and recording people's views and narrations – interviews, focus groups,

observations, documentation and so on. To apply Flick's principle of appropriateness (2007), my methods needed to reflect how best to enable people to talk about their spiritual development, which is a topic not much discussed and for which finding a language can sometimes be an issue. I needed to create research situations where participants felt secure and at ease, and were well facilitated in order to find ways to express themselves. Becoming more familiar with the ways people talk about spirituality through focus groups, and then applying this understanding within individual interviews, is therefore an appropriate design feature for this particular topic and group of participants.

Qualitative methodologies can creatively support a range of research designs, from small to larger scale. Their contribution is usually to offer interpretive dimensions to the theories and methods employed in studies and, sometimes, to build their own models and typologies for further investigation. From this discussion of ontology, I conclude that qualitative methods are indeed appropriate for arriving at accounts of social reality through the eyes of participants in my research. The phenomenon under investigation (people's spiritual outlooks in maturity) was thus pursued by eliciting and recording verbal data on the life-long meanings that build up and continue to develop, possibly in response to ageing.

4.2.2   Epistemology

If ontology addresses the question of 'what is knowable?', it is the epistemological dimension of research practice that addresses 'how can it be known?'. Weiland's (1995) depiction of interpretive social science seeks to show its relevance to spirituality and ageing. He notes that social science need not imitate natural science in its assumption of a knowable world or the possibility of an objective, detached point of inquiry. It does, rather, need to affirm that the world of human experience always reflects subjectivity and contexts. Social science findings are interpretations, not verified results (Weiland 1995). Qualitative methods are therefore often chosen for providing data about the experiences and realities of participants. They may be particularly appropriate when both the context and richness of data are important and when researchers need to know what something 'feels like' from the inside (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Qualitative methods apply when *how* people interpret an experience is more important than knowing *how many* people have had such an experience. This, again, is of particular relevance to spirituality where the 'inside' experience is not often scrutinised, such that its description would be a valuable addition to understanding. The use of learning concepts to aid this interpretation imposes a particular approach, which I have sought to justify in my conceptual framework (Section 3.4).

Having established the opposing poles of social research epistemology as positivist and interpretivist, three further aspects of epistemology are of particular relevance to my research approach and design, as noted by Ritchie and Lewis (2003). The first is that of the *understandings of the actors in the research process* - both participants and researchers. Neither party can be wholly objective or produce a privileged account of the social reality under investigation. Indeed, as Bryman observes (2012:31), the researcher is often providing an interpretation of others' interpretations, as well as placing findings into an existing social science framework. Findings can be consciously mediated by the researcher's assumptions, or negotiated between the participants and researchers. Or between these two positions, findings can demonstrate 'empathetic neutrality', where the researcher has made assumptions transparent. This is the one that I adopted, in using semi-structured questions within open group conversations but without obscuring my own current understandings about spirituality in later life (see Section 4.2.3 on reflexivity).

A second aspect is that of *how 'truth' is understood as being established.* A traditional way has been that of correspondence, where observations of the (natural or social) world match an underlying reality. Study of the social world, however, even assuming an underlying reality is held to exist, often relies on its truth claims being judged in consensual rather than absolute ways (Ritchie and Lewis 2003:14). If corroboration within a field of research confirms a particular finding, then it is held to be representative of a socially constructed reality, whilst still acknowledging multiple realities and interpretations thereof. This understanding of 'truth' relies on the attitude that knowledge produced from a constructivist / interpretive position will be contingent, since researchers' own accounts of the social world are themselves constructions (Bryman 2012). That is, they are specific versions of social reality – defendable but a narrative nonetheless. However, if enough accounts broadly agree, a research paradigm may emerge and prevail until the consensus is disturbed sufficiently to challenge it. For example, a broad consensus about a relationship between ageing and increased spirituality is currently being challenged by a lack of empirical evidence for a connection between the two, as well as by changing understandings about what is meant by both spirituality and ageing. My study has aimed to create further understanding of that relationship by modelling new ways in which later life spirituality can develop, based on informal adult learning.

A third aspect of qualitative epistemology concerns *how knowledge is arrived at.* Deductive processes construct theories and propositions logically and then use evidence to support or refute

them. Inductive processes look primarily for patterns and associations derived from observation, thus using evidence to both generate and corroborate conclusions. Induction therefore 'represents an alternative strategy for linking theory and research' (Bryman 2012:26). In practice however, it is difficult and possibly unnecessary to separate these processes in research design.

> 'Although qualitative design is often seen as an inductive approach, it is not a singularly defining characteristic of qualitative research. … [T]he processes of sampling and generalisation from qualitative research involve both induction and deduction' (Ritchie and Lewis 2003:14).

This leads to a suggestion of a 'third way', that of abductive thought, where the researcher grounds theoretical understandings (of the research subjects and context) in the worldviews of the people studied. Blaikie (2004) explains that this can be achieved by first understanding and describing participants' perspectives, in order then to arrive at a social scientific account of that worldview. He proposes that the researcher is seeking

> 'background knowledge that is largely unarticulated, constantly used and modified by social actors as they interact with each other, and produced and reproduced by them in the course of their lives. It is the everyday beliefs and practices … that have to be grasped and articulated by the social researcher to provide an understanding of these actions.' (ibid:2).

This is an intrinsically inductive approach, but with emphasis on eliciting an account of the subjects' understanding (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Abduction's utility for exploring a phenomenon such as older people's spiritual development seems high, since awareness of such matters would be largely unarticulated, despite being in constant use and modified by interaction and life experience. However, Blaikie also notes that having derived accounts of the worlds of social actors, social scientists can then differ on the interpretation of such material. Reporting of descriptions of social life, with the minimal imposition of concepts that differ from the participants' language, is one option. Other choices are to bring an existing theory or model to bear, producing a particular interpretation of the way of life under study; or to generate new kinds of explanation based on the ingredients of the descriptive accounts, and by treating narratives as data. This last option is the one I have pursued.

4.2.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has become widely discussed within social research practice, especially related to how data is collected and analysed, and how findings are presented and disseminated. In his classic

critique of sociology, Gouldner (1970) commented on social scientists' attempts to objectify other humans through study whilst failing to account for their own human qualities. Attending to reflexivity offers a chance to address the issues researchers face when enquiry takes place in the real world, rather than in controlled conditions. So, reflexivity is relevant to the theoretical framework and methodologies chosen, as well as practical constraints and personal characteristics. From the outset, I was aware that my choice of topic and approach had arisen from my own life and professional experience, including values and beliefs I have developed. Dean (2017:2) refers to the 'reflexive turn' in qualitative social science and 'its objection to objectivity (which) has created the space whereby it is now accepted and normal to write the researcher into the world they investigate'. I reflected on the relevance of previous experience: my competence as an adult educator familiar with older learners was arguably an advantage, and had disposed me towards including groups in my research design. My commitment to the potential of personal development in later life drives an interest in continued learning in all its forms, which was reflected in my career, where I have been variously involved over the years in adult education for health, retirement and faith. Beyond my obvious characteristics as a middle-class woman in my early sixties, I openly represented myself to potential participants as a person with professional, research and personal interests in later life spirituality. In choosing to approach participants with both religious and non-religious bases for their spirituality, I also needed to be open about my own background in Christianity as well as convincing about my broader interest in other forms of spirituality.

Debates about reflexivity seem originally to have been concerned with the intrusion of researchers' values and assumptions into the research process, and the need to engage in self-reflection to acknowledge them (Bryman 2012). However, reflexivity has more recently broadened into a consideration of 'how we think about what we bring' (Dean 2017: xi). He encourages self-awareness about pre-dispositions, knowledge and competences as a general aid to honest and open research. On the matter of researcher effects, Mertz and Anfara (2006) observe that

> 'Qualitative inquiry is a value-bound enterprise. The primary instrument in qualitative inquiry is human; therefore all data collection and analysis are filtered through the researcher's worldview, values, perspectives and theoretical frames.' (ibid:141)

Dean reports that a prompt that first engaged his interest in reflexivity was the experience of researching an area previously known to him as a practitioner (which also describes my position). He realised a need for 'a clear articulation of the subjectivities contained within the project' (ibid:3). I wrote in my research diary, when planning the focus groups, "Being seen as fully and positively identified with my field of study meant I would be able to use my understanding of how the research context worked, rather than feel the need to stand back from it." I described myself on the invitation flier that solicited participants (see Appendix D) which had the approval of the organisations within which it was disseminated. I presumed my self-description would be understood similarly across the three focus group settings I was developing. However, in one location where I was arguably less identified with their culture, I was questioned in a pre-meeting about my background, motives and how I would interpret their contributions. I reassured them that my interpretations of what they discussed would not be fitted into what they said they feared might be a pre-set religious or academic framework. In his discussion of 'the reflexive me' Dean (2017) notes a similar experience where, once he had addressed people's suspicions, they were keen to talk and participate (ibid:113). In my case, the number of people willing to be part of the focus group actually increased following this initial meeting.

I was acquainted with a few participants through being a volunteer (among 100+) at the EP Centre; through being associated professionally with the GDS programme (average attendance 250+); and through being active in spiritual / religious networks in my area. My intention was to establish enough familiarity to engender trust and confidence whilst retaining enough distance in order to occupy the role of researcher. I anticipated that the challenge of talking about personal matters might be better conducted in safe spaces that had known protocols.

It is clear that critical assessment of one's own role as a researcher is important to the quality of data, its analysis, findings and research conclusions, according to Gibb (2007). The issue of research quality is now further explored in the following section on trustworthiness and ethics.

4.3 Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

The idea of trustworthiness in research gathers issues of credibility which have traditionally focused on validity, reliability, objectivity and generalisability (Marshall and Rossman 2016). These concerns have broadened and deepened with their application to qualitative methodologies, since traditional criteria to establish causality or quantifiable relationships do not apply. For instance, the reliability of a research instrument needs a different evaluation where the researcher herself becomes part of the conduct of the research (ibid:44). The attribution of trustworthiness to indicate quality in qualitative research was therefore described by Lincoln and

Guba (1985) as comprising credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. I explore how validity, reliability and generalisability are seen to apply to qualitative research at Section 4.3.1.

Since ethical practice underpins the quality of research in all its stages, I discuss ethics as part of trustworthiness. Gibb (2007) asserts that all research imposes costs, not least in time and goodwill, but may also produce benefits such as improving policy or practice. One purpose of ethical considerations is therefore to minimise cost and maximise benefit. The immediate challenges involved in collecting the detailed data often associated with qualitative enquiry is that of privacy and confidentiality. I discuss these and other more procedural matters involved in meeting ethical criteria and gaining consent for research in Section 4.3.2 before considering the more particular ethical considerations that arise in researching the spiritual lives of older people at Section 4.3.3.

4.3.1   Validity, reliability and generalisation

Although questions of validity and reliability need to be adapted to better fit social rather than natural scientific enquiry, they are still important to the nature of data and goals in qualitative research. They affect the kinds of inferences that can be drawn from studies, which is the basis of generalisation. Generalisation from qualitative research is clearly a different matter from the kind of representational generalisation that might be attempted with quantitative methods. Ritchie and Lewis (2003:264) advise that two alternative types of generalisation can apply when using qualitative methods: Whether findings can be inferred to other settings or contexts, different from the one(s) studied; and whether theoretical propositions, principles or statements can be drawn out for more general application. These are the kinds of inferences I will be interested in making and which will be pursued in my concluding chapter.

Validity extends beyond whether findings can be generalised and applies to all stages of research. Validity involves the notion of achieving a good fit between the conceptualising of research questions, the nature and location of the phenomenon being studied, and the methods chosen (including their ontological and epistemological bases). These ideas about the components of validity within the research process are articulated in detail by McGrath and Brinberg (1983), who emphasise that validity needs to be considered at all points, from design to presentation of research findings. Inspection of their 'validity network schema' (ibid:117-118) suggests that my

study will seek validity in three stages: Initially in the ideas that I find interesting or important to my research; secondly in the fit that I can achieve between my conceptually-informed assumptions and the methods and sample I select; thirdly in the range and limits of the findings regarding the research questions pursued. My achievement in these areas will feature in the Discussion (Chapter 7) and Conclusions (Chapter 8).

Thus, research validity in qualitative investigation involves ensuring a good match between the observations made and the ideas about them subsequently developed. Indeed, since qualitative methods may involve spending more time with participants, internal validity (congruence between concepts and observations) can be a strength of this approach. Lewis and Ritichie (2003) concur with the importance of congruence: does the research accurately reflect the phenomenon under study (i.e. spiritual development in later life) as perceived by the study population? In particular, this requires the sample to include the constituencies that were felt to be of importance; for the research method to have been effective in capturing participants' responses; for aspects of the phenomenon to have been categorised in ways that reflect participants' meanings; for adequate evidence to have been generated for the accounts developed and for such analytical constructions to be visible.

Reliability (consistency), as a contributor to generalisability in qualitative research, rests less on replicability of the study and more on demonstrating how the procedures have led to the conclusions, so that the cogency of the outcomes can be assessed. For example, in my study, NVivo facilities for writing memos on the evolution of research ideas and interpretive processes support the demonstration of this sort of reliability, as do the keeping of good records on the research decisions taken and procedures followed. For the lone researcher, this involves much checking of records – transcripts, memos, codes and their definitions, for example. I guarded against 'definitional drift' in coding by revisiting and checking definitions, and by writing memos on progress.

On the matter of procedures, Flick (2007) observes that these activities are part of the quality that is produced in the making of research. However, he advises that rigour in applying the chosen methods (such as sampling or interpretive schema) may also need to be balanced by creativity, to take up unforeseen insights or adapting plans to the reality of the research field. Furthermore, consistency is needed to compare cases (such as interviews) but 'very good interviews always profit from the flexibility of the researchers to adapt their questions to the individual participant and to the course of the interview' (ibid:64). I felt that this flexibility had been exercised in both stages of the research. Despite the group and individual conversations developing differently, it was clear from the coding that a similar range of issues had been raised and explored.

4.3.2 Ethical considerations and approval

The main ethical issues of relevance to my study concerned informed consent, confidentiality, potential harm in the form of sensitive topics, and security of information. Ethical approval for the first stage of fieldwork (focus group discussions) was gained on my first attempt (see Appendix P). The main concern noted was the potentially sensitive nature of discussing a personal matter such as spirituality. Based on my initial flier about the study, respondents could take a view on their willingness to express thoughts and feelings that are not often talked about, and for which finding a vocabulary can be difficult. In holding the research activity in comfortable, non-threatening environments and involving participants who were currently members of existing groups and activities that are used to thinking about and discussing spirituality, I hoped that they would be encouraged and value the chance to share their own thoughts and hear those of others.

Further standard procedures were addressed through the process of ethical approval, which I mention here briefly. Informed consent was achieved with the use of a Participant Information Sheet for focus groups members and individual interviewees, giving them the opportunity to read more about the research background and purposes in advance, and to ask questions prior to the interview (see Appendix C). A consent form was completed immediately prior to interviews taking place and assurances given about the ability to withdraw. Confidentiality was assured in all written communications prior to interviews, and at the start of the interview when it took place. Given that focus group discussions cannot be guaranteed confidential, participant confidentiality was raised in an initial discussion on ground rules and based on mutual consent of the group members. Data analysis subsequently focused on eliciting themes, but where responses were attributable to individuals these were anonymised. Individual participants were allocated a pseudonym and a code reference; focus group names/locations have been given a code. The written reflection data following interviews was treated in similar manner to the verbal data.

To assess harm I considered possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects that participants might experience. I reflected that discussion group participants had been recruited on the basis of their willingness to speak about their experiences of spiritual learning and development, including related life experiences. I felt that my experience in leading small groups, as well of that of the participants of being in group situations, would predict problem-free events. In fact, rather than distress, discussions engendered enthusiastic engagement and a willingness to contribute and listen. In terms of documentation and data management, I have

been responsible for all transcription of the focus group discussions except for a part of one session, delegated to the FGD assistant, and all individual interviews except five, which were professionally transcribed to save time. All information gathered from participants has been kept securely according to University guidelines.

4.3.3 Ethical issues in researching spiritual development in later life

Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggest that respect for persons is the general principle that receives the most attention within ethical considerations – issues of privacy, anonymity and rights to participate (or withdraw) with free and full consent (ibid:52). A second key area, which I will discuss more fully with regard to older subjects and spirituality, is that of doing no harm. The main issue in avoiding harm is the sensitivity that might reasonably be a concern when discussing personal matters such as spirituality and ageing. Whilst the composition of groups and setting of the interviews were carefully considered, the impact of an in-depth, semi-structured conversation could not be entirely anticipated. The private thoughts of participants during and after the discussion, which did raise matters of self-identity, age-related change and death, could have been unsettling.

Another source of disturbance could have arisen for participants from hearing the views of others that differed from their own, which they might not have considered before or perceived as being a challenge to their current beliefs or attitudes. Confrontation with feelings about finitude, and death itself, might have been unexpectedly difficult, even though such a topic was likely to arise (although I did not raise it myself). In two of the groups, a member worried about speaking frankly about their own views in case it upset the settled beliefs of others. They received reassurances from the group on this matter but, again, it cannot be known what thoughts were taken away. It might have taken courage to describe how one's inner life or relationship with the transcendent are experienced, since these things are rarely spoken of. I was reassured that in all groups everyone spoke and no-one looked uncomfortable or dis-engaged. All individual interviewees engaged thoughtfully and seemingly freely. Further thoughts and reflections were requested as follow-on written responses, but none of these raised different issues or degrees of feeling not previously expressed in interviews.

The main ethical concern here, the act of inviting disclosure on personal and possibly sensitive matters[12], was further considered in a subsequent application for ethical clearance of my second

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[12] In their Ethical Guidelines, the Social Research Association (2003:35) includes a major section on protecting the interests of subjects. They recommend 'minimising disturbance' and helping subjects be involved in protecting their own interests by giving them good information about the consequences of

stage of research (Appendix Q). A balance was needed between adequately preparing people for the experience and scope of the interview, without constraining their response or imposing my own assumptions on what might arise from the encounter. As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) observe,

> 'Interviews can have a certain seductive quality: participants may appear comfortable and may disclose information apparently willingly during an interview, but may later regret having been so open. They may also be left with feelings and thoughts stirred up by the interview long after the researcher has moved on' (ibid:68).

The chance to speak of matters often left unvoiced may provoke extra disclosure within the safety and encouragement of a well-engaged group, or the confidentiality of a one-to-one interview. Both Atchley (2009) and Johnson (2013) speak of people's relief, even need, to talk about spiritual matters and what they mean to them in later life. I required a mix of good listening skills and openness about my own assumptions as appropriate. Interviewers are neither advisers nor counsellors. They can, however, be open, authentic human beings, giving full attention and acceptance to their interviewees. The negotiation of ground rules for interview interactions and the chance to elaborate on thoughts and feelings through written reflections hopefully also helped participants' sense of being collaborators rather than just subjects within my process.

4.4   Overview and justification of research design

My study is a qualitative, multi-method investigation of the spiritual learning and development of older people, with a view to accounting for the changes in spirituality that may take place in later life. As just discussed, the phenomenon of later life spirituality is best researched through interpretive, qualitative methodologies. This gives primacy to older people's accounts of their reflections and self-perceptions, rather than observed behaviours or attributed meanings. These accounts were derived from two stages of research: semi-structured focus group discussions followed by individual interviews. Using more than one method within a single study enables the data and analysis of one method to inform and guide the strategy and subsequent analysis of the other (Morse 2003). Two samples of participants were recruited, who were spiritually engaged,

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participating (as set out, for instance, in a participant information sheet). Disturbance may arise from the stress of participation or the loss of self-esteem in doing so. The researcher must estimate the severity and likelihood of these occurrences.

independent, community dwelling older people. My overall aim was the collection of verbal data, initially using focus groups to exemplify the language, concepts and ways people talk about spirituality and its development in later life. Analysis from this first stage enabled me to fashion further enquiry with individuals in order to develop deeper and wider answers to research questions. I included participants expressing both religious and non-religious spiritualities in both stages of my design. My research questions are set out in the Introduction (Chapter 1), but I reprise them below in table form in order to illustrate the overall research plan.

Table 3   Research Questions within overall design. Source: author

Research questions	Data sources and methods	Purpose
1. **What is the nature of spiritual learning and its development in later life?** • How is spiritual learning & development recognised within older people's life experience? • What forms of spiritual learning & development operate in older people's lives?	Focus group discussions Individual interviews	To identify issues and themes about spiritual learning and development in later life; To hear about how older people see, relate to and develop their spirituality. To ascertain instances of this kind of learning and its location in the mature life-course and in personal biography; To understand the ways and means involved in spiritual interpretations of experience, especially in later life.
2. **In what ways do older people see spiritual development as related to ageing or being older?** • Spiritual questions at this time? • Significance of a spiritual dimension to late life?	Individual interviews Focus group discussions	To explore the meaning of being older for ongoing spiritual development; to explore the significance of mature spirituality for being older. To hear about ideas on later life spirituality and its significance.

The method of interviewing (for both groups and individuals) addressed the research questions in complementary ways, with themes and concepts identified during focus group discussions

informing subsequent individual interviews. This influence was reflected both in the concepts and phrasing employed in the semi-structured interview guide as well as in the further issues and detail elicited through probes and follow-up questions (see Appendix G for individual interview guide). Individual interviews allowed me to better locate later life spiritual practices and ideas within the life-course and personal circumstances of interviewees.

Choosing interviewing as my main strategy enabled me to gather verbal data in an interactive setting, allowing clarifications and elaborations to be pursued. The importance of talking to people in order to grasp their point of view is underlined by Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003), who note that personal accounts have the power of language to illuminate meaning (2003:138). Qualitative interviewing offers a meaningful way to generate data from people by talking and listening, usually by analysing what takes place in order to construct a reality. In my study, interviews were semi-structured by the use of topic guides involving a few open questions, with a number of probes and follow-ups listed for use if appropriate. They enabled in-depth interactions with participants, for 'reconstruction of knowledge' rather than 'extraction' of it (Mason 2002:63). This observation seems especially relevant to my purposes, which were to tap into people's reflections and reconstructions of their experience of spirituality. I did not explicitly seek biographies but anticipated that life-story episodes would arise as people illustrated their responses.

I will make a few observations about comparison and complementarity of focus group and individual interviews within research, before going on to describe the design features of employing focus group discussions (FGDs) as a method for the first stage of my research. The 'reconstruction of knowledge' effect can be enhanced in the context of a FGD which provides the stimulation of other people's reflections, but individual interviews offer complementary advantages, namely making their combination with FGDs a powerful one (Barbour 2007). Exploring research-relevant issues with a group can yield not only concepts but also language – the terms people use to express their ideas and views – which I have used to compose and tune questions for individual interviews. The challenge of researching spirituality is not so much that the subject is unfamiliar but that it is not commonly expressed, since its largely internal nature does not naturally lead to public discussion or even everyday conversation. In the case of my study, the focus group helped in airing and finding words for things that are familiar but not often articulated. Two of my FGDs were relatively large (10 and 8 members) and the structure of the

discussion was kept fairly open. These two factors improved the chances of deriving a good range of themes and terminology from the spiritual outlook of participants (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

The main benefit of individual interviews, for the purposes of my study, is the possibility of greater in-depth understanding of the personal context in which later life spirituality is located (Silverman 2007). They also offer the chance to explore spirituality's interaction with other life-course characteristics and sources of development. Importantly this can include the opportunity to relate different aspects of spirituality more closely to personal circumstances, such as particular life events or transitions experienced. Individual interviews facilitate the tracing of impacts and outcomes as well as the explanation of motivations. In summary, my understanding of the different nature of focus group and individual interviews is that they can yield complementary kinds of information. For instance, a group can generate a range of opinions and spark an exploration of conceptual ideas, giving clues about how ideas and understandings operate, but individual conversations are better for eliciting detail and experience or for tracking someone's reasoning or rationale for certain views or behaviours.

4.5   Focus group discussions: stage 1 design

Focus group discussions are a well-established method within social research and typically consist of a group interview process involving six to ten people who meet once, for a period between one and two hours (Bryman 2012). Focus group discussions (FGDs) are a good technique especially for initial data gathering, as they can provide insight into a research topic in order to identify major themes. In particular, in my research, their purpose was to help with the conceptualising of the phenomenon under study. My literature review has shown that spirituality in later life is a contested and evolving concept. Focus groups can also help identify the interests of a specific group of people by focusing on how they think and feel (Barrett and Kirk 2000) – in my case, how they think of and experience their spirituality.

In contrast to individual interviews or questionnaires, a focus group generates interaction, producing a greater range of information on people's experiences and opinions, as well as more rapid responses and a greater number of ideas than one-to-one questioning (Barrett and Kirk 2000:623). The notion that focus group data can represent more than the sum of their participants' views was voiced by Morgan (1996) since ideas can emerge that may not have been forthcoming from individuals, or indeed the researcher, but are a product of the group discussion. Indeed, Ritchie and Lewis (2003) assert that 'the group process, the interaction between participants, will itself illuminate the research issue' (2003:58). Focus groups are described as 'a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in

order to generate data' (Kitzinger 1995:299). Valuable interaction results from participants both responding to each other and explaining more about their views when hearing the views of others, or being asked for clarification. This not only produces data on both diversity and consensus of opinions, but can also lead to further explanation of views and behaviours in addition to initial descriptions of them (Morgan 1996). Further, the group moderator has the advantage of being able to probe further about divergence of views. Both variety and consensus within outlooks can be compared to good effect when people are engaged in a well-performing group situation. Fresh insights can emerge for participants when hearing other people's stories. This reflective process was manifested in my focus groups, with some members supplying initially quicker responses that aided the reflection of others. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note that groups are also better for conceptual topics or for clarifying views and attitudes. Even if sensitive matters (such as personal beliefs) are to be explored, a group setting can be appropriate if group members have similar enough experiences of the issue. It can also be helpful in getting beyond normative responses if the group works well. This effect was demonstrated in one of my focus groups in particular, where members challenged each other about approaches to faith they were less familiar with and said at the end that they had learned from the discussion.

The strengths of focus group discussions rely largely on the recruitment of appropriate participants. Marshall and Rossman (2016) note that focus groups are typically composed of people who are unfamiliar with one another, but selected on the basis of shared characteristics of relevance to the study's questions. For this reason, I decided that I would include in my study older people who already had some degree of spiritual understanding and engagement in their lives, rather than sample older people in general. Although I had no age cut-offs per se, I decided that independently dwelling, relatively active older adults would provide a more coherent subject group, rather than attempting to include participants who might be physically limited or in residential settings. The lower age / stage boundary for my target group was identified as retirement from main career or family raising. Although retirement is difficult to define with precision nowadays, the thrust of my recruitment was of those who were mostly if not entirely in charge of their own time, and choosing priorities about how they spent it. I anticipated that this lifestyle would also involve having commitments to voluntary, informal or even paid work as well as attending to one's family or community.

In making these choices I have opted for more homogeneity than heterogeneity: they were third-age, spiritually engaged, independent residents in Southeast England. Having a higher level of

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shared characteristics in the group is said to promote interaction and disclosure, but risks a less full articulation of different views, since participants assume others know what they mean. This can be countered by the moderator probing and following up on people's contributions to highlight differences and promote discussion. I felt that the disadvantages of creating a group with a common characteristic of spiritual engagement were outweighed by its benefits: Sharing sensitive and private thoughts could be easier with some notion of a common (if not similar) spiritual approach to life. Although 'sensitive topics therefore leave less scope for diversity, … some difference between group participants is nevertheless desirable' (Finch and Lewis 2003:190).

Finch and Lewis (2003) suggest other ways in which a homogeneous group may be made more diverse. One is to have a range of expertise regarding the research topic represented in the group. This could have meant including those who had previously undertaken formal theological education or held a leadership role within a spiritual community. However, I was more interested in tapping into the range of learning and spiritual maturity shown in 'lay' (untrained) outlooks for conducting spiritual lives. Another way to diversity is to seek a range of socio-demographic makeup within the group. From focus group members, I sought information on age, educational attainment, gender, self-rated health and type of spirituality on a brief the pre-discussion questionnaire. I was then able to establish criteria for selecting a second sample (see Section 4.8.1).

4.5.1   Recruitment: focus groups

I will now set out how recruitment took place. For practical purposes, I decided to concentrate on my local area of Hampshire/West Sussex. An initial online search of spiritual groups and activities within a 25-mile radius of my home town near Pxxxxxxxxx confirmed the presence of a wealth of spiritual groups and activities. These included 25 'spirituality' groups that met regularly and were open to anyone to join; four 'religion and belief' groups that were not churches; and nine non-creedal church communities (Quakers and Unitarians). The results of this search are included as Appendix A. I did not attempt to list group activities for older adults associated with mainstream churches, mosques or temples, but these would have been numerous. I excluded the very many alternative spiritual health services that offer group and individual therapies and, in some cases, learning and training opportunities. My initial survey demonstrated that spirituality was 'alive and well' in many forms locally, despite not being something that a majority of people engage with. This meant that I would not have to look far for spiritually engaged, community-dwelling older people. Of course, not many of the groups and activities that I found were specifically aimed at older participants, so it was a matter of targeting groups to find out more about accessing older

people from amongst their members. I realised that I knew someone who was involved with one of the alternative spirituality groups picked up by my search, so started making contact. This was a West Sussex educational trust that provided spiritual activities, groups and classes, whose clients and volunteers were mostly mature and older people.

To also recruit a group that was more likely to include religious spiritualities, I approached a coffee shop sponsored by a group of churches in a Hampshire village that offers a pastoral service to the public and had a mostly elderly clientele. My targets for recruitment were the older volunteers who staffed the service, whom I presumed might have a spiritual motivation for their work. A third possible source was a large adult learning programme for church-based spiritual learners held annually in Surrey, whose clientele was mostly older and were attracted to the programme's less orthodox outlook. I felt that this group might contain those who were more consciously spiritual learners. As a result of these decisions[13], the first stage of fieldwork involved holding focus group discussions in South East England (Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex).

Having made contact with potential groups through their leaders and managers, I used these as gatekeepers to recruit participants. Meetings or email correspondence with the gatekeepers established my general purposes, hopes and credentials and gained interest and commitment on their part to help recruit participants. Agreed information about me and my project was then communicated either directly by group leaders to members identified as potentially suitable, or by the distribution of an agreed invitation (in the form of a flier) in settings where members could opt to follow it up (see Appendix D). This process enabled self-selection, such that those without a significant interest in spirituality would presumably not respond. A table that summarises the formation of FGDs is found at Appendix B.

4.5.2   Interview guide

A semi-structured focus group interview guide seemed the best option in order to encourage discussion, but also because I felt that a completely open interaction would make comparisons

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[13] A fourth potential connection was with a network of middle-aged and older people interested in personal development and whose membership included many with a spiritual background, both religious and non-religious. They met twice a year in a Hampshire village but lived more widely across the county. Participants came forward, but a date could not be agreed within my time frame and the FGD did not take place.

and common themes more difficult to identify. Four open-ended questions were used as the FGD guide:

1. What does your spirituality (having a spiritual perspective or outlook) mean to you at this time in your life?

2. What changes (if any) have you noticed in your spiritual outlook and behaviour as a mature person in recent years?

3. Can you say what prompted these new understandings or expressions of your spirituality?

4. How do you think your spiritual life might develop in future, in your later life?

Prompts and possible follow-ups were also identified and included in the interview guide. The discussion was held with myself in the role of moderator, with the help of an assistant to take notes and share responsibility for the welfare of the group. (See Appendix E for the Focus Group Discussion guide, including its follow-up questions.)

4.6 Data Collection: conduct of focus group discussions

The settings used for the FGDs were locations familiar to the participants in buildings they were used to visiting for existing activities. In all groups, some participants knew at least some others, and a few were acquainted with me. A certain degree of initial familiarity was an advantage, but most members were still unfamiliar with most others and did not constitute pre-existing groups. I have discussed under reflexivity (Section 4.2.3) the issues of participants' perceptions of me in the role of researcher, and my own self-awareness of interaction with the participants and the topics under discussion.

I prepared a briefing for each session which covered my role and that of the assistant. This included the administration of a brief information gathering questionnaire on participants' characteristics (See Appendix F). At the end of the recording, I offered an optional follow-up written reflection exercise for those who wished to say more in writing concerning the discussion questions. I subsequently received 11 responses by email. These comprised 9 of the 21 participants who had attended focus groups and a further 2 from respondents who had not been able to attend, responding to the following brief: "Please reflect on whether or how your spirituality has changed over recent years, especially since mid-life or retirement." A guide of 500 words was suggested and the average word length received was 530, but the range was from 120 to 1000. The purpose was to give opportunity for people to expand on thoughts that had occurred since the discussion and this task was interpreted widely. Written reflections were subsequently analysed alongside FGD data (see Section 4.7.2).

I also wrote up some brief field notes of my own on returning from each FGD, which included general observations on atmosphere and levels of engagement. The focus group discussions thus yielded three transcriptions of audio-recordings amounting to approximately 90 pages, and field notes on points of immediate interest and patterns of interaction. These notes included some initial comparisons between the groups' interactions, such as similar or contrasting ways in which concepts of spirituality were expressed and employed in discussion. Some brief observations on how the groups functioned are described in the following section.

4.6.1 Reflections on the FGDs

The nature of the discussions on spirituality displayed some variance between the focus groups, which comprised spiritual learners of various kinds. The largest one, HH, had 10 participants, which made it harder for participants to break in with their contributions. Once someone got the floor they tended to keep it until they had said what they intended. Although this initially impeded conversational flow, interaction increased in the course of the discussion as people relaxed. The smallest group, GDS, had only 3 members having suffered 3 no-shows, so the overall discussion was harder to sustain. In the role of moderator, I had to make more input but conversation between the members was better able to develop. The medium sized group of 8, EPC, was the best balanced in terms of individual responses to the discussion topics and group interaction. In all groups, some participants were more dominant than others, but not to a problematic degree. There was a great interest in listening to others, especially to the large range of opinions and beliefs expressed; all groups noted the unusual, but welcome, experience of talking about spiritual matters in this way.

The greatest source of difference between the groups lay in their compositions: HH containing mostly non-religious spiritual learners; EPC being largely a religious but ecumenical Christian group; GDS including members of an open learning programme within a religious setting, attracting non-traditional thinkers. Some initial observations could be made about the overall tenor of the responses within each group. For instance, the first question: 'What does your spirituality mean to you at this time in your life?' aimed to elicit ideas about recognising spirituality. For the HH group (comprising mostly 'spiritual but not religious' outlooks) spirituality was part of one's developing identity and being open to new understanding and experience, including acceptance of others. For the EPC group (mostly religious spirituality), it was seen as a journey involving a search for connection with the transcendent, and with others along the way.

For the small GDS group it was about living an ethical and authentic life in tune with one's values and with other people.

4.7 Qualitative data analysis: focus group discussions

4.7.1 Strategy and processes

These initial descriptions of the focus groups were based on re-reading each transcript and written reflection, thus involving an implicit, informal thematic coding process which initiated my familiarity with the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This was followed by further analytical work, involving explicit coding across all data sources and the building of themes using NVivo. Case attributes were created to reflect variables of age, spiritual upbringing and other items collected in a brief pre-discussion questionnaire. Further details on analysis and interpretation are given in findings Chapters Five and Six.

Qualitative analysis is thus a matter of both data handling and its interpretation. These two activities can be carried out at the same time, but there is often an initial emphasis on what Gibb (2007:2) calls the 'office' procedures. These are the functions of sorting, retrieving and indexing in order to reduce and deal with the amount of raw qualitative data. The other, contrasting aspect of analysis is the more intuitive, imaginative process of creating a consistent but perceptive account that nonetheless remains grounded in the data. As Ritchie, Lewis and Spencer (2003:219) put it:

> 'The first requires managing the data and the second involves making sense of the evidence through descriptive or analytical accounts'.

For this interpretive task, there are a number of approaches to the data to be considered. The chief division appears to be between an interest in the *content of the subject matter* discussed and a focus on the *ways ideas are communicated* (Gibb 2007). This latter approach implies use of methods such as conversation or discourse analysis. Since I am primarily interested in the content of the participants' contributions I have employed thematic analysis. Bryman's view of thematic analysis is that it does not associate with any particular school of thought or imply particular techniques, but can be adapted to a variety of methodological designs where thematic elements are sought (2012:578).

Since the themes employed in my study were not pre-determined or theoretically derived before inspecting the data, the kind of thematic analysis used has some similarities to that described by Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor (2003) as grounded theory. This involves composing analytical

categories and defining their dimensions in response to data, and then identifying relationships between them. Unlike grounded theory, however, I did not come to data analysis devoid of theoretical ideas, as apparent from my literature review. My thematic strategy also had some elements of treating the transcript as a document. With this approach, I looked at how ideas that generated potential themes were presented by participants. Braun and Clarke (2006) observe that the identification of themes is not a passive process (as implied by describing themes as 'being discovered') because the researcher plays an active part in creating, selecting and reporting them. Themes do not 'reside' in data but in researchers' thinking about data and creating meaningful links (ibid:80). Similarly, analytical meanings do not reside in codes but in the interpretation attributed to their relationships.

In practice, qualitative analysis is not only a matter of steps but involves fluidity and iteration within both data management and interpretation. This process has to be tracked since researchers need to document and reflect on their research activities, as well as become aware of the impact of their processes on results (Silver and Lewins 2014; Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor 2003). Project management software packages now offer ways of supporting analysis at all stages of research, but particularly with data analysis. Silver and Lewins discuss the basic principles and purposes of different aspects of the analytical process (2014:16) and provide a table of tasks that can be aided by computer software (ibid:9). Mine was aided by a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) programme, NVivo, which has the capacity systematically to explore data according to its content. Most importantly, for developing themes, the programme is an aid to coding and coding schema.

4.7.2 Coding and concept building

My research questions seek to find out about what people 'think and do' about their spirituality in later life, how they have developed it so far, and in what ways they relate continued spiritual learning to growing older. In pursuing these questions through qualitative interviewing (of both focus groups and individuals), I have used largely *inductive* approaches to analysis whereby coding assists in the process of generating concepts and explanations, and potentially to theory building. Such theories or models are based on the accumulation of many particular, but similar, instances of the ideas or relationships proposed (Silver and Lewins 2014). However, even whilst focusing on building 'upward' from empirical data, my interpretations have been influenced by existing theoretical concepts and relationships, involving some 'top-down' *deductive* thinking that has also

been reflected in coding. For instance, an early exchange between group members on later life spirituality described a 'greater simplicity' and rejection of an over-determined pattern of belief associated with church / temple, I later identified as a changing style in one's spiritual learning (see Section 5.3.2). This combination of grounded and theory driven ideas, discussed earlier as abduction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), is particularly appropriate for the empirically-based modelling that I anticipate moving towards in this research (Silver and Lewins 2014:170).

The interview transcripts and participants' written pieces were thematically coded using NVivo (Silver and Lewins 2014), employing descriptive and interpretive coding, to build a picture of responses in relation to the research questions. Coding is a means of organising data in order to aggregate and interpret them. Segments of text, words or phrases can be indexed as instances of something that is felt to be of interest, as a first level of analysis. I initially allocated 'literal' and then more 'interpretive', abstract or theory-related codes as I re-read my material, keeping notes of reflections, decisions and connections as I went. These types of coding can be seen as different kinds of 'lenses' on the data (Mason 2002). The process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) describes how to generate, refine and describe themes. My coding process was started by noting very simple codes (using participants' wording) on the left-hand margin of the transcript print-offs. As more abstract or theory-driven codes or concepts additionally occurred to me, these were noted in the right-hand margin[14]. For instance, left-margin notes such as 'became Methodist', 'joined Quakers' 'left Siddha Yoga' could be grouped as 'steps on spiritual journey'. Later still, 'spiritual journey' became an aspect of a key theme on spiritual change. This process generated a large list of initial codes for each group transcript, which were then further aggregated to reduce their overall number and in order to work towards a common coding frame for all sources.

An iterative process followed, of re-reading text and re-defining the draft codes, to ensure they still represented the data despite being more abstract. The original annotated transcripts and early listings have been kept as an audit trail for decisions taken; a memo noting the process was filed in NVivo. Codes were modified and refined as extracts of text were attributed to them, and their definitions adjusted. Codes are known as nodes and sub-nodes in NVivo, and can be listed hierarchically. I was now able to print off lists of extracts under each 'parent node', and its 'child

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[14] Timmermas and Tavory (2012) confirm the impossibility of approaching data without any theoretical ideas or assumptions; they recommend 'repeated exposure and close engagement with both data and related examples of theory' for theory construction (p.181)

nodes' (see Appendix R). As a check, I wrote a memo summarising the data attributed to one parent node 'Ageing and spirituality', finding nothing wrongly attributed and very little missing when I re-inspected the transcripts and written responses. This assisted my confidence in the coding structure as being sufficiently differentiated and consistently applied. As Ritchie, Spencer and O'Conner (2003) observe 'Having found what appear to be linkages in the data, it is necessary then to explore why they exist' (ibid:251) in order to aid verification within a small, purposefully selected sample. Additional steps to check proposed relationships include further interrogation of patterns of association. In my study design, this was achieved by the further, complementary data gathering stage of individual interviewing as a major means of deeper analysis.

4.8   Individual interviews: Stage 2 design

The main purpose of the second stage of my research was to capture more of the contexts of spiritual development, within individual biographies as well as responses to the new terrains of later life. In what ways was the participants' spiritual learning seen as part of their ageing journeys? An in-depth interview strategy is particularly appropriate for focusing on individual lived experiences, such as spirituality in older age, by creating a form of access to the meanings participants attribute to their experience and ways of looking at the world (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003). Individual interviews can be both flexible and interactive, achieving breadth and depth. Because the individual interviews were grounded in an initial understanding established through the FGDs, this gave me a good idea of key topics and issues to explore. Groups had given some insight on how spiritually-aware older people thought and felt about their spiritual development in later life, and the concepts and language they used to describe it. I was keen to hear individual interviewees' own words and ideas on these matters (Marshall and Rossman 2016:102). The flexibility of the interview was to be achieved through a semi-structured guide of a minimal number of open questions (see Appendix G and Section 4.8.2 below). This was in order to

> 'Permit topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee, to allow responses to be fully probed and explored and allow the researcher to be responsive to relevant issues raised by the interviewee' (Legard *et al* 2003:141).

The complementary nature of focus group and individual interviews described earlier (Section 4.4) enabled me to pursue in greater depth people's rationale for their spiritual thinking and practice and how they saw it in the context of their later lives. I also hoped to elicit responses to topics the

interviewee might not have considered before by using the ideas produced in the focus groups, such as the ways in which their spiritual perspective had developed as a learning response. The phrasing of the questions was enhanced by the focus groups' conceptualisations and experiences. For instance, the role of intuition and learning to trust one's inner consciousness was a significant group theme, in addition to an ongoing wrestling with making sense of life experience. I also needed to probe further on patterns I had initially identified, a process described by Marshall and Rossman (2016:229) as 'moving towards theoretical sufficiency'.

In conducting the individual interviews, I aimed to encourage respondents to talk freely about their spirituality and spiritual development, but also had a list of possible probes and follow-up questions to hand, according to the possible directions of the conversation (see individual interview guide at Appendix G[15]). For instance, the individual interview situation allowed for exploration of the ways in which a person's spirituality might develop further in future and how this could be supported. Individual conversations also enabled more explicit linkages to be explored between life course events and spiritual change and development, and how these have been understood at different phases in a person's life.

4.8.1   Sampling and recruitment for individual interviews

In terms of target respondents, in order to derive broadly comparable data, I planned to speak to a further sample of spiritually engaged, community-dwelling older people. As in Stage 1, their ages were from earlier to later third age; that is to say, from retirement onwards, but not including those for whom dependency and limitation had become a significant part of life. I anticipated conducting approximately 20 interviews on the basis of a number of criteria (purposive sampling) and succeeded in carrying out 23. This was to make sure that enough diversity was included to explore the impact of potentially relevant characteristics within the limitations of a relatively small size sample. This is not the same as seeking representation of a larger population (Bryman 2012), such as all spiritually engaged older people. My sample criteria were age-group, gender and spiritual identity (religious and non-religious). I balanced my interview sample with at least four participants aged under 70 and at least four over 75; and at least four men and four women. These took part, respectively, in ten interviews involving people of religious and ten with non-religious spiritual identities. With this approach, I recruited an interview sample group which displayed variation on a particular phenomenon (later life

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[15] The fairly extensive list of probes and follow-on questions currently listed in the interview guide at Appendix G should not therefore be seen as constituting any kind of questionnaire.

spirituality) but which allowed sub-groups to be compared (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003). For instance, on the criterion of age, younger (>70) respondents were likely to be processing the spiritual implications of retirement and re-orienting themselves as third agers, as well as familiar with more recent conceptualisation of spirituality as opposed to religion. Older participants (75+) had more likely begun to experience loss and change that is not of their making, or were re-framing narratives from religious upbringings. Target and actual numbers of interviewees are set out below in Table 3.

Table 4   Criteria and numbers for individual interview sample. Source: author

	Religious spirituality: target	Religious spirituality: actual	Non-religious spirituality: target	Non-religious spirituality: actual
Men	4 or more	4	4 or more	5
Women	4 or more	7	4 or more	7
Of whom, under 70 years	4 or more	5	4 or more	6
Of whom, 75 years or over	4 or more	6	4 or more	6
TOTALS	10	11	10	12

Recruitment of participants was carried out through the same networks and approaches used for focus discussion members. I generated a further sample of interviewees, using and extending the networks I had established, in order to identify and recruit similar kinds of participants to those who had participated in the focus groups. In this way, I followed up the issues raised in the first stage of research (focus group discussions and written reflections) in more detail. Groups involving spiritually engaged older people, initially identified through a search process (Appendix A), were revisited and augmented through personal and professional connections with both religious and non-religious spirituality groups; these were still within a 25-mile radius of my home town (near Pxxxxxxxxx). Through these networks and connections, I contacted members of two local alternative spirituality centres that offered learning opportunities (HH and HL); a non-religious contemplative group (FQG); and an ecumenical range of older Christians in local church volunteer activities and learning groups (GDS and SJN).

As with the focus groups, I encountered a range of both religious and non-religious backgrounds and affiliations. As before, I approached gatekeepers to enlist their support and agree the best method for recruitment, involving a mixture of fliers inviting participation (see Appendix F) and personal contacts suggested by group leaders. I offered a briefing to participants prior to interview and included a simple life-line diagram to aid reflection on their spiritual development so far (see Appendix H). This optional exercise invited them to make notes on major events and phases relating to their spirituality over their life-course (see Appendix H). Settings of interviews included community venues used previously in Stage 1, or in people's own homes, according to their choice. See Appendix K for a list of individual interviews carried out.

4.8.2   Individual interview guide

The individual interview guide was drawn up following analysis of Stage 1 FGD data. Indicative findings from thematic analysis of focus group data thus provided a basis for a second stage of enquiry through individual interviews. These initial findings were summarised into six thematic domains in which further data could provide more insight not easily obtained in a group, such as greater biographical detail and context, and personal rationales and responses to experience. I briefly describe these domains that subsequently underpinned the individual interview guide:

i.   *Life experience and meaning-making* described focus group members' understanding of how spiritual learning was derived from life experience, how it was interpreted as having spiritual meaning and how trust in it was developed for future understanding. Could individual interviewees provide further descriptions and examples? The relationship of this process with ageing had emerged so far in two ways: as an accumulation of ageless experience formed and re-formed throughout life; and as a particular re-formation or 'coming together' of spiritual understanding associated with later life. Were these views incompatible and how were they situated in life-courses?

ii.   *Reflection and the inner life* had been frequently described as integral to people's spirituality. Cultivation of interiority as a reflective response to life was both an outcome and a means of spiritual learning. The mental processes of inner life seemed also to operate beyond the cognitive/rational and included openness to emotion, intuition and a sense of 'inner voice'. It was also associated by respondents with different 'ways of knowing' and of being spiritual in the world, such as acting with congruence between one's inner and outer presence. What more could individuals say on how this inner sense was experienced and nurtured?

iii. *Spiritual development and a spiritual self-identity* were recognised as confidence to re-evaluate previous beliefs and practices as part of ongoing development of a spiritual perspective. It included self-awareness and values that were fruits of experience so far, and which could be worked on further. Most expressed intentions to continue development of spiritual potential and ethical values and practices, which I anticipated could be probed in terms of self-directed learning. Did this broadly humanistic approach imply that spiritual development was potentially available to all but needed to be actively chosen?

iv. *Making spiritual connections* was a common theme that recognised an enhanced or alternative spiritual reality beyond immediate perception (transcendence) and was a hallmark of spiritual engagement, whether religious or non-religious. Spiritual development regarding connection tended in one of two directions: to enable a higher self to be brought into consciousness, wherein and whereby spiritual connection was made; or to connect with another reality, personal (divine) or impersonal (nature, energy). What further description or experience could be offered regarding transcendence beyond or into a larger self/reality?

v. *Developing spiritual narratives* were evidently being built up and edited, as a back-story to a person's spiritual outlook or perspective. FGD analysis had discerned two kinds of spiritual learning responses, linked to sources of narratives: dwelling, which involved adapting an adopted narrative; and seeking, which was constructing a narrative using a variety of sources. Could individual interviewees shed further light on how these styles of development change over time or circumstance, or coexist in different dynamic ways?

vi. *The journey of spiritual development* was recognised as a good metaphor by many FGD respondents, regardless of spiritual background or current perspective. FG data could not reach far enough into this awareness of spiritual learning – either in terms of reflection on the past or intentions for the future, which needed more attention to life-context and story. Could the time and space of an individual interview enable such data to emerge?

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These six domains for further enquiry divided fairly easily: the first three cohere around spiritual self-development and how it is experienced and made sense of; the second three are more oriented around practice and relationships with others in developing the spiritual journey. Wishing to keep interview questions to a minimum, I therefore decided to pose two open questions to potentially cover these issues:

> *What does your spirituality, or spiritual life, currently bring you?*

> *In what ways does getting older affect the way your spirituality is developing?*

I also listed a number of sub-questions that related more directly to the six domains to act as either prompts or follow-ups. In this way I sought to represent FGD insights in the general structure of the guide *and* in particular ways if appropriate, whilst also keeping a very open structure for the interviewee's contribution. To remind the reader, the full individual interview guide is shown as Appendix G.

4.9   Data collection: conduct of individual interviews

A total of 23 interviews were carried out with individuals in private homes and in familiar community settings, over five months (from September 2017 to February 2018). Recruitment carried on following initial interviews in order to pursue participants that met the sample criteria (for instance, needing to find two more 75+ towards the end of the process). As with focus groups, participants responded to fliers or gatekeepers' invitations to consider my request, so that their willingness to talk about spirituality and personal lives could be assumed. Ethical considerations discussed in Section 4.3.2 had been further examined and approved in an ethical application for this second stage. This had focused to a greater extent on the potential harm of an individual personal interaction (see Section 4.3.3) which had resulted in a more detailed pre-interview briefing acknowledging these issues (see Appendix H) and a consideration of any risk factor for a solo interviewer visiting participants at home.

A consent form was signed immediately prior to interview, and the same brief questionnaire administered as had been used with focus group members (Appendix I). This enabled comparable biographical data to be collected from all participants and confirmed that I had recruited my target sample. At the end of each interview, a written response form was offered *as an option* for follow-up thoughts, as it had been for FGDs. I subsequently received four written reflections from interviewees, of average length 327 words. The interview durations ranged from just under one hour to just over two but mostly lasted a little over an hour, with an average time of 1 hour 20minutes (see Appendix K). Typed transcripts of interviews ranged from 19 to 49 pages, which

reflected not only the length of interaction but the rate of speech exchanged. On return from each interview, I wrote field notes about my impressions of its content and processes, as well as the participant and our interaction. For the purposes of reflexivity I included my own thoughts and feelings, especially concerning unexpected or surprising elements, or connections with other cases, theories, literature etc. When I came to transcribe the recordings, I wrote a further section of field notes with my thoughts on re-hearing the interview, sometimes weeks or months later, and with the benefit of a growing experience of data gathering.

4.9.1   Reflection on the individual interview process

I felt that the interview guide did function as planned and was also flexible enough to enable interviewees' issues and stories to emerge, making no two interviews alike even where individuals shared a similar age/gender/spirituality. The interviews displayed variance in length, content, style and participant response. Some participants had clearly thought about or even prepared some of what they wanted to say, sometimes in response to the briefing I offered. Others approached our interaction more spontaneously or reflectively in the moment. Some were wanting to tell their story almost regardless of the questions; some only wanted to be helpful and answer what they thought was wanted and took more encouragement to say what was important to them. I did indeed feel the need to be proactive to facilitate an interaction that suited both my purposes and theirs. Where I became more aware of their needs (for instance, for a listener or even a counsellor) I was conscious of my role as researcher but also of the need to respond as appropriately as possible within that context. Clandinin and Caine (2013) note the ethical dimensions of researchers acknowledging the relationship and reciprocal respect that should exist with participants. Conversely, I could not anticipate the effect of the conversations on me and so needed to consciously keep my role in mind in order to avoid being distracted. Field notes and a journal were useful outlets for reflection on such matters as I processed the interaction a few hours later; and sometimes again weeks later, leading to an adapted interpretation.

Participants' later reflections had been encouraged in the form of a written piece, in the same way as for FGDs (see Section 4.6). One interpretation of the relatively small number received was that interviewees had had a chance to express all that they wished in the actual interview. Of the four received, one continued with matters we had discussed; the other three contributed thoughts about the process and some new thoughts that had resulted. I reflected further on the issues of researcher effects in the context of a two-way interaction compared to that in a group

situation (discussed under reflexivity in Section 4.2.3). I had become more adept at spotting my own assumptions, which arose in some interactions more than others. The visibility of these for the interviewee would have been in my further probing of something I found surprising or perplexing, rather than me stating my own views. As with the focus group discussions, many interviewees said (both on and off the recording) that they had found the experience positive and thought-provoking.

4.10   Data analysis: individual interviews

4.10.1   Strategy and process: thematic and narrative approaches

I transcribed, analysed and interpreted the individual interviews in similar ways to the focus group discussions, including the use of NVivo (see Section 4.6) and findings are set out in Chapters 5 and 6. I carried out *thematic analysis* on individual interview data in relation to both research questions in the manner described above for focus group discussions (Section 4.7). I found early on that the coding structure established for FGD material was more than adequate for this second stage of data. There were no significant additional topics that could not be accommodated. I inspected related nodes to refine codings by conflating or differentiating them, especially where the same textual fragment had also been coded elsewhere. This operation also identified further related excerpts that shed light on the research questions, and relationships between participants' responses and coded attributes could be explored. Checks were made by re-inspecting quotes within the full text to guard against taking things out of context. As noted in the introductory chapter (Section 1.2) my overall aim was to grasp ideas, explanations and narratives that people had arrived at, and were still working on, concerning their spirituality and its development at this time in their lives.

However, in addition to thematic analysis, which identifies themes that cut across the whole data set, I also employed *narrative analysis* for my second research question which concerned the relationship people perceived between spiritual development and growing older (Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes 2010; Holstein and Gubrium 2011). I found that people had struggled to respond to this topic and that further clues might emerge from appraising whole interview texts, rather than looking for similar statements across data. I started compiling case notes to aid my own familiarity with participants' details when reading transcripts. Increasingly, as I re-read the data, some of the things I wished to note about cases centred around how they perceived any relationship between their spirituality and ageing, and how I might characterise the kinds of spiritual learning they engaged in. 'Pen portraits' thus blossomed into fuller case summaries, of which two items were 'ageing and spirituality', and respondents' later life 'spiritual learning project' (see Appendices M

and N). I describe in the next section how these two interpretive categories were used. For a narrative approach to analysis I now had case summaries in addition to full interview transcripts and field notes. In narrative analysis, these form 'field texts', underlining the idea that all research communications are to some extent co-productions with participants, capable of revealing aspects of the experience that the research relationship enables (Clandinin and Caine 2013).

A major focus for my narrative analysis was how accounts of later life spiritual learning and development were presented in the interview context. Following Josselsson (2011a), I agree that meaning is not inherent in experience but is constructed through social discourse – such as the formation of a person's spiritual outlook. Narrative telling is not simply a representation of what happened, but a construction for the purpose and context perceived. In the research context, interview narrations are therefore accounts of experience for particular purposes and audiences; and to create a particular point of view in relation to the interviewer. Researcher reflexivity acknowledges that findings are relative to my standpoint as observer and participant in the process (see Section 4.2.3). Research meaning is generated by the further interpretation and linkages that the *researcher* makes – in this case, concerning the participants' understanding of spirituality (Josselson 2011b). This idea is helpfully illustrated by Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) with a travelling metaphor:

> 'The interviewer is seen as a traveller who journeys with the interviewee. The meanings of the interviewees' stories are developed as the traveller sees them … (who) is thus an active player in the development of data and of meaning' (ibid:139).

Another possibility with narrative analysis is to explore whole accounts rather than conceptualising discursive units or categories, and looking at how the whole informs the parts. Since space did not allow this for all twenty-three individual interviews, I constructed brief case studies to illustrate the nature of later life spirituality and how it was understood by, for instance, a seeker and a dweller; by an older and younger participant; and by a religious and a non-religious participant (see Section 6.3). This strategy recognises that, having understood participants' stories to a good degree by creating case summaries, cross-case analysis can help discover patterns across individual narratives (Josselson 2011a:227). The aim is not to re-construct the stories that participants tell, such as finding a chronological order, but more to listen out for the kinds of ordering of stories that they present, and by following a narrative thread in the storyteller's responses to my prompts.

4.10.2   Coding and concept building: working with individual data

A narrative approach was chosen as an additional strategy in response to my experience within the research. By the end of conducting the interviews, I had become more aware of my participation in them, compared to the role of moderating a focus group discussion. Although their styles varied, individual interviews were basically conversational, with me playing an active part in the narrative that resulted. I noted in discussions of my work in progress that I used the term 'accounts' for data, prompting the idea that the narrative element of my findings should not be neglected. Whilst wishing to avoid experiencing my data as overwhelming and 'susceptible to endless interpretation, by turns inconsequential and deeply meaningful' (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou 2013:1), my exploration of literature on narrative approaches showed ways to incorporate them that seemed suitable (Clandinin and Caine 2013; Pfhal 2012; Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes 2008).

A narrative approach can in fact take many forms, and I identified one which still retained and built on thematic understandings. This offered a way to develop narrative analytical concepts which arose from a narrative understanding of the text (Josselson 2011a:226). As mentioned above, these related to ideas I developed about respondents' perceptions of 'ageing and spirituality' and their current 'spiritual learning project'. They were narrative in the sense of drawing on an overall understanding of each case (with the whole illuminating the part) but also thematic or 'categorical' (Josselson 2011a:227) in bringing together common elements – a kind of complex or super-code. For example, 'ageing and spirituality' expressed a range of perceptions about how later life did or did not relate to spirituality; and 'spiritual learning project' brought together my understanding of the kinds of learning and development that people were currently engaged in. I was able to further interpret these 'narrative categories' to develop findings on spiritual development in later life and the nature of the third age spiritual journey (see Chapter 6).

I also found that I need not be restricted to what appeared to be actual stories, episodes or events. Any recollection reported by participants was part of the story that they told themselves and included anything that had had an impact. When planning individual interviews, I had imagined that life events might be linked to spiritual changes, but the more potent link is with the meaning of such events to the individual, not with what an observer might consider impactful. A narrative approach thus helps underline the subtlety of so-called life events, especially those that are routinely associated with later life. Narrative analysis also assumes that experience becomes part of conscious outlook through stories we tell ourselves and others (Randall 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 2011). This assumption fits well with my understanding of how informal learning takes place through reflection on experience.

Narratives that describe experience may not be chronological, as in a biography, but can be characterised by themes or topics suggested by an interview guide (Squire 2008). In this way, turning points, realisations, life-course markers or long-term factors (such as illness or legacies of earlier events), as well as actual events and outcomes, can feature at different places across an interview, and sometimes in contradictory ways as the narrative develops. I found that my participants' experience-centred narratives still had sequence and meaning and illustrated human sense-making over time. The concepts and interpretations that I was able to develop from data took the form of the narrative categories, 'spirituality and ageing' and 'third-age spiritual learning journey', and some comparative case studies illustrating aspects of later life spiritual learning.

4.11   Conclusions on methodology

In this Methodology chapter, I have set out my broad methodological approach in terms of its epistemology through the use of qualitative methods. I have discussed issues of reflexivity, trustworthiness and ethical considerations that impact on design and conduct of research, and applied these to my research plans. I have provided a detailed description and justification of my research design and some initial commentary on the conduct of research. Chapters 5 and 6 which follow present findings in relation to my two major research questions, combining the analyses of both focus group and individual interviews.

Chapter 5   The nature of spirituality and its development in later life: findings from focus groups and individual interviews

5.1   Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to set out findings from both focus group discussions and individual interviews, using the data to address my first research question: *what is the nature of spirituality and its development in later life?* (see Sections 1.2 and 4.4). This question seeks to understand how older people view their spirituality and its development, in order to then shed light on any changes in spiritual experience and understanding in later life. The question was pursued in two ways: asking about how spirituality is *recognised* within older people's life experience (Sections 5.2 and 5.3); and the *kinds* of spiritual learning and development that take place (Sections 5.4 and 5.5).

Previous to writing this chapter, preliminary analysis of the focus group data was carried out in order to inform the next stage of data collection, namely individual interviews. The ways in which these preliminary findings shaped the methodology of the second stage were described in Chapter 4 (Section 4.8.2). This chapter (5) describes a fuller analysis, combining focus group discussion data gathered in stage one with individual interview data gathered in stage two. This strategy enabled me to start building ideas about spiritual learning and development in later life, based on initial evidence, and then later expand these by identifying similarities and differences through an analysis of stage two.

Four themes emerged in response to RQ1 from the fuller analysis and these are now outlined with their subthemes and illustrated by excerpts from across the data set (all interview transcripts and written responses). These report, first, on ways in which respondents *recognised their later life spirituality* (Section 5.2). From observations on this data, I then suggest some patterns and propose a basic typology of the ways in which later life spirituality is recognised (Section 5.3). Second, from observations on the *kinds of spiritual learning* reported by interviewees (Section 5.4), I propose a model of spiritual learning that draws on processes of informal adult learning as applied to later life spiritual development (Section 5.5).

5.2   Recognising spirituality and its development

To aid the reader, a brief recap on my understanding of spirituality is as a *search for meaning and significance, carried out in the realm of the sacred* (see Section 2.3.1). To more clearly distinguish spirituality from an existential pursuit of meaning, I include in spirituality an acceptance of a larger or 'transcendent' dimension to reality beyond the material world perceived by senses. In analysing participants' talk about spirituality I could discern four main ways in which spirituality and its development was recognised by older people. These address the 'what' and 'how' of spiritual learning and development, but do not attempt the 'why'[16] (Silverman 2017).

The four modes of spirituality and its development that participants recognised were: first, that spirituality was *something experiential and personal to me*; second, spiritual development engendered a *sense of spiritual self or identity*; third, consciousness of one's spirituality was *through an 'inner life'*; fourth, understanding of one's spirituality was developed *through a meaning frame* and its associated narrative. I will illustrate these aspects of recognising spirituality with reference to both focus group and individual interview data.

5.2.1   Something experiential and personal to me

People identified that learning from life had nourished their sense of spiritual experience and that this was their preferred way of understanding spirituality. This is captured well in the following quotes from both focus group and individual interviewees:

> *But the way my life has gone, the things I've learned and the things I've done, has made me focus in a lot more on --- you know – our spiritual side and how we should be.* Rachel

> *So my spiritual life simply focuses on stopping, noticing, watching the mind, feeling the heart and body whilst sensing and opening intuitively in the here and now.* Annabel

> *It had to be experienced and the understanding thing sort of fleshed it out.* Tom

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[16] since interviews represent a form of co-constructed data that are better analysed as social behaviour than unmediated ways of discovering people's motives. See discussion of this approach in Methodology chapter, Section 4.1.

Openness was a recurring idea that described a more conscious way into experience, whether in the moment or on looking back. Noticing more through becoming more deliberately open initiates reflection, which can lead to interpretations that support spiritual learning and development. See Section 2.2.3 / Figure 1 for 'reflection ladder' (Moon 1999) which describes how noticing is a first step from surface to deeper understanding as reflection plays an increasing part. Openness, as an increased propensity to notice, can be developed individually, with others, or pursued through spiritual practices.

> *So yes, I am open, but you have to learn through experience to be more open*. Alice

> [*T*]*his has obviously been nurtured in me by things I've gone through – what's grown in me is a very high sense of sensitivity to other people, and an understanding that they are precious and they are unique.* Paula

> *So through service then you learn, you grow, you come across problems and as a result of that you become able to serve more – because you've got more depth, more knowledge and so on.* Neil

Realisation is a term I have adopted for a less purposive form of reflecting on something – new meanings that just occur or dawn on people - compared to *review*, which has a more purposive feel about it. Realising and reviewing are kinds of reflection that can relate to both recent or longer-ago experience. These kinds of interpretation either confirm or adjust existing understandings and enable unplanned or novel experiences to be admitted to one's outlook or perspective. They also alert to the spiritual elements of everyday experience, as was captured when participants spoke of how they created spiritual meaning. The key message on recognising spirituality and its development was the primacy of experience as a basis for understanding, rather than 'knowing about' or being told how spirituality was meant to work.

> [*W*]*hat's important is - you know - you've got to develop your relationship with God, not your understanding of God. And I thought 'Oh!' --- I just need to sit down quietly and pray.* Rod

Since the processing of experience is unique to the individual, it follows that spiritual development is personal and not subject to exterior direction or control. Furthermore, ongoing experience is a means of continuously testing current spiritual understandings. So it is not surprising that spirituality and its development in maturity was identified as *confidence to assert one's own questions, critiques and 'ways of being spiritual'*. Concerning both beliefs and practices, this confidence develops as a result of holding up other views, propositions or experiences against one's own. A clear expression of this came from Marlene:

> *Ageing has given me the courage to make up my own mind and not feel bad or fearful because I disagree with some of what pious men, eons ago, determined what they thought Catholics should do, be or believe in.*

And from Jack:

> *I have to validate the theory - the doctrine - against my own experience.*

Finding one's 'own way of being spiritual' was more clearly expressed in individual interviews. It was associated with maturity and experience; the outcome of a long-term process; and seen as never complete. There was always more to learn and this goes for practice as well as knowledge and understanding. One participant felt that a life-lesson from her maturity was that

> *[T]here had been so much change in how life is lived we all needed to acknowledge the thing that doesn't change – God's love. The challenge is to be open about the different ways we express it, receive it and deal with it as a gift.* Caroline

Another reflected on what has changed for him long-term:

> *And if I'm in a different situation now, compared to say 10 or 15 years ago, I think it's because there's been consolidation of the idea that (pause) - that one has to be thoughtful and mindful in one's own being. But that only really works if one has the highest aspirations.* Pete

Jen (in her eighties) was aware she needed to keep on learning about what her spirituality meant in order to develop in new ways:

> *But I think in many ways, I'm finding it really important to really see what I'm either moving through or looking at.*

Sally's view was prevalent among interviewees, whether from a religious or non-religious spirituality:

> *I do look for meaning in things and I do look for spiritual significance in things, but I don't necessarily want somebody else telling me what that meaning is.*

5.2.2   A sense of spiritual self or identity

Spirituality and its development as a kind of lifelong self-development, especially of self-identity, arose initially from group respondents. I labelled these responses *Identifying and understanding oneself in a spiritual context.* They involved developing identity holistically in spiritual terms, rather than thinking of having a 'spiritual aspect' or part of one's self identity.

> *[Spirituality] it's like a stick of rock with it being stamped right down through me, that's who I am. And I'm always learning something new, or slightly tweaking or re-assessing, or whatever – it is my identity.* Marlene

Spiritual identity is also concerned with enabling a 'larger self' that is in some sense greater than one's material presence. It was often expressed in terms of a person's human potential and / or relationship with the transcendent that offered a space in which one could grow.

> *I became more aware that there was more to me than the 'bricks and mortar' of me, if you like!* Marlene

> *It's a basic human need to feel that there is something beyond humanity; beyond us – something bigger and, dare I say, better*. Jean

Individual as well as group respondents discussed whether the spiritual nature of the identity being developed indicated a capacity for a 'higher self' *and / or* a connection with another kind of reality beyond direct perception – with something or someone 'other'. People found a way of learning spiritually within whichever framework they had chosen.

Participants with a non-religious spirituality tended to view transcendence – that larger sense of the self – as indicating a greater spiritual reality of which we are all part. According to them, all life is part of a great force or energy that is often referred to as God (or similar non-personal term) but there is no division between our spiritual selves and the greater spiritual context. Spiritual learning and development could therefore enable a better understanding of ourselves as we relate to all else – a web of being – as well as develop our human potential and higher self. Delia and others explained how they saw this:

> *We're all part of one great enormous energy 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. (But) I tend to think that what you're aiming at is the higher mind, which is the voice of the soul.* Delia

> *I feel much closer to what I perceive as a divine spirit that is animating everything --- Nature as a manifestation of a superior being somewhere.* Sally

For me, it's attuning to what I personally consider is wisdom. So the great wisdom of those whose teachings I've read --- how can I be in this moment so I can tune in, receive, be empty enough to be open to some great wisdom? Mary

Other participants (mainly but not exclusively from religious spiritualities) were happier with the idea of transcendence involving the 'otherness' of a spiritual reality, since they felt they had developed ways of connecting, conversing, or relating in various ways that enhanced their sense of a spiritual self (as in 'I am a child of God' or 'I am a being of light'). They also could imagine a divinity within, such as the action of the Holy Spirit, or a divine intelligence that guided them.

My Lord walks with me every single day, wherever I am, whatever I'm doing. I know he's there and his Spirit is with me – guiding me, helping me, picking me up whenever I fall down. Daphne

I find myself drawn to a more meditative, contemplative way of being with God, who I feel is everywhere, all times, all places. Sasha

I feel nearer to a transcendent 'other', having more time to be in his presence, more open to listening for his voice and discerning him in other people; looking for, and finding, that of God in everyone. Jean

Almost all participants were of the view that, whether a spiritual force or divinity is external to us, or within and around all living things, a spiritual reality is available in everyday and ordinary circumstances. Participants felt that a spiritual dimension to human experience is not only accessible but part of how we learn to see our spiritual identities.

A key purpose of spiritual learning and development is to discover and grow a spiritual self or identity. As individual interviews showed in greater detail than focus groups, the spiritual self under construction took on various shapes within unfolding life-stories. Within codings on spiritual / self-development, I found various characterisations of spiritual selves that participants talked about. Some drew on *metaphors or typologies*: Alice identified with Mary the listener in the biblical story of Martha and Mary; Josh viewed astrological types as helpful metaphors for understanding one's strengths and weaknesses (like a kind of personality typology). The *higher or true self* was recognised as a means and a goal for spiritual development by Delia and Doug. The *damaged self*, from early life experience, was felt to be a hindrance to their spiritual development by Elsa and Greg. Jen and Rod identified the *self in transition* as their current perception about

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development; the *accepting self* was enjoyed by Paula and Sally whose development now felt less hindered by the past. People's ideas about their spiritual identities were now developing in a later life context and possibly receiving greater focus through growing older. I created the term 'spiritual learning project' for the sorts of learning that participants were engaged in. Spiritual identity development was often part of this endeavour.

For some, this learning had long roots in earlier life when their adult spiritual ideas had first been formed, and life experience had thereafter prompted further development. Here are some examples of *formational contexts or events* that had initiated or supported spiritual change and had been accessed by reflection on the past:

Cath mentioned that teenage questioning of religious upbringing from school science lessons became more pressing as a young adult going 'out into the world'. Both *Sheila and Delia* felt that their discovery of psychic gifts was neither acknowledged nor approved of by the church communities they had been part of, prompting a search for other sources of spiritual learning. A more sudden and challenging change had been felt by *Ginger* by going to art school in London following a sheltered schooling and religious upbringing in Hampshire. *Neil* had undergone a transformative change of teenage conversion to Methodism from no spiritual background, but this was superseded within a few years by a further conversion to Rosicrucianism which he felt fitted his outlook better. *Pete* described an initial discovery of 'alternatives to the Christian model' through self-directed learning as a young man, amplified in midlife by the death of his father, which raised further existential questions. Also in midlife, *Sasha* was reviewing her spiritual understanding following spousal bereavement, but her personal and spiritual change was facilitated by her church community that was 'broad enough' to support her searching. In her twenties, *Sian* experienced a radical change of spiritual practice from a Roman Catholic upbringing to membership of a Brethren church, leading to what she felt a more authentic Christian spiritual experience. *Veda* found through answering an advertisement in her thirties a different spiritual path that quickly made sense of unanswered questions from her earlier adult church life.

Changes in adult spiritual identity had also resulted from *realisations* that were part of spiritual searching, rather than attached to any particular life event or circumstance. They could arrive at any time, just on reflection, or as part of a more purposeful review. A more proactive spiritual searching facilitated an openness to learn, enabling a response to encountering new information or circumstances. Here are some realisations that had arrived in various ways:

Ben described a lifelong but growing preference for the spirituality of the natural world compared to addressing an abstract deity in church. In late life, *Elsa* had discovered a sense of 'non-attachment' to possessions as an antidote to the middle-class materialism she felt her peers

suffered from. *Prue* said she was currently pursuing her recent re-discovery of openness and wonder, remembered from childhood. Both *Tom and Caroline* reflected that the nominal faith of their earlier adulthood had been enlivened by conversion experiences and, later, further developed by transcendent experience of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, *Alice's* spiritual understanding had been significantly enhanced by discovering that a more personal relationship with God was possible; and *Greg and Rod* mentioned that spiritual development had followed the realisation that something more than mental assent was required, and possible, for a meaningful religious spirituality.

5.2.3   Through an inner life and its source

Focus group discussions identified that spiritual learning and development is experienced and conducted through an 'inner life' with its associated practices and skills. I use the term to refer to thoughts, feelings and intuitions which are essentially private unless expressed, but which are affected by interaction with others and society. This inner domain is both a locus and a resource for spiritual learning and development and focus group members indicated a variety of beliefs about how it operated. For example:

> *Spirituality refers to the inner life of the believer in relation to God, to the devotional life and practice which provide the motivating power for our transformation and our action.* Patricia

> *It's very subjective, very much an inner experience. --- It's what we depend upon as long as we recognise that this is an experience I'm having and be reasonably reflective about it.* Claire

Individual interview data extended these ideas on how such an inner resource is accessed and developed, and how it contributes to spirituality. For many respondents, this happened through the phenomenon of an 'inner voice'. Descriptions of the inner voice included:

> *like silent words inside of me*; *qualitatively different from my own thoughts* (Alice); *something inside me said …* (Josh); *my name was called* (Jen); *an idea forms … sometimes it's just a feeling …a shiver will come up my spine … a picture will form* (Neil); *Not a voice word – but this kind of thought* (Sasha); *he does actually speak … I hear words* (Tom);

> *sometimes I go to a quiet space … but within that empty space it's like there's everything* (Veda).

The inner communication with the higher self or a transcendent other could be facilitated by cultivating consciousness and discernment; a key theme here was *paying attention* and becoming aware. However, tuning in to a spiritual dimension need not always be at the forefront of attention to be effective because a continuous background setting was possible, from which awareness at higher level could be amplified. An 'operating system' concept (Atchley 2009) describes a continuous but background spiritual consciousness that could be part of the spiritual perspective that people develop.

> *I feel the presence of an absolute reality underpinning everything, which I can only describe as a constant beam of awareness that has never left me.* Annabel

> *I'm now convinced of a power – that it does shape … whatever is happening on the surface … that I'm being it rather than reflecting on it. It's not a thought process. … I've internalised it.* Pete

This sounds similar to the choice to 'be open' that featured in data coded under experience and meaning. So, here again, there seems to be a continuum from less conscious engagement with experience (but which may still produce spiritual learning when reflected on) through to a more proactive looking out for spiritual meaning that aids understanding and development.

> *You can deliberately become more open, so that the times they happen (particular spiritual insights) are less spaced out. I think you can enable yourself to be more deliberately open to that*. Cath

Or the choice could even be about what version of transcendence one needs to draw on for spiritual support:

> *I could take the view that there is this impersonal 'other' (force) and relate very well to that. But then I can step into a story where there is someone I can talk to and I'm very conscious when I do that I am choosing to step into that particular version of reality. And there are times when I find that extremely comforting and want to be able to do that.* Claire

Trust was another key theme, since the inner voice experienced by many (but not by all) engendered trust in the process of operating from their chosen spiritual perspective. That is, the inner life provided evidence that people's beliefs and practices were the right ones, in their

experience. Examples would include perceiving an answer to prayer, or an outcome of paying attention to a received word or picture.

> *I think one thing I have become aware of and learned as I've got older is that you really do have to listen to the inner voice, because there are occasions when I haven't – and gone against that 'knowing' – and then things haven't gone so well. … I want my life to flow, so I have learned to trust that.* Charlotte

Accessing a spiritual connection for the purposes of problem solving and guidance also added to confidence and contributed to spiritual development. Trust generated via a sense of inner life was expressed in terms of the relationship with one's higher self or a transcendent other and also in the narrative or rationale that underpinned one's spiritual perspective.

> *If I have major problems I generally take them into meditation. … (I'm) preparing to receive contact from a higher level. If I'm going in with a question … I'll be thinking about it in my mind and what the solutions are; and then let go and you become passive, and then you might get a picture imposed or you might get a feeling, or whatever else.* Neil

> *But then there are times when I'm just still, and times when you suddenly find you've got the answer to something which … sometimes things come up you don't know why they've come up*. Jen

Sometimes inner voice experiences are beyond words, explained by Jen as 'a way of putting the inexpressible' which can nevertheless be understood: *I know what it's about but there's no way I could say*. Sometimes, the sense is to be open to an interpretation, without any direct message, or something intangible that needs pursuing. Nevertheless, all inner voice experiences are reported by participants in positive tones.

> *Sometimes you do have real insight, and it's totally unexpected* (Veda): a gift of a specific piece of learning. Similarly, there might be a message that needs attention: *It's something that I have to listen to* (Neil) or *I heard God say to me so distinctly … So that was a real milestone thing* (Alice). Or there may just be an encouragement to continued spiritual searching: *You've got to find it out for yourself what it means* (Jen).

5.2.4   Through a meaning frame and its associated narrative

An emerging picture of spiritual learning based on experience, which is continually reflected against current understandings, appears to fit with the idea of a meaning system built up from interpretations of experience over time. This was discussed in literature on adult learning processes within spiritual learning (Section 2.5). I am therefore identifying this kind of recognition by respondents as the *building up of a coherent spiritual meaning system, with its associated narrative.* The meaning frame that builds up from processed experience produces an overall spiritual perspective or outlook – a stance or faith position regardless of whether a religious or non-religious spirituality is involved. This perspective then frames future learning, from what is noticed to how it is reflected on and interpreted. Such spiritual perspectives or outlooks were offered by participants in all groups. Here are some contrasting examples that summarise people's stances:

> *My spiritual life is … more about learning - not gathering information but noticing, clarifying experience to find meaning, patterns of response, wisdom and insight.* Annabel

> *So for me, it's not church (traditions), nor literal belief in the Bible, that drive my religious belief, but determination to make the spirit of Jesus a part of my life…- this is what my faith comes down to.* Brian

> *At the heart of evangelical Christianity lies the atoning work of Christ. The Christian life is viewed primarily as a life that finds its origin in the Cross and is lived in grateful response to it.* Patricia

> *I can sit comfortably with others of different faiths. I don't think I have an exclusive way to God through my Christianity.* Debra

Meanings, including spiritual ones, are in the mind of the experiencer, though it varies how these are constructed and imputed. Some participants assumed that all experience has meaning within or according to a particular narrative; others were struck by particular experiences at particular times. Some were content for particular experiences to have an individual meaning to them, as well as being part of some greater picture of which they need not be wholly aware (eg. God's will). Some wish to have both meaning and sense-making within an understanding of their own life. Some took the view that everything has a meaning, or even that everything is 'meant', without that meaning being known.

> *I'm quite happy to accept that I don't know the meaning. I won't until I get to the other*
> *side and maybe not even then. It will be something bigger than I can grasp while I'm here.*
> Annette.

How coherent does the overall spiritual narrative have to be? Does it need an external validity as well as an internal one (making sense to me)? Coding of responses under 'meaning-making' did not reveal any noticeable differences between religious or non-religious spiritual outlooks, nor between younger or older participants. The degree to which people could accept 'mystery' or needed a more widely acceptable explanation to support their spiritual perspective seemed individual. Ben's case reminded me that experience trumps other forms of 'truth': he had adopted elements of spiritualism in preference to Christianity because he had discovered it for himself, rather than being 'told' it. Some participants expressed a lesser need for certainty in later life, as predicted by some models of spiritual development; others were on a journey of discovery which wanted answers and explanations regarding spiritual questions. Adopting a life-course perspective on the matter could reveal that different dynamics operated over time to produce times of relative doubt and certainty, driving the spiritual journey forward.

To summarise briefly at this point, I have explored four themes on recognition of spirituality and its development. These were discerned initially from the first stage of research data (from focus groups), then confirmed and refined through analysis of the second stage research data (from individuals). The key messages about *what* spirituality means to participants were that it is experiential and personal, and can be identified in terms of a growing spiritual identity. *How* spirituality is experienced and expressed were through an inner life and the development of a meaning frame and its associated spiritual narrative. This personal narrative is the back-story that makes sense of a person's current outlook.

5.3   Patterns emerging from RQ1: recognising spirituality and its development

From the four ways discussed above in which spirituality and its development were recognised, I wish to pick out some particular patterns that speak of the nature of later life spirituality and how it can develop – the topic of my first research question. I focus on what participants have said about the *interior mental operation of spirituality* and how this can be enhanced; on two responses or *styles of spiritual searching* that lead to growth and change, namely dwelling and

seeking; and the expressions of spirituality that are recognised by participants in their *spiritual practices.*

5.3.1   Experience, interiority and narratives

The first major observation to make on the recognisable aspects of later life spirituality reported above is the primacy of *personal experience*, rather than the receipt of understandings from other sources, such as family, religious authorities or culture. Spirituality and its development are perceived in data as responding to personal experience and its interpretation, in preference to uncritically adopting a theory or doctrine. A prevailing understanding is that re-interpretation of spiritual understandings throughout life creates a person's unique spiritual perspective (meaning frame) and identity – what 'being spiritual means for me'. Spiritual identity is often seen as part of a 'larger self' in the context of a transcendent spiritual dimension that offers enhanced human potential (the higher self), or as a relationship with a transcendent other. For the spiritually engaged, the issue of how to connect with the transcendent is all-important and can be recognised in various ways, as reflected in spiritual practice (see Section 5.3.3. below).

The operation of an *inner life* is a major means of interpreting experience, and also generating internal senses such as intuition. Spirituality was recognised as *awareness of interiority* as locus and means of reflective learning. In considering how participants create spiritual understanding from spiritually relevant experience I also drew on data coded as the 'ways of knowing' that spiritual learning both employs and produces. For instance, what does it mean to develop your intuition and rely on its results? Is there a more affective dimension to knowing – can something be 'emotionally true'? Or is it a creative integration of strands of thinking which is still essentially rational? Within data, the following 'ways of knowing' were discriminated as sub-codings: *Affective; Believing; Intellectual; Intuition; Metaphor; Mystery; Revelation; Wisdom[17].* However, I realised that relatively little text had been attributed to these, from which I concluded that the codes were more about my ideas than what participants were saying. Data did not adequately support these finer distinctions, but taken together as 'ways of knowing' did indicate that spiritual experiences also present in non-rational ways such as through dreams, images, voices or strong feelings. Such intuitions can *bypass our brains* as Alice put it, and the appreciation of stories and metaphors can *go further towards spiritual understanding* than rational thinking (Cath).

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[17] A last sub-code recognised *Wisdom* as a judicious mixture of the various ways of knowing. Wisdom amounted to more than the sum of its parts and was certainly more than intellectual knowledge. In individual data, it appeared as experience that had been processed in a high-quality way (Alice, Veda).

So, consciousness of an inner life is a key to much of what contributes to spiritual development: interiority creates experience through interpretation of both external and internal sense data – such as the voice of intuition and conscience. The significance of the spiritual meaning frame or outlook that develops, powered by a person's inner life, is its ability to process, reflect, integrate and ultimately communicate with the outer world and beyond. Its concerns for learning are the cultivation of that interiority to support a way of being spiritual in the world, and the development of a learning partnership through connection with transcendent reality, however this is conceived.

Indeed, the ability to link one's inner spiritual awareness to action and behaviour was seen as a sign of spiritual maturity, such as might be expressed as living according to one's conscience or having integrity. Spirituality was therefore also recognised and expressed by respondents through ethical values and moral codes. Focus group members identified spirituality as a source of *responsible action in the world.* Development of this involved *applying experience and empathy to others* and enabling *moral choices and self-improvement.* This ethical meaning of spirituality was not further expressed or amplified in individual interviews, although it did appear as part of conversations, for instance when articulating an overall spiritual outlook or perspective.

> *Treat others as you want to be treated yourself – it's not foolproof, but given what else is out there, it's a relatively good place to start.* Pete

> *As an older person you've experienced so much more, (so) stand alongside somebody and say 'well I can't take away this pain, whether that's physical, emotional or spiritual but … I have been there'.* Cath

> *Yes, I think compassion and attempting to understand why people do things. Not judge them; don't just look at what they do but try and look behind it.* Sally

Moreover, one should act morally in one's exercise of spiritual practice:

> *If you go into meditation just to test the concept, it's not actually going to produce very much for you. If you go in because you genuinely want to grow and be closer to God, you're going to get some support from higher levels to do that – from God, from your inner self, whatever*. Neil

A way of conceptualising the process of spiritual development, expressed both directly and by implication in many responses, was the generation of *spiritual narratives* that people built up and elaborated in the light of experience. By spiritual narratives I mean the rationale that is elaborated to make sense of experience and understanding so far, in support of a spiritual outlook. Being older generally meant that respondents felt that they had more learning material to work with, in terms of life experience. However, I began to identify a significant difference concerning how these narratives were elaborated which I conceptualised as contrasting spiritual learning responses. This difference was to do with the source of the narrative. One source for a narrative was an existing spiritual or faith tradition that had been inherited or adopted earlier in life, and was being re-worked in terms of life experience. Another source was the ongoing construction of a narrative from a variety of spiritual resources encountered, in the absence of one that had been personally inherited or adopted. The further elaboration that took place was thus influenced by either the presence or absence of an 'orthodoxy' of understanding that needed to be considered as interpretations of experience continued. I linked these types of spiritual learning response to the notions of 'dwelling' and 'seeking', prompted by these concepts from literature (Section 2.3.3).

5.3.2   'Dwelling' and 'seeking' as spiritual learning responses

A second area of patterning I wish to highlight from data, then, is that of the 'dwelling' and 'seeking' responses that sourced and developed people's spiritual narratives in different ways. The idea that religion could be distinguished from spirituality began to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Roof (2019) recalls, one of the main ways in which this distinction was manifested was affiliation, or absence of affiliation, with a traditional faith community which held spiritual beliefs, views and practices in common. As discussed in my literature review (Chapter 2), researchers such as Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999) developed the idea of dwellers and seekers to distinguish these approaches to religion/spirituality, which was then further explored by Wink and Dillon in the early twenty-first century. My understanding of these concepts is that *spiritual dwelling* associates learners with spiritual 'homes' which consist of a shared sacred space, often involving belief and practice, and supported by an organisational structure and order. A spiritual narrative is inherited or adopted from this source. The main spiritual dwelling places encountered in my study have been various branches of the Christian Church (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist), non-creedal (Unitarian, Quaker), Buddhism and some non-religious paths such as Rosicrucianism. Spiritual dwelling is therefore a style of learning where changes in spiritual understanding are made through adapting the dwelling-based frame of interpretation to accommodate new experience. People who engage in spiritual dwelling are mostly, but not

exclusively, holders of religious spirituality perspectives[18] and can adapt their orthodoxy and orthopraxy (their normative beliefs and actions) to a large extent in order to stay based within their spiritual homes – attached to their spiritual communities. Here are some examples of this approach:

> *I have very much simplified my beliefs…- and discarded a lot of traditional church views, partly because I find them difficult to accept: the Virgin Mary for example. … [W]e are locked into beliefs of the fourth century that are not really appropriate for the modern world, so I have very much simplified my views.* Brian

> *I shall almost certainly remain distinctively Christian, for that is our heritage and I would certainly feel that there is no-one like Christ in what I know of other faiths. But I like the idea that people of different faiths can come before God in a non-competitive way and learn something from each other*. Anna

> *I thought, if I'm not careful, I'll do with Christianity what I did with Hindu belief; that I'll turn my back on it because it doesn't all add up. So when I read something that doesn't add up, I just park it over there [indicates with arm].* Jim

So, people with a spiritual dwelling response employ a range of strategies to maintain their dwelling whilst still being aware of their continuing need to engage in learning through the searching that is the hallmark of spirituality (see Section 2.3.3). Participation in, and relationships with, a spiritual community are often important and form part of their spiritual identity for those with a spiritual dwelling response. The strength and significance of this relationship with a spiritual community can be seen from the individual interviewees, about half (11) of whom clearly demonstrated a dwelling response. A further three had done so for many years but were now possibly transitioning to more of a seeking response.

In contrast, those with a spiritual seeking response to spiritual development have no current spiritual 'home' (again, about half of respondents). They have neither inherited nor chosen one, or have left one to embark on a narrative of their own construction. Spiritual seeking is therefore a style of learning where people tend to range more freely; adapting, expanding and transforming

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[18] See Section 7.3.2 for discussion of dwelling in relation to religious spirituality

their spiritual understandings as they see fit, without recourse to an existing discourse or established tradition. Seeker-type learners have more a sense of journeying than location.

> *My own spiritual path has led me all over the place over the years. I've been a lifelong pilgrim, lifelong student really.* Claire

> *Well, hopefully to keep on doing it until such time as I can't. There's always so much to learn, isn't there? Depends on what you're interested in and what's available. Certainly I don't see myself … ever stopping searching and looking for more.* Charlotte

Seekers may sometimes appear to be dwellers as they affiliate with various kinds of spiritual traditions, but then move on.

> *Prior to that I'd been casting around looking for a true belief, something I could be really enthusiastic about, without actually practicing any of them or going into them too deeply – whether it be Buddhism or Islam or Victorian spiritualism – they were all in the mix.* Sean

From individual interview data, a more nuanced picture can be proposed. *Searching* for new spiritual understanding is common to seeking and dwelling styles of spiritual development. It is the basis of spirituality, as defined throughout this thesis. Spiritual searching could be discerned in both dwelling and seeking styles within my sample. For dwellers, learning also takes place both within and without the orthodoxies of a spiritual community's narrative. However, when searching leads to a significant questioning of a dwelling narrative, this can activate a more seeking style. Alternatively, continued searching from a seeking perspective might accumulate sufficient narrative and community of practice in common with others that a new dwelling place could be formed. Figure 6 below places searching as the basis for spiritual growth, featured in both seeking and dwelling types of learning, noting that movement to adapted seeking or dwelling can result.

Figure 3   Searching as basis for spiritual development, leading to adaptation. Source: author

In what follows, I present some examples from individual interview data, followed by a proposed typology for dwelling and seeking. Although a dwelling response to spiritual learning and development sounds potentially restrictive, it is quite elastic, both in depth and width. Several respondents reported growing meaningfully and in continuing ways within their chosen spiritual community and its narrative. Their searching was into the greater depths of spiritual meaning they felt their tradition held for them (Jack, Tom, Neil, Doug, Veda). Others were expanding their understanding and practices, finding a wider vision of their spirituality but still within the parameters of their dwelling framework (Caroline, Sian, Neil).

> *I think I am able to marry together human experience and Christian teaching. I'm part of the big story – the big narrative - from Genesis to Revelation, and I'm part of a community within society which is the Church. And it carries with it its own values about love and truth, and generosity and care and concern for people - all those sorts of things bundled together. And wisdom lies in evaluating and expressing and communicating the large truth in relation to human experience.* Jack

As I say, wisdom is defined in School terms as that knowledge that enables you to live life happily but truly as well. So, you're true to yourself. --- You're doing what is right --- it's the whole purpose of life. Doug

Caroline had *reached that point and gone beyond to faith in God's love* and felt that this was not only a common experience but also a liberating one. She said that she was a member of an informal theology group that met monthly, where mature Christians (lay and ordained) shared and discussed their questions and doubts about living a spiritual life within a faith tradition.

The elasticity of dwelling is tested further when the searching that lies at the heart of spiritual development needs the narrative to accommodate different ways of believing or practising, in response to life experience. Some dwellers had identified aspects that it would be helpful, or necessary, for them to adjust in order to further their development in a dwelling mode (Alice, Greg, Rod, Carrie).

> *I feel a bit of a square peg in a round hole - whatever the phrase is - in that I have grown more reflective as I've got older … But the church I'm in seems to be a very 'doing' church … and much of it is very good. And I've participated in it, but I would be happier if I could be in a church where there was more reflection.* Alice

> *I'm (no longer) taking, kind of, what was given to me. … I just used to go to church, do a bit of youth work or whatever. Now, I don't kind of necessarily take what comes from the pulpit as 'gospel'!* Carrie

Having made adjustments to their dwelling styles, some adapted dwellers were beginning to go beyond their community's resources. They were searching for new ways to develop, but these might not be acceptable to some community members. Prue and Sasha had augmented their dwelling practices, having begun to feel constrained, and their searching was now taking on more of a seeking style. They could be seen as boundary dwellers, since there seemed no current compelling need to move from their spiritual homes.

> *It felt as though the Anglican was squeezing me into a model. I wasn't aware of it at the time. And I did what the system … I think there was a knock-on effect of 'do you know, these services by rote don't mean anything'. … I don't feel … (but) I still take communion. I used to read (the Scripture lesson) at church: "This is the word of the Lord". And I just couldn't do it after a bit. I said, "This is not the word, this is somebody's perspective".* Prue

> *So, I kind of feel I'm in a ministry spiritually which has still connections with church but I've also kind of broken those bounds, really, outside the walls, and worshipped … been to*

> *Quaker meetings, and been involved musically too in more ecumenical things where you experience other people's ways of worship. That takes me to probably where I am, being more meditative within here, within my own space, but still recognising that the church has a place for me.* Sasha

For Jen, the need to move had recently become clearer, through a process of life review, when her adaptations could no longer support a dwelling response. She was, arguably, transitioning to seeking, but with a large range of spiritual resource from her previous dwelling still available to her. Paula had made a similar move some years previously, and struck out on a seeking pathway of her own.

> *I suppose at the moment, I'm exploring, all the time. I'm finding that the institutional church really doesn't answer my needs. … I need to be out, I need to be silent, I don't want people to tell me about God. I'm not convinced that what I've been told in the past is … well, it certainly isn't adequate. I'm not even sure that it's entirely accurate.* Jen

The seeking response to spiritual development is, by definition, adjustable, since the construction of the narrative is in the hands of the spiritual searcher. As indicated above, some have come to seeking having moved away from a spiritual home. This previous dwelling could have been inherited and occupied well into adulthood, until change was initiated (Cath, Delia, Elsa).

> *There are times when I feel less comfortable with that, when I'm really sort of wanting something in the way of teaching, or understanding or support or nourishment. And at other times, I'm perfectly ok with it – I think 'yep, that's alright, you go on seeking'. … Sometimes I just get this sense of – what you might say is an inner hunger – almost a sort of itch. Saying 'you haven't got there yet, there's something else that you're looking for and you want to find'.* Cath

Others had no spiritual upbringing or background, or had rejected it before adulthood, but subsequent life experience had raised a seeking-type response (Ben, Ginger, Sally).

> *Yes, that's the reason I went (to HL) in the first place (health issues). But I do feel a bit more spiritual in there than I would anywhere else. It's peaceful, it's quiet.* Ben

The decision no longer to dwell or relate to a particular spiritual community and its narrative was often due to the perceived detractions of the one(s) that participants had already tried.

Sometimes their seeking response was therefore towards a self-defined alternative version (for example, Josh' self-description as an 'esoteric Christian'). Sometimes seeking brought them later to another dwelling place (Elsa).

> *Met a lot of people with similar thoughts to mine (at a Unitarian church). We are all (pause) accepting … we invite people of all religions to come and talk to us. And that sort of develops one's spirituality, I suppose. Which I found very interesting because we're all really just interested in the key thing, but in different ways. And I found it very acceptable. … [W]hereas I found the Church of England very limiting.* Elsa

There were a few out-and-out seekers who were content to construct an independent understanding and pathway, weighing up the validity of spiritual contributions from various sources (Josh, Pete, Delia, Cath).

> *It's just human beings that try and put fences round, I think, and limit it. … I'm quite curious to know what happens next. I'm reading more and more, into quantum physics which fascinates me.* Delia

> *To me, any one life is a school. I believe that we choose our parents, we can see ahead what sort of life it's going to be and we go there for a purpose. We might be doing O levels or a PhD in this particular lifetime in understanding who we are - in climbing a ladder (pause) to the reality of the divine.* Josh

> *It was a combination of things. A Buddhist approach gave me access to the idea that there was an alternative to the Christian model. And then things like psychology, psychiatry and counselling, which enable one to examine some of one's internal mental processes … And I suppose it's accepting that, and just thinking about that for quite a long time, and sort of informed by people I've spoken to and things I've read, has focused that as a functional model.* Pete

These seekers were probably the most active learners, often engaged in self-directed learning in response to their searching. It is possible, of course, that seekers could at any stage identify dwelling places with others with whom they shared enough common understanding or practice, although these lodgings might be relatively informal or temporary. As seekers, they were often part of looser networks where they shared some common elements of their spiritual lives.

•Growing within a spiritual community 'home' and its narrative

•Growth through making helpful or needed adjustments, in order to stay

Dwelling

Adapted dwelling

Seeking

Transitioning

•Growing through finding one's own path: Not looking for a home; or looking but not finding a home

Searching from dwelling has turned to seeking; searching from seeking has turned to finding a home

Figure 4   Changes in spiritual development response, dwelling and seeking. Source: author

NB this figure illustrates the possibility of movement from dwelling to seeking, but it could be formulated for movement from seeking to dwelling; this was less frequently represented in data. I have used the term 'growing' to denote the learning outcomes that both seekers and dwellers pursue in response to continued searching for meaning (see previous Figure 3).

5.3.3   Spiritual practices

A third area of patterning that could be drawn from data, as compiled in case summaries, were the kinds of spiritual practices people mentioned. These were not usually articulated in detail, but in passing in discussion. I did not ask a direct question about practices, so the examples mentioned may not be the only activities pursued. Spiritual practices were oriented around forms of connection with the transcendent, ways of receiving / pursuing input on spiritual matters, and

social action to express spiritual values in the world. I list the practices mentioned by individual interviewees at Appendix L.

Connecting with the transcendent (to larger reality or other power/force) took two major forms, of prayer or meditation. All but two participants engaged in one or the other, and a few in both. Meditation was the connection of choice for those of non-religious spirituality (NRS), who were mostly seekers and had learned a technique at some stage and applied it in ways of their own choosing. The few NRS who were dwellers had more formal routines as recommended by their spiritual paths (Rosicrucianism, and the Wxxxxx School). These routines involved the timings, lengths and settings for their meditation. The Wxxxxx School style was mantra meditation, based on a personal mantra conveyed secretly to the learner at the stage they formally joined the programme and accepted its path. Those who practiced prayer were mostly religious spiritualities and dwellers, but a few NRS who accepted a notion of 'otherness' or divinity for their transcendent connection said that they both prayed and meditated. The practice of prayer also varied in formality and structure. All praying dwellers had a routine, but mostly of their own devising. The styles of prayer varied quite widely; praise and worship, intercession (making requests), contemplation. These were sometimes combined with other activities such as prayer walking or artistic expression (music, painting, poetry).

Thus, practices such as prayer and meditation (including mindfulness) showed commonalities of form, settings and purposes: they could range from formal to informal, from self-devised to directed by their community. They could be pursued in private, in groups, in congregations or large groups and in nature, involving spoken words (improvised or set texts) or silence. Their purposes seemed primarily for connection and communication, including intimacy and devotion where a personal relationship was experienced (Tom, Alice). Even without believing in a personal relationship, connection with the transcendent was a deeply felt experience which sometimes offered spiritual peaks (Doug, Josh). For meditators as well as pray-ers, there were possibilities to share problems, request help and offer healing and blessing to others (Neil, Delia, Jen, Sian).

Input on spiritual matters was pursued mostly by reading scriptures and other sacred or spiritual writing, and listening to spiritual teaching, such as in sermons, seminars and lectures. Reflecting on both written and spoken words was done formally through schemes, programmes and services of worship, and informally at home or in groups. Small groups or paired conversations such as spiritual direction and pastoring / mentoring were an important part of the spiritual lives of both religious and non-religious learners. For seekers, a healing, meditation, yoga or discussion group could act as a mini-spiritual community. The purposes of seeking spiritual input and reflecting on

it with others (peers or more spiritually expert) were to support spiritual searching, whether in a seeking or dwelling style.

Engaging in spiritually-driven activities in the world could produce social action that expressed spiritual values, as in Sian's 'heart for Africa'. Sometimes a specific calling was recognised (Sean), or opportunities were sought to fulfil a general commitment to be of service (Marlene, Paula). For dwellers, service often included responsibilities to maintain the organisation and its functions, thus also serving other members (Carrie, Veda, Doug, Jack). Some felt later life offered a chance to re-new or re-direct their calling, to use their gifts and time responsibly (Tom, Rod, Caroline, Alice, Neil). Discernment about the outworking of their spiritual values and beliefs was mentioned as ongoing by several (Pete, Cath, Prue); particular skills or products were seen as offerings for others' benefit (Rachel, Ginger, Sasha, Rod).

In the previous two Sections (5.2 and 5.3) I have described findings relating to the first part of my research question asking about recognising spirituality in later life, and offered some patterns that I have discerned concerning this recognition – of people's understanding of the inner life, of how they pursue spiritual development as seekers or dwellers, and how these outlooks are reflected in spiritual practices. This leads next into findings on what kinds of learning people could identify that they engaged in to support their spiritual understanding and practice.

5.4   Kinds of spiritual learning and development

Having discussed how spirituality and its development is recognised by participants, I now turn to the various forms that spiritual learning may take in their lives. In this second part of addressing research question 1, *'What is the nature of spirituality and its development in later life?'* I will present data that further describe the kinds of learning that were reported and how they operated, leading to spiritual development. This builds on the first part of my data analysis (Section 5.2 and 5.3 above) where recognising experience and its subsequent interpretation have been discussed as key processes in spiritual learning and development. I have proposed that a spiritual meaning frame or perspective is built up that then frames future learning in terms of what is noticed, reflected on and incorporated into understanding.

5.4.1   Incidental learning

Where learning from experience had been identified, participants reported that it was triggered by a wide range of 'noticeable' events and inputs: sights, sounds, images, written communications, every-day or unusual happenings, and so on. For instance, someone recalled:

> *It was on the radio and I had to pull over into a layby and switch the car off, and it moved me to tears. --- this music just totally surrounded me. I recall it as a completely transcendental moment.* Cath

Social interaction, whether one-to-one, in groups or larger gatherings was particularly significant as a source of learning. This included situations where interaction was both sought, or unsought as part of life experience. I have chosen to define this kind of learning as incidental, often only perceived by the learner on reflection. It could be as simple as noticing someone else's different view and therefore wondering about one's own; or as multi-layered as belonging to a spiritual community, encountering a range of perspectives and behaviours.

> *I think I'm more open to hearing other people's views and learning from them. I used to cling on to my own, because that was safe. I'm actually much more interested in responding to other people's reaction and thoughts and feelings.* Jean

Some respondents also reported that interactive situations such as informal groups were sought for this purpose:

> *Being a member of NVLW [local spirituality group] since its inception is my joy and I receive a blessing in some form at every meeting, often because of the knowledge another member has imparted that has resonated with me makes me think and sometimes, too, makes change in my thoughts, words and actions.* Marlene

Incidental learning also resulted from realisation and review which, along with intuition from an inner life, brought other interpreted items into the meaning frame. Examples mentioned included regret, forgiveness, gratitude, self-awareness and making sense. For example, on reflection, one person reported:

> *The thought of getting rid of everything - to begin with, I was filled with horror. It was then it really came home to me that all you need in life is what you need, and not what you want. … It was a great lesson in life.* Elsa

Since most of this learning is neither consciously chosen nor pursued, I have included it as incidental so as to distinguish it from other kinds of learning inputs that are more proactively generated.

> *I suppose life just teaches you things, really. When the going gets tough and you survive it, you come out the other side and you realise what's helped you get through it – might be people, might be all kinds of things*. Rachel

> *Well, it (spiritual development) is ongoing because you learn. … We have this saying "whoever or whatever is in front of you is your teacher".* Doug

> *I believe that everything that you meet as an apparent problem is actually an opportunity to grow. And that every cloud has a silver lining and the darker the cloud the greater the light when you come out of it*. Josh

5.4.2   Self-directed learning

A more purposeful form of spiritual learning I have termed 'self-directed', where learners have followed up on a thought or question, or engaged with a more organised learning opportunity on a topic that has raised a spiritual question. The forms that self-directed learning takes range from informal – most commonly, reading – to attending lectures, events or groups, and on to actively seeking short courses or longer programmes. In adult education literature, learning that has been designed and offered in a focused and purposeful way, but without being formally accredited or offered for qualification of any kind, is known as 'non-formal'. Much spiritual self-directed learning falls into this category, including taking part in retreats and pilgrimages, or affiliating to a group or programme of some sort. A few participants in my study had followed a spiritual learning journey into more formal education and training experiences. A list of examples of self-directed learning mentioned by participants is given at Appendix M. I have broadly divided self-directed learning into activities that people pursue or *organise for themselves*, such as reading, internet searching and going on retreats from learning opportunities *designed by someone else*, such as short courses, conferences, lectures and events. Needless to say, these categories are not watertight, but may be useful to discern patterns.

The following quotes illustrate a range of learning opportunities chosen, and participants' reasons for doing so.

Carrie reported enjoying her new retirement time pursuing spiritual learning:

> [J]ust recently I did a week of guided prayer, which is scripture-based ---- up here at the
> Cathedral --- they encourage you to look at each word. It's called 'lectio divino' - I did
> mostly that, but some people did art or music - looking at the scripture, seeing what it
> meant in your own life and formulating prayer out of it. Somebody in U3A wanted to teach
> New Testament Greek, so I've picked up my Greek. Carrie

In response to a question about how she goes on learning spiritually, Caroline cited reading, blogs, and her theology group. She mentioned an example of reading which was a story of survival and forgiveness. Such material on universal themes, not just Christian books, were discussed in her theology group.

Cath described how the weekly sessions of a two-year course at a local spiritual learning centre were feeding her:

> It's a healing course but we start off with a meditation, then we'll come back to a
> meditation during the day time to help us stay centred in ourselves but also to bring us
> together as a group. And that feels nourishing and supportive and does feed into ----
> where I am, I think. Cath

She was also a keen user of internet learning resources, both for learning material and for identifying further opportunities:

> [T]here are certain people on certain sites that I know maybe write articles, and I'll read
> those regularly. And sometimes there might be a day's workshop or a weekend where they
> will offer a concessionary fee. So I'm always looking out for things I could do. Cath

Delia described a self-directed learning path she had undertaken, as a mature seeker, having found spiritualism unsatisfactory:

> I decided to join the non-denominational group, the National Federation of Spiritual
> Healers, and I went to one of their conferences in Bournemouth ---. And one of the
> speakers, a woman called BJ, was talking about healing the energy field. I wanted to know
> more about that and I found out she lived at L (local). So I trained with her and began to
> make sense of what I was feeling. And she introduced me to … the study of Theosophy.
> Delia

Jack, in his nineties, had opted to continue with long-established personal learning routines and chances to discuss with others locally:

> *I still meditate on the lessons (set Bible readings for the day, Anglican liturgy online) and I'm still part of home groups in the parish; I find them stimulating. Just at the moment, the film 'Chocolat' - that's the subject for our group.* Jack

Jen had a particular challenge, moving out of dwelling into seeking, and needing to self-direct new kinds of learning:

> *What I'm working on is the fact that what I've been taught all my life cannot be true, which isn't exactly a helpful place to be. [INTERVIEWER Where are you getting your teaching now if not the church? How are you finding your way with those (new) ideas?] Well, with all the books I'm reading; and the Quiet Garden (local group).* Jen

For Sasha, a more formal degree course played a part in a time of life-course change:

> *I was doing a BA with Open University and after my husband's death I had a real kind of reinventing of myself. My two children had grown up and were away doing their own things and I just explored in all kinds of directions, including spirituality.* Sasha

Sean had identified and pursued the possibility of accredited training that he felt would enable him to play an enhanced role within his spiritual community:

> *I want to do more and be more for my church, and among the congregation, so I'm attending this course [lay ministry] from September. And already, this summer, in the preparation work I've undertaken, it's given me a great insight into my spirituality and how it has grown – because it has become of more importance in later years.* Sean

Veda explained how the Wxxxxx School, although not offering accredited learning, followed a more formal education model of planned learning progression:

> *In the early terms you're almost spoon-fed; you're given all this information and it really is quite straightforward and quite easy. Whereas as you go on in your study in the School you're given less but what you're given is deeper, so you've got to do some hard work to fully understand. --- Like you wouldn't give first year students a whole load of Sanskrit to look at. You would give them something … like you might introduce a little bit of Plato or Shakespeare and get them to discuss what they think of it.*

The quotes illustrate a wide range of self-directed learning that participants had identified as serving their spiritual learning and development. I argue that the common thread is the conscious, chosen nature of these kinds of learning, as continued spiritual searching prompts both seekers and dwellers to grow.

> *The spiritual friends in my life are many, including books, teachings, retreats, good companions, art, poetry, writing, music and nature. My children have been my most powerful teachers.* Annabel

5.5   Patterns emerging from RQ1: kinds of spiritual learning

I now bring together ideas from data that relate both incidental and self-directed kinds of informal spiritual learning in a proposed pattern. In my evolving model of informal spiritual learning, what can be said about incidental and self-directed learning as means of spiritual development? In terms of the *processes* at work, in the case of self-directed learning, the learner's intention has brought some new input into play. The spiritual searching that prompted the learning implies the need for an answer. Does the new input answer the query or supply a new kind of understanding or practice? Moreover, is the new meaning on offer true to experience or will it require further information or adaptation of existing understanding? In the case of incidental learning the processes are, as previously described, less consciously chosen and arise in response to noticing disparities with previous understandings.

In terms of the *characteristics* of incidental and self-directed learning, I propose that self-directed learning is intentional, if only regarding a next step rather than the whole way ahead. Its progression in mature learners is also more likely to be organic and self-developmental rather than linear or progressive in pursuit of a known goal or level of learning. Incidental learning from experience is less conscious in nature, and often perceived in hindsight, although it can have a purposive element through deliberate review. I express these relationships in Figure 5 below:
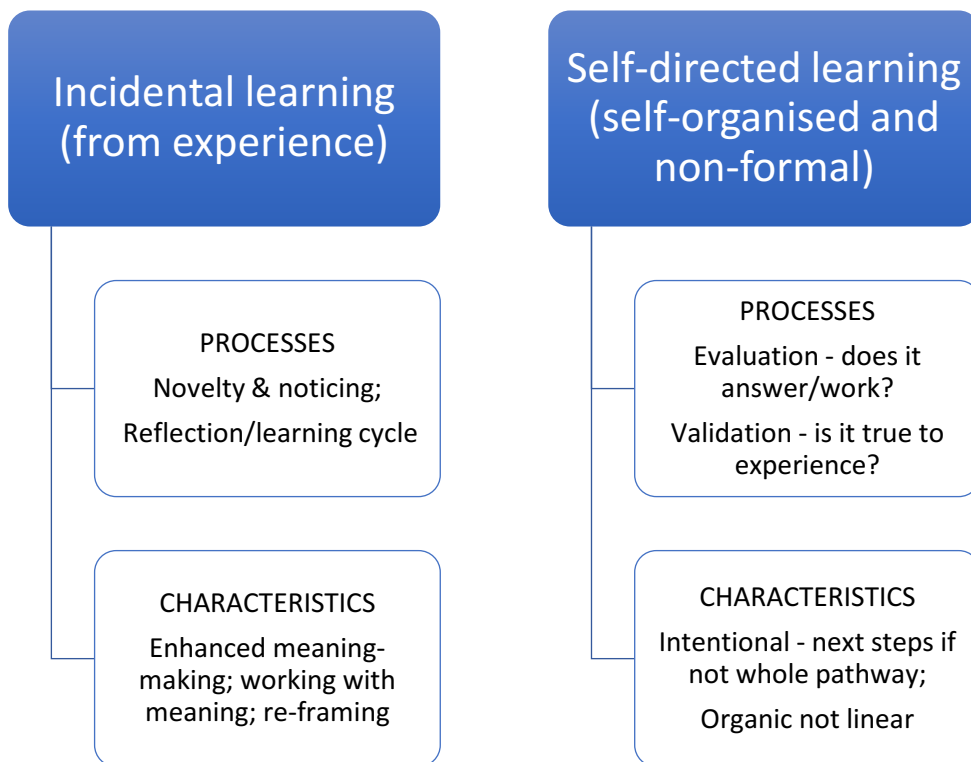
Figure 5   Types of informal learning. Source: author

The outcomes of both types of learning are the changes engendered in a person's meaning frame and its accompanying narrative. Learners may experience these changes as a realisation at a particular moment, or as a result of more consciously reviewing past experience and finding that one's view has changed. Quotes have illustrated how people are constantly monitoring and adjusting their spiritual meaning frame for understanding both life experience and learning inputs they have chosen. Learning outcomes can be both incremental, when understanding evolves through small but cumulative change to a point such that an adjustment within the outlook takes place; or there can be a more radical or transformative adjustment, involving change in the meaning frame itself. I express these ideas in the table below:

Table 5   Types of learning by types of change. Source: author

	Incidental learning	*Self-directed learning*
Incremental change: adapts within meaning frame; adds to current outlook.	Reflection (realisation or review) builds up the spiritual perspective through cumulative evidence from experience;	Continuity of change through learning inputs; pattern is episodic and organic rather than linear;
Leads to ->	gradual change over time and continuity of meaning-making.	builds up spiritual under-standing and practice.
Transformative change: meaning frame cannot accommodate; creates new meanings.	Response to life event or insight from reflection cannot be integrated within current understanding;	Learning opportunities or resources offer new knowledge and / or interpretation;
Leads to ->	significant / radical change and discontinuous meaning-making.	re-frames past as well as future learning, so discontinuous

The incremental mode of adaptation (gradual change building up to a realisation) was more prevalent for participants than radical adjustments or enlightenments. Even when talking about times of significant personal change or life-course events, few reported that these had led to what might be termed transformative learning and a radically different way of looking at things. Of course, a caveat might be that once a meaning frame has changed, it may be difficult to recall from a previous perspective. However, respondents were often aware of how their changing perspective influenced subsequent interpretations. Here are some examples of participants' accounts of how their meaning-making had changed:

Commenting on the value of review, leading to adjustments of understanding:

> *I know… this is a good exercise to do because I can look back on all the times and see He*
>
> *has been spectacularly there, in some way or other*. Alice

I see more clearly how this has led to that. (pause) I suppose I can see more meaning in each point. Cath

Yes, you could see with the benefit of hindsight that I was being told something. And it was a lesson to me, actually, that if images come up, to pay attention as well. Neil

Acknowledging a changed perspective:

I can understand more what was happening in the past, but it seems to be … a process of growth. (pause) I'm not sure where the mistakes were - certainly there were. (pause) But probably in a narrowness, um, trying to establish something in a very black and white way. And now actually accepting that life isn't black and white. Tom

Some realisations:

And I can remember the day that I'd gone along to the family service in the morning – but just being there in the church and the image that came to me was like being in a desert … and these words were pouring over me, that the vicar was saying - and they didn't touch me. There was no kind of connection at all. And it's the last time I went to church. Cath

I went as a spectator and halfway through the afternoon I suddenly wanted it (an experience of the Holy Spirit). And I've never been the same since. … I'd not set out to find it but, yes, that was a radical change. Tom

'I am' in the depth of yourself is God. So Jesus is saying 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the insight to life' and he's saying 'I am the divine within you'. … I suppose it's only in recent months that it's really dawned on me the enormity of this understanding of the Christian message. Josh

And I went back to my seat and grinned. Something had changed which had not … it was the sort of experience I had been expecting at confirmation. … You know, I'd had the theological blessing and then I had the spiritual experience. So that was really the start of my spiritual (life). Rod

I had wondered whether the learning of seekers was more likely to lead to greater adaptations or even transformative learning, since they were less tied to a communally held narrative. Would being able to significantly change their spiritual outlook easily and frequently favour new ideas

rather than re-working older ones? Or does the individual narrative that seekers create mostly feature degrees of incremental change and adjustment, similar to those made by dwellers? It seemed that patterns of change were broadly similar in the dwelling and seeking responses reported by my participants.

Within individual interview data coded under 'incremental' and 'transformative' learning, there were equal numbers of items in each node, which also represented equal numbers of dwellers and seekers (10 of each). Moreover, half of them had responses in both categories, implying that they could identify both incremental and transformative learning experiences, and did not engage in one type more than the other. Over the whole data set, there were 45 respondents as group members and individual interviewees, which included 21 dwellers, 20 seekers and 3 whom I felt to be in transition between dwelling and seeking (in both directions). Perhaps this indicates that meaning-making, for each spiritual learner, outweighs the source or nature of the narrative they are working on. More than any other considerations, the spiritual narrative needs coherence in terms of experience, inner life, and the developing spiritual identity. I have hesitated about claiming the presence of transformative learning, since few people reported examples of this (or did not interpret their experience as such) and because literature varies on how more radical developmental changes are conceptualised. I will return to this possible mismatch between theory and data in the Discussion chapter. For now, I will refer to significant or radical changes as major adaptations or re-framings of previous understandings, which I can support from data.

Most individual interviewees answered a follow-on question about their future learning in terms of a continuing spiritual journey (searching). For some, that process was seen as continuing in future lives, possibly building on what they had learnt in this one. Most participants felt that the potential for learning lay in the 'something beyond' character of one's spiritual self – an access to a larger reality or transcendent relationship. Proactive learning was possible, and desirable, to move towards fulfilling one's human potential and to apply one's experience through empathy and compassion to responsible action in the world. The fuel for this movement was the activity of the inner life.

> *I don't think there's anybody who can't do it. What determines how well you do it is your degree of application, your degree of sincerity, your degree of aspiration.* Neil

> *We were doing the awareness exercise one evening and I had an amazing experience and ever since then, that was my glimpse, if you like, of me connecting with my true self.* Doug

Although few were able, or wished, to define an end point or ultimate goal for spiritual learning and development, some attributes of a well-developed spirituality were mentioned: developing

one's true self, leading a good or happy life, attaining wisdom, being a good disciple of Jesus (or other spiritual guru or leader), serving others, learning for the next life, and reaching enlightenment. In this section, I have sought to describe findings on how participants experienced both incidental and more self-directed forms of spiritual learning in order to attribute and extend spiritual meaning within their current perspectives. From examples given, I have proposed ways in which both these types of informal spiritual learning operate on people's ongoing development, noting that experiential (incidental) and chosen (self-directed) learning can have slow, incremental, as well as quicker or more radical effects.

I will now turn, in the next chapter (6), to further findings that address my second research question, on the relationship between spiritual development and getting older.

Chapter 6   Spirituality and ageing: findings from focus groups and individual interviews

6.1   Introduction

This second chapter of findings addresses my second research question (RQ2): *In what ways do older people see their spirituality as related to their ageing or being older?* That is, in the context of later life, do people see any connection between their spiritual development and growing older? Having established the nature of spirituality for my participants (Section 5.2) my purpose was to ask about changes in people's spiritual outlooks and contextualise them in an experience of later life. For example, as topics arose in interview discussions, I asked about the spiritual questions that now engaged participants in their third age; about changing spiritual understandings, feelings or outlooks; and any sense they had of the significance of a spiritual dimension to later life. Their responses to these probes, and all other interview conversation that touched on ageing and spirituality, were coded and used to generate a thematic analysis (see section below).

For this second research question, I have additionally conducted a narrative analysis, since the relationship of ageing and spirituality was a less straightforward one to elicit, even in individual interviews, and benefitted from the insights of narrative approaches to interpreting the data. This Chapter reports on the thematic analysis at Section 6.2 and the narrative analysis at Section 6.3. I start by tracing some key themes initially discerned from focus group discussions and enhancing their analysis with individual interview data.

6.2   Thematic analysis

In this section I describe findings from the thematic analysis of RQ2 concerning the way participants perceived the relationship between their growing older and their spirituality and its development. In focus group data coded as relevant to this relationship I had initially identified four themes which I now use as a basis for comparing the first and second stage data (focus group and individual interviews). As in Chapter 5, this is with a view to finding similarities and differences, and creating a nuanced response to the research question.

6.2.1   Things coming together

The first theme concerning ageing and spirituality focused on the idea of *things coming together* which was mentioned specifically by a focus group participant (immediately below). It represented a good way of describing what others implied as the discovery, in later life, of new meanings and connections between things previously thought unrelated, or the formation of answers to (spiritual) questions. Such realisations were described in Section 5.4 as outcomes of a reflective or reviewing process, and could come about even after long periods of time. Now in considering RQ2, it is possible to link new meanings and understandings of spiritual issues to the vantage point of later life.

> *So yes, that's me, still working on it, put it like that. But finding as I get older, the more things come together. What seemed to be disparate themes, I'm realising the underlying commonality between them, which is great.* Claire

Such realisations also had a future-oriented aspect, as new integrations prompted further searching and learning. For instance, Pete was hoping to move from a less well-defined seeking onto a more identified path:

> *I suppose it's a rationalisation of what has been a random association of books, thoughts and meetings and stuff. I formed the thought that … if I'm on a journey I should know where I'm going.* Pete

> *This continuing journey is very important … always looking for how can I incorporate more of these special moments … how can I share it with others?* Cath

> *So, basically, my spiritual development is very much a work in progress. I've got the foundation in.* Rod

Marlene (written response to FGD*)* cogently describes the elements of her 'coming together'*:*

> *I am continually learning and evolving with confidence knowing that prayer, meditation, invocations, affirmations, blessings, gratitude, and an open heart/mind are there to support me and encourage me to teach/share with others, as and when Spirit wishes.*

6.2.2   Ageing as continuity

A second theme about ageing and spirituality, derived initially from FGD data, was that *ageing is continuity, not discontinuity.* This is a repudiation by some respondents of the idea that a greater interest or enhancement of spirituality in later life is linked to ageing itself. More particularly, spirituality was felt to be only indirectly related to ageing through continuity of experience over time; there is no causal link between being older and developing one's spirituality.

> *But I don't feel as I've got older it's changed a great deal; it's still searching, still learning. … The more I know, the less I know – and that seems to continue.* Charlotte

However, some of the same participants did acknowledge later in the discussion a greater recognition of spirituality's significance in later life.

> *It's not a case of it getting stronger but you realise it's a truth you're living in.* Alan

There was an appreciation of having been engaged throughout life with the same spiritual reality, or of experiencing longstanding development, but this was not perceived as age-related change. Development had long roots – continuity was seen as extending both backwards and forwards. This is an argument for age just being seen as the current place from which one looks back and engages in realisation or review.

One participant muses on this point:

> *I know that an evolving, probably sometimes inadequate, faith is and always has been crucial to my life, and remains just as critical in my later years – perhaps even more so.* Anna

Another observes that his long-running spiritual seeking has simply taken this long to develop:

> *I think I was fairly strongly impelled once I started moving along; I probably didn't notice how the momentum built. … A talent for spiritual insight isn't necessarily age-related. … It's to do with the development point I'm at, which just happens to be now.'* Pete

Another feels similarly, and doubts there is a different period of 'age' to come:

> *I think that's where I am; and that's a trajectory I've been on for a long time. So it's not peculiar to age. I think some consider that when you're older, you have more time for contemplation: I'm not sure I've got that yet.* Tom

Some expressed their idea of continuity as a journey, so that one's spiritual learning and development is seen as continuous rather than in age-related stages, but may indeed pass

through different territories. Those who were on a known path (such as Veda, Doug, Neil) saw a kind of life-long spiritual curriculum stretching ahead. Others who were less certain of their journey's route nonetheless felt they were continuing to work on similar questions and issues as before (Greg, Elsa, Rod); there were no radically different or age-related quests, which I felt amounted to their story as implying 'nothing different about being older'. Sheila and Veda were sure that age did not necessarily bring wisdom; Jen and Cath had realised that 'living the questions' was an ongoing feature of their third age. One participant illustrated this continuity narrative well:

> *When you're older you look back and you think, well, life hasn't been that planned. You've taken opportunities, you've had setbacks, so why should this bit of life be any different?* Carrie

Data that I gathered under a coding (parent node) of 'continuity' suggest that ageing could just be seen as a label for part of a life-course in which accumulating experience continues to be the fuel of spiritual learning and development. Thus, 'being older' is simply the vantage point from which one looks at any one time, enabling realisation or review; again, part of the ongoing adult spiritual learning process. Only as proxies for experience and a changing viewpoint, then, do ageing and being older inform the meaning making process that is central to spiritual learning and development. Data from RQ1 (Section 5.3.1) indicate that spiritual meaning making involves three elements: establishing coherence across experience, consciousness of an inner life and a sense of spiritual identity. This is a process that continues across the terrain of later life, whether or not people construe it as ageing.

6.2.3   Changed spiritual perspectives

Evidence of a relationship between spirituality and ageing, however, *was* identified by some respondents, which I have brought together in a third theme as *changed spiritual perspectives*. People describe arriving at these changed outlooks through reflection when comparing later with earlier periods of life. Respondents could describe these changes in spiritual perspectives, but did not necessarily link them to age-related events or circumstances. This accounts for the denial by some when asked directly if their age related to their spirituality in any way. When asked to identify changes between earlier and later adulthood, however, the different terrain of the distance travelled became more apparent. Their outlook therefore differed from the 'continuity'

theme (above) in that they were willing to label their changes as age-related in some way. Examples of the more general changes noticed included greater confidence in one's spirituality and changed priorities and values.

> *This is where spirituality comes in as you get older and more experienced. You feel more comfortable to be able to go with what you feel is the right thing to do.* Marlene

> *Already, reflection has given me great insight into my spirituality and how it has grown – because it has become of more importance in later years. So it does affect the path and the decisions I take.* Sean

Several individual interviewees spoke of a main change being a much deeper understanding and progress on issues that were part of their chosen spiritual outlook, such as knowledge of God or their true self (Tom, Josh, Neil, Carrie). For others, it was more a matter of better practice and relationship (Rod, Caroline). For instance, Sasha realised she had become drawn to spend more time in quiet and contemplation, and in different kinds of church involvements than previously. She felt *it's such a gift when you're older to sit and look back and see where God's been there, even though at the time you least recognised it*. Sasha later referred to this recognition as a *golden thread*. Another had noticed a lessening of his need to have certainty as his spiritual roles were changing:

> *But when I was younger, I needed that conceptual framework to be fixed, so then I could write, I could speak, whatever else, on that. But now I just accept there's softness and greyness and fluidity – yeah.* Neil

This was echoed by Caroline who felt it was now *ok not to know all the answers*, but to stay open and questioning. She had noticed this propensity for more questions and less certainty in herself, and in others, as a way of *understanding more rather than believing less*. Some changed outlooks included seeing ageing as a good context for continued spiritual understanding and development.

> *I see this life stage … not from a perspective of loss, having less, but now seeing it as living with more, living with spaciousness; feeling nourished from a home that now feels like a healing refuge rather than a busy hotel.* Annabel (written statement)

Cath said she was much more mellow – more accepting and inclusive because she now had time and energy: *a freedom to give attention to a spiritual part of my life, probably in a way I have long wished to do, and not been able to*. She felt her retirement years were opening up with an immense richness not previously envisaged, and that flourishing was possible on several levels, despite her physical and financial limitations.

Paula, Prue and Sheila (all aged 75+) felt that older age had given them permission to strive less, to 'be' rather than feel pressured to 'do' or 'become'. There had been a rediscovery of playfulness, joy and gratitude. This sense of acceptance was complemented by others who reported a freedom to more consciously use their gifts and follow their potential, not only because of the opportunity that later life offered but also because they felt released from the expectations of previous periods of their lives.

> *You know, I don't feel I have to create an impression anymore. I suppose that's a big thing. So I can be what I am without having to worry about it.* Neil

The comparison of earlier and later lives also revealed some less positive thoughts and feelings. Some felt they were still struggling with long-standing issues, or were stuck or less certain about where they were going spiritually (Greg, Alice). Jen was exercised by the loss of elders that were no longer available to her in much later life. There was no direct exploration within the interview guide of what the idea of ageing meant to people in general, rather than to do with their spirituality, though it appeared a difficult idea for some.

6.2.4 Particular changes, related to being older

A fourth theme brought together descriptions of the relationship between ageing and spirituality through *particular changes in spiritual attitudes or beliefs* that respondents were able to relate to being older. These could also be characterised as aspects of self-discovery, usually in a positive direction. Examples given included greater acceptance of self and others, and the acceptability of admitting needs:

> *It's an accepting of what people are saying even though I might not agree with it. I've got more time to listen properly to people and just hope that I can give some support back.* Sarah

Neil felt he was less judgmental of both himself and others because of the insight he had gained through experience of his own mistakes, and Alice felt similarly that difficult life experiences had brought her to a wiser place. This self-acceptance was the basis for a greater propensity to reach out to others (Caroline, Jack) and show greater tolerance (Sally). It could be expressed in service to others which was becoming more nuanced and modest as 'grand gestures' and ego-driven projects were toned down in response to greater self-knowledge (Sally, Tom). Paradoxically, this

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could lead to greater self-confidence, enabling greater empathy and compassion. Some expressed this as a willingness to trust their intuition and be open to feeling more vulnerable (Prue, Paula). Jen observed that this more sensitive place was *ok when it hurts, if you know more that you're loved.*

Rooting her later life observations in experience, Paula explained:

> *I must say, you do get to a point - which is a theory to begin with - that you've got to abandon all else and just rest in God. And you sometimes get there through very turbulent happenings, but they're always productive and that is how I feel now.* Paula

In addition to these aspects of self-discovery in their later spiritual journey, a cluster of responses around increasing critical understanding formed another example of particular change in people's outlook. A more questioning, even sceptical, stance on religious or spiritual matters was often part of valuing faith and spirituality, not diminishing it. This was encapsulated by Caroline, a lifelong Methodist, who found both her beliefs and practices changing in later life.

This kind of change in outlook was noted by Carrie who reported less acceptance and more critique of church teaching and parish life; she no longer regarded what she heard from the pulpit 'as gospel'! Similarly, Sasha found that her concept of God was now of someone less judgmental and controlling, rendering the religious narrative on sin and guilt less relevant. Jim likewise said he *didn't now accept what he didn't believe* and was a *less black and white believer*. Anna's view represented several people:

> *I no longer espouse conventional church views, though faith is still important.* Anna

I also noted, however, that there were dwellers and seekers who were finding new depths and kinds of understanding *within* their spiritual outlooks (Tom, Veda, Neil, Alice). Their developments were not so much changes in perspective, but more in levels of knowledge or practice. For instance, Josh claimed that, looking back, he could see he had developed a *hugely deeper understanding* on spiritual matters. Caroline said, regarding changes in her prayer practice since younger: *then it was all about me and the way ahead; now it's about living prayer out at every moment*.

6.2.5 Patterns from thematic analysis of ageing and spirituality

There were no significant differences between focus group and individual interview data regarding the relationship between ageing and spirituality but there was more detail and nuance present in individual interviews, as would be expected. In particular, there was more expansion

on people's life context, on how they viewed the here and now of being spiritual and older. For instance, one felt

> *It's a very important time, lovely time, to be a spiritual person in later life now. Advances in science … mystical viewpoints … an explosion of groups doing meditation and spiritual movements.* Neil

There was also more detail in terms of later life-course markers (events, circumstances) that individual interviews were able to explore, compared to focus group contributions. The experiences that were most prominent were retirement, bereavement, illness and finitude. The life-course event of retirement was significant for some, in particular, the use of one's time. This was a prime concern for Carrie, not only because there was less left, but the length of one's lifespan was unknown. She emphasised that her spiritual learning was not for filling time but for catching up and using opportunities only recently accessed. Several others mentioned the liberating effect of retirement, offering time, space and energy previously occupied by work, as well as the freedom to determine one's use of these things. For some, that choice was to swop paid work for significant voluntary roles, often in response to an ongoing sense of mission or calling (Tom, Sian, Cath). The extent to which people could become the masters of their time was perhaps a larger question, but retirement did at least raise it. Frustration was expressed where spiritual learning and development was still not being pursued despite having more time (Rod, Greg).

The significance of retirement could also be observed from a farther point, as seen by two older participants (aged 82 and 79). One commented on retirement from a much later life context:

> *In your sixties, you work towards retirement. Perhaps you've got all sorts of expectations for that; you've got to work through not having that status … You've got to become yourself. And in your seventies and eighties you discover who you are. (pause) And, as I would put it, it's learning how to love.* Jen

One the topic of looking back when older, the other noted*:*

> *I was late sixties; but it was a wonderful liberation. I must say, I suddenly realised I was who I was meant to be.* Paula

Despite its current flexibility, retirement is still a key later life-course marker, but there are others. Grandparenthood was mentioned by several, not only for the new delights and responsibilities that it brings (Doug, Jack), but also because it represents promotion to an older generation. A change in generational status can also be from the loss of much older parents, which also triggered reflection on the manner of their going and on one's own life (Sally, Ben, Pete, Alice). Among other life-course challenges noted, spousal bereavement was the most impactful, even after many years since the loss (Sasha, Ginger). Along with the many life-changing effects, reflections and coping strategies she experienced, one had also undergone a major spiritual perspective change:

> *So, I was a church person. Then at the age of fifty my husband died extremely suddenly, and it marks a very … for me, a very, very significant point in my faith life.* Sasha

Now, from the vantage point of the further marker of turning seventy, Sasha was finding new ways of faith and spirituality (see more on Sasha in Section 6.3.1). In a similar way, Ginger's later life story was bisected by spousal loss in his early sixties, though the main spiritual response he spoke about was reflecting on much earlier events in his life. He recounted visits earlier in retirement to his childhood home town and school, describing them as 'pilgrimages' to assist his meaning-making in his sixties, and again through reflection more recently in much later life (80+). Vera's current interest in spirituality had been initiated through the spiritual self-care she had discovered during her husband's terminal illness, having moved away in early adulthood from a religious upbringing and schooling.

A further change in spiritual outlook that was linked to ageing was the issue of finitude and death awareness. This final life-course marker was raised by participants in both focus group and individual interviews at various points, but often in the context of their changing awareness of later life. There were no direct questions or probes within interviews, but awareness of mortality, the event of death itself, and sometimes preparations for death, arose mostly as part of thoughts on spirituality and ageing. For a few, it was their only thought about being old(er), as they did not yet consider themselves in that phase of life.

> *I wonder if there's an element of 'there is more to this life than here' as you get closer to the end of 'here'.* Polly

> *All I want to do is to continue to deepen my understanding until I take my last breath. And (then) all I want to know – to learn – is how best to die.* Dan

> *I did get a real sense of feeling 'mmm, right, ok, count up the years, there are not so many to go as there have been'.* Sasha

Others had formed a view about death and what lay ahead:

> *Death is death. You do die but that which is loved – which is you at the moment and is still in a state of becoming – um, that's going to live and that which isn't love … will just die. … the love bit just goes into a different dimension and adds to the wholeness of God, who is love.* Jen

> *The act of death and what I'm going to is, to me, returning home. It's going back to where I came from, hoping to take with me something for those in my group soul that I can share.* Marlene

However, since a significant minority of the sample believed in future lives, I wondered about the effect of this on their attitude to spiritual development. If one had further chances at living, did learning continue, or affect one's re-starting position in some way? Here are some examples of learning for infinitude:

> *I think what one comes in with (at birth) is 'lessons to be learned', both as a result of mistakes and of things done correctly – morally, spiritually or ethically in the past. And this life … if there are others … you just start off at another point with more learning to do*. Pete

> *It doesn't really matter … I can lose the physical body, but the (spiritual) search will still continue. So, what's important - like the essence of myself - that will be unchanging; that will continue.* Veda

> *I have no fear of death because to me it's a step upwards in the path of development.* Josh

The continuing learning opportunities implied by future lives seemed also to suggest the possibility of an assessment of spiritual development, and some people expressed this directly. For example: Josh's idea of a 'school report' on the quality of spiritual life in each incarnation; Carrie wondering about St Peter's question at the heavenly gate; and the idea of karma, expressed by several.

As concluding observations on patterns, I include particular statements from participants that I felt encapsulated several different ways in which the relationship between ageing and spirituality was seen. These bring ideas together in ways that could be lost if just coded separately. Using these as illustrations, I propose three types of understanding about ageing and spirituality as:

ageless experience; finitude and flexibility; and witness without arrogance. These were first noticed within focus group material, but with the addition of individual interview data, the three approaches were further identified:

Ageless experience epitomised the view that accumulated experience was the active ingredient in spiritual development; increased age simply represented greater time and opportunity for experiential learning.

> *I'm not sure that age is the most important factor, rather the response of the individual to life events and their capacity to accept change and grow in their involvement with faith.*
> Carrie

Early in her interview, Jen did not recognise a direct link between ageing and her changing spirituality: *I think it's just that one is continuing to live. I've been in this model most of my life.* And Sean said his spiritual development in later life felt like *a natural growth coming from a steady foundation.*

Finitude and flexibility represented an awareness of growing older, often as people entered the third age marked by retirement or family changes. The recognition of finitude and flexibility had a dual effect on raising age-related spiritual consciousness, as people realised that both mortality and new opportunities now featured in their lives – a kind of simultaneous closing down and opening up.

> *It's certainly something to do with getting closer to death; the further away from birth, so, you know, endings. It's to do with having more flexibility because I'm retired I'm not so distracted by work … a general opening up and the question 'how am I spending my time?'*
> Mary

Cath describes the life-course transition of retirement as*:*

> *a grieving process that you go through, missing colleagues and so on, and a bit of adjustment and uncertainty – who am I now – all of that. So it's since then, being able to stand back a bit and thinking 'what now' and then seeing this opening out that is available for me!*

Witness without arrogance describes the mature disposition that expresses confidence in a person's own developed perspective alongside tolerance of that of others, especially where they are different.

You become aware, as you get older, who has shaped your spiritual journey and give thanks for that. And they're not necessarily Christian people – it's everyone you've met and had the joy of relating to. Jean

I'm quite sure God really doesn't mind what language we speak or what name we use, because this great energy is beyond all that. It's just human beings that try and put fences round, I think. Delia

In more recent years I have matured and my faith has strengthened. … I am able to tell the world I thank God for his creation, for the skills he gave me to be a counsellor, and to help maintain my parish church. … I pray for his world, I try to remove judgement from my thoughts, to show empathy and be compassionate with all. Sean

A parallel can be suggested between these observed patterns and theoretical thinking about later life, in that they illustrate continuity theory, a life course perspective and a narrative approach to gerontology (life-as-story). I will comment more about how this idea is developed in the next section (Section 6.3) and in the Discussion (Section 7.5).

To summarise, this thematic analysis of interview data has sought to address how spirituality responds to age and whether ageing calls forth a spiritual response. I propose that later life does provide a different relationship to spirituality, in the sense that the changing, experience-based perspective from which people view the events and circumstances of their lives enables spiritual development. Consciousness of spiritual ageing emerges from whatever vantage points of later life that provoke reflection (in the forms of realisation and review). Common vantage points include today's key markers of later life, such as retirement, bereavement and dependency; these form part of the life-course landscape and become part of older people's meaning systems, along with other less predictable elements of their individual biographies.

Responses to events and circumstances are mostly experienced as part of a continuous life-course, rather than signifying entry into particular ages or stages, because most development is incremental rather than transformative (see Section 5.5). Perception of life's patterns and changes can be made on reflection, through the re-interpretation of experience when looking back. As Pete observed, what seems like random searching at the time can be seen later as amounting to a path of development, which then 'turns out' to be happening in later life. In this sense, life-long experience and life-course location are preferred to the attribution of 'ageing' or

'being older' as explanations of spiritual development. Another source of contested feelings about being older is that (spiritual) self-identity is forged in relationships with others, so that the experience of later life is also subject to others' perception of one as 'older'. This can be in conflict with the continuity of the younger self experienced in one's inner life. The varying self-perceptions of the participants in my study enabled me to identify, through thematic analysis of their talk, three kinds of views on ageing and spirituality: ageless experience; finitude and flexibility; witness without arrogance.

I now move onto some narrative analysis considerations of the relationship between ageing and spirituality (RQ2) since the accounts of later spiritual life presented through individual interviews offer insight from this additional way of looking at data.

6.3   Narrative analysis

Narrative enquiry works with stories drawn from lived experience, often generated from interviews. Individual interviews offered greater scope for longer stories, for further questioning, and for life contexts to be explored (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003). Therefore, in this section I use data from individual interviews to deepen the insights gained from the focus groups on the relationship between participants' ageing and their spirituality. This involves two main discussions: first, of the three gerontological themes I discerned concerning people's views of ageing and spirituality; and second, of participants' current engagement in spiritual learning and development, which I have termed their third age spiritual learning project.

In terms of methodology to enable narrative analysis (Section 4.10) let me remind the reader that my aim was to elicit narratives, be aware of the context of the interviewer/interviewee relationship and then analyse data within the framework of the research question I have brought to the study. It should be recalled that individual Interviews were based on a few open questions, generated by issues arising from focus groups, and neither sought nor elicited whole life stories. However, my understanding that a narrative can be experience-centred rather than focused on chronological events (Squire *et al* 2008) has enabled a consideration of interview texts as narratives (see Section 4.10.1). Two analytical categories which underlie my main narrative analysis have evolved from writing increasingly detailed case summaries, as I formed ideas about similarities and differences between participants. These categories of *relationship between ageing and spirituality* (see Appendix N) and of *third-age spiritual learning journey* (see Appendix O*)* were informed by my understanding of each case's full narrative. Furthermore, the patterns that I was discerning enabled 'conversation with the larger theoretical literature' (Josselson 2011a:228). In this way, I identified the theoretical (gerontological) approaches of continuity, life-course and life-

as-story as three ways in which people themed their perception of the relationship between ageing and spirituality. In the next sections, I say more about how I used these approaches to analyse data, illustrating with examples and case-studies. I will first describe the narrative category of *ageing related to spirituality* (Section 6.3.1) and then the narrative category of *third-age spiritual learning journey* (Section 6.3.2).

6.3.1   Ageing related to spirituality: a categorical narrative analysis

On the basis of my overall sense of their interview accounts, participants appeared to represent one of three overall outlooks in how they thought about their spirituality in relation to their ageing. The three outlooks that I could identify corresponded to ones when first analysing focus group members' attitudes to the relationship between ageing and spirituality. At that point, I had labelled them 'ageless experience', 'finitude and flexibility', and 'witness without arrogance' (see Section 6.2.5). I had further noted that these outlooks had resonance with key approaches within gerontology itself: continuity theory, which focuses on incremental change and development rather than seeing later life as qualitatively different from earlier periods; the life-course perspective which appreciates that later life has earlier-life precedents and a historical dimension, and may contain patterns that characterise today's experience of ageing; and life-as-story, denoting the emergence of narrative gerontology which focuses on diversity that arises from life stories about trajectories of change in later life.

Sometimes the outlook that was evidenced from their overall narrative was in contrast with a participant's particular remarks that had been coded thematically. In other words, although aspects of their narratives could illustrate different themes that it was useful to identify, their overall story tended in one of three directions. For example, Paula reported that age-related wisdom was attributed to her by family and friends, but she felt that this did not amount to anything more than good use of experience on her part. This remark (coded thematically as 'continuity') helps clarify the attitude adopted by many participants, that spirituality is not particularly related to ageing *per se*, but ageing is seen as a proxy label for long experience. However, taking her narrative as a whole, Paula's interview places her more as someone who *does* recognise that her later life spirituality is different in quality and tells of changing ways of 'being and doing' as she has aged (analysed narratively as awareness of life-course).

I discerned the three broad outlooks on the basis of the whole case summary I had developed for each participant, having inspected case summary items on ageing and spirituality (Appendix N). Although the case summary items had drawn on participants' speech extracts coded under 'ageing and spirituality', I had formulated a statement about their overall view on the relationship between ageing and spirituality by a careful reading of each interview narrative as a whole. This is an example of narrative analysis as *my* interpretation of participants' interpretations (Legard, Keegan and Ward 2003). I will now discuss a few cases in further detail, to illustrate particular elements I felt to be important to these various stances illustrated by my narrative category of ageing and spirituality.

Ageing and spirituality as continuity

Veda (60+, non-religious spirituality (NRS), dweller) and **Carrie** (65+, religious spirituality (RS), dweller) both made definite statements about spiritual change in their lives *not* being due to ageing but to continuity of life. Spiritual learning and development were attributed to ongoing experience which, of course, accumulated with age. Later life spirituality was thus business as usual in that it continued to respond to experience and self-directed learning, as in previous periods. Differences could be perceived looking back, comparing earlier with later life, and could be anticipated in the future as the spiritual journey traversed different terrains and yielded different experiences. But in principle, the learning and development process was the same; its operation in later life was not qualitatively different.

Both Veda and Carrie were recent retirees, embracing new opportunities for the purposive learning styles they had developed thus far. Both dwellers, Veda's learning was focused on the spiritual learning path provided by the Wxxxxx School which was, in effect, a mixture of reflection and self-directed experiences. Carrie was less directed by her spiritual community, although her learning was oriented towards being of service to it. She was identifying and accessing local and regionally provided short-courses, as well as re-interpreting her earlier spiritual narratives. Veda's dwelling response to spiritual learning had been chosen in earlier adulthood and developed over thirty years, having relinquished the unsatisfactory spirituality of her upbringing. Her ongoing searching in later life was being addressed by the curriculum, ethos and spiritual satisfaction provided by 'the School', her spiritual community. Carrie's dwelling response was undergoing adaptation through a mid-life change of denomination within Christianity and as a result of personal and family change. She nonetheless perceived her newly-entered later life as continuity, on the basis that change and choice were part of every life stage and that learning from experience was the ongoing process. Similarly, Veda felt that although some spiritual issues of

later life may be different (such as awareness of finitude), they simply continued to provide learning material from which to develop.

There were some variants on the picture of ageing and spirituality as continuity (that is, from others who also detected no sense of a direct relationship between one's spirituality and being older): Delia (75+), Josh (75+) and Sally (65+) expressed their spiritual learning as seekers, following a path of their own making rather than dwelling, but were clear that their seeking would continue in the same vein regardless of their current ageing. Sian and Tom were still in a significant period of transition into third age, and did not see retirement or ageing as implying anything other than the ongoing conditions under which their spirituality would develop. Their perception that ageing made little difference to spirituality was more because they lacked a consciousness of being older. Another source of their sense of continuity rather than discontinuity in later life was that of ongoing calling or vocation. Neil (dweller) had a similar outlook about continuity, but from a non-religious context.

The stance of continuity concerning ageing and spirituality was adopted by participants of various ages within my sample. These participants perhaps attributed greater significance to their processing of experience and learning opportunities rather than the contexts and circumstance of their spiritual lives at this point. For some, this was a more overt disassociation with the idea that they were old(er), which held negative connotations. The idea of lifelong or mature experience was more acceptable as a framing for their ongoing learning. It perhaps also indicated an attitude that life was what you made of it. This could be expressed through either a seeking or dwelling style of spiritual development. A current identification of themselves as lifelong rather than older learners illustrated a 'nothing different' attitude to later life which was as yet unchallenged in their third age.

Ageing and spirituality in life-course context

Cath (60+, seeker, NRS) and **Jack** (90+, dweller, RS) both acknowledged a sense of age and ageing, and could identify spiritual connections to their current 'stage' of life. For Cath, it was the impact of a recent and quite sudden arrival into retirement (through ill-health) and for Jack, the acceptance that he had acquired the status of an elder. Such spiritual responses were linked with changing circumstances or events and could appropriately be seen as discontinuities rather than continuities on an onward path of adaptation.

Retirement was a key change of this kind; other examples were illness, disability and, most disruptively, spousal bereavement. Cath had embraced the major life change of retirement despite it having been imposed on her on grounds of ill health rather than by her planning. She had cast it as an opportunity to extend her spiritual learning and development, and to practice gratitude for the release from work that had become increasingly difficult. Whilst her spiritual learning to date had largely been experiential, based on reflection through meditation, she could now add self-directed non-formal learning and had taken on two-year part-time training in spiritual healing. Further pursuit of courses was limited by financial and health factors. She continued to engage with online resources, following a self-organised path of reading lectures, blogs and discussion threads. Her spiritual development arose from a sense of who and where she was in her life-course, which also represented a coming-together of earlier strands of her spiritual self, alongside reflection on a lifetime of professional experience. Her ambitions for future spiritual development were generative in nature, in the service of others and her community. She was a seeker, having accepted that she had matured beyond her earlier quest to find and fit in with a ready-made spiritual narrative and community. She reported her current outlook as flourishing in ways that she had not anticipated before retirement. As a seeker, she was aware of a large range of potential spiritual resources to be garnered from a new phase of life.

Jack was a contrast in many ways, being much older, male and a lifelong dweller with a traditional religious spirituality. However, I felt that he and Cath shared the sense of having reached an identity and place that were both positive and age-related. Jack's sense of flourishing was also a cause of gratitude, given his age; he was keen to state all the things that were *not* wrong with him. Jack's spiritual learning and development had followed a traditional and visible path as an ordained Anglican minister, but it had become more self-directed and less formal in retirement (a period of nearly thirty years). He was reluctantly accepting a spiritual identity of 'elder', increasingly attributed by his network of friends, family, and spiritual community among whom he practiced an adapted form of ministry. He retained daily disciplines of reading and prayer, but had added membership of discussion groups, interacting both with retired ordained and lay people. He was an active mentor for his grandchildren and valued the authenticity of his life experience in situations of offering pastoral care. He viewed such interactions as learning experiences for him, as well as service to others.

Other respondents who demonstrated a sense of life-course location often did so by acknowledging later life markers and reflecting on them, usually with a view to making adjustments in their understanding or practice. For instance, Rod was conscious of the changing dynamics of retirement and of family relationships that were impacting his spiritual learning. Those who reported 'intimations of mortality' showed that this ultimate life marker needed

attention, as in leaving a legacy. For a few, finitude was the main thought that came to mind concerning a relationship between ageing and spirituality. For Elsa and Ginger, thoughts about finitude were probably prompted by their greater age; for Doug, and particularly Ben, their focus was a current health concern.

Rather than a consciousness of older age itself, this stance on the relationship of ageing and spirituality lay more in an awareness of a finite life-course and where one was currently located. Such an awareness could include the recent past, and the future, and an understanding of the changed circumstances that were now in play. Cath, as a younger example of this stance, was proactively responding to changes that had not been of her making, but actively dealing with the 'closing down and opening up' nature of life-course transitions. For Jack, the spiritual learning was more in terms of ongoing meaning-making as he felt his roles change, especially in how he thought others now responded to him. Far from inducing passivity, a greater later-life consciousness engendered proactive learning, as people grasped what their ageing could mean.

Ageing and spirituality as a feature of life-as-story

Sasha (70+, dweller, RS) and **Josh** (75+, seeker, NRS) adopted a storyteller's perspective, from which ageing and spirituality were seen as connected through the intertwining of continuity *and* change. Sasha could identify threads of spiritual development running throughout her story; Josh saw developmental episodes that seemed only to follow one another through chance factors but had subsequently prompted him to reflect on connections and deeper meanings. Now in later life, the story was taking yet another turn, compared to previous 'chapters' in their lives. They both offered several key stories within their interviews as responses to probes, and discussed (ongoing) meanings ascribed to them.

Sasha's account of her spiritual development was bisected by the early and traumatic event of her husband's death twenty years earlier, which prompted an intense period of searching and reviewing of her spirituality. The self-directed learning that she subsequently engaged in, both self-organised and course-based, enabled her to significantly but satisfactorily adapt her dwelling response to spiritual development within a Christian narrative. The symbols and meanings she created around bereavement served her well for a long period, but were now no longer needed in the same way. She continued to work out new interpretations of her life-long faith both in spiritual practices (contemplative prayer, music, art) and in teaching others to explore these media for a sense of transcendence and connection. From her recognition of more recent life-

story episodes, such as retirement, grandparenthood and turning seventy, she anticipated further transitions. She continued to reflect further on her Christian meaning frame in terms of later life experience and changing understanding of its narrative.

Josh' lifelong seeking response to spiritual learning and development was illustrated by his accounts of dramatic episodes, spiritual experiences and plot twists in his life (such as taking an unplanned diversion to the island of XXXX on a holiday road trip, which subsequently became a very important place for his spiritual development). Such stories were woven into explanations of the many spiritual theories and beliefs he had explored and brought into spiritual practice over the years. At some points, he may have appeared to be dwelling but his searching was clearly a seeking kind. His predominantly intellectual quest for spiritual understanding is never quite fulfilled and this drives his search onwards for new narratives to try out. Currently describing himself as an esoteric Christian, he had constructed a narrative of his own from resources such as Christianity, astrology and various strands of ancient wisdom. In mid-life, his own searching engaged him in facilitating spiritual education for others, by running an alternative spirituality learning centre in XXXX. Now in later life his goal was to pass on (through publishing and offering talks) the conclusions he has come to so far - the individual narrative he has developed in support of his spiritual outlook.

There were others who offered insight into a *life-as-story* outlook concerning ageing and spirituality. On reflection, they saw the story of their spiritual development as having moved on, such as Prue looking back on the ways in which she previously expressed her spirituality. Several had become conscious that a new chapter was ready to begin, perhaps by changing the spiritual narrative relied on hitherto. This was most forcefully expressed by Jen, but also in more muted ways by Alice and Pete, who saw things 'coming together' slightly differently now. Caroline and Paula, with dwelling and seeking styles respectively, were consciously open to changes in their ongoing story. Prue's attitude of 'connect rather than correct' indicated an increased willingness to consider other people's stories in order to advance one's own.

The distinctive nature of life-as-story lay in its combination and integration of both continuity and discontinuities across life. A story metaphor therefore works well, as would that of a tapestry or quilt, where threads start and finish at different places and interweave to produce a unique picture/article. Whilst elements of storytelling could have been identified for most participants, I focused on those whose stories were most overt and had been employed as answers to my questions and prompts.

All three of the stances people adopted concerning ageing and spirituality could be seen as contributing to a sense of later life spiritual development today: the continuity of a third age that

looks and feels similar to previous adult development; the awareness that circumstances have changed or are changing, adding a contextual dimension to personal and spiritual development; an assertion of one's individual trajectory, with its lifelong mix of stability and change and its eye on the nature of the journey undertaken. These attitudes all enable spiritual learning and development if viewed as ways in which incidental and self-directed learning continue to support spiritual meaning-making.

6.3.2 Third age-spiritual learning journeys: a categorical narrative analysis

In this second part of narrative analysis, I continue to address participants' understanding of ageing and spirituality, now using my narrative category of 'third-age spiritual learning journeys'. This narrative category has been drawn from my interpretation of people's overall learning project at this stage of life, and what it represents on their spiritual journey. It includes not only the progress of their spiritual learning, which may have been ongoing through adulthood, but also an element of any response to the spiritual demands of later life. The notion of third-age spiritual learning journeys therefore complements people's *thoughts* about spiritual ageing by revealing something of what they are now *doing* to further their spiritual journey. As in the previous section (6.3.1), this narrative category on people's current spiritual learning was developed from case summaries, and thus draws on thematic coding, but is also based on my familiarity with the whole case. A table that lists the case summary elements of third-age spiritual learning journeys is given at Appendix O.

Inspecting this element of case summaries in age order shows no strong link between age and degree of engagement on such a journey. Some participants who were relatively young (under 70) were well engaged in their third-age spiritual learning, adapting or transforming their outlook prompted by reflecting on their experience or age-related factors. Some others, despite being older (over 75), were less established in a conscious spiritual learning project, having only more recently become aware of developmental issues in later life. There were slightly more respondents who were more consciously engaged in a third-age learning project among non-religious spiritualities. This was perhaps because they were more likely to be seekers, who tended to be more proactive in their spiritual learning. This effect was more pronounced among younger respondents. Older respondents' (over 75) spiritual learning journeys appeared more developed, from both religious and non-religious bases.

Those who seemed most proactive in their current learning (what I have termed their third-age spiritual learning project) included those for whom spirituality appeared to be more of a conscious priority and interest in their lives, such as Jen, Sasha, Prue, Pete, Cath, Delia, Josh. They came from all age groups, but were mostly seekers, perhaps demonstrating that making one's own path demands more proactivity. Others were also proactive in the sense of taking up learning, but these opportunities mainly came their way from their chosen path or dwelling place. Thus Neil, Carrie, Doug, Veda and Tom were dwellers whose spiritual communities offered them regular development opportunities that they took up as a normative part of their spiritual lives.

Another group, who were less proactive, had access to learning opportunities including support for their own reflection and review, but had tended to engage mostly in response to some spiritual issue that arose. Examples include Alice, Greg and Rod in that they expressed some current dissatisfaction with their spirituality, but appeared unable to overcome perceived barriers to spiritual learning. There were a number who drew more (or additionally) on everyday life for their spirituality, and were happy with their own ability to reflect and engage with others informally for spiritual meaning making and so appeared to seek it less proactively. Spiritual learning and development happened for them along the course of their lives without having to consciously prioritise it: Paula, Sally, Sian, Jack. Lastly, Ben and Ginger were more engaged in coping with diminishment than any other current interest or activity, and thus needed someone to offer them spiritual support; they were not in a place to find it themselves. Participants' consciousness of where they might be on a third-age spiritual journey was therefore varied, and not linked to age or kind of spirituality (religious or non-religious). I now explore contrasting cases for further nuances about third-age spiritual learning journeys.

Third-age spiritual learning journeys: early and later journeys

Rod (60+, dweller, RS) and **Alice** (70+, dweller, RS) were both well engaged in a spiritual journey, having been Christians for all their adult years. Alice's depth of spiritual maturity had been forged in the struggles of life with a disabled child, but also in self-transcendent experiences that she described as connection with the Holy Spirit and the practice of 'spiritual gifts'. Rod had experienced the deeply significant event of spousal bereavement in mid-life and had re-married in his late fifties. Their third-age awareness differed, I felt, such that Rod's spiritual journey had yet to take on the perspective of later life. His re-marriage to a younger wife (in her fifties) and a re-engagement with paid work in retirement had re-identified him somewhat with second rather than third age. He was however aware of this in-between location, which I interpreted as a life-course stance on ageing and spirituality. He felt on the cusp of a new calling but was hampered by an unhelpful view of himself as 'not spiritual enough' which was proving difficult to work through

and was a barrier to further spiritual learning. Alice, having journeyed and grown through so much, was now finding later life a time of challenge despite having a mature spiritual identity. However, she was using her well-tried practices of reflection and connection to identify her current and future spiritual needs (for instance, for more opportunities for contemplation). In stepping down from certain leadership roles to accommodate more self-development, she was beginning to accept others' attributions of her as wise and adding to her sense of a mature spiritual self. This illustrated the later nature of her spiritual journey compared to Rod's, in which he still strove to know himself as a third-ager and to recognise where his spiritual strengths lay. He felt that much journey still lay ahead of him.

Religious and non-religious journeys

Sian (60+, dweller, RS) and **Elsa** (80+, seeker, NRS) varied significantly in age but were examples of a religious and non-religious third-age spiritual learning journey respectively, in which they were both engaged. Sian's awareness of her later life was relatively new, but already featured retirement opportunities through which she sought to express her religious convictions. Elsa's late life was beginning to yield restrictions but her mental and spiritual life was active and self-described as 'questing', mostly on the topic of the nature of transcendence – was there a personal God? Sian's dwelling and Elsa's seeking were very much rooted in their affiliation, or lack of affiliation, to a particular religious narrative and its associated spiritual community. An earlier rejection of faith had occurred for both of them, but Sian's re-connection (with a different Christian denomination) was made as a young adult and had grown into a long-standing dwelling, with a strong sense of a God she could relate to. Now in retirement, she continued to seek and find fulfilment and growth in religious interpretations of life and events. Her sense of calling and social action was framed by her religious outlook. Elsa's bleak upbringing had not seemingly featured religion, but her adult married life had included church attendance. Finding a conventional religious narrative increasingly unhelpful, she had come to Unitarianism as a more acceptable form of faith, but in widowhood her active membership had become difficult to sustain. Sian's recent set back with volunteering on an overseas development project that failed had been helpfully processed within the spiritual framework of her church and family. Her willingness to discuss its significance to her spiritual identity and ongoing mission helped her contextualise the event in a more positive way. Without such a strong sense of religious community, Elsa's limited driving capacity and lack of internet now made it difficult to keep up with networks that she had previously valued. Elsa had harsh words for those of her long-standing

friends who did attend church for social support / status in old age, but did not engage with spiritual questions, in her view. There was a sense that their religiosity was bogus, whilst she was still seeking - pursuing questions and not finding answers that satisfied her. The answers offered by non-religious narratives and practices which she had previously tried did not seem to meet her quest. However, her continued resistance to the idea of a personal transcendent 'other' meant that she still had yet to find any religious outlook compelling.

Seeking and dwelling journeys

Paula (75+, seeker, NRS) and **Doug** (65+, dweller, NRS) were both non-religious but their styles of spiritual learning and development could be contrasted in terms of seeking and dwelling. Both had experienced religious upbringings that had not developed into adult convictions, but life experience and opportunities for spiritual learning had presented themselves. For Paula, a testing lifestyle of tumultuous marriage and family difficulties, both in the UK and abroad, had produced a self-reliant stance that included the self-authorising path of spiritual seeking. In late life (nearly 80) she spoke of a mature spirituality that was familiar and at ease with itself and the present moment. She particularly recognised her people skills and community engagements which expressed her continuing spiritual search as a seeker and her values of openness and self-acceptance. Doug painted a picture of moving from a conventional non-spiritual, corporate work life to embracing the chance in mid-life to explore spirituality with a new partner. Not necessarily starting from a recognised spiritual need or life event trigger, he had nonetheless progressed through the Wxxxxx School programme, and was now a dedicated dweller and tutor of others. He valued the path set out for him and wished that others he cared about could also discover its worth. He fulfilled local and regional roles in service of the School and promoted it in other ways open to him through professional networks. He attended groups and summer school-type retreats as required by his membership and supported others to do so. A key spiritual experience, through meditation, had reinforced for him the veracity of the path that would lead to development of the true self. Both Paula and Doug reported that they were successfully pursuing spiritual searching and growth in their respective seeking and dwelling styles, not needing to make adjustments to their major narratives. Their life experiences could be accommodated within these differing spiritual meaning frames – one being self-constructed, the other being drawn from the pathway set out by the Wxxxxx School.

6.3.3 Case studies

In this final section of narrative analysis, I will move beyond the two narrative categories explored above into observations on a small number of whole interviews. This will be in order to make

case-level observations about contrasting *ages, spiritualities* (RS and NRS) and *dwelling/seeking* in the relationship of ageing to spirituality. This methodological strategy was discussed at Section 4.10.1.

Jen the older and Pete the younger spiritual learner

Jen, at 80+ was at the older end of my sample range, and Pete at 60 was among the youngest participants[19]. Jen and Pete did not have a lot in common on first sight, except their dedication and interest from an early age in spirituality. Jen had until recently been a life-long Anglican but now followed a seeking path beyond the narrative she has adjusted as far as she could. Jen's ageing brought her a wealth of experience through which she lived with her Christian narrative, but ultimately found the church's version of the narrative wanting and its teachings untenable. She wished to be free to explore what she made of that heritage for herself and can therefore be seen as moving from a dwelling to a seeking style of spiritual development. With some minor intimations of frailty, she viewed an end to her life with equanimity and faith in an unknown but ultimately good outcome. Like some other older participants, she identified love as an eternal and overruling principle that would not be extinguished either before or after death. Jen was an incremental but eclectic learner from a long and wide life experience and had reached a transformative point of outlook change. She exemplified how a cumulative effect of learning adjustments could reach a tipping point where the meaning-frame itself had to change. As an older spiritual learner, she had also drawn on a sense of her life-course in its setting and the times lived-through. She was one of a few participants who had childhood memories of the Second World War. The openness of her spiritual maturity had enabled a new path of reflection and re-framing of a long (spiritual) life.

Pete was a generation younger than Jen but shared her enthusiasm and boundless interest in all things spiritual. He had been a seeker since an adolescent repudiation of Roman Catholicism, as an eldest son of an Irish family. An active mind and voracious reading appetite were the main features of his seeking throughout adulthood. He could account for several distinct periods of development which had never quite produced a satisfactory dwelling. He had studied Buddhist

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[19] To remind the reader, the individual interview sample includes: five participants at 60+, four at 65+, five at 70+, five at 75+ and four at 80+.

practices, Eastern philosophies in general, martial arts, Victorian spiritualist writings. There were aspects of all these that drew him, and assisted his spiritual learning, but the whole narratives that accompanied them were not sustainable, in Pete's view. They did not meet modern standards of credibility (compared with Western science) or lacked sufficient insight into the human condition (compared with modern psychology and the therapeutic movement). As for many participants, including Jen, the spiritual narrative had to make sense to Pete and resonate authentically with experience. In later life, he developed trust in some practices such as meditation and continued spiritual reading and now actively sought a narrative to link them. This, he claimed, was coming together into a path of his own making, as he developed confidence in his self-authorisation to choose between what were previously unlimited options.

Pete's relative youth potentially offered a longer time-scale for spiritual development (towards his goal of greater enlightenment) compared to Jen, but were they different in other ways because of cohort membership? Perhaps Pete's rejection of a church upbringing came more easily to a person of his generation. Jen has felt more 'alone' in her doubts about a faith narrative, now lacking both peers and elders to talk with at a deep level. Pete had many other seekers around him. In terms of proactivity however, often associated with younger seekers, Jen and Pete were similar in their thirst for spiritual development at these times in their lives.

Caroline the religious and Neil the non-religious dweller

Both of these dwellers were faithful, long-term members of their spiritual communities and followers of their respective narratives and teachings. They both had a calling to serve others and had developed ministries, including teaching, and participated in mission on their communities' behalf. In later life (Neil in his late sixties and Caroline in her early seventies, but living with a health condition) they were still adapting their skills and ministries to maintain their contributions. I wondered initially if Neil's Rosicrucianism was in fact a religion. Although it had structures and a community, the interview data pointed to it being more a developmental path than a community of believers following doctrines or one particular spiritual vision. Neil's dedication to the Rosicrucian way of life is however similar to the discipleship demonstrated by religious believers, which positioned him as an 'adapted dweller' who had adjusted his beliefs and practices over the years in response to life experience.

Caroline was a lifelong Methodist, who found both her beliefs and practices changing in later life. She had 'gone beyond' some beliefs to a more encompassing faith in God's love, from which *separation was not possible whatever we believed or experienced*. Her changed perspective included *a real question mark about the 'one way' claims of Christianity* and now embraced the need for all people of different faiths to meet and hear from each other concerning spirituality.

She was less likely to use a petitionary form of prayer for particular outcomes, but metaphorically lifted people before God. She speculated that older people might be more able to tolerate a healthy degree of uncertainty, since experience had taught them that many aspects of life could not be controlled or fixed by an external deity. Her principal spiritual focus was to *acknowledge the thing that doesn't change – God's love* and be open to ways of receiving and expressing that relationship as a gift, particularly in the context of a community.

Neil referred to his growing attitude of tolerance and inclusion, and a willingness to be of service to any spiritual endeavour (including the local Anglican church, by playing his guitar on some occasions). Forgiveness of self and others for flaws and mistakes had guided his behaviour both in the family and in his spiritual community. Adaptations to his ministry included a reduction of speaking engagements and writing (to encourage and recruit members) in favour of tutoring and mentoring and more contemplative communications. He was modest about his own spiritual progress towards the higher spiritual states recognised within Rosicrucianism, self-describing as an 'aspiring mystic' despite nearly fifty years of practice. He visualised his spiritual openness continuing in future, including his re-connecting with a more inclusive, practice-oriented Christian Church that he felt would surely come about when all spiritual people recognised their shared values.

For these participants, spiritual learning was (for Caroline) to deepen a relationship with God and express Christ-like characteristics; and to identify and live more fully out of one's own godlike nature, seen as the true self (Neil). Both had a strong calling of service to their communities and to express the life of the divine, as they saw it, in their own practice and way of life. These are all long-term projects and both were still engaged in spiritual search as the motivation for their learning journeys. Both drew on spiritual practices they had established over the years, which had different rhythms – daily, weekly, annually; smaller and larger group activities; formal and informal roles. They were adapting these practices as later life made different demands on them and frequently reflecting on how their behaviour and attitudes measured up to their spiritual understandings, striving to improve. In adjudicating these matters, Neil relied solely on his own intuition enhanced by study and meditation to feel what was right. Caroline also studied and prayed, and drew on spiritual community values and tradition for discernment. They had both held office at national level within their spiritual organisations but had willingly returned to operating as ordinary members serving their communities. This reflected the high value they

placed on the spiritual practice of expressing divine love, compared to holding correct belief and doctrine.

Although similar in the importance given to a spiritual life and its practice, Caroline and Neil's cases can help highlight the distinction between faith in the truth of a religious narrative and faith in a way of life – a path sustained by practice but not underpinned by particular beliefs. As with the Wxxxxx School participants (Doug and Veda), the Rosicrucian path of spiritual development is spelled out in the levels of learning on offer ('degrees'), and the spiritual learner selects their route towards the goal of finding and living out of one's true self. Christianity is also a way of life, dedicated to developing ways of being in the world that emulate its founder but, as voiced by several participants, also requiring a basic set of beliefs. In maturity, and through spiritual learning based on experience, older Christians such as Caroline were able to re-frame and re-apply the narratives that supported their outlooks in earlier years and place more emphasis on the ways of life over the set of beliefs.

Delia the seeker and Tom the dweller

Delia (75+, seeker, NRS) and Tom (70+, dweller, RS) share some attributes: they were both very committed to their spirituality, although in contrasting seeker and dwelling styles. They continued to look for generative opportunities to contribute to the welfare of others in voluntary ways, spending many hours a week doing so, and were prepared to pursue learning / training to further this goal. This included attending national and international gatherings, as well as more local and regional learning opportunities. They had both reflected extensively on their spiritual learning and development at earlier life stages and had generated a spiritual outlook and identity through both incidental and self-directed learning. They could discern that they had been on a spiritual learning journey since early adulthood but were both clear that ageing was not linked to any recent developments; the same process of responding to life was operating as at all previous stages.

Tom was a good example of the dwelling-type response to spiritual learning, in that he had been engaged for some time in a quest to deepen his spiritual understanding and development within the Christian tradition that he chose to adopt more consciously as an adult. Tom experienced a transcendent relationship with God, but divine presence for him was personal rather than impersonally expressed 'in all things'. Like Delia, he felt that a spiritual connection with God was available, if not on call, and that tuning in through spiritual attentiveness increased its likelihood. His main spiritual practices were prayer and study of scripture to better understand the nature of God. Tom and Delia have both had 'enhanced reality' type spiritual experiences; Delia in connections with the natural world, and Tom in experiences of the Holy Spirit.

Tom was a highly-engaged member of his spiritual community and devoted many hours and skills to its benefit, for the support and spiritual development of others. In this context, he lived within the Christian narrative but also with confidence to interrogate and apply it to his life. Life experiences which have tested his spiritual understandings have led him to review and, at times, make adjustments to his outlook. His views on the relationship of all this to ageing are minimal; he foresaw an ongoing trajectory of experience and study-based development, in which service to others was a key value. He planned to respond to later life in the context of his dwelling within a much-valued spiritual community and its narrative. His attitude to death was not one of fear but of hope that his use to others would continue for as long as possible.

Delia was a valued and skilled contributor to the non-religious spiritual life of the local community, which was more in the nature of an informal network rather than an organisation. She facilitated spiritual learning for many others by managing a local healing centre, which also provided rentable space for other courses and therapies. She had been a seeker since disassociating herself from the Christian narrative in her thirties, and following a self-directed path to develop spiritual practices including healing and meditation. She was now an advanced practitioner and tutor in both these areas. Like Tom, her gathering from a wide source of experience and self-directed learning was driven by an intellectual curiosity in service of spirituality (but not in service of a particular narrative). She had developed a particular interest in the inter-face between spirituality and science, especially through medicine and neuroscience. Her maturity was of the kind that has confidence (though not certainty) in its own outlook, whilst accepting those of others. Her attitude to death was entirely pragmatic and held no fear, based on the larger spiritual reality of the energy field in which she believed all living things participate.

Since Delia and Tom both engaged in a significant amount of ongoing spiritual searching to further their spiritual lives, they offered a good comparison regarding their seeking and dwelling styles for doing so. They were both confident in the connection they felt they had developed with the transcendent. For Tom, this embodied a personal relationship with God, enabling trust, discernment, help and self-acceptance through a loving spiritual learning partnership. In a real sense, he had no incentive to seek beyond his understanding of this fundamental relationship, since ongoing development was available within its infinite depths. The nature and dimensions of this relationship were the focus of his understanding of the Christian narrative, which is the subject of his conscientious study. Likewise, Delia's desire for growing spiritual insight and effective practice was confidently expressed through her relationship with her higher self. This

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was the locus for connecting with spiritual energy that sustains all things, and thus the source of her spiritual development. And although she shared elements of this narrative with other seekers, the path she forged is her own.

6.3.4   Conclusions on ageing and spirituality

This chapter has described the overall findings concerning participants' views on the relationship of their spirituality to ageing or being older. A thematic analysis drew on data from focus group and individual interviews, extending and nuancing initial focus group observations in four areas. These themes characterised later life spirituality as: things coming together; ageing as continuity; changed spiritual perspectives; and particular changes (Section 6.2). I discerned some common features from this initial thematic analysis of data, such as the idea of later life-course markers that became vantage points for reflection and therefore learning. I encapsulated three ways in which I felt participants were tending to view the relationship of their spiritual development to their ageing. My terms for these at this stage were 'ageless experience', 'finitude and flexibility' and 'witness without arrogance' (Section 6.2.5). Each of these three attitudes reported by respondents concerning their later life was seen as supporting ongoing spiritual development.

Making links between these three outlooks and major themes in gerontology literature (continuity, life-course context and life-as-story) provided me with an approach with which to carry out an additional narrative analysis of the individual interview data (Section 6.3). Although the narratives collected were experience-based rather than biographical, I was able to use familiarity with cases to construct case summaries for each respondent. This enabled case-comparisons on the basis of narrative categories that I had constructed concerning participants' views on spirituality and ageing, and on their third-age spiritual learning journeys. In this way, further interpretation was made of participants' later spiritual lives and learning journeys. Looking first at case comparisons on spirituality and ageing, I described three pairs of participants who illustrated aspects of the three approaches of continuity, life-course context and life-as-story (Section 6.3.1). Second, I presented three pairs of third-age spiritual learning journeys to make observations about journeys that are in early or later stages, are religious or non-religious, and which demonstrate seeking or dwelling styles (Section 6.3.2). To conclude, I moved beyond these particular narrative categories to offer six brief case studies to draw out a range of observations about later life spirituality (Section 6.3.3).

In the following chapter I now turn to a discussion of findings in order to link them to the research questions and literature set out as the framework for this research.

Chapter 7   Discussion

7.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings described in the two previous chapters (5 and 6) in relation to the research questions and the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3. I thereby shed further light on *the nature of older people's spirituality and its development* (Research Question 1) and *the ways in which older people see their spirituality as related to their ageing or being older* (Research Question 2)*.* I will also discuss policy implications in terms of what good practice in later life spiritual learning looks like.

The chapter will cover the following topics: First (Section 7.2), I focus on my major finding that later life spirituality can be seen as a kind of informal adult learning process, since participants nominated experience, reflection and review as key ways that they developed spiritual understanding and practice. Second (Section 7.3), I discuss my discernment of 'dwelling' and 'seeking' as helpful ways of describing two styles of spiritual learning, according to the ways people sourced and applied spiritual meaning and understanding. This enables a re-consideration of religious and non-religious spirituality. Third (Section 7.4), I extend the discussion of dwelling and seeking which both contribute to a contemporary understanding of 'spirituality of practice' as a key indicator of spiritual engagement. Fourth (Section 7.5), I discuss the three ways in which participants related their spiritual learning and development to the experience of being older and how these can be understood in a life-course context. Fifth (Section 7.6), I reflect on the significance of my findings for good practice for those involved in spiritual learning and support that could enhance spiritual development for older adults.

7.2   Spiritual learning and development as informal adult learning

I will first discuss findings related to the research question *What is the nature of spirituality and its development in later life?* RQ1 explored how spiritual learning and development are recognised within older people's life experience (for example, through spiritual meaning, understanding and practice, and accounts of spiritual change); and what kinds of spiritual learning and development take place in older people's lives. This research question was posed in the context of investigating spiritual development as a type of adult learning involved in the spiritual search for meaning in life. To remind the reader, in asking about spirituality and spiritual development, it was clear to participants that I was referring to both religious and non-religious experience.

7.2.1 Experience and its interpretation

My main observation was the primacy of *personal experience* in how participants said they recognised spirituality in their lives, compared to any other source of input or understanding such as the secondary appreciation of someone else's experience. The growth of the importance of subjective understanding in preference to received views of others, often those seen as in religious authority, has been reported in literature and sometimes termed 'the subjective turn' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Collins 2008; Roof 2019). I understand personal experience as denoting mental events or states that arise in the mind; the unique story that constitutes an individual biography; and as a person's particular knowledge and understanding (their expertise) that has also evolved over life (as discussed by Jarvis 2009). In my findings, spiritual development was perceived by participants as arising from the interpretation of personal experience in all these modes, giving rise to spiritual meanings (see also Thomas and Cohen 2006)[20].

Participants also reported how such interpretations took place and how they could increase their openness to receiving spiritually meaningful experiences for further development. In recognising that they could choose how to relate to their experience, participants illustrated observations from adult education that much of everyday life is dealt with routinely, drawing on existing meanings, but that alternative spiritual meanings can be consciously considered. For example, Sasha spoke of 'God-instances' as interpretations for things occurring together that might otherwise be thought of as co-incidences. Different levels of awareness of potential spiritual dimensions were also suggested by participants who described 'tuning in' to a transcendent reality beyond the visible world (also noted by Kartupelis 2017:74). Sometimes this required a particular focus or set of practices (such as preparations for meditation or prayer), but could also just involve 'turning up' a level of background awareness. These descriptions illustrate well Atchley's (2019:45) observation of spiritual development as:

> 'an intentional process of being open to and seeking spiritual experiences, using values and insights arising from spiritual experiences to make life choices, and learning from the experience using this process'.

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[20] I did not elicit participants' definitions of spirituality because my focus was on how it was recognised; that is, in terms of outlooks and behaviours. Only one respondent offered a definition in the course of our conversation: "awareness of life outside the physical".

Evidence suggests that re-interpretation of spiritual understanding throughout life creates a meaning system (Thomas and Cohen 2006; Atchley 2009). I propose that this meaning system comprises a spiritual meaning frame or outlook, through which further experience is framed, together with an associated narrative that supports and interacts with the outlook. The narrative is a kind of back-story that accounts for spiritual life so far and draws on other stories available in the person's life-world and culture generally (Jarvis 2009; Manning 2019). Participants noted that trust in their spiritual outlook increased when further experiences were interpreted as providing evidence of its validity and instances were woven into their ongoing narrative (see Section 5.2.3 on 'inner life'). Items coded under 'meaning-making' referred to examples of patterns and links that participants perceived, or even natural / spiritual laws that they felt made sense of experience. Marcoen (2005) similarly summarises the evolution of a spiritual outlook:

> 'The experientially-based belief in a transcendent dimension to life is the core component of (spirituality). The experience of an invisible presence of "something more" that occasionally invades or permanently inhabits the person's consciousness gives rise to deeply held convictions ...(of) meaning and purpose ... mission ... and empathetic compassion' (ibid:365).

The meaning system primarily grows from the process initiated by experience and its interpretation, which I have identified with the adult learning cycle (Knowles 1989; Cranton 2012). A key dynamic is reflection, which compares what is currently held with new inputs that present themselves (Merriam *et al* 2012, Foote 2015). For instance, participants referred to 'holding up' spiritual or religious input against what was felt to be true in their experience. They talked of spiritual realisations that resulted from proactively reviewing their lives but also from every-day, in-the-moment reflection.

Although my primary finding on recognising spirituality is one of personal experience, the ways and means people mentioned often involved interaction with others. There is a complementary dynamic to the inner dialogue that is outwardly and socially focused: meaning-making facilitated through interaction and collaboration, opening up new input and explorations of others' outlooks. This includes interacting with shared cultural perspectives, through which learning is socially mediated, and enabling comparative conversations with others (Merriam *et al* 2012). These social dimensions offer a wider canvas against which to hold up our own meanings and understandings (Morisy 2016). Most spiritual learners, including seekers in my study, were not ploughing a solitary furrow, and valued spirituality's social dimensions for interpreting their developing spiritual meanings. As Atchley (2009:147) goes on to say: 'Thus spiritual community is not only

about belonging but also about support, checks and balances, and feedback along the spiritual journey'.

7.2.2   Informal spiritual learning

My findings confirm that the individual and social monitoring process just described is the engine of adult learning, including spiritual learning, most of which I identified as *incidental.* Another form of adult spiritual learning was identified as *self-directed*, where participants followed a thought or question that arose incidentally to actively seek out further input on the topic. This typology is in line with a model of informal adult learning reviewed by Marsick and Watkins (2001) who place informal learning as central to adult learning because of its ubiquity and learner-centred focus. That is, it takes the role of primary experience seriously for learning. In their model, which I have adapted below (Figure 6), informal learning comprises incidental learning from experience, which is mostly unintentional and often unselfconscious; and self-directed learning which is more intentional but not usually highly structured (ibid:25). I have further categorised participants' examples of self-directed learning as *self-organised* (such as reading) or as pursuit of *learning opportunities* devised by someone else (such as short courses, retreats or group meditation). Such learning opportunities are also referred to as 'non-formal' to distinguish them from more structured courses (Jarvis 1985). See Appendix M for examples of self-directed learning from data.
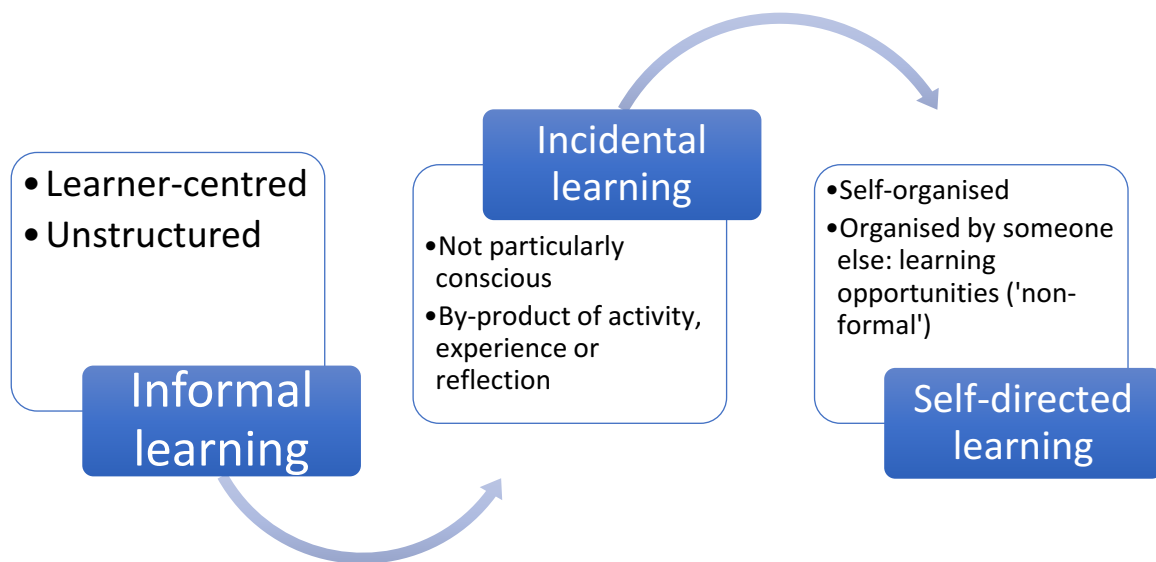
Figure 6   Informal learning. Source: author, after Marsick and Watkins 2001

Interesting questions can be asked concerning self-directed learning as an adult education activity (Merriam 2001b), which apply well to spiritual learning: How is it sustained and supported over long periods, such as into later life? Does it change as a process or in its strategy as learners gain in expertise? These questions are partly addressed in my discussion of where and how participants derive and share their narratives (see section 7.3). My observation here is that spiritual learning appears to be mainly a mutual learning exercise between those who are interested, who create and draw on expertise as they find it. The benefits of self-directed learning include more of the social and emotional aspects of learning that are valued by older people (Withnall 2010; Findsen and Formosa 2011) and important for sharing spiritual insights. Building networks of knowledge and communities of practice are ways of sustaining long-term development, even if these groupings are themselves temporary and changeable. Self-directed spiritual learning is essentially learner-led, thus confirming the contemporary subjective turn, and an organic development path that can only usually be identified on reflection. The spiritual learning journeys of the most independent seekers in my sample demonstrate this pattern (Delia, Cath, Pete).

7.2.3 Reflection and review

In further support of the primacy of experience for recognising spirituality, my findings on the inner life and its locus for meaning-making (Section 5.2.3) point to the role of reflection. Both life experience (incidental) and chosen (self-directed) learning inputs are seen as sources of people's spiritual development, through the process of reflection. That is, participants spoke principally of the meaning they had made of life events or learning inputs, rather than the fact of these experiences. Their accounts supported the idea that reflection can be triggered by many kinds of inputs and experiences in life that are 'noticed', which is the first stage of processing leading to learning (Section 2.5.3). This initial noticing can be a disjuncture between a new experience and current understanding (Jarvis 2009); or a 'dissatisfaction with current ways of thinking or being' (Marsick and Watkins 2001:29). Such diverse promptings have some common characteristics, they suggest (ibid:28): A disjunctive prompt is often part of other activities or routines, and is thus neither particularly organised nor conscious; it can happen by chance, often in interaction with others, and noticed because it triggers a recognition that one's existing understanding is challenged. Such realisations were offered by participants in evidence of this kind of incidental learning (Section 5.5).

Reflection can also be deliberately engaged through life-review or reminiscence, involving re-interpreting earlier experiences from a later standpoint. This kind of re-framing was evident in data collected within codes on meaning-making. Sometimes re-framing that takes place in later

life has been delayed to when there appears less at stake from change (Jarvis 2009). This was reported by some participants as a sense that the threat of breaking with some aspect of a long-held outlook was now seen from a different vantage point. However, not all noticing leads to reflective processing and on to changed meanings. In Moon's (1999) model (see Section 2.5.3), simply making sense of, and absorbing experience into, one's existing meaning frame are also options.

More usually, the process of life-review is seen as having potential to identify spiritual turning points, where critical or even everyday life events engender 'lasting alteration or reorientation of priorities in the developmental trajectory' because of their 'personal significance for the individual' (Thomas and Cohen 2006:66). As noted by several participants who adopted a 'continuity' narrative about later life spirituality, living longer enables a greater period of time over which new meanings can be interpreted, and more life experience with which meanings can interact. However, this observation is not the same as proposing that spiritual issues become more important in later life (discussed in Section 7.5). Older age provides more extensive material for learning but my data indicate that the propensity for spiritual meaning-making, as an aspect of adult development, enables different kinds of learning, at different levels of reflection. This variance arises from the unique combination of biography and social context (Merriam *et al* 2012).

7.2.4 Informal spiritual learning and change

A further dimension of the proposed informal adult learning model for spiritual development is the *rate and type of change* engendered by spiritual learning. The significance of later life as the context for spiritual development over time, as discussed with my participants, was also noted by McFadden and Kozberg (2008) as the importance of the 'late life meaning shaped by religiousness and spirituality' (ibid:8) To this end, I added the dimension of time to incidental and self-directed learning (Table 5 in Section 5.5) by indicating that both these types of learning can lead to minor or more significant *change over the life-course*. I have re-depicted this idea below, in Figure 7. A person's meaning-frame adjusts to accommodate small, incremental changes that accumulate over time; or it can undergo more significant re-framing where adaptation is not possible, arising from a major new realisation or a radical change of understanding. (See Section 5.5 for participants' examples of significant changes / realisations). In adult learning literature, major

changes of this kind are often known as transformative learning (Tisdell 2008, Howie and Bagnall 2013, Illeris 2014).

In its original formulation, transformative learning described how adults made meaning out of experience, challenging their existing assumptions and thus developing through a changed meaning frame (Mezirow 1991; Jones 2010). Reflection and reassessment were key processes in transformation that applied to all kinds and levels of change. However, transformative learning became more associated with significant change that altered a person's way of looking at the world, rather than adjustments to or within the frame (Miller 2011). I prefer to retain 'transformative' for describing the whole range of change that interaction with life in the world provokes, and therefore descriptive of learning itself (further discussed in Section 7.5.2).

Inner life: location for	Spiritual outlook & narrative			
Disjunctures: leading to	Incidental learning		Self-directed learning	
Changes: various kinds	Incremental, minor, over time	Transformative, major, radical	Incremental, minor, over time	Transformative, major, radical
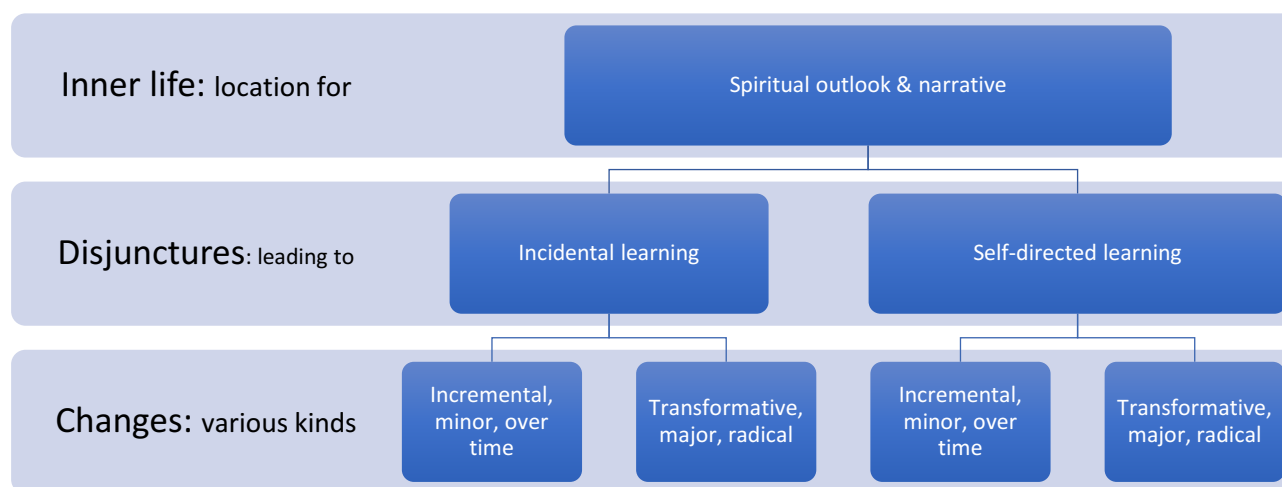
Figure 7   Informal spiritual learning and change. Source: author

Whilst there were plenty of examples of different kinds of change in my data, there were few of the more major kind that might be viewed as transformative in Mezirow's terms. The presence of transformative learning thus cannot be evidenced in my data. However, the overall proposition that both experiential (incidental) and chosen (self-directed) learning can have slow, incremental outcomes as well as quicker or more radical ones can be supported by my data. Findings illustrate the range and nuances of degree and speed of spiritual change. For instance, Tom attributed a radical change in his spiritual life to his first encounter with the Holy Spirit; Paula told of a sense of liberation in her sixties when she 'suddenly realised' that she was already who she was meant to be. Sean spoke of the practice of reflection that he now recognised had yielded spiritual insight over a number of years; Carrie reported that her self-directed spiritual learning had blossomed with the opportunity and incentive to 'catch up' with spiritual questions in retirement.

I therefore conclude that the difference between incremental and transformative learning is not as categorical as the model might suggest, but more on a scale of minor to major change, as I

have illustrated in Figure 7 above. My reluctance to distinguish them categorically also relates to the literature which uses the term 'transformative' in a variety of ways (Taylor 2007). This is not to deny the radical nature of some spiritual interpretations, but to note their relative rarity within the spiritual development reported in my data. The prevalent recognition of spiritual development in my study is of continuity through adjustments of frames and narratives, rather than experience of discontinuous states, inclining me to view later life spiritual development more as a trajectory rather than stages of change. This has implications for models of later life development to which I will return later (Section 7.5.2). I now move on to discussing findings on two distinctive ways of sourcing and developing spiritual interpretations.

7.3   Spiritual learning responses in later life: dwelling and seeking

In this section, I continue to discuss my findings concerning the nature of later life spirituality and its development (RQ1) and say more about two styles of spiritual learning responses that I observed in my study. Broadly, these were primarily based in a religious / spiritual community narrative (through 'dwelling') or were individually constructed (by 'seeking'). The differences between 'dwelling' and 'seeking' responses arose from the sources of the interpretation that people developed for their experience. Through interview dialogue, I had felt a distinction could be made not only concerning the kind of narrative (religious or non-religious) but also the source of narratives that respondents built up alongside their spiritual meaning frame or outlook.

Ideas about dwelling and seeking were first articulated by Wuthnow (1998:3), contrasting 'habitation and negotiation') and Roof (2001:16), on 'varieties of spiritual quest' to describe changes they detected in American spirituality since the mid-twentieth century. They identified an emerging difference between spirituality that placed beliefs and relationship with the divine within the boundaries of an organised or church-focused religion, which they termed spiritual dwelling; and a more individualised and negotiated spiritual understanding and practice, drawing on diverse spiritual resources, termed spiritual seeking (Dillon and Wink 2007). These concepts were further investigated by Wink and Dillon in their longitudinal work on spiritual development across the adult life-course, and featuring two older cohorts (Wink and Dillon 2002, Wink 2003, Dillon and Wink 2007, Dillon 2009). In their work, dwelling and seeking were operationalised in order to study change in belief and practice from earlier to later adulthood. In my work, I have proposed that the concepts of dwelling and seeking provide a basic typology for the ways

participants recognised and pursued spirituality. In this third section of Discussion (7.3), I relate how this approach has been supported by my data and ways in which I have applied the notions of dwelling and seeking, with particular reference to adult learning.

7.3.1   Applying and extending 'dwelling and seeking'

As discussed in my literature review (Section 2.3.3) and conceptual framework (Section 3.4.5). I felt that dwelling and seeking could be useful concepts for exploring the different kinds of spirituality I expected to encounter. I understood that spirituality (as the search for the sacred), could be pursued differently by *dwellers*, for whom the search tended to be mediated by religious communities / authorities, based in communal spaces created for them, often in line with traditional beliefs and practices; compared with *seekers*, who preferred individual autonomy and sought to create their own outlook, often constructed from a range of existing traditions but fashioned uniquely (Wink 2003). I had also noted that dwellers engaged in critical reflection and made choices within the parameters of their communities, whilst seekers browsing the 'many strands that span Western and Eastern traditions' (ibid:103), could also identify communities (even if small or temporary) with whom to express their spirituality. This mixing, in various proportions, of the communal with the individual narrative to form a *spirituality of practice* (see Section 7.4) was the essence of spiritual engagement for Dillon and Wink (2007), following Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999).

I can confirm that these two styles of spirituality (dwelling and seeking) were clearly visible within my individual interview data, as were the ways in which they combined to form each person's spirituality of practice - their way of being spiritual in the world[21]. Without presupposing the categories of dwelling and seeking, for instance by initially attributing them as participant characteristics, I was able to identify spiritual dwelling and spiritual seeking within my coding scheme and later analyse them as the main influence on people's spiritual interpretations of experience. Because the source of the narrative (community or individual) could be seen as having a bearing on a person's evolving spiritual meaning frame, I then realised that dwelling or seeking was a style of learning response, rather than an attribute of a spiritual learner.

In my study, a *dwelling* style of spirituality was expressed by around half of respondents: 12 out of 23 individual interviewees, and 11 out of 22 focus group members, usually involving participation

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[21] By this I mean their religious or non-religious forms of spiritual expression and practice, their memberships of spiritual communities or networks, the narratives and inspirational teachings they followed, and so on.

in a spiritual community and its narrative. Sixteen of my participants self-described as members of spiritual communities, mostly from various denominations of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist) and Buddhism. A few of these were more likely seekers, as their spiritual community affiliation was nominal or residual from a previous dwelling. A further few were members of more recent spiritual paths that also offered dwelling, thus sharing some features with religion, but not all. For instance, participants who were adherents of the non-religious spiritual communities Rosicrucianism and the Wxxxxx School had a wealth of spiritual teaching available for consideration and adoption, and encouragement to do so. Their group narratives were strong on practice (rather than particular beliefs) and their communities offered networking and support.

For the other half of participants, spirituality was a *seeking* kind and relied a lot less on existing systems of belief and practice (11 individual interviewees, 11 focus group members). They were forging an individual narrative without prevalent recourse to such systems. Mostly, they had drawn on a variety of ideas, such as those from an earlier life narrative, or from formative experiences and searches among current, or even ancient, outlooks from a wide range of cultures (also described by Wink 2003). Their spiritual outlook was therefore potentially more individual and personal than that of someone who sought to integrate their own story within a larger one, and draw on its meanings. In practice, the same process of interpretation and integration operated, and the critical faculties engaged were similar. However, the difference in the source (group or individual narrative) seemed significant to the overall meaning systems that were represented in interviews. Continued searching by the spiritually engaged takes both dwellers and seekers into new experiences and deeper integration of their spiritual learning, but the horizon of their search may change with time and circumstances, over the life-course.

A further insight, then, was the possibility that the learning responses of dwelling and seeking were expressed differently over the course of spiritual learners' lives. Although initially tempting to identify participants themselves as either dwellers or seekers, the more I worked with their interview narratives, the less straightforward this appeared. A more complicated typology also did not feel appropriate (for example, to accommodate those who appeared in transition between dwelling and seeking, or remained on boundaries). It felt more consonant with the data to recast dwelling and seeking as spiritual learning responses that were elicited at various times and circumstances. Searching was common to both responses as a basis for ongoing development, and the adjustments wrought by learning could be cast as adaptive dwelling or seeking (as

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described in Figure 4 in Section 5.3.2). Sometimes the adjustments people made were sufficient to lead them to shift the predominance of their style to the other response. I would argue that Wink and Dillon also struggled with dwelling and seeking as categories when they concluded that they were 'overlapping and interrelated rather than polarized constructs' (Wink 2003:104). My treating them as spiritual learning responses – implying a continuum - avoids the complications of further defining and categorising what constitutes dwelling or seeking.

The idea of movement between dwelling and seeking can also be seen in other research, although these terms are not used directly. Eccles (2012) describes the spiritual development made by a small group of 'holistic switchers' as involving a 'mixed repertoire' of beliefs and practices, utilising anything from their previous religious lives that might be useful.

> 'They are looking for a religion that is credible ... which means that no one tradition will adequately meet all needs, and hence they combine elements of several, as seems appropriate to circumstances' (ibid:190).

Eisenhandler (2005) talks of spiritual development that adopted both 'traditional religious' (similar to dwelling) and 'non-traditional' (similar to seeking) styles within a sample of older people in the community and in residential settings (ibid:97). She uses the term 'the finding thing' to describe evolving spirituality within both religious and non-religious spiritual development, thus emphasising the ongoing searching that characterises spirituality (ibid:85).

My understanding and application of the concepts of dwelling and seeking have thus evolved through my research. As indicated initially, I started by noticing the effect of dwelling on the meaning-making of some participants, compared to others, as they sought to relate to a particular spiritual narrative. I then realised that dwelling or seeking could be construed as a learning response, or style of spiritual learning, rather than as a learner characteristic. In building these alternative learning responses into my thinking about a spiritual learning model, I further realised that dwelling and seeking were not watertight categories but preferences. A spiritual learner could be identified mainly as dwelling or seeking, but still feature elements of the other type of response (such as pursuing unorthodox beliefs and practices, or joining a spiritual community). This mixture of each person's spiritual expression and practice was labelled 'spirituality of practice' (Roof 1999), which I shall discuss further at Section 7.4. Furthermore, this spiritual response could vary over time, with dwelling or seeking becoming more or less predominant at different periods, opening the possibility of an ageing effect (see Section 7.5). In setting my informal spiritual learning model in today's life-course context, I can now also include cultural dimensions that favour greater self-direction of spiritual narratives for all spiritual learners. This means that those who favour a dwelling style now *also* do so through the primary lens of personal

experience and its interpretation, as part of their adopting of religious / spiritual narratives. This brings me back to an earlier observation, from literature, that the search for meaning in the realm of the sacred (a subjective project) is the defining element of spiritual engagement. Continued spiritual searching is the common motivation for spiritual learning and development, whether in a dwelling or seeking style.

7.3.2   Dwelling and seeking in relation to religious and non-religious spirituality

In this sub-section I explore the relationship between dwelling and seeking and religious spirituality (RS) and non-religious spirituality (NRS), since the latter were among the criteria for my purposive sample selection (Section 4.8.1). I have established that dwelling and seeking responses characterise the *source* of the narrative that accompanies one's spiritual outlook or meaning frame, as well as the part played by continuing reference to a group narrative. However, the *nature* of the spiritual narrative is perhaps better distinguished more traditionally as religious or non-religious. Whilst I did not find consistent differences between religious and non-religious participants in terms of my research questions, the nature (religious or otherwise) of their seeking and dwelling is worth observing. Indeed, in exploring the ideas of dwelling and seeking, I have perhaps been in danger of downplaying more traditional ideas about what is meant by religious spirituality (RS) or non-religious spirituality (NRS). Religiousness usually implies membership and participation in the beliefs and activities of a particular religious faith, while spirituality denotes a more experiential, individually derived faith and practice from various sources (Moberg 2008). This would seem to identify RS with dwelling, and NRS with seeking, so any difference between RS and NRS more likely lies in the nature of the narrative, as I have argued in my findings on dwelling and seeking in Chapter 5.

I had attributed a religious or non-religious label to my participants' spirituality on the basis of their own self-descriptions but also on my sense of whether participants mainly identified with a recognised religion or not. Most readily identified as RS or NRS, but the orientation of some was more ambiguous. For instance, one respondent participated in all of the networks I recruited from which, between them, included a range of religious and non-religious spirituality. Participants with a *religious* orientation tended to believe in a transcendent Other, or divinity, who was personal rather than an impersonal force or energy; they drew on religious resources such as sacred texts and traditions for ways to connect, worship and act in the world. Their interaction with these resources, and with fellow-members, led to experiences that were adopted into their

own meaning frame and built up their narrative of spiritual understanding and practice based on a communal understanding. *Non-religious* participants tended not to include a personal, transcendent Other in their self-authorising narrative; some used the term God for a transcendent energy that they recognised but which was part of all living things, not separate from them. They also drew on spiritual resources such as writings, and practices such as meditation, but the combination and meaning of these was more individualised and not guided by an authority or orthodoxy.

Religious spirituality was more linked with a dwelling response, then, as might be expected. Having a bigger story within which individuals worked out their own story, and access to other people working along the same lines with similar resources, made for a supportive spiritual learning community. Some religious narratives also offer a bigger 'house' within which to look for accommodation, allowing for 'adapted dwelling' as described in Figure 4 (Section 5.3.2). However, further space was needed by some, as seen in the later life development of three of the eleven religious participants who were now moving from dwelling towards seeking. And although most NRS participants were indeed seeking, three of the twelve non-religious participants were dwelling. This was because, although their narrative was individually developed, it was derived from following an established spiritual path in a fairly formal way. These non-religious dwellers included the Rosicrucian (Neil) and Wxxxxx School members (Doug and Veda) who had a defined community and practice for their spirituality, but did not follow any one particular spiritual leader or set of beliefs. So, in attempting to differentiate the relationship between dwelling and seeking and religiosity and non-religiosity in my sample, most participants were identified as expected. I have described the few *non-religious dwellers* as explained above, and a few *religious seekers* on the grounds that their dwelling/seeking was in flux (as also described in Section 5.3.2).

Table 6   How did RS and NRS relate to seeking or dwelling? Source: author

	RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY	NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY
SEEKING	Jen Prue Sasha	Ben Cath Delia Elsa Ginger Josh Paula Pete Sally
DWELLING	Alice Caroline Carrie Greg Jack Rod Sian Tom	Doug Neil Veda

It should be recalled that my evidence shows that all kinds of spiritual development are essentially learning processes based on experience, whether religious or non-religious, and whether pursued in dwelling or seeking modes. The locations and styles of people's spiritual learning influence the

meaning frame from which their development proceeds, as discussed throughout this thesis, but this process is common to religious and non-religious outlooks. An outlook, such as a faith, is religious if its values, images of power and master stories – that is, its narratives - are religious[22]. Religious spiritualities perhaps have a head start, given that they are often introduced early in life, as several participants attested, and are part of a broader cultural narrative or 'cultural toolkit' that shapes people's spiritual narratives (Manning 2019:63). However, as Astley 2002 notes, there is a difference between learning *about* religious ideas and practices and making them part of one's narrative.

> 'Religion is learned from others and ultimately from tradition or history. If and when it becomes 'our religion', it is learned in another way and at a different level, through personal reflection and experience … our personal 'discovery' or even 'invention'' (ibid:17).

Furthermore, even when apprehended in this more personal way, Astley says, religious spirituality continues to be learned and changed. This learning process is also illustrated in Fowler's (1981) adult stages of faith formation. Fowler encapsulates the way in which the group narrative associated with dwelling informs a person's meaning frame: 'The experience of life helps form and change our theology because it is *our* experience that we connect with the Christian story' (ibid:21).

It was this kind of understanding that Rod reported as transformative for him when he read about the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God. Shifts in meaning systems also took place for non-religious participants, such as when Josh discovered astrology and Veda found the Wxxxxx School. Most participants, whether currently religious or not, recognised they had had a spiritual (usually religious) upbringing of some kind. Some had embraced it as their own in earlier adulthood, but later changed to a non-religious seeking style. Others had discovered or re-invigorated their religious understandings in adulthood and adopted a fuller dwelling response to

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[22] Defining 'religious' is difficult given its global varieties, but Wilson (2012) proposes that it is to do with transcendence, supernatural power and ultimate reality; involving a relationship (mostly in Western traditions) and / or a path of transformation (Eastern traditions), in pursuit of truth, meaning and belonging.

assist their spiritual development. Some of these changes were similar to stage-developments in Fowler's scheme, but I conclude that the informal spiritual learning model (discussed in Section 7.2) is a better overall account of the variety and continuity of changes in both religious and non-religious meaning frames. This is because it is less prescriptive about stages and tasks, and describes an ongoing momentum of change and development. Combined with the insights of seeking and dwelling, which add ideas about the styles and sources for spiritual learning, the informal spiritual learning model describes an overall learning process that drives change and development.

It has been argued that both religious (mostly dwelling) and non-religious (mostly seeking) styles of spirituality are ways of drawing on spiritual resources for the development of the spiritual self (Ellingson 2001). Traditional dwelling-style religious spirituality has also adapted to facilitating people's individual spiritual journeys, rather than laying down particular paths for all to follow. This can lead to

> 'a more enriched spirituality of dwelling ... because many churches (have) absorbed a great number of spiritual practices into their services and activities' (Roof 2019:230).

Roof (2001) reports spiritual resources that facilitate individual journeys have been accessed not only from churches' own earlier traditions (such as contemplative forms of prayer and meditation) but also different cultural expressions of music, liturgy, and spiritual writings. These changes represent a move to enhance the spiritual value of religious participation to individuals and groups who now have more subjective requirements. The expressions of both positive and frustrated feelings of my participants about their dwelling, and sometimes their moves towards seeking, support Roof's observations. Such evidence perhaps diminishes the contrast between religious and non-religious spirituality, because a common turn to subjective spiritual experience has brought them closer.

I would also argue, from my data, that religious communities' approval of subjective spiritual interpretation of experience is still constrained by orthodoxy, and the communal narrative is strongly suggestive of how its members should see the world, but acknowledgement and support of the individual's spiritual life is now apparent (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Manning 2019). In terms of how spiritual learning and development is recognised and pursued, as per my research question (RQ1), the answer features both dwelling and seeking as discernible styles, albeit ones that have more in common than first appears. In the twentieth century, Wuthnow (1998) and Roof (1999) started the debate about subjective spirituality becoming more prominent and particularly associated with spiritual seeking. The processes of spiritual learning that I have sought

to elucidate for all kinds of spiritual learners were voiced by Roof (1999) when he described spiritual development thus:

> 'The individual deliberately assumes a posture of exploring the interior life, of marshaling effort and energy; the self is defined, shaped and sustained through such effort and energy and looked upon as if in the process of creative transformation' (ibid:66).

This subsection has discussed how my findings recognise spiritual dwelling and seeking as kinds of learning responses linked to the narrative sources (community or individual construction) that spiritual learners draw on and contribute to. I have linked my observation of the dynamic nature of both dwelling and seeking to the accumulation of life experience and cultural change in recent understanding of religious and non-religious spirituality. In continuing to ground my findings in an informal adult learning model of spiritual development, I note that whether dwelling or seeking styles predominate, the individual learner is continuing to build a meaning frame, with its associated narrative, through which to interpret a spiritual dimension to life. How the dwelling and seeking styles are expressed and interact in practice is the topic of my next Discussion section.

7.4   Spirituality of practice

The proponents of the concepts of dwelling and seeking, discussed above (7.3), envisaged a new context for religious and spiritual expression which they called 'spirituality of practice'. Roof (2001:33) speaks, from detailed case studies, of a mixing of people's seeking and dwelling responses that produces adaptations and unique combinations of beliefs and behaviours. *Spirituality of practice* denotes how people's spiritual understanding is expressed in their spiritual practice – what their spiritual outlook enables them to think and do - which I discuss in this section. Wuthnow (1998:169) speaks similarly of 'practice-oriented spirituality' which describes the lifestyle wherein 'people engage intentionally in activities that deepen their relationship to the sacred'. Such activities, or practices, also demonstrate 'how beliefs and assumptions influence ordinary life' and ways in which spiritual 'knowledge and skills are developed' (ibid:170). In spiritual practice, then, we see how dwelling and seeking styles of spirituality are played out in everyday life and give an indication of people's spiritual engagement.

Wuthnow (1998) proposed that, in the previous fifty years in America, spiritual dwelling had been significantly challenged by the rise of spiritual seeking. He further predicted that a later development, in the twenty-first century, was likely to be one of 'spirituality of practice' where spiritual learners sought the openness of seeking in combination with some of the security, community and disciplines associated with religious dwelling (also referred to as 'habitation' in the quote below). Indeed, Wuthnow felt that the benefits of both seeking and dwelling had much to offer each other, and avoided the detractions of exclusively pursuing one or the other.

> 'Yet neither of these styles is entirely satisfactory ... Habitation spirituality encourages dependency on communities that are inherently undependable and fosters an idolization of particular places [so] that energies gravitate too much to those places rather than being deployed to the full round of human needs in a complex world. A spirituality of seeking, in contrast, is too fluid to provide individuals with the social support they need or to encourage the stability and dedication required to grow spiritually and mature in character' (ibid:16-17).

7.4.1 Spirituality of practice over time and in life-course context

I found evidence of movement between dwelling and seeking in my data, which enabled me to cast these responses as styles of spiritual learning rather than categories of spiritual engagement. I therefore concur with Wuthnow's idea that spiritual practice usually involves both, *especially over time*. Thus, spiritual development can arise from those who favour dwelling by adapting or supplementing a relationship with religious authorities rather than abandoning them altogether. Examples in my study included those who additionally joined contemplative spirituality groups for a greater sense of connection than they experienced at church. The converse would also apply: that a seeking kind of spiritual engagement can produce features of dwelling within a spirituality of practice – such as a group narrative or spiritual community. An example from my data would be those who, within their personal mix of activities, regularly attended a Lxxxxxxxxxxx group[23]. I discuss these adaptations to dwelling and seeking in Section 5.3.2 and Figure 4. I therefore agree with Roof's (2001) proposal that seeking and dwelling are both valid and overlapping expressions of spiritual engagement. I base this on the dynamic nature of the dwelling and seeking responses that I identified as movement within, and sometimes movement between, these two styles. My data on the actual spiritual practices described by individual interviewees (Appendix L) showed a

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[23] Lxxxxxxxxxxx aim to make the world a better place and serve others by raising their levels of energy and transpersonal connection, so as to demonstrate empathy, visualisation, healing, intuition and so on.

good deal of overlap between dwelling and seeking styles (prayer, meditation, reading) but with differences showing more in the detail and contexts of how these were conducted. That is, there were commonalities (Section 5.3.3) such as connecting with the transcendent, which were practised in a variety of ways. Examples mentioned included: mantra meditation, walking in nature, lectio divino (combining scripture reading and prayer), group silence, intercessory prayer, contemplation of art/photograph/object.

Wink and Dillon's longitudinal study showed that the seeking kind of spirituality 'gains in salience' from mid-adulthood thus supporting 'the idea of older age as a time of growth' (as reported by Wink 2002:115). They had already noted, however, that dwelling also offered an 'opportunity to grow and mature in faith' (ibid:104). The idea of spirituality of practice is therefore helpful to seeing spiritual development as a combination of people's style of learning (seeking or dwelling) together with their understanding (their meaning frame and associated narrative). The nature of this understanding can be religious or non-religious. In a longer reflection on their empirical work, Dillon and Wink (2007) observe that seeking and dwelling have long existed in America, but the growth of an extensive 'spiritual marketplace' has facilitated participation by adults in a much wider range of spiritualities of practice (ibid:120). Roof (2001) particularly associates the US Baby Boomer cohort with the growth of a spiritual marketplace, which services a widening variety of 'spiritual quest' (ibid:16).

This phenomenon has been studied in the UK by Heelas and Woodhead (2005:49), reaching broadly similar conclusions by speaking of a 'spiritual revolution' and the rise of a 'spiritual milieu'. Charting the evidence for this in practice and in culture, the authors cite the rise of engagement in 'associational activities regarded as spiritually significant' (ibid:53) similar to those described by Roof (2001) as the practices of the 'questing culture' (ibid:46). The greater subjectivity that is associated with spiritual seeking has also begun to impact more traditional religious practice and structures, according to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), although only in ways constrained by existing theological narratives. Coleman (2011) also describes generational and cultural changes in ways pertinent to the UK and Europe, noting an emphasis towards 'personal life experience as the touchstone of belief, and a distrust and dislike of external authority' (ibid:12).

Dillon and Wink (2007:212) note:

'At the individual level, both church-centred religiousness and a more individually negotiated spiritual seeking are different but equally adaptive ways of engaging with the sacred and of functioning in everyday life.'

7.4.2   Intentionality of practice

Not all forms of spiritual interest growing in later life would necessarily amount to the *intentional* practice of spirituality that Wuthnow had defined. As Dillon and Wink observe,

> 'Many Americans might easily call themselves spiritual without engaging in the spiritual practices that are necessary to maintaining connection with the sacred. Yet the people who intentionally practice spirituality likely differ in important ways from those who simply think of themselves as spiritual' (2007:214).

The intentionality of spirituality of practice thus makes it a helpful concept for the study of spirituality. Intentional practice is more likely to be indicative of spiritual engagement (a conscious search for the sacred) than the expression of attitudes about what spirituality means. This is why I asked participants for accounts of *how they recognised spirituality in their lives*, rather than how they would define it. The importance of practice, whether from a religious or non-religious perspective, arguably accounts for the broadly similar responses from both religious and non-religious participants in my study because they had spiritual engagement as a common feature. A wide and overlapping range of spirituality of practice was also found by Ammerman (2014), who nonetheless was able to categorise the spiritual engagement observed among her research participants as deistic or extra-deistic. Wuthnow (1998) observed that spiritual practice was becoming a common denominator of different kinds of spiritual engagement and a better means of apprehending spiritual development. That is, dwelling and seeking say something about the style and source of people's spirituality, but their practice will speak of how they 'spend time on a regular basis worshipping, communing with, listening to and attempting to understand the ultimate source of sacredness in their lives' (ibid:16).

As a concept then, spirituality of practice encompasses the attractions of dwelling, in the sense of setting aside (sacralising) a space and methods for connection and communion with the transcendent self or Other, based around a common narrative. It also allows for elements of seeking, in the sense of a negotiable, changeable style of spiritual engagement in pursuit of individual spiritual understanding and goals, whilst imposing some discipline on personal exploration. For example, in my data, Pete's later life realisation was the need to move more towards dwelling in order to settle on a spiritual path and some chosen goals, after an adulthood

of seeking; but Elsa could not come to a place of trust in any particular spiritual narrative, even in late life, although she could see the advantages of doing so.

7.4.3   Subjectivisation and self-authorisation in spirituality of practice

A tension within spirituality of practice concerning authorisation was found by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) who examined the spiritual lives of adults in Kendal, Northwest England. They sought to illustrate their thesis that a 'subjective turn' (ibid:5) was contributing both to secularisation of society (including a reduction of dwelling) and sacralisation of everyday life (including an increase in seeking). The growth in spiritual searching based on an inner life and interpretation of experience was seen as part of a wider cultural change that included 'subjective-life spirituality' (similar to seeking). This was in contrast to remaining faithful to roles and relationships that embed external expectations, including 'life-as religion' (similar to dwelling) (ibid:130). The key difference for spirituality was the turn *from* deferring to a higher authority *to* becoming one's own authority; not following established paths, but forging one's own inner direction (ibid:4). This latter process, termed 'self-authorisation' describes well the difference I was distinguishing through seeking and dwelling. My data show examples of those pursuing their true or authentic selves, in contrast to those who wished to serve and follow a calling expressed through, and shaped by, a communal narrative.

Because both Wuthnow (1998) and Heelas and Woodhead (2005) were concerned with the broader cultural changes in which spirituality was expressed, they also enquired about the effect of the spiritual turn on existing religious / spiritual communities. As noted above, Wuthnow accommodates the effect within changing spiritualities of practice. Heelas and Woodhead studied the variety of resources on which people in Kendal drew for their spiritual development, proposing a basic division between those that catered for 'life-as' spirituality, which were the *congregational domains*; and a looser network of groupings and activities for the 'subjective-life' termed the *holistic milieu* (ibid:13). Spirituality of practice within congregational domains (which were churches in Kendal, as in my study) involved traditional roles and structures, guided by understanding revealed by a higher authority and geared towards the fulfilment of a common rather than an individual good. The dwelling that was facilitated could accommodate continued spiritual searching and, increasingly in some churches, some more subjective practices oriented to individual experience, as also evidenced by some of my respondents. However, as Heelas and

Woodhead (2005) note, this subjective kind of searching was more difficult to accommodate within some congregational forms.

> 'Belonging to a congregation had more to do with being caught up in a vision of the higher good than in going inwards to discover truth and goodness by trusting and exploring one's own feelings, intuitions and experiences' (ibid:14).

Subjective understandings were not absent in settings that offered dwelling, but individual spiritual interpretations tended to conform to a range of acceptable (orthodox) norms, which implied authorised rather than self-authorised meanings. I have identified this kind of orthodoxy as the group narrative within which spiritual dwellers interpret their own story. For instance, Sian had successfully processed a recent setback in her spiritual journey when a mission she embarked on had not succeeded. Her focus was to re-assess the value of a future project to the church, rather than be over-concerned with its meaning in her own life. Caroline and Neil also voiced more interest in the value of their work to the community than to their own spiritual fulfilment or the need to leave a legacy. From some participants within a group narrative, however, I did hear of yearnings to find a true calling or to 'become the person God intended', which had some of the subjective elements which Heelas and Woodhead (2005) identify with the spiritual turn that characterises contemporary spirituality.

The relatively strong group identity of spiritual community contrasts with the less formal, less visible groupings that support seeking-style spirituality in people's search for self-authorised spiritual development. The spirituality of practice of the looser networks within the holistic milieu 'serves to help people live out their own interior lives in their own unique ways' (ibid:13). In Cumbria, the 'holistic associational territory' included mind-body-spirituality activities and alternative spirituality practices (ibid:12-13). In my study, in Southeast England, it consisted of a similar mixture of mind-body-spirituality groups and centres for the practice of healing and meditation. For example, some of my participants sought the resources of such mileux for the development of their true selves or individual enlightenment (mostly seekers). Others were primarily aiming to be better disciples or of service to others (dwellers and seekers) and looked to a range of spiritual communities. In Kendal, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) found that the congregational domain that came closest to authorising subjective spiritual interpretation were the non-creedal Unitarians and Quakers.

> 'Rather than preaching a higher truth which believers were expected to hear, follow and obey, such congregations actively encouraged individuals to forge their own unique life paths and spiritual paths ... each had the ability and responsibility to develop a personally meaningful spiritual path' (ibid:21).

This was the form of dwelling that I identified for those of my participants on the spiritual path of Rosicrucianism and the Wxxxxx School, on the basis that it enabled 'self-authorisation' whilst also offering the structure of a spiritual community and a recommended practice. A further participant who had dwelt uncomfortably in Anglicanism up to mid-life had turned to Unitarianism to support a more overtly seeking-style spirituality in later life. Commenting on the primacy of intentional practice rather than institutional affiliation as an indication of spiritual engagement, Wuthnow (1998:181) notes

> 'people with deep devotional practices run the gamut from being significantly involved in local congregations to not being involved at all'.

One of his case studies is quoted as saying "I value the institution but as my relationship with God has become more important ... I've been drawn more into that and drawn less into the institution" (ibid:182). Several participants echoed this sentiment, that they valued their own spiritual understandings above those of a spiritual or religious authority (Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.4). This not only illustrates the presence of self-authorisation, even within dwelling, but also the importance of a person's spirituality of practice rather than his or her affiliations alone.

7.4.4 The narrative of spiritual practice

Prior to Heelas and Woodhead's investigations (2005), Ellingson (2001:258) had summarised the 'common story of the rise of religious individualism and consumerism' in the late twentieth century. In particular, the author had noticed a change in emphasis to personal growth rather than a community growing together; an external transcendent God now being found within the individual; a reliance on self for matters of conscience and interpretation; and a shift from 'right belief' to 'right practice' (ibid:258). I have reflected on whether the more recent emphasis on spiritual practice therefore still needed a narrative, since the spiritual meaning frame that people develop based on experience seems less oriented around belief than practice. The idea of authorisation helps me conclude that a meaningful narrative account of a person's spiritual understanding is still the rationale for their spirituality of practice. The authorisation can be mainly self-generated or from a spiritual community, but the narrative's meaning and salience still derive from the person's sense-making interpretations of experience.

A person's spirituality of practice will tend towards either dwelling or seeking, but will often feature elements of both, and will change over time and circumstance in response to life

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experience. In Figure 8 below, I depict the additional element of 'authorisation' of narratives (self or group) as related to dwelling and seeking, together with Heelas and Woodhead's sites for spirituality of practice (domains and milieux):
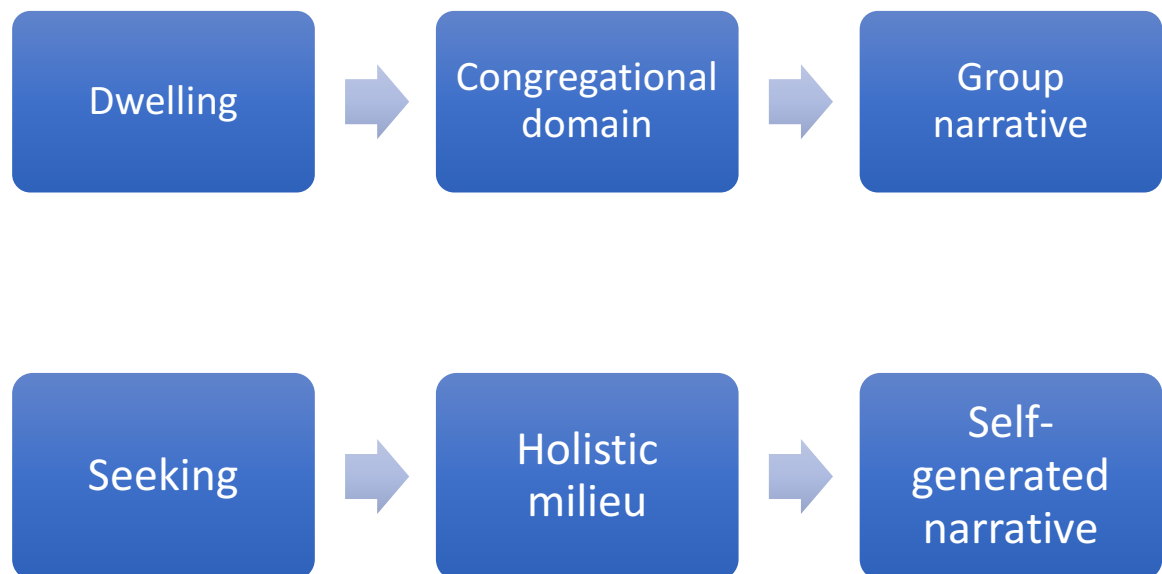
Figure 8   Sources and sites of spirituality of practice. Source: author, after Heelas and Woodhead 2005

I have sought to show that whilst seeking is particularly identified with a subjective outlook, both dwelling and seeking can develop an individual rather than community focus for spirituality in today's spirituality of practice. Thus, the congregational domain is no longer the sole arena in which even those of a dwelling disposition search for the sacred; they also browse freely in the holistic milieu. Ellingson (2001) observed that it was common to experience God and a real sense of faith based on a spiritual community life, yet still rely on a subjective narrative for one's spiritual transformation – that is, for one's learning and development. Several of my respondents' narratives involved changing churches and even faiths in order to find a more suitable spiritual home, implying a search for an overall subjective authorisation for one's spiritual journey. A few mentioned having encouragement from their spiritual community to pursue development (such as a particular piece of learning), but most informal learning noted had been self-identified, organised and funded as spiritual learning needs were prompted by experience. These were actions that sometimes led to adapted dwelling and seeking or, occasionally, more major change.

Exploring the concept of spirituality of practice in this section has included how religious and non-religious narratives are expressed in spiritual lives. My sample was recruited in a way that was likely to produce a balance of religious and non-religious spiritualities, but I found initially that

participants' dwelling or seeking styles of spiritual learning were more relevant to the learning processes I was researching. In this Discussion (Section 7.3.2), I have further explored how a religious or non-religious orientation maps closely but not completely onto dwelling and seeking. More importantly, I have shown how a person's spirituality of practice says more about his or her deliberate attempts to relate to the sacred. As Wuthnow (1998) observed:

> 'The idea of spiritual practices encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own spiritual development by spending time working on it, deliberating on its meaning and how best to pursue it, seeking to understand the sacred by reading and from the counsel of others, and seeking to have contact with the sacred through personal reflection and prayer' (ibid:196).

This readily describes the attitudes and activities of my spiritually engaged sample, whose spiritual learning and development were largely self-directed and, arguably, increasingly self-authorised in today's subjectivised culture. As discussed earlier in this section, greater subjectivisation has entered the institution to some extent, such that recognition of inner experience has taken on spiritual significance. However, all participants drew to greater or lesser extent on the resources and communal narratives of spiritual communities for their spirituality of practice. In the case of dwellers, their attachment and reference to their congregational domains was stronger. Seekers were also part of networks and groups (the holistic milieu) that provided resources and narratives, but their *anchoring* was relatively low and their *self-authorising* relatively high, making changes in their spiritual outlook potentially much easier.

7.4.5   Spirituality of practice and change

I had speculated in my conceptual framework on the significance of dwelling and seeking (Section 3.4.5) for the rate or magnitude of spiritual change. Would the learning of seekers more likely lead to greater adaptations or even transformative learning, since they were less tied to a communal narrative? Would they experience more major development than dwelling-style learners, by favouring new ideas rather than re-working older ones? What my data allowed me to conclude, however, was that patterns of change were broadly similar in the dwelling and seeking responses reported by participants. Within individual interview data there were similar numbers of items coded under 'incremental' and 'transformative' learning, which had been gathered from equal numbers of dwellers and seekers (10 of each). Moreover, half of them had responses in

both nodes, indicating that they could identify both incremental and transformative learning experiences and did not engage in one type to the exclusion of the other. This suggests that spiritual meaning making itself is more important than the source or the nature of the narrative being worked on. More than any other considerations, the spiritual narrative needs coherence in terms of experience, one's inner life, and a developing spiritual identity (as concluded in Sections 5.2.1-3).

I conclude that spiritual development impacts in similar ways on older people's spiritual meaning frame and narrative, whether they are religious or not, and regardless of the source of their orientation as dwelling or seeking. I have proposed that spiritual learning proceeds through reflection on everyday experience (incidental learning) and in response to chosen learning opportunities (self-directed learning) and that the practice of these occurs now in more self-authorised ways, as informed by an inner life. Spirituality of practice thus reflects the subjectivised turn associated with the twenty-first century, where the spiritual engagement of dwellers as well as seekers is now more likely to rely on their sense-making and experiential understanding of life. In this way, and on the basis of the similar processes described by my participants, it has been possible to adapt and extend with further detail a model of informal spiritual learning (Section 7.2). This has been developed from the work of Wuthnow and Roof discussed in this section, and on that of Wink and Dillon (2002):

> 'Spiritual development demands not only an increase in the depth of a person's awareness of, and search for, spiritual meaning over time, but it also requires an expanded and deeper commitment to engagement in actual spiritual practices' (ibid:80).

7.5   Spirituality, ageing and experience: vantage points for learning

My fourth discussion topic is based on findings that address the second of my research questions (RQ2): *In what ways do older people see their spirituality as related to their ageing or being older?* This question enquired about changing understandings or perspectives in later life spirituality, and about the significance of a spiritual dimension in later life. I detected in most participants an overall sense of continuity rather than difference in the experience of growing older as a spiritual person. For some, their sense of continuity was strong, to the extent of saying that later life spirituality was no different, and any awareness of spiritual change appeared only on reflection when looking back in time. Others could appreciate more recent age-related changes in their spiritual outlook and even relate them to elements of their later life-course, such as bereavement or retirement. Whether looking back, forward or in the moment, I propose that the later life landscape offers new vantage points for reflection, such as impactful events or changing

circumstances. These disjunctions can act as prompts for spiritual development, although it is the reflection process that engenders spiritual learning rather than the changes themselves. Later life reflection on earlier experience was cited by participants as ways in which new spiritual meanings are generated, in addition to responses to the experiences of older age.

When designing my study I had assumed that the major life-course markers of *retirement* and *dependency* (Fisher and Simmons 2007) would be my boundaries, so that sample members' life experience would fall between these two 'events'. This meant that chronological age itself was not a selection criterion and that participants would be in what is broadly regarded as the 'third age' (Laslett 1989). Some were nearer to transitioning either in or out of this period, and others were growing within it. Life events and circumstances that had impacted some of them in their third age were grandparenthood, bereavement and illness. The processing of retirement and the anticipation of finitude were issues that were most apparent in interview talk and most recognised these as having a bearing on spiritual development.

From data analysis, I discerned three outlooks concerning people's sense of spirituality in relation to their ageing (Section 6.2.5) which will be used to discuss how findings relate to literature. A first outlook was themed as *ageless experience* by which I mean a preference for ongoing experience as an explanation of spiritual development compared to one of age-related change. This 'continuity' view of later life can be particularly associated with Atchley (2009:47) who applied his Continuity theory of ageing to spiritual development by proposing a self-system that creates and maintains meaning through feedback from life experience. A second outlook came from participants who related age/stage awareness to spirituality more clearly. This outlook was themed as *finitude and flexibility*, which was a perception of later life as both opening up and closing down, rather than a continuous adult state. As noted in my literature review (Section 2.4), a number of theories and models offer ideas about how ageing proceeds in phases or stages, with some application to spirituality. Prominent among these models are those of Erikson and Erikson (1997), Fowler (1981), and Tornstam (1999).

A third outlook, which I themed *witness without arrogance*, denoted a sense of participants' own evolving 'truth' and came from those who adopted a story-telling approach to their development. They readily cited spiritual episodes and opportunities in later life, as demonstrated in the work of Randall (2012), Rymarz (2009), and Woodward (2011). These participants' accounts tended to show a confidence in their own outlook alongside a tolerance of the outlooks of others who may

have reached different conclusions. They combined the continuity of a narrative with the novelties of later-life action and plot, and saw themselves both as authors and witnesses to this latter part of their story.

I developed and further illustrated this typology of outlooks on spirituality and ageing through narrative analysis and case studies (see Section 6.3). I now discuss these three outlooks on ageing and spirituality in more detail, and in relation to literature.

7.5.1 Ageing and spirituality as continuity

An underlying message shared across several data codings was that the learning process was no different in later life and that an older person's accumulated experience was more relevant than age *per se*. A similar stance was identified, for instance, by Marcoen 2005 in terms of a lifelong, developing spiritual self and by Burke (2005) as a continually developing spiritual identity. A contrasting view was composed of coded extracts that nominated general and more particular changes as related to being older. These underlying accounts spoke of difference and discontinuity rather than continuity (see for example Moody 2003). I attributed this to a greater consciousness of what ageing represented, rather than the kinds of spiritual changes nominated. I thus had two contrasting answers concerning the relationship of ageing to spirituality: of continuity where ageing was seen as largely irrelevant; or discontinuity, where ageing and being older played a relevant part in one's spiritual development.

On further analysis, the difference became less stark and the metaphor of journey that emerged from several participants' narratives was helpful to the continuity vs discontinuity discussion (as set out, for example, by Grenier 2012). Those who perceived ongoing spiritual development in terms of its unchanging process saw later life as the same journey, now just passing over different territory. They would continue to learn by responding to their experiences and circumstances in the same manner as previously. This held whether or not the path ahead felt predictable. They were, however, able to identify actual changes in their spiritual outlooks and behaviour when comparing earlier with later periods of their lives, including within the third age itself. So, whilst the process of spiritual learning remained the same, its outcomes could be seen to differ both *in* later life, and *from* the new perspective of being older. The group (of eight) that held this continuity view tended to be younger, with six of them under 70, perhaps reflecting the continuity still felt in the transition from paid to voluntary work that featured in their spiritual practices and values. Still invested in a work ethic, albeit unpaid, several were keen not to identify with ageing at this stage.

I noted that seeing the *process* of later life spiritual learning as continuous with earlier periods, whilst acknowledging that *outcomes* can be age-related is not incompatible for a group who favour continuity. This is represented well in one of Atchley's later reflections on ageing and spirituality (2016). Spiritual development is a continuous 'evolving capacity to perceive the spiritual elements of experience' (ibid:14) but which is related to ageing in several ways: through phases of life that are socially constructed (such as retirement) and which act as 'invitations' to conscious reflection and a 'turning inward' (ibid:16) which, like spiritual development itself, is a capacity that needs to be activated. Furthermore, in Atchley's view, the later life-course offers the possibilities of developing wisdom and resilience as outcomes of positive and negative experiences. These outcomes result from the ongoing process of what Atchley calls an 'open feedback system', whereby people's 'observations are used to fashion, maintain and correct a belief / value system, lifestyle and philosophy' (ibid:17).

In all these ways, continuity of spiritual development is compatible with age-related features of later life spirituality. Within the continuous open feedback loop mentioned above, there are also iterative dynamics that apply to spiritual development, according to Atchley (2009). A re-iterative succession of *awakening interest, inquiry, endeavour, integration and intention* produces a forward development. There are other iterative patterns that meet my participants' description of 'the same process but over different territory': Moody and Carroll's (1997) stages of the soul: *the call, the search, the struggle, the breakthrough, the return;* and McClaren's seasons of spiritual development: *awakening, strengthening, survival, deepening.* Similar in effect is MacKinlay's spiritual tasks model (MacKinlay 2014) which, although not sequentially iterative, nominates four key 'continuing processes' which she has found in her empirical work to be particularly pertinent to late life: *transcending loss, finding final meanings, finding intimacy with God and/or others, and finding hope.* Fisher and Simmons (2007) suggest a corresponding set of developmental projects that persist through later life*: discovering purpose, maintaining relationships, balancing autonomy and dependence, and facing loss and change.*

I conclude that these iterative patterns are particular examples of the broad developmental process I have described in terms of adult learning: a common dynamic of disruption to current understanding, followed by steps to re-interpret meaning, leading to an integration of change. The direction of travel is towards a changed outlook (as described in Section 7.2.1) but the process is consistent with a perspective of continuity, as adopted by some of my participants. I find that the various accounts of spirituality and its interaction with ageing considered in this sub-

section can be accommodated within the learning cycle that is at the heart of my informal spiritual learning model.

7.5.2   Ageing and spirituality as life-course related

In contrast to the continuity approach to ageing and spirituality discussed above, a number of my participants did recognise later life as offering a different spiritual phase. I therefore now discuss a relationship between ageing and spirituality which emphasises its location within the life-course. This resonates with literature on adult development which is predicated on changing phases or stages of life (for example, as summarised by Cranton 2012). It can be seen that even within a continuity approach to later life spirituality, there is still scope for age-related features. Furthermore, as noted in my literature review (Section 3.2), there is a sense for many scholars that there is a connection between getting older and becoming more spiritually aware or developing an existing spiritual dimension to life (Sinnott 1994, Bianchi 1987, Tornstam 1999), despite a lack of conclusive empirical evidence to support this (Dalby 2006; Coleman 2011).

> 'The idea of age-related changes in apprehending the complexities of life is quite compelling and, by extension, the idea of age-related change in the personal meaning of religion' (Dillon 2009:63).

Accepting that spiritual development is a possibility rather than a certainty for older adults, I have sought to elucidate the processes associated with spirituality's emergence. My evidence shows that almost all participants were able to recognise various kinds of spiritual learning and development in their later life, regardless of their outlook on spirituality and ageing. This still allows the possibility, as Marcoen (2005:366) proposed, that 'some age periods may be more receptive to spiritual cognitions and the renewal of ... visions on life'. It is possible to imagine that both the accumulated experience of later life, and its more recent challenges and opportunities, contribute to this age period being more 'receptive'. The group of (seven) participants who perceived that their spirituality was related in some way to being older were those who were most conscious of entering a new phase of life such as retirement, or some other health or family change.

From my discussion of ageing and spirituality so far, I argue that my evidence supports the view that life-course contexts, whether seen as continuous or discontinuous, create vantage points that offer changing views of previous times and the experiential terrain travelled. Continuing with the journey metaphor, it could be said that some major vantage points are commonly encountered in the life-course (such as retirement or grandparenthood), while others appear with varying degrees of likelihood (major illness, divorce), and others are less common and particular

to individual life-journeys. Several life-course development models are predicated on such points (Levinson 1986, Fisher and Simmons 2007). Participants reported that encountering these life events / experiences could be sources of learning, either as disjunctures that prompt the learning cycle, or as triggers for reinterpretations of earlier experiences. Those who were more aware of significant life-course markers such as retirement, chronic illness or bereavement, could more readily identify changes in spiritual outlook (see Section 6.2.5).

Labelling these markers as reflective vantage points, then, resolves what at first seemed a disparity between those that stressed continuity but recognised later reflections (instances of which were gathered under a 're-framing' code) *and* those whose responses readily recognised the territory of later life (coded as 'life-course'). Such recognition was usually greater on reflection than at the time of the change of circumstance, supporting the idea of spiritual development as more an outcome of interpretation than directly linked to events. Those who perceived the later life landscape as holding different terrains and markers were more currently aware of their changing perspectives, and it was from them that a discussion of later life-course factors in spirituality was more forthcoming. In data analysis, I had themed the outlook from those who expressed age/stage awareness as *finitude and flexibility*, denoting the two main life markers mentioned in interviews: death and retirement. This awareness of life both opening up but also involving a finite closing down denoted recognition of a new phase of life. Other vantage points for later life reflection mentioned in findings (see section 6.1) included illness, change in generational status (birth of grandchildren or death of parents), and spousal bereavement (noted as a potent change in Coleman 2011).

The idea of vantage points features in the research of Fisher and Simmons (2007) who propose *landmarks* within what they term 'the journey called aging' (ibid:3).

> 'As the journey through the last third of life unfolds, major landmarks appear, present significant challenges, require decisions, and result in a course of action. These landmarks are captured in a framework that begins with entering older adulthood and ends in dying' (ibid:3).

I find this model/metaphor of later life pivotal to my study in that it acknowledges the individual development of older individuals whilst also proposing some difference regarding the later stages of the life-course that such individuals may experience in common. It mirrors well the outlook of this second theme of characterising ageing and spirituality as life-course related. Fisher and

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Simmons' model (2007) is based on accounts of life-stories from 74 older people aged 61-94 at US senior centres, residential centres and private residences. Later life was analysed as comprising life-events and clusters of experience as interpreted by participants. These yielded a pattern of change and transition that re-directed life and grounded the next period where subsequent events and changes took place. This movement was termed the 'cadence of older adulthood' (ibid:16). The first three sections of the model (ibid:20) encapsulate the life-course locations of my participants. The entry point to older adulthood is seen as *retirement*, which ushers in:

Extended middle-age

- Middle-age lifestyle continued
- Goals for retirement pursued
- Other activities substituted or combined with work

Early transition

- Involuntary transitional events
- Voluntary transitional events
- End of continuity with middle-age

Older adult lifestyle

- Adaptation to changes of early transition
- Stable lifestyle consistent with older adult status
- Socialisation realised through age-group affiliation

Rather than the completion of developmental tasks, the dynamic for moving on is the accumulation of experience: 'the heterogeneity that comes from a lifetime' (ibid:15). Fisher and Simmons' (2007) model for post-retirement life thus imposes some patterns on the diversities of later life, proposing periods of change, where awareness of a new phase takes root, and a subsequent phase where this new self-understanding is lived out. I have found this a useful way of framing the life-course context for my third-age sample, especially with its emphasis on older people's own interpretations of their location.

The model continues into a later transition and second period of adaptation (not shown in list above), which represent a fourth age of dependency. The first three sections, however, do describe my third-age participants' range of self-understandings: For instance, as being engaged in significant voluntary roles where they continue to use work-related skills or develop new ones. Data from case summaries show that those who saw the relationship of ageing to spirituality as one of continuity were mostly in early retirement, working through its consequences for their spiritual journey (Veda, Sian, Carrie), or who had persevered with work-style voluntary activities

well into their seventies (Delia, Greg, Josh, Neil, Tom). Those who perceived a life-course discontinuity around their spirituality were mostly older or had otherwise entered Fisher and Simmon's 'early transition' via chosen or unchosen events in their lives (Ben, Cath, Doug, Elsa, Jack, Rod). The settled nature of the 'older adult life-style' I have found less easy to identify with my older participants, since several of them were engaged in significant spiritual change, but this could be construed as development emerging from a stable period that had facilitated reflection (Alice, Jen, Prue). Several others in this older group did indeed talk of adapted spiritual lifestyles and affiliations, especially those who had reflected on the nature of their later-life calling (Caroline, Jack, Paula).

Fisher and Simmons'(2007) model is relevant to my research perspective and findings because it proposes a life-course account of ageing, with a trajectory of change over the period of life in question. Grenier (2012) also casts the whole movement through the adult life-course as one of *transition*, rather than seeing growth as dependent on the completion of developmental tasks. This idea fits well with an adult learning model of continuous meaning making and re-framing of experience. It may be that the tasks embedded in more structured models are indeed the common experiences and changes that older people encounter but, as Grenier (2012) observes, the notion of life-course transition 'is intended to capture the fluid and changing aspects of experience' and 'can be used to situate older people's experience over the duration of a lifetime' (ibid:8). I note similarities with Jarvis' (2009) attribution of transformative learning to later life in general, compared with formative or vocational learning, attributed to earlier periods. Grenier further suggests that 'late life' is a helpful term for reference to the whole of the later part of the life-course, describing it as 'a large, relatively unspecified period of life implied by the process-based statement of 'growing old'' (ibid:9). This resonates with how my participants thought about themselves: as mature adults who could, on reflection, be considered as growing old.

Participants' self-perception of growing older is important to my research question (RQ2) on how they saw the connection between their ageing and their spirituality: Do the changes they recognised as spiritual development relate to the experience of growing older? On the whole, it appeared not to be the case. Their primary self-identity was not as an ageing person, but as an adult responding to and making choices within whatever life had in store. They were prepared to frame their later lives as 'older' on reflection (such as in an interview conversation), or perhaps if some significant upheaval such as bereavement or difficulty brought new interpretations of life to bear that was *normatively associated with older age*. For instance, Greg (aged 75+) observed that

problems with his knees were just beginning to make him feel old; Sasha and Sally spoke of the death of relatives that had prompted them to reflect on ageing. Otherwise, being old did not appear to be consciously part of many participants' self-understanding. Interview speech coded under 'later life awareness' was generally low, at one or two items per person, but slightly higher for older respondents (aged over 80).

Evidence from my research lends general support to an idea of ageing constituted by experience over time rather than particular stages. Later life (spiritual) development can be seen as taking on an overall trajectory of transition. Within this whole transition called 'later life', an older person's learning and re-framing also develops its individual biographical pattern. On the societal level, however, we may also be able to see group patterns, such as responses to the common later-life vantage points of retirement, grandparenthood, widowhood and so on, which is where some expectations about age-related spirituality arise. From participants' accounts, it is the interpretation of both biographical (individual) and normative (commonly experienced) events that prompt the onward transition that we label as later life. Portraying transition in this more holistic way, as implied by Grenier (2012) and Fisher and Simmons (2007), removes it from its more particular role within age/stage models, where transition functioned as the periods of learning and adjustment between stages (for example, Levinson 1978).

What does the foregoing imply for spiritual learning within this overall period of later life? In the same way as *transition* could now refer to the whole 'cadence of older adulthood' (Fisher and Simmonds 2007:16), I wish to argue that *transformation* could act in a similar way to describe the whole spiritual learning journey of later life. This has the advantage of affirming that transformation is better employed in this holistic sense, rather than as a type of learning (see Section 5.5 on transformative learning) which was challenging to evidence in data. It also underlines how reflection continues to enable learning throughout later life, and that change is more visible and significant in retrospect from a (vantage) point further on. The distinctiveness and complementarity of *transition* and *transformation* are helpfully drawn by Danely and Lynch (2013:3), when they refer to 'the changes that people experience' (transition) and 'those that they create' (transformation). So, for instance, there are changes to people's bodies, families, and economic statuses (transitions), but also changes in 'how people imagine what they want to become and where they have come from' (transformations) (ibid:3). Transformative learning is also applied in a similar way to the whole developmental process in Thomas and Cohen's discussion of spiritual meaning making by older adults (2006:65).

The focus of this sub-section has been on a possible relationship between ageing and spirituality which involves an awareness of later life as a *different phase* rather than continuity of adult life.

For gerontologists, a life-course perspective has greatly assisted the modelling of changes beyond adulthood. For example, Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2012) summarise the progress in understanding adult development[24]. This discussion has moved beyond the limitations of stage models to a more contemporary approach to the adult life course as *transition* (a social process) in which individual biographies are situated. There is a parallel process of *transformation* (what individuals make of their lives) that describes the older person's learning journey. I depict these processes below, in Figure 10.

Transition - the social process of ageing contextualising the experience of later life

- Containing both social and biographical changes which interact

Transformation - the meaning-making learning journey of later life

- Including both cultural and individual narratives of change

Figure 9   The parallel processes of later-life transition and transformation. Source: author

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[24] Psychosocial models (such as Erikson 1982, Levinson 1986) attempted to represent common themes of adult life into phases or stages, with maturation as the process that moves people on. These approaches have been succeeded by a greater emphasis on sociocultural factors, including life-events, with interaction between experience and context as triggers for growth. Most recently, there is greater attention to larger cultural and temporal contexts in which lives are situated.

In the same way that the transition of later life is composed of both continuity and disjunctures, the later-life transformation of spiritual development is likely to be both incremental and episodic as featured in my spiritual learning model (Section 5.5). I have employed the notion of transformation to describe the learning that takes place *throughout* the transition of later life, thus making all spiritual learning 'transformative' in its contribution to development. This position is supported by Thomas and Cohen (2006), who equate transformative learning with the whole process of meaning-making in older adults. Taking this view avoids sharply categorising particular kinds of learning as either adaptive (incremental) or transformative (perspective-changing), noting rather that these are on a continuum of change. In similar vein, Howie and Bagnall (2013) recommend transformative learning as a metaphor for an overall process rather than a theory predicting types of learning. As Danely and Lynch (2013:4) observe:

> 'To study transitions and transformations of aging and the life-course is to study the webs of relationships and possibility that unfold through lives as they are embedded in social, economic and political contexts.'

A different lens on the interactions involved in this unfolding is that of the individual narrative, which forms the focus of the next subsection on participants' perception of their ageing and spirituality.

7.5.3   Ageing and spirituality as story

A third interpretive option for participants' perceived relationship between ageing and spiritual development was that of *life-as-story*. A narrative perspective was found helpful for understanding my participants' views of growing older, which I have just discussed as transition, and the spiritual learning journey, which I have conceptualised as transformation (Section 7.5.2). The evolving spiritual meaning frame is itself an unfolding story, composed of interpretations of an individual's situated life experience. Merriam (2012) observes

> 'While the sociocultural-historical context interacts with and to some extent shapes the life-course, the meaning of our life experiences constitutes our particular developmental trajectory' (ibid:214).

In my data, the group whose understanding of ageing and spirituality was themed as 'life-as-story' were mixed in terms of age, gender and dwelling / seeking[25]. I discriminated them from holders of

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[25] Four under 75, four over 75; six men and two women; three dwellers, three seekers and two in transition.

either continuity or life-course perspectives on the basis of the style of their interviews. Their narratives spoke more of an unfolding, revealed sense of change, from the past and into the future, rather than a consciousness of being in a particular place (age / stage) or being ageless (continuity). Participants also recounted more life episodes to illustrate responses within the interview conversation and were aware of the constructed nature of their story.

Spiritual narratives thus combine elements of an evolving sense of spiritual self, (McFadden 1999), which grow through incremental learning but also through episodes of particular learning, and are related to change within the overall transition of later life. As discussed in the previous sub-section, such life-course events and episodes can be construed by gerontologists as normative, non-normative or biographical, but their subjective interpretation is the key to their learning impact for the older person. Randall (2015) reports that ongoing narratives support a sense of self in the face of what he nominates as the changes of later life – retirement, bereavement, relocation, loss.

> 'Insofar as narrative is our principal vehicle for making (existential) meaning, how we 'story' our lives is of pivotal importance' (ibid:156).

What is needed, therefore, are narrative accounts from individuals on their perceptions of the spiritual learning they have achieved. My findings have couched these recognitions in the spiritual terms that participants used (such as connections with the transcendent, the growth of a spiritual self, the experience of an inner life), but respondents had been less direct about the relevance of the ageing context in which they continue to develop. The assumption that people are able to reflect on and interpret their own ageing (Himmelsbach 2018:207) relies on the idea that they have, or 'over time (will) adopt age-awareness into their self-concept and personal identity'.

> 'Learning efforts in old age are not automatically age-specific, but rather biography- and life-stage specific, sometimes in relation to transitions, sometimes in relation to continuing learning strategies' (ibid:206).

The idea of life as a journey is familiar, however, and perhaps a less controversial idea for some than ageing. The ongoing spiritual journey was thus a natural narrative topic for those of my participants who readily adopted story-telling as a way of explaining what they thought and felt. As Pfahl (2012:67) states:

'When we think about how and why events have happened, narrative becomes the form of examination with potential to answer such questions, to expand our understanding, and to influence and change our patterns of thought and action'.

I have expressed my interpretation of participants' later-life spiritual learning narratives as a *third-age spiritual learning journey* (see Appendix O). Using case study summaries, the narrative analysis section of Chapter 6 sought to place participants' spiritual learning projects (what they are currently doing in terms of spiritual development) within their spiritual journey, to show the relation of their learning to their later life transition (Section 6.2). I thus address the need that Himmelsbach (2018) identifies for understanding learning processes in terms of their 'ageing characteristics'. The approach she advises is to focus on 'small stories within narrated biography' (ibid:208) which illustrate learning processes and outcomes. Since only a longitudinal qualitative method could enable a coalescence of stories over time to more clearly discern learning outcomes in relation to ageing, I have indeed concentrated on the 'smaller stories within narratives' (ibid:208).

Participants, whether dwellers or seekers, spoke of the need for openness in order to hear the stories of others, but also to perceive spiritual dimensions of experience that they might otherwise miss. Developing one's capacity for spiritual interpretation in this way was mentioned as a learning goal by several. In Randall's (2015) research, the strength of a narrative was indicated by its complexity and richness, but also its capacity for flexibility and openness to continuous re-storying. In spiritual communities, individual narratives connect with and contribute to the stories of others and, as we have seen, with a group narrative around faith, belief and practice.

Narratives that result from a mature spiritual outlook often embody much expertise, but the understandings my participants arrived at were held more like witness statements than declarations of truth. Thus, my thematic label for story-tellers was 'witness without arrogance'. There was a sense of modesty around having answers, as illustrated by Prue's aspiration to 'connect not correct'. This attitude arose from the life-as-story group's awareness that they were creating personal narratives rather than engaging with propositional thinking to define and defend a position. They were able to offer the 'story they told themselves about themselves' for the benefit of others, who then may wish to reflect on its relevance for their own. These findings echo those of [26]Bianchi (2005), who was willing to state that he discerned 'an overall theme of

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[26] Along with Dillon and Wink (2007), Bianchi (2005) is one of a few authors who offer evidence-based views on links between developed spirituality and ageing. A key process observed in his biographical interviews

developing spirituality in later life' (ibid:328). He also felt that 'elders are crafting their own spirituality as they age', which I take as pointing to changing meanings and narratives.

In particular, Bianchi notes that this crafting process produced aspects of change such as revised images of the divine, greater tolerance of diversity and ambiguity in religious expression, and a greater need for contemplative styles in relating to the transcendent. Most of my participants mentioned several of these types of change, and a few talked with some emphasis on one or two of them. For instance, greater tolerance of, or even need for, wider types of religious expression were present in interviews featuring increased seeking; a yearning for greater opportunities and help with contemplative spirituality was present within several dwelling responses. Narratives also interact with their contexts, sometimes conforming, sometimes reacting against a culture, as seen in some participants' responses to religious up-bringing. Stories embody the sum of experience that shapes identities; the longer the experience, the more material for learning and the greater the opportunities for re-framing. The making sense of experience (looking back) and the outlook-framing which supports purpose (going forward) are mediated by the stories we tell about life events and circumstances. Gerontologists who favour narrative methods point out that stories not only capture and reflect experience, but also create it (Manning 2019).

Part of the narrative context is the one in which stories are told, whether informally or for a purpose. Bearing in mind that stories elicited in interviews are likely to be influenced by what the teller understands to be the listener's purpose, there will be many other aspects to the 'small stories within the biography' that constitute my data (Himmelsbach 2018:208). Nevertheless, my observation was that the *story-teller* participants adopted narratives specifically as a means of explaining their spiritual learning; an unfolding story or journey was their preferred understanding of how their spirituality related to their ageing. Randall (2012) draws a distinction between the process of 'getting old' as opposed to 'consciously growing older' (ibid:172) which may explain the reluctance of the *ageless experience* group who still thought in terms of distancing themselves from getting old. Those whose spiritual learning had recognised later life as a new chapter, or as the next episode in the story, were perhaps growing older more consciously, and had taken age-

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with a cross-section of over 100 'elders' (average age 77) was the re-interpretation of past events, including previous religious / spiritual outlooks and the re-purposing of previous life experience.

awareness in to their narrative. They had the chance of not only telling their stories but also noting what their stories tell them, thus enhancing later-life reflection.

People's narratives, then, are the stories they create to interpret their thoughts and actions in the world: 'We tell ourselves (or, more precisely an internalised other) what we have done, and how we anticipate and justify our acts' (Heikkinen 2004:187). It is this story from which researchers attempt to access a version of the past and present of an individual's life. However, researchers 'wishing to thicken [their] sense of the inside of aging in intriguing ways' (ibid:173) should recall that stories are not unmediated insights but constructed texts. Furthermore, Heikkinen argues, although only the present version is available, stories are the lens for the past and the future. Crucially in later life, the relationship with the future can change as it grows shorter, prompting a realisation that existence is finite. Life-as-story, then, 'is a mode of meaning construction that displays various experiences with time' (ibid:188) and enables a consciousness of finitude to emerge – thoughts about the end of the story. Finitude was indeed a later-life marker acknowledged in some way by most, but not all, of my participants (Section 6.2.5). I drew out some implications for spiritual learning according to whether one current life or future lives were envisaged. The same observations would apply to whether life-stories were monographic or serial; where and how does the story end? Do spiritual learning journeys produce 'final meanings' (MacKinlay 2014) or does the story continue into a further series?

The ability to explore a relationship with past, present and future through story is noted by Danely and Lynch (2013):

> 'Life-course narratives pieced together from culturally situated experiences of transition *[the ageing journey]* and transformation *[the learning journey]* provide new perspectives on the nature of self and society and the ways people reflect on their pasts and imagine their futures' (ibid:18, *my insertions*).

To conclude on the connection between ageing and spirituality, participants felt that the kind of link they recognised between spiritual development and growing older was *mediated by experience* and *seen mostly on reflection* within their life-course context. I have linked this kind of reflection with the vantage points that later life provides as triggers for realisations and review, concerning both current and earlier experiences. Literature seems broadly to support this view, such as the main conclusion drawn by Dalby's (2006) review article that spiritual development was not related to age per se, but to experience of the challenges and opportunities that older age presents. My further observation is that, for spiritual learning, it is the *interpretation* of life events and circumstances that prompts meaning-making and thus contributes to spiritual development. Gerontologists continue to seek understanding of the landscape of later life, within

which today's older generations make meaning, including spiritual meaning. Older people can give narrative accounts of ageing and spirituality that weave together both continuous processes and episodic developments in spiritual learning. It is from these that further patterns in later-life spiritual development can be discerned.

7.6 Good practice in spiritual learning and development

Participants indicated that spirituality is chiefly about developing an inner life that commonly involves recognising and connecting with a transcendent dimension, however conceived. This development builds a sense of a spiritual identity, with varying relationships to spiritual communities. My focus has been on how this is worked out through life-long spiritual learning and brought to bear on the experience of later life. My sample of independently living third-agers ranged in age from 60 to 90+, thus including older and younger elders for whom the 'spiritual turn' to greater subjectivity is both an opportunity and a challenge to their spiritual ageing. Whether younger or older, religious or non-religious, I found a commonality in their development of a meaning system and its associated narrative which raises the question of how older spiritual learners can be supported and encouraged in their spiritual development. On the basis of my finding that spiritual learning is characterised by informal adult learning, this section addresses what good practice for incidental and self-directed learning in later life could look like.

In their later-life spiritual learning journeys (Section 6.3.2), participants were largely pursuing goals of their own making, based on individual reflection and sometimes involving courses and inputs from others. For instance: they were reviewing their lives in retirement to work out a new purpose or calling; they were re-framing past experience because they had become aware of a need for a different understanding; they were pursuing spiritual teachings and expertise from others to extend their understanding or widen their meaning-frame; they were seeking skills in spiritual practices such as meditation, contemplation, prayer and healing; they were coping with changed circumstances that needed (or offered) new ways of being spiritual. Spiritual learning to meet these needs came via like-minded others and attentive facilitators or mentors. Support was also found in learning resources, such as written or spoken input, and the bounteous supply of these now available online, together with virtual communities and forums. A few were taking part in particular courses, mostly identified by participants themselves (Appendix M). More course provision is one key to meeting a growing need for spiritual learning opportunities. From my

evidence, however, the greater need is for chances to engage in discussion and reflection on spiritual matters of interest to older people. This would arguably lead to greater demand for follow-up learning opportunities, including courses. Discussion will now critically evaluate what exists and how it can be strengthened.

7.6.1   Finding and selecting learning opportunities: self-direction and self-authorisation

As noted in Chapter 2, the provision of adult learning on spirituality is relatively small and in the hands of the voluntary sector, including religious bodies and small charities offering particular legacies of spiritual understanding and practice (local examples include Hamblin Trust, West Sussex; Fintry Trust, Surrey; White Eagle Lodge, Hampshire). There is also increasing availability of commercial educational offerings online: for example, see sources and listings of spiritual learning opportunities from such organisations as Spiritual England, Living Spirit and Spirituality and Practice. Religious organisations have policies and standards for content and practice of learning through their structures of governance (for instance, Boards of Education in Anglican Dioceses). However, beyond the general frameworks of regulation for voluntary and commercial sectors, learners need to exercise their own discrimination as consumers in the spiritual market place. This situation demands a well-developed sense of self-authorisation, as discussed in Section 7.4.3, which could support older learners' wish to be self-directed and to find appropriate learning for their self-identified learning needs.

On the question of quality, adult educators have debated their responsibilities for good practice around spiritual teaching and learning. For example, English (2000) argues that informal learning itself can enhance spiritual aspects of learning especially where dialogue is involved. She suggests mentoring and facilitation of self-directed learning as instances where content is still learner-led but assisted in terms of process and structure by an adult educator (ibid:36). An example of this within spiritual learning is spiritual direction (now becoming known as spiritual accompaniment) which was accessed by several participants. It involves a spiritual mentoring relationship with someone who has training and support in the role, and who facilitates and guides the aspirations of the learner. Merriam (2005) notes that most adult educators acknowledge support and assistance as part of their role with learners but proposes that they should go beyond this to actively promote people's development, such as in times of transition. In a later exploration of the same topic Merriam *et al* (2012) add practical advice, such as creating safe spaces for learning to occur and providing creative and imaginative learning activities. These observations and practices would most likely improve the learning on offer from many voluntary and religious organisations, if they could benefit from adult education experience.

A primary audience for discussion of good practice in spiritual learning and development are institutions of organised religion (Vogel 2008). Heelas and Woodhead (2005) reported that the congregational domain was still the major provider of 'associational spiritual activity' (ibid:149), although the holistic milieu was growing in engagement. My findings on the practice-oriented spirituality of both dwellers and seekers underline their ability to make choices about the most helpful kinds of spiritual activities. This includes affiliation to different kinds of spiritual communities, according to how they perceive their spiritual growth might be facilitated. The established Church's approach to ageing has been largely pastoral in nature but needs to further consider the later and ongoing spiritual journey of its older members (Johnson and Albans 2013). A landmark report (Board of Social Responsibility 1990) from the Anglican Church in the UK considered the implications of an ageing society for the Church, but with minimal exploration of faith development or spiritual learning more broadly. Since then, the Church' emphasis in terms of adult learning has been more on the learning and development of lay people of all ages. Whilst this has included spiritual formation and faith development, it has been focused on training and extending the deployment of people in roles, especially in these days of clergy shortages.

In his policy review of religion, spirituality and older people, Howse (1999) recommended that since religion matters to older people in Britain, organised religion could ask itself some critical questions including: how to acknowledge and encourage the contribution of older people to the life of spiritual communities; how to nourish older spiritual lives as well as offer appropriate pastoral care from a position of a better understanding of ageing. A similar range of challenges was issued by Hawley and Jewell (2009), based on research with older Methodists who wished to continue as spiritual community members, both valued for their contribution and supported in their needs. My findings have suggested that connection and encounter with the transcendent are the prime concerns for older spiritual learners, who welcome support and ideas about how to sustain and improve these aspects of their spirituality. A need for new outlooks and practices in these areas was mentioned by several participants. Where a greater questioning of faith had emerged for participants, opportunities to voice and discuss their changing interpretations of spiritual experience were sometimes sought, but on the whole not easily found. I sensed a reluctance to seek such discussions, perhaps for lack of confidence in their evolving views, but also a perception that being seen and heard as an older spiritual learner was difficult. Jewell (2001) reported that, in addition to help with transcendence and changing faith, older church members wanted support in understanding later-life difficulties and loss, and in dealing with

unfinished business (such as forgiveness or reconciliation) in anticipation of the end of life. Neither of these issues was overtly presented as a current spiritual need in my data, but instances of how such episodes had been dealt with were part of life stories shared.

A strength of religious community life is that faith and belonging are recognised as a buffer in challenging times of later life (Coleman 2009). My data do not provide much evidence of practical and emotional support from religious communities that would confirm this view, but then it was not a topic I raised directly. The finding that dwellers could adapt and change within a faith-based anchoring does support the idea that spiritual/religious community affiliation can offer spiritual growth. Participants who were part of spiritual communities found great resources for spiritual development, both in reflecting on the meaning of the group narrative for their own lives and being in fellowship with others. Indeed, the power of a personal narrative that is creatively linked to a sacred community narrative should not be underestimated, according to McFadden and Kosberg (2008). My findings suggest that the learning resources of spiritual communities could be improved if they adopted a greater openness to continued searching and a tolerance of other outlooks, in the spirit of discussion. The fact that most participants' self-directed spiritual learning was taking place outside their immediate faith community could indicate that developmental needs are not being met within it. Since self-authorisation is a cultural change that cannot be avoided or reversed by churches, a more overt recognition and willingness to support older people's spiritual meaning-making would be helpful. As Jen and Sally put it, quite forcefully, they did not want to be told the meaning of things.

For a group of participants, story-telling had been their preferred means of making sense of their lives so far. In addition to discussion and sharing of outlooks, the opportunity to tell and hear life stories could be part of support for spiritual meaning-making in later life. In her discussion of how storying can enhance 'elder learning' Pfahl (2012) suggests:

> 'Narration of life experience to interpret its meaning is a natural entry point to learning; … inducing reinterpretation of the meaning of what has happened. Experimenting with narrative teaching, learning and research strategies offers rich potential to optimize the way learners integrate disparate, sometimes conflicting elements of reality to create a more coherent life story' (ibid:81).

Furthermore, the personal value of any story can be enhanced by listening to others' in 'biographical encounters' (Birren *et al* 2004; Randall and Kenyon 2004). These are conversations that consciously focus on life-as-story and the exchange of life-long wisdom (ibid:341). A few participants had taken part in structured reminiscence activities, but others had improvised their own methods from other sources. Journal writing was mentioned but not autobiography; several

commented that thinking about their lives using my pre-interview timeline exercise had been interesting and useful. For some, the journey of ageing was a relatively new story, experienced as a continuation of the previous one, or seen as a new chapter. For others, the ongoing story had developed new storylines and changing characters. Sometimes, reviewing the story so far had helped participants clarify a way ahead, launched a new chapter, or edited some earlier ones. A few were aware of how the story could be seen as coming together towards an ending and were reflecting on its meaning. In all these ways, reflection and review carried out with others were seen as contributing to self-understanding. I say more about narrative learning as a group activity in the following section (7.5.2).

To play a better part in the spiritual journeys of their older members, faith communities could seek to build up the group narrative from a widening 'spiritual discourse' in which older people also participate (Coleman 2009). This should be done recognising that self-authorisation is active in all spiritual learning these days, even for dwellers who are loyal to their communities, because spirituality needs to make sense in the context of personal experience. In an age of increasing ways to pursue spiritual searching, 'beliefs no longer hold believers' (Roof 1998). Members may wish to engage with other discourses if their faith community cannot enter into dialogue with others. A few of my participants were or had been in that position, leading to a shift in their spirituality, usually towards a more seeking response to spiritual development. Faith leaders being willing to listen to older people's spiritual interpretations of lived experience could not only help them remain part of their communities but also benefit other searchers of all ages.

7.6.2   Supporting spiritual development through dialogue: with the self and others

Drawing on my findings as presented in Chapters 5 and 6, I will now consider some ways in which spiritual learning dialogues take place. My aim is to highlight potential good practice in regard to (i) the internal conversation within the self; and (ii) the interaction with others that supports later-life spirituality. Where and how might good practice be identified and facilitated in these areas?

First, the centrality of *interiority, experience and narratives* for spiritual development was summarised in Section 5.3.1. Participants mentioned particular ways in which they nurtured an inward dialogue with themselves. These included openness, reflection and review; and in finding a still place in meditation or prayer where spiritual prompting or communication with a transcendent Other could be discerned. The skills of contemplation and mindfulness are now

more widely available, alongside long-established sources for learning meditation, such as the Eastern religions, and the Eastern tradition within Christianity (see Kelly 2012). What Heelas and Woodhead (2005) termed the holistic milieu (Section 7.4.4) is now common in many parts of the UK, including the local area in which I recruited my sample. Some Christian communities are taking up the challenge to re-discover and promote their spiritual resources for inner growth. This can be seen for instance in the popularity of spiritual retreat and pilgrimage, and contemplative forms of prayer. Such opportunities were mentioned by several participants but were forms of learning they had usually located for themselves, rather than having been offered them by their church.

One of the benefits of a mature inner-life, according to my participants, is the confidence it engenders in one's understanding where this is based on well-processed experience. In later life, this attitude is valuable for addressing cultural and biographical challenges from a position of knowing oneself. Whilst confidence was expressed by many participants, a few appeared hampered by lack of confidence in their later-life spiritual understanding and experience. Greater opportunity to reflect and review would therefore be helpful to strengthen spiritual identity. A mature spirituality may assist later-life flourishing in many ways, but the realities of late life often require support beyond the individual's resources, especially as third age gives way to the fourth. Being able to express and live out vulnerability, neither denying ageing nor striving to make it productive or successful, has been described by Cruikshank (2013:4) as 'comfortable ageing'. This occurs where a positive picture of later life comprises reviewing one's sources of self-identity, primarily to embrace 'being' rather than 'doing' and to transcend consumerist cultural values that denigrate older people. Several of the oldest within my third-age sample expressed the need to relinquish busy-ness and role statuses. However, the outlooks of these older respondents did not amount to the qualitative spiritual transformation of 'gerotranscendence' described by Tornstam (1996, 2011). This will now be explained.

The three dimensions of growth towards gerotranscendence proposed by Tornstam (Section 2.4.2) provide a good example of the interiority of spiritual development. The age-related pattern he proposed consisted of a number of changes within existential understanding, in self-understanding, and in personal and social relations (Tornstam 2011). However, these dimensions were evidenced only partly, and by a few participants. For instance, less self-occupation and the perception of oneself as a small part of a greater whole were mentioned, but the predicted linked effects of greater solitude and a blurring of borders between life and death, and of times past and present, were not evidenced. For instance, the issue of time, when mentioned by participants, was about creatively using what was left. It was not about inhabiting a different outlook on the past/present, except in the sense of re-framing earlier experiences through life review. Reports of

confidence in the spiritual self and in developing a simpler lifestyle could be seen as gerotranscendent, but they could also be the outcomes of experiential learning. The few mentions by participants of a gerotranscendent acceptance of mystery and an incomplete sense of life's meaning could as likely have been conclusions from reflection. Similarly, cumulative interpretations of experiences proposed by Tornstam (1999:198) to be 'bridges to gerotranscendence' have been described in my study as incremental spiritual learning that may/not lead to more radical (transformative) shifts in perspective. I estimate that three older female participants (80+) most nearly demonstrated aspects of a gerotranscendent profile: prioritising activities and relationships they most valued and dropping others; desire for silence and solitude; placing more value on the transcendent over the material. Tornstam accepted (ibid:169) that not everyone who develops 'in the direction of gerotranscendence' displays all its features. In my thematic analysis, the code 'gerotranscendence', that captured instances construed as gerotranscendent, was the least populated of all nodes. It is possible that gerotranscendence better applies to a fourth age lifestyle and did not emerge appreciably in my sample. This concurs with a conclusion in Jewell's (2014) critique that gerotranscendence may increase in older age, but not consistently so.

Living with finitude was an acknowledged but little explored aspect of participants' later-life spirituality. They mostly associated the end of life as something still ahead of them, not needing current attention. Some had been prompted by the extra time and opportunity of retirement, or by life events, to think about finitude. However, it is helpful to recall that 'the meaning of finite life is much broader than the prospect of death' (Baars 2017:971). Baars recommends that older age be seen as a learning opportunity on how to live out a finite life, such as appreciating its richness. Several of my older participants made reference to living more in the moment, practising gratitude, and feeling freer to attend more to themselves rather than to others' meanings and concerns. Becoming more conscious of how one confronts later life and its finitude

> 'will play an important formative role in aging; to learn to let go, re-appreciate situations and integrate experiences into the awareness of a finite life' (ibid:972).

Engaging in spiritual learning is one way to address such issues. Where experiential learning has raised consciousness about finitude, self-directed learning to pursue spiritual issues could be encouraged by greater numbers of learning opportunities on end-of-life. For example, a novel form of learning is provided by the Death Café movement (Miles and Corr 2017). This initiative

offers informal ad hoc groups that meet with a facilitator, usually in a public venue, to have an open discussion about death. I will now discuss other ideas about spiritual development practice that involve groups.

Second, where *dialogue with others* is possible, in pairs or groups, further opportunities for spiritual learning abound, especially in activities that foster sharing of views. The art of focused conversation on spiritual matters can be facilitated in many ways. Most participants reported helpful learning experiences in groups, whether these were part of their spiritual community life, or accessed from a looser network. Morisy (2016) describes a particular project for regular discussion among older people on spiritual topics that concern them[27]. A group of responses that I themed later 'life-as-story' illustrates the value of sharing one's own interpretation of experience (witness) and being willing to listen to others in a spirit of openness and tolerance. The value of reminiscence and life review has a large following and an extensive literature which has been brought to further attention through a gerontological interest in narrative (Randall and Kenyon 2004; Randall 2012). Telling and listening to stories have obvious and strong links to both meaning-making and transformative learning (Randall 2004; Kenyon *et al* 2011). The interpretations and adjustments seen in data that I have attributed to an informal adult learning process for spiritual learning are similar to the concept of 're-storying' employed in narrative gerontology. Among my participants, most appeared willing and able to talk easily about their spiritual lives, but a few wanted and needed to talk at length as part of their on-going sense making. Several volunteered that they had gained new insights and self-understanding. The churches and spiritual groups that they were part of were perhaps missing opportunities to facilitate helpful reflection.

Many participants spoke of the 'lessons learnt' as a result of life experience, implying that their reflections had enabled meaning to be made and applied to future understanding. The strengthening of self-understanding is explored further by Randall *et al* (2015). In making a link between resilience in later life and the kinds of storying older people offer, they recommend that people's stories should be the subject of 'narrative care' by providing opportunities and support:

> 'Whether reminiscence, life review, guided autobiography, psychotherapy or simply soulful conversation – any activity, that is, in which deep storytelling is elicited through deep story listening' (ibid:156).

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[27] An annual programme entitled 'Conversation Matters', held in London.

I observe that Randall and colleagues' linking of narrative and resilience could also apply to a kind of spiritual resilience to be gained by good practice in narrativity. I have established that dwelling and seeking are ways of relating to either an existing communal story or constructing one's own from various sources. Both these styles of narrativity are capable of conscious development in later life, as evidenced particularly by my 'life-as-story' participants. An aspect of good practice in storytelling that older people and their supporters can look out for is 'narrative openness', such that a narrative is capable of expanding, deepening and continuous re-storying; a process that illustrates and facilitates development of an older person's meaning frame (ibid:156).

The openness to deepening, expanding and re-storying has been discussed in my research in terms of how informal learning (incidental and self-directed) is processed incrementally or more radically (Section 5.4). Merriam *et al* (2012) make a further connection to transformative learning to describe the re-storying process, which I have viewed as taking place over the whole spiritual learning trajectory of later life (Section 7.5.2). Narratives are retrospective and life stories in later life have the advantage of increasing amounts of experience to access and choices about interpretation – a fact recognised by some interviewees. Although essentially cognitive (producing coherence and credibility), narratives accommodate emotional, intuitive and identity-building elements that transformative learning has come to include, and thus offer an effective way into developing spiritual understanding.

As a final comment on provision of spiritual learning opportunities, I would note that learning in community has a long history in both religious life and adult learning. A growing literature discusses concepts such as 'eldering' (Wacks 2011) and 'conscious ageing' (Moody 2003) to describe how older people encourage each other to develop roles and ministries in service of others, based on their experience and gifts in later life. A particular example in the US is the 'Sage-ing' movement (originated by Schachter-Shalomi and Miller 1995) which now offers conferences, training and resources (see Atchley 2016). No such equivalent exists in the UK, led by older people, although there are growing numbers of sites for spiritual learning (see above, 7.6.1), and networks for professionals and volunteers involved in supporting older people's spirituality (such as 'The Gift of Years'). The primary organisation of mutual learning (older people as teachers and learners) in the UK is the University of the Third Age (U3A), now an international movement. Organisations that facilitate older people's access to non-formal learning within learning institutions include Road Scholar (originally Elderhostel, in the US) and Ransackers (UK). Whilst not offering spiritual learning in particular, educational gerontologists would maintain these

movements promote self-development for older learners, increasing their capacity for self-directed learning generally[28]. A recent review of seniors involved in adult learning (Narushima *et al* 2018a) notes that learning addressed several *existential* aspects of their lives and that, overall,

> 'Participants' continuous practice of learning works as a therapeutic self-help mechanism to counterbalance changes in their lifeworlds … findings contribute to … evidence of the wider benefits of lifelong learning … among aging populations.' (ibid:696)

7.6.3   Conclusions on good practice

In this good practice section, I have discussed how my findings on self-direction and self-authorisation in spiritual learning are important for older people wishing to access and select learning opportunities, and how providers such as voluntary and religious organisations could respond. I have further considered how different kinds of spiritual learning could take place for individuals and groups, to respond to both the inner-life spiritual journey and its social dimensions with other spiritual learners.

To use a learning metaphor, 'literacy' in matters of spirituality could be regarded as the aim of spiritual searchers of all ages – to gain understanding and competence in an aspect of life deemed valuable. Spiritual literacy has been defined thus:

> 'the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences … is a skill which can be learned to help us decipher a world full of meaning' (Spirituality and Practice website, 2019).

The extensive resources of the 'texts of our own experience' are at the heart of spiritual learning and development in later life. I have argued throughout this thesis that informal adult learning is integral to spiritual ageing. Evidence from my focus group discussions and individual interviews suggests that this learning takes place in a number of ways which could be supported by good practice. Spiritual development takes place within the continuing development of a meaning frame / self-system and its associated narrative; in the recognition of the inner-life and its self-authorising role in spiritual development; in a greater openness towards different kinds of practice-oriented spiritualities; and in greater opportunities for dialogue in groups or in mentoring relationships, both in traditional religious settings and more informal, evolving sites. The voices

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[28] Recent examples of particular learning approaches that address self-understanding and development in later life include: Adult Learning for Self and Relational Growth (Borras, 2016) and Wisdom-Focused Education (Huynh and Grossmann 2018).

that can advocate for greater spiritual learning, and play a part in its provision, include religious and spiritual communities, which may involve them 'review[ing] their missions and strategies in the light of the wider ageing society that they seek to serve' (Walker 2010:191). The movement for older adults' learning continues to promote learning for flourishing, not just employability, and could add spiritual learning more centrally to its agenda. However, judging from my sample, older people themselves might prove the best self-advocates, especially as the Baby Boom generations apply their spiritual searching in both seeking and dwelling modes to the task of mutual help for learning and development.

Chapter 8   Conclusion

8.1   Introduction

In this final chapter I reprise my research story and its findings, and summarise my contribution to the understanding of later life spiritual development. I then discuss the limitations of my research and its generalisability and the contributions of my research to knowledge in terms of research gaps identified earlier (Section 1.1).

8.2   The research story

The research puzzle that engaged me and provided a rationale for my thesis was why a heightened interest in spirituality was thought to be linked with ageing or being older (see Chapter 3). One response to a puzzle can be to research a new explanation for a phenomenon (Gustafsson and Hagstrom 2018) - in this case, later life spiritual development. The evidence on whether later life spirituality is different from that of earlier periods in a person's life needed to come from older people themselves. My governing questions concerned the nature of spiritual development in later lives (RQ1) and the ways it was perceived to be related to being / growing older (RQ2). This thesis argues that an updated view of spiritual development in later life can describe it in terms of adult learning, whereby a person's spiritual viewpoint is continuously adjusted to take account of experience. This accords with my adopted definition of spirituality as the *search for the sacred within a quest for meaning* (see literature review, Section 2.3.1), since searching is central to the spiritual learning process I was investigating.

Evidence that addressed my first research question (on the nature of later life spirituality) told of ways in which spirituality was recognised in people's lives and the kinds of spiritual development that took place. The primary finding was one of reliance more on personal experience rather than on the interpretations or instructions provided by other religious or spiritual authorities. Personal understandings of what constituted spiritual meanings clearly mediated spiritual inputs from various sources, including faith communities. Such meaning-making continued to build and adapt an overall spiritual meaning frame or outlook through which further interpretations of experience could be made. A spiritual outlook also included an evolving 'story' that accounted for one's current stance, referred to in literature as a personal spiritual narrative. I found that an informal adult learning model for spiritual development could also explain different rates and degrees of spiritual learning. Reflection on experience could produce either a slow, incremental growth of

spiritual meaning and understanding, or it could lead to more radical changes in a person's spiritual outlook, triggered by a sudden realisation or new experience.

Despite the primacy of experience through which spiritual meanings were made, there was a discernible difference in the ways that people conducted their searching and subsequent spiritual learning. For some, their meaning frame and spiritual narrative drew on a larger 'group narrative', such as one held by a faith or spiritual community. This was known in literature as a dwelling style of spirituality. Others sourced spiritual inputs and practices for themselves and thus had fewer boundaries to pay heed to for their spiritual interpretations. This was known as a seeking style of spirituality. Dwelling was found to be mostly applicable to those with a religious spirituality, affiliated to a faith /spiritual community; and seeking mostly applied to those of a non-religious spirituality, operating in looser networks or individually. Thus spiritual searching, which was common to both styles of spiritual development, was conducted in these different ways.

However, my data also showed that over time, with life-experience adaptations, a predominantly dwelling or seeking approach to spiritual learning could include elements of both styles. This indicated that dwelling and seeking are not water-tight categories. For example, 'highly adapted dwellers' – by which I mean those who had significantly adjusted their dwelling-based meaning frame in response to life experience - continued to affiliate to faith / spiritual communities although their beliefs or practices would probably not be considered orthodox by most other community members. Experienced seekers met together with others in mini-communities with whom they shared key outlooks and practices, thus providing them with an element of dwelling. Sometimes, participants' meaning frames could no longer accommodate their main approach, and they reported being aware of the balance shifting towards a different style (say, from dwelling to seeking).

The different permutations within the ways people combined these styles were described as their 'spirituality of practice'. This is a useful concept indicating not only someone's individual spiritual outlook but also how it is expressed in spiritual practice and in everyday life. Indeed, spiritual practice (what people think and do) was seen as a better guide to spiritual engagement than holding certain beliefs. This contemporary emphasis on practice is supported by a culture of 'does it work?' rather than 'is it true?' (Graham 2014). Other major changes in culture now enable greater 'self-authorisation' of spiritual meaning-making (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Williams 2019). This is to say that people judge for themselves what to include in their spiritual beliefs and

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practices. As Williams puts it 'the capacity to make spiritual life personalised and individually salient would seem never to have been greater' (ibid:40). While this has probably previously been the case privately, it is now much more acceptable and permeates dwelling-style spirituality as well as being definitive of seeking-style spirituality.

Having considered the nature of the spiritual development that participants recognised in their lives, I found that my evolving adult spiritual learning model could also accommodate the kinds of learning engagements that people were identifying. Since almost all learning which my participants mentioned was of the informal kind, I adapted a typology of incidental and self-directed learning from Marsick and Watkins (2001) to interpret my findings. Incidental learning covered the experience/reflection/adaptation learning cycle described above, usually identified as part of every-day life, and by which spiritual meaning-making developed. Self-directed learning described a range of learning activities that people initiated for themselves or pursued through learning opportunities offered by others. Such activities and opportunities often followed a spiritual learning need that had been identified through incidental learning. The answers to my first research question thus gave me a sense of what spirituality and its development looked like to the older respondents in my study. This was a basis for then understanding how this phenomenon interacted with the experience of ageing or being older.

Evidence that addressed my second research question, on the ways in which spiritual development was perceived as being related to later life, chiefly pointed to the ongoing processing of lifelong experience. It also demonstrated the fruit of both incremental and episodic kinds of learning that were triggered by the circumstances of older age (both individual and social). A person's spirituality, as an ongoing search for meaning, continually interrogated the experiences offered by later life, producing spiritual interpretations to integrate into a growing spiritual outlook.

The views of participants on the role of their ageing in this process were of three main types. Some were clear that ageing had no effect on their spiritual development, because the same process of learning from life had continued and would continue to operate regardless of the kinds of experience encountered. There was recognition of later life change, however, when looking back. Participants could cite subsequent interpretations of experience as age-related, made on reflection. These assertions convey that, for this group, age-consciousness was not a factor in their spiritual learning – for instance, they did not sense promptings about mortality or a need to review the past. Their stance also clarified that the interpretations of events and experiences, rather than the fact of them, is the key for spiritual meaning-making. On reflection, participants

could acknowledge changing life-course landmarks but their main awareness was of an ongoing journey.

A second group of responses was identified from those who did show greater age-consciousness, and who felt that they had moved into a different phase of life and context for their spirituality. They were more aware, for instance, of the potential effects on their spiritual lives of retirement, generational changes (involving parents, grandchildren) and most significantly, bereavements. Their awareness included a sense of location in the life-course, as well as its challenges and opportunities. Some saw this phase as a co-incidental opening up and potentially closing down of life. Where spiritual engagement was a particularly important part of their life, third age was seen as a significant time to pursue spiritual development.

A third group were holding later-life continuity and change in tension which they expressed in terms of 'life-as-story'. Later life was a further chapter that built on the narrative so far. Their interview responses about spiritual development often involved recounting an experience or episode. The witness nature of their evidence helped me conclude that their chief awareness was not so much of continuity or change, but of the interpreted nature of their account. This was their truth, born of experience, in which they had confidence as a way of understanding spirituality. However, it could be shared with others, who may have other truths.

These three approaches have contributed greatly to my overall understanding of how ageing relates to spirituality. In my discussion (Chapter 7) I was able to explore them further in terms of the gerontological approaches of continuity theory, the life-course perspective, and a more recent appreciation of narrative gerontology (see Chapter 6). Thematic and narrative analyses of interview data enabled a nuanced account of how older respondents interpreted their ageing in relation to their spirituality. This has led to a broad conclusion that cumulative experience of life was perceived as more directly related to spiritual development than increasing age *per se*. The passage of time and the territory covered by life's journey were, however, not irrelevant. Later life represents a trajectory of transition (the ageing journey) along which older people continue to learn spiritually, in response to the vantage points offered by later life. Some have a greater awareness of life's continuity, others are more aware that they are responding to different circumstances and possibly the contemplation of finitude, and some track their journey as a unique story of past, present and future.

I termed the trajectory of spiritual development within later life a 'third-age spiritual learning journey'. This combined participants' consciousness of both the spiritual learning they were currently engaged in, and the later life context in which it was taking place. I described case studies to illustrate different combinations of factors identified in my data, such as: dwelling and seeking, incidental and self-directed learning, reflection and re-framing, and incremental and episodic development. I proposed that the whole movement of spiritual development over this later life period be seen as transformation, because of its ongoing adaptations in response to experience, as per my spiritual learning model.

My contribution to an understanding of later life spiritual development therefore includes several main observations:

(i)   Previous models of adult development, such as those premised on life and faith *stages*, can be updated by an informal adult spiritual learning model based on a *process*. This provides a more fluid conceptualisation of spiritual development, taking place at varying rates and magnitudes over the whole of later life.

(ii)   A trajectory of development and change in later life includes a basic pattern of adjustment in response to the spiritual interpretation of experience. This can be interpretively linked to vantage points in today's later life-course that prompt learning.

(iii)   Any perceived ageing effect on spirituality is mediated by the length and nature of experience whereby informal spiritual learning adds to an interpretive meaning frame; the third-age spiritual learning journey can be discerned at the biographical level but could also be investigated for patterns at the social level.

(iv)   Styles of spiritual learning, which include dwelling and seeking in varying combinations, illustrate how people orientate their spiritual meaning-making with regard to group narratives or narratives of their own construction, but which nonetheless change over time and circumstances.

(v)   These styles (dwelling and seeking) operate over time and life-experience, and are expressed in older people's practice-oriented spirituality. They are also subject to cultural influences, which currently facilitate greater self-authorisation of people's spiritual outlooks.

8.3   Limitations

The main limitations of this study are the small size and circumscribed representativeness of its sample. In choosing a qualitative design in order to examine in-depth descriptions of later-life spirituality through open-ended interviewing, I had to limit my respondents to a manageable

number. Focusing on spiritually engaged participants rather than a sample of older people in general was done in order to increase the chance of meaningful commonalities emerging whilst also allowing comparisons of spiritual perspectives. This decreased the chances of identifying whether ageing prompts spirituality where little or no spiritual engagement existed earlier. For those already embarked on a spiritual journey, spiritual questions may adapt or change in response to the opportunities and challenges of later life, but they are less likely to be altogether new. This is consistent with my finding that older spiritually engaged participants talked of continuity and adaptation, with some acknowledgement of age-related change, as their main perceptions of later life spirituality.

In recruiting for my study, I discovered that a good range of types of spiritual engagement could be identified locally, including religious and non-religious spiritualities. I shaped my individual interviewees sample purposively to achieve a balance of age, gender and religious/non-religious spirituality since these were primary characteristics of interest and seemed a realistic range to achieve within a small group. I decided against introducing further heterogeneity in terms of religion, ethnicity or class because that would have made it more difficult to support empirical generalisabilty to a wider population of spiritually engaged older people (Ritchie *et al.* 2014:365). My findings are thus based on a relatively homogeneous group of third-agers in Southeast Hampshire/ Surrey/ West Sussex. My interests were primarily in the processes and types of later life spiritual learning engaged in, not in the contents of their beliefs or reasons behind their practices. The kinds of generalisation this study supports are *inferential* (to other groups and settings concerned with later life spiritual development) but mostly *empirical*, to do with extending concepts and categories that add to understanding about the phenomenon. These consist chiefly of my re-conceiving spiritual development as an informal learning process; its contextualising within the later life-course as a trajectory of transformation; and the application of dwelling and seeking to describe varying orientations to meaning-making and spiritual narratives.

Strategies pursued to aid eventual generalisabilty included a detailed audit trail of data gathering and analyses, a recognition of biases and limitations and consideration of ethical and reflexive elements of research. I was able to conduct the research as planned and have provided an account of research decisions at all stages, which I hope serves the purposes of trustworthiness and ethical practice. I gave significant and increasing consideration to reflexivity in response to the experience of interviewing in both stages of focus group discussions and individual interviews.

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I have been aware of the co-constructed nature of the data and my role in analysis, which I hope has reduced the likelihood of unsupported conclusions based on my assumptions.

In addition to the limitations of the study conducted, the design choices made have by definition ruled out other kinds of study that could have been done, and which my findings cannot speak about. I have already mentioned the absence of a greater heterogeneity of participants pursuing religious / spiritual paths, beyond the Judeo / Christian traditions, and representing a wider range of ethnicity and class. The spiritual development of those experiencing illness, disability, end of life or other forms of dependence (referred to in literature as 'fourth age') would also likely be different from my sample. In focusing on spiritually engaged respondents, accessed through gate-keepers, I have not conversed with those whose spirituality operates with no reference to any kind of group. Nor have I identified people considering themselves spiritual in a way that falls outside my adopted definition of spirituality. Examples would be those who do not include any transcendent or non-materialist element (a dimension of reality beyond the self or the visible, material world) whom I had termed as having an 'existential' rather than spiritual perspective (see Section 2.3.1). Some of my observations and findings may apply to these excluded groups, but I cannot claim that they do.

8.4   Research gaps and contributions to knowledge

This study has contributed to revealing later life as a period of development, thereby challenging assumptions that older age does not accommodate growth and change, including spiritual development. It has also identified an appropriate methodology for investigating a subtle, invisible phenomenon such as spirituality and its development. In particular, this research has illuminated the role of experience and reflection in spiritual development and its relationship with ageing, albeit within the context of a clearly / narrowly specified sample.

From literature reviewing of ideas about later life spiritual development, a major concern was to better understand how such development proceeded. Between the polarities of biological and social determinism, I sought an interactive account of how people's spirituality responded to the changing circumstances of ageing. The stage models of adult development, prevalent in literature on spirituality, offered timetables of developmental tasks and their resolution as a dynamic for growth and change. I hope to have added an insight on the everyday learning processes that fuel spiritual meaning-making and the development of the evolving spiritual self in later life. I have shown that this overall transformation includes both incremental and more radical changes which can occur within an older person's spiritual outlook. These changes form a path of development which is biographically unique but also responsive to social circumstances and cultural change. My

contribution is thus more about proposing the processes involved than predicting developmental patterns or stages. For instance, a gap identified by Thomas and Cohen (2006) around linking spiritual turning points with critical life events is addressed by my finding that the interpretation, rather than the fact or nature of later life events is the key to their spiritual meaning.

In similar vein, Marcoen (2005) identified a need to say more about the different trajectories followed by older people in their spiritual searching. I have argued that the whole of later life be regarded as one of transition, driven by meaning-making of experience, and that the spiritual learning journey within that trajectory be seen as one of transformation. The differences in these trajectories are thus individual at the level of biography but could also yield patterns when viewed sociologically. For instance, the life markers of retirement and onset of dependency chiefly characterise today's later life-course (in developed societies), but the personal meaning of these will include other elements in addition to their social significance. I have discerned from my participants three main perspectives on their later life spiritual journeys: as continuity, as a later-life stage, or as a developing story. My evidence allows me to conclude that later life markers (of which participants also gave examples) do play a part in individuals' ongoing spiritual development, through their interpretation of them. My finding that spiritual learners relate mostly to either an individual or communal narrative in support of their meaning-making also adds a valuable perspective to the research gap around the trajectory of later life spiritual searching.

In further examining individual (seeking) and communal (dwelling) narratives on the basis of their visibility in data (not as a-priori ideas), I discussed them as additional dimensions of my informal spiritual learning model. This observation enables a response to another research gap around new forms of spirituality and their expression, which I have approached through the idea of spirituality of practice. The informal spiritual learning model allows for different rates of change (incremental and more radical) and for different styles (dwelling and seeking) which may also change over time. An older person's spirituality of practice expresses what they think and do regarding their spirituality at any one time. This makes it a useful vehicle for also including the social circumstances of today's cohorts of older people. One particular cultural change that has been discussed is the 'spiritual turn' to greater self-authorisation of one's spiritual outlook. Spirituality of practice, as a combination of spiritual meanings and their expression, was shown in data to be actively derived through experience rather than adopted from other authorities.

Research on the interplay between spirituality and religion in relation to beliefs, practices, affiliations and self-identities has been too large a field in which to venture far. However, there appears a growing diversity on a continuum of religious to secular, along which different forms of expression of spirituality and its development can be encountered at all ages. More consideration of the interaction of both religious and non-religious spirituality in the lives of older people is needed. This could involve a more sophisticated understanding of the range of stances included in 'spiritual not religious' and 'non-religious' (Manning 2019; Voas and Day 2010). The kinds of learning needed to develop today's spirituality of practice (see Section 3.7 and 7.3) could then be further identified and made available.

The important question of spirituality's contribution to health and wellbeing in later life has not been addressed in this study, but is one of growing significance within social and health sciences. I can only claim, from an educational gerontology perspective, that greater understanding of oneself in relation to others and the world are linked to greater flourishing and coping in later life (Findsen and Formosa 2011; Jenkins and Mostafa 2015; Narushima *et al* 2018b). Spiritual learning and development as aspects of older adult learning are therefore also likely to relate to a beneficial sense of agency, resilience and self-worth. My application of the perspective of lifelong adult learning to the study of spirituality and ageing has yielded an augmented account of spiritual development in later life. For my participants, years of experience on a spiritual journey has enabled a growing spirituality, expressed in changing understanding and practice. As cultural change brings greater variety of spiritualities of practice into sight there is, going forward, a need to

> 'expand the view of spirituality within gerontology to begin to match the richness and complexity that it has in the everyday worlds of most middle-aged and older people' Atchley (2009:149).

Appendix A   List of local spirituality 'meetup' groups

Local spirituality 'meetup' groups near EXXXXXXX & HXXXXX (< 25 miles)

As at April 2016

Group Name	Name of members	Numbers meeting (if available)
Bosham Healthy Living	Lightworkers	183
'Change your Thoughts, Change your Life' Workshop, Worthing	Creators	49
Chichester Sacred Devotional Chanting	Chanters	49
Chichester Consciousness Expansion	Polarity Integrators	new group
Discover your Hero's Journey, Coaching and Transformation	Heros and heroines	107
Eriksonian Hypnosis, Hampshire	Enablers	49
Find Yourself in Wittering, Sign of the Times Astrology	Astronuts	138

Appendix A

Gnostic Cultural Association	Gnostic Community Associates	211
Gurdjieff Reading Group, Southampton	Group members	9
Hampshire Meditation Group	Members	148
Healing and Meditation For Personal Wellbeing, Winchester	Members	151
Hu Meditation, Winchester	Meditators	234
KKI Sounds Alton &	Drummers	62
KKI Sounds Midhurst, Shamanic Drum Chant And Meditation		25
Life Alignment, Isle Of Wight	Aligners	22
Meditation and Mastery Meetup	Seekers	248
Mind, Myth and Magic	Members	54

The Oneiro Foundation	Conscious Explorers	38
Petersfield 'A Course in Miracles'	Brothers	18
Portsmouth Transformation (Psychics)	Be Awesome	49
South Coast Self Development Group	Success Seekers	125
Worthing Spiritual And Meditation Group	Spiritual Seekers	68
Who You Really Are	Lightworkers	77
5 Rhythms Moving Meditation Tribe, Southampton	Dancers	235

Local 'Religion and belief' groups (non-church)

Chichester Humanists	Humanists, atheists & agnostics	26
Chichester Skeptics In the Pub;	Skeptics	205
Portsmouth Skeptics In the Pub	Skeptics	415
Sunday Assembly Southampton City 'Live better, help others, wonder more'	Secular Sunday Congregation, Assemblers	77

Appendix B Development of focus group discussions

Organisation	HH Trust	EP Centre	MB Network	GDS Programme
Date approached	April 2016	April 2016	March 2016	May 2016
Gatekeeper discussion	Initial meeting with centre leader Offer of recruitment help & agreed info to send	Initial meeting with Chair of Centre Written proposal to management committee; permission to display invitations	Agreement of organiser for me to speak to meeting and collect email contacts to follow up	Meetings with managers and organiser of programme Offer to display invitations during programme
Recruitment period 2016	April to June	May to June	April to June	First two weeks of July, during summer programme
Recruitment method	Personal invitation by centre leader and referral to me for email follow-up; pre-meeting for questions, 16 June	Copies of invitation flier available in Centre and brought to volunteers' attention by Centre staff	Invitation emailed by me to contacts collected from sign-up sheet at meeting	Copies of invitation available at all sessions of programme
PIS supplied	Distributed at pre-meeting; emailed to additional recruits	Emailed on response to invitation	Emailed on response to invitation	Emailed on response to invitation
Date group held	7 July, 2pm	25 July, 11am	Not held	3 August, 2pm
Venue group held	Trust premises	Community centre	Village / parish hall	Educational centre
Length of (i) session (ii) recorded discussion	(i) 2 hours (ii) 1hr 20mins	(i) 2 hours (ii) 1hr 15mins	n/a	(i) 1hr 30mins (ii) 57 mins
Number of participants	10	8	6, but could not agree a date	3 (6 expected)

Organisation	HH Trust	EP Centre	MB Network	GDS Programme
Gender	8 F, 2M	7F, 1M	6F	1F, 2M (2 more F, written response only)
Ages:(i) average (ii) range	(i) 65-69 (ii) 60 to 84	(i) 75-79 (ii) 60-79		(i) 70-74 (ii) 60-84
Self-rated health	7 active & well; 3 some limitations	7 active and well; 1 some limitations		3 active and well
Educational level	8 at graduate level; 2 at O level	7 at graduate level; 1 at O level		3 at graduate level
Post-discussion (optional)written reflection received	3	4		2 (+ 2 from non-attenders)
Religious or spiritual identity / affiliation	Religious *and* spiritual: 3 Religious: 1 Spiritual: 5	Religious *and* spiritual: 2 Religious: 5 Spiritual: 1		Religious: 2 Spiritual: 1

Appendix C   **Participant information sheet**

Study Title: Informal learning in later life spiritual development

Researcher: Joanna K. Walker

ERGO number: 30010

Please read this information carefully before deciding to take part in this research. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am an early-retired, self-supporting PhD student at the University of Southampton. My research is about spiritual development in later life, from retirement onwards. I am interested in how people view their spiritual lives, how they see spiritual change and pursue spiritual development – and what these bring to their experience of later life. My purpose is to understand how spiritual development in later life could be better supported and encouraged.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You are an older member of one of a variety of groups or networks that I have approached which are involved in spiritual interests and activities. With their support I am inviting members, such as yourself, to consider taking part in a one-off interview with me. The groups I have contacted represent many different kinds of spirituality, including religious and non-religiously-based ones. This is so that I can hear about a range of spiritual experience in later life.

What will happen to me if I take part?

We will agree a time to meet for a face-to-face interview which will probably be about one or two hours in length. It will be open-ended, more like a guided conversation rather than a questionnaire, so that you are free to explore with me your spiritual perspective on life and how it has developed. After the interview, you will have the *option* to respond in writing, to explore the topic further or reflect on what has come up in our conversation, but taking part in the interview does not obligate you to write anything. We can hold the interview in a private room in a community venue, or you may wish to invite me to your home if you prefer. I will make an audio-recording of the interview and subsequently transcribe it for analysis purposes. I will give you a written pre-interview briefing, which will re-iterate the purposes of the data collection and the process of giving formal consent, and re-state contact information about me and the University.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you in taking part, but I aim to make the interview an interesting and enjoyable experience. As an interviewee, you will be playing a part in research that I hope will have something to say about the value and need for better support of older people's spiritual learning and development. The topic of how we make sense of spiritual experience and develop spiritual understanding over the course of our lives is one that is not often discussed. People who have participated in focus groups that I have run previously have valued the chance to talk about such matters.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no significant physical risks attached to your participation but I am aware that talking about personal spirituality and spiritual experience may raise unexpected thoughts and emotions. So, in deciding about taking part in an interview, you will need to consider whether talking about such personal matters might cause you any discomfort, either at the time or afterwards. You are, of course, entirely free to disclose as little or as much as you choose. As a responsible researcher, my attitude and approach to any views you express, or experience you share, will be attentive and non-judgmental.

Will my participation be confidential?

Our conversation will be entirely private and kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any transcript or quotation from it. Records concerning the interview will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and, in the case of electronic documents, in a password-protected environment. The University's data protection policy will be followed, which has detailed protocols for both secure storage and archiving of data.

What should I do if I want to take part?

Please email me on jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk or ring me on 07795 370411 so that I can get in touch to arrange a time and place for an interview and send a pre-interview briefing.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to withdraw at any time prior to, or during, the interview. Should you change your mind about participation *after* the interview has been conducted, you can still withdraw by contacting me. For practical purposes, I would be grateful if you could do so within two weeks of the interview. The same applies to the optional reflective written response. Any withdrawn material will be removed from my records and securely destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results of my research will be written up for the purposes of examination and my thesis stored by the University for reference by others. In line with the University of Southampton's policy, the anonymised research data will be stored for 10 years in its institutional repository. With your permission, the anonymised research data could be archived for analysis by other bona fide researchers. Articles, conference papers or book chapters may be published that draw on the data, but always in an anonymised form.

Where can I get more information?

My contact details are Joanna Walker at jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk or mobile 07795 370411.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, the University provides a contact who is independent of my study. This is the Research Integrity and Governance Manager (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk). Please quote the ethics reference number given at the head of the document.

Thank you.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet and considering taking part in the research.

Appendix D   **Focus group invitation**

An invitation to volunteer workers at Exxxxxxxx Pxxxxxxx Cxxxxx

April 2016

Dear friend,

My name is Jo Walker and, like you, I am a coffee bar volunteer at the Pxxxxxxx Cxxxxx, and live in Exxxxxxxx. The Management Group has kindly agreed to give out this message on my behalf.

I'm an early-retired postgraduate student at Southampton University wishing to research how retired people view and experience their spiritual lives. I'd particularly like to hear about any ways in which people perceive their spirituality changing and how they pursue spiritual development.

I hope to set up a focus group discussion with a maximum of ten participants to explore these questions. We would meet once, for about two hours, hopefully in July, at the Pxxxxxxx Cxxxxx. I will facilitate the group, take some notes and record the proceedings for analysis. There will be an *optional* follow-on writing exercise for those who want to reflect further on the discussion or extend what they said in the group. All of this information will be treated and stored confidentially; no names will be identified in writing based on the research.

If you are interested to be part of such a discussion and are willing to share your views and experience, please be in touch with me direct (not the Pxxxxxxx Cxxxxx) and let me have your contact details. I can then send you further background information as required by University of Southampton research regulations, and arrange a date and time for the focus group to meet.

I look forward to hearing from you at: jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk or ring me on XXXXX XXXXXX or XXXXX XXXXXX.

I am grateful to the Pxxxxxxx Cxxxxx for their support.

Many thanks,

[Signature removed]

Please reply by the end of June 2016

Appendix E **Focus group discussion guide**

1. What does your spirituality (having a spiritual perspective or outlook) mean to you at this time in your life?

Follow ups:

- o In what ways is it significant / important?
- o What forms does it take?
- o How do you express / practice your spiritual beliefs and values?

2. What changes (if any) have you noticed in your spiritual outlook and behaviour as a mature person in recent years?

Follow ups: Changes in ---

- o Particular beliefs or overall spiritual outlook?
- o Spiritual practices or behaviours?
- o Relationships with others, such as in membership of spiritual communities?
- o Relationship with a transcendent Other?

3. Can you say what prompted these new understandings or expressions of your spirituality?

Follow ups: Were they

- o Gradual or more sudden?
- o Related to more general experience or specific events?
- o In response to new spiritual questions that arose?

4. How do you think your spiritual life might develop in future, in your later life?

Follow ups:

- o Do you envisage new circumstances for / challenges to your spirituality?
- o What resources will you seek out to help your ongoing growth?

Joanna Walker at **jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk**   Ethics reference: 20728

Appendix F **Individual interview invitation**

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

September 2017

Dear friend

RESEARCH ON SPIRITUALITY IN LATER LIFE

I'm an early-retired post-graduate student researching into how people's spirituality may change and develop in later life. I'm also interested in what people think their spirituality adds to the experience of growing older.

I'm looking for volunteers, over the age of 60, who would be willing to be interviewed about their experience of spiritual growth and change. All kinds of spiritual backgrounds are welcome. The interview style will be more of a guided conversation than a schedule of questions, as I want to hear about how you think and feel about the topic. I anticipate that individual interviews will take between one and two hours, and will be conducted locally to Exxxxxxx.

If you would be interested to take part, please respond by emailing me with *your* contact details at: jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk I will then send you further background information about my research. The University of Southampton has strict ethical procedures, so participants will be asked to confirm they have read this further information and sign a consent form if they wish to proceed. If you are not an email user, please ring me on xxxxx xxxxxx.

I look forward to hearing from you!

[Signature deleted]

Jo Walker, Centre for Research on Ageing,

Faculty of Social Sciences

Appendix G   Individual interview guide

1. Your spirituality and spiritual development at this time in your life

Main open question: *What does your spirituality / spiritual life currently bring you?*

Prompts if necessary to enable response: some examples about spiritual identity; 'benefits' of a spiritual dimension; ethical / moral elements.

Follow on questions, as appropriate – use as few or many as needed, not necessarily in this order:

1.1 Reflection and inner life

To what extent do you feel you have an 'inner' spiritual life – how would you describe it?

Can you describe in what ways spiritual experience occurs for you?

Can you tell me some of the things you do to nurture your inner spiritual life?

Do you engage in practices that help you review or develop your spirituality?

1.2 Life experience and meaning making

In what ways do you feel your spiritual outlook has changed in recent years?

Can you give me an example of a recent experience or event in your life that you felt had spiritual meaning?

In what ways does your ongoing experience give you confidence in your way of seeing spiritual matters?

1.3 Making spiritual connection

Can you describe in what ways you experience a connection with a larger context or reality for our lives (e.g. with all life; with something greater than myself; with a sacred presence)?

What kinds of spiritual learning would help you connect better with spiritual reality as you see it?

Does learning to connect get easier with age and / or experience?

2. Reflecting on spiritual development in the course of your life

Main open question: *In what ways does getting older affect the ways your spirituality is developing?*

Prompts if needed: new or different spiritual questions; challenge to make sense of the past; better sense of your spiritual identity; dealing with unfinished business; reframing earlier experience

Appendix G

Follow on questions, as appropriate (as few or as many, in any order):

2.1 Spiritual self-development and identity

In what ways could you contrast your younger spiritual self with now?

Who or what has helped you grow or develop your spiritual life?

What kind of spiritual learning or development would you like to pursue further?

As a spiritual older person / person of faith, what role(s) do you feel you have to play?

2.2 Developing spiritual narratives

If you inherited or chose a particular spiritual tradition, how has that changed or evolved into the kind of beliefs / faith you hold today?

Do you see your spiritual ideas and practices as part of a known religious or spiritual tradition, or have you developed your own understandings and practices?

If you have mostly worked out your own spiritual outlook, how has that changed or evolved into the kinds of beliefs / faith you hold today?

Have you made mostly gradual changes or have you had any major ones, involving transformation of what you think, believe or practise?

2.3 The journey of spiritual learning

In what ways do you see yourself on a spiritual learning journey or feel committed to one?

In what ways do you consciously seek opportunities or circumstances to aid your spiritual growth?

What does your spiritual life contribute to your understanding and experience of growing older or being an older person today?

Appendix H   Pre-interview briefing (individual)

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in an interview as part of my research into spiritual development in later life. These are some brief notes to set the scene for our conversation. As you have seen from the Participant Information Sheet, I am interested to hear about how people view their spiritual lives, how they see spiritual change and pursue spiritual development, especially in later life. I have found that the best way to do this with individuals is to have a guided conversation rather than use a questionnaire. That way, I hear what's important to you in your spiritual life, and what has been significant in helping get to where you are in your spiritual understanding and development.

Before starting the interview, I will ask you to sign a consent form, based on the information I have supplied about the study. If you are happy to go ahead, I will then ask for a few basic details about you, such as age and spiritual affiliation (if you have one). For the interview itself, I will ask you two main open-ended questions about your spirituality, concerning *where you are now* and how that looks from the *perspective of later life*. In between, I may have some follow-up enquiries according to the things you mention, which we may then pursue a bit further. I believe that the conversation may last at least an hour, probably more. You are, of course, welcome to say as much or as little as you like. So, across my sample, the length of interviews will vary and cannot be entirely predicted. *If helpful, please use the timeline below to reflect on your spiritual journey before we speak.*

You may anticipate some concern about discussing what could be felt to be personal matters or information about your life. Please be free to share only that which you are comfortable to talk about. There is no pressure to say more and no judgement being formed about anything you mention. You are a partner in this conversation, not just responding to a series of questions. Be assured that our conversation is and will remain confidential. The audio-recording and any written material generated by it will be treated in strict accordance with the protocols described to you as part of the process of giving your consent.

My purpose in researching about spirituality and later life is to understand the changes that people may experience and to propose some explanations as to how and why these come about. It is also to encourage better support and learning opportunities for those who wish to explore their spiritual development in this interesting and demanding phase of life. Being a third-age learner and spiritual explorer myself has prompted me to find out more. I very much look forward to meeting and talking with you.

[Signature deleted]

Joanna Walker

Please use this space to sketch in significant events or milestones in your spiritual development so far, and any hopes or plans you have for future growth.
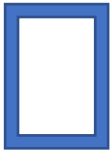
BIRTH

Appendix I **Participant questionnaire**

1. What is your current age in years? Please circle one of these options: 60-64; 65-69; 70-74; 75-79; 80-84; 85-89; 90+; prefer not to say.

2. How do you describe your current health status?
   Please tick one that fits best or describe otherwise:

   - Active and well
   - Active, living independently but with health condition(s)
   - Experiencing some restrictions due to health condition(s)
   - Health or disability becoming more of an issue for independent living
   - Other, please describe _____

3. At what level did you leave formal learning? Please tick one option:
   - School Certificate / GCSE O level
   - OND/BTEC/ GCSE A level
   - Professional qualification / Higher Education degree
   - Other, please state _____

4. How would you term or describe your current faith or spiritual identity?

5. Are you currently a member of a faith or spiritual community? Y/N

   If yes, please state: _____

6. Were you raised in a similar community or tradition, as above? Y/N
   If no, please describe your childhood or earlier spiritual /faith affiliation:

   _____

7. Name: _____ Gender: M/ F
   NB: names will be detached from responses for data analysis

Thank you very much. Responses will be treated and stored with confidentiality.

Joanna Walker at jkw1g12@soton.ac.uk   **Ethics reference: 20728**

Appendix J   **Participants of focus group discussions**

NAME	GENDER	AGE GROUP	SPIRITUAL I/D	FGD GROUP/ case number
Alan	M	80-84	Spiritual not religious	HH8
Anna	F	Not known	Religious (Christian)	GDS4 (written only)
Annabel	F	65-69	Religious (Buddhist) and non-religious spirituality	HH1
Annette	F	65-69	Religious and non-religious spirituality	HH10
Brian	M	80-84	Religious (Christian)	GDS3
Claire	F	75-79	Spiritual not religious	HH2
Carrie	F	Not known	Religious (Christian)	GDS5 (written only)
Charlotte	F	75-79	Spiritual not religious	HH5
Dan	M	60-64	Religious (Buddhist) and non-religious spirituality	HH3
Daphne	F	75-79	Religious (Christian)	EPC8
Debra	F	65-69	Religious (Christian) and non-religious spirituality	EPC3
Jean	F	75-79	Religious (Christian)	EPC6

NAME	GENDER	AGE GROUP	SPIRITUAL I/D	FGD GROUP/ case number
Jim	M	75-79	Religious (Christian)	EPC5
Marlene	F	65-69	Religious (Christian) and non-religious spirituality	HH7
Mary	F	65-69	Religious (Buddhist) and non-religious spirituality	HH6
Patricia	F	75-79	Religious (Christian)	EPC2
Penny	F	65-69	Spiritual not religious	HH4
Polly	F	65-69	Religious (Christian)	EPC4
Rachel	F	65-69	Spiritual not religious	GDS1
Sarah	F	60-64	Religious (Christian) and non-religious spirituality	EPC7
Sean	F	60-64	Religious (Christian)	GDS2
Sheila	F	80-84	Spiritual not religious	HH9
Vera	F	70-74	Spiritual not religious	EPC1

Appendix K **Individual interview participants**

Case number / pseudonym	Male or female	Age	Religious or Non-religious spirituality	Interview date	Interview duration Hr: min	Interview location
HH11 Sally	F	65+	NRS	September 2017	1:45	Interviewer's home
HH12 Ginger	M	80+	NRS	Sept 2017	1:36	Interviewee's home
HH13 Neil	M	65+	NRS	Oct 2017	1:05	At HH
HH14 Pete	M	60+	NRS	Oct 2017	2:07	Interviewer's home
HH15 Paula	F	75+	NRS	Nov 2017	58mins	At HH
HH16 Josh	M	75+	NRS	Nov 2017	1:42	At HH
HH17 Veda	F	60+	NRS	Nov 2017	1:05	Interviewee's home
HH18 Doug	M	65+	NRS	Nov 2017	1:15	Interviewee's home
EPC9 Caroline	F	70+	RS	Oct 2017	1:25	Interviewee's home
HL1 Delia	F	75+	NRS	Sept 2017	1:12	Interviewee's home
HL2 Ben	M	70+	NRS	Oct 2017	57mins	At EPC

Case number / pseudonym	Male or female	Age	Religious or Non-religious spirituality	Interview date	Interview duration Hr: min	Interview location
HL3 Cath	F	60+	NRS	Oct 2017	1:18	At EPC
HL4 Prue	F	75+	NRS	Nov 2017	1:02	At EPC
HL5 Elsa	F	85+	NRS	Feb 2018	1:30	Interviewee's home
FQG1 Jen	F	80+	RS	Oct 2017	1:31	Interviewee's home
FQG2 Sasha	F	70+	RS	Nov 2017	1:13	Interviewee's home
[GDS4]	[F]		[RS]	[Dec 2017]		**No show**
GDS5 Carrie	F	65+	RS	Dec 2017	1:13	At GDS
SJN1 Sian	F	60+	RS	Jan 2018	1:07	Interviewee's home
SJN2 Greg	M	75+	RS	Jan 2018	1:16	Interviewee's home
SJN3 Tom	M	70+	RS	Jan 2018	1:16	Interviewee's home
SJN4 Alice	F	70+	RS	Feb 2018	1:39	Interviewee's home

Case number / pseudonym	Male or female	Age	Religious or Non-religious spirituality	Interview date	Interview duration Hr: min	Interview location
SJN5 Rod	M	60+	RS	Feb 2018	1:36	Interviewer's home
SJN6 Jack	M	90+	RS	Feb 2018	59mins	Interviewee's home
TOTALS 23 interviews	10 M 13 F	Range = 60+ - 90+ Ave = 70+	NRS = 13 RS = 10	From Sept 2017- Feb 2018	Total time = 30:47 Range of duration 57mins – 2hr:07 Ave i/v length1:20	Community venue = 7 Interviewee home = 13 Interviewer home = 3

Appendix L   **Spiritual practices of individual interviewees**

SJN1 (Sian): Bible reading (daily, with an annual plan) and study; prayer (all kinds); group study; corporate worship; walking (enables contemplation); service and social action; pastoral conversations; retreats; journaling.

SJN2 (Greg): Bible reading and study, group study, prayer; other spiritual reading and reflection; listening to and reflecting on sermons and other teaching inputs; corporate worship; retreats - would like more meditative practices.

SJN3 (Tom): Bible reading (daily with annual plan) and study; other spiritual reading; group study; prayer, all kinds; journaling, service (local and international); spiritual direction and mentoring; corporate worship.

SJN4 (Alice): Prayer, all kinds; intercession, contemplation and discernment; Bible reading and study; group study; corporate worship; spiritual direction; God in nature; retreats; healing; service.

SJN5 (Rod): Prayer, different forms; retreats and healing; Bible reading and study, group study; music (playing guitar); corporate worship; service (photography, technical support).

SJN6 (Jack): Daily, weekly, monthly and annual patterns of practices, including Bible reading, study and reflection; other spiritual reading and reflection; liturgy and corporate worship; group study; prayer, including intercession; pastoral conversations; mentoring.

FQG1 (Jen): Bible reading and reflection; other spiritual reading and reflection eg. on Christian mysticism; contemplative prayer and associated practices – silence, 'active imagination', art, photography; spiritual direction; networking and group activities.

FQG2 (Sasha): Contemplative prayer and meditation; music (singing, playing, leading groups), painting and craft; Bible and other spiritual reading; reminiscence and review; retreats and pilgrimage; symbolism of water and rainbows; conversation and spiritual direction; corporate worship in various styles.

HL1 (Delia): Meditation (daily); healing; spiritual reading and reflection; walking and being in the natural world; group study; pastoring and mentoring.

HL2 (Ben): Attendance at meditation and healing sessions at HL; listening to music; seeking peaceful places / atmospheres and sacred spaces; contact with spirit guide; veganism as an ethical lifestyle.

HL3 (Cath): Meditation; walking (God in nature); mindfulness and gratitude; retreats; healing; yoga and Qi Gong; spiritual reading, poetry and reflection; music (singing); service.

HL4 (Prue): Contemplative prayer and meditation; spiritual reading (daily, online blogs); journaling, group study; spiritual direction and mentoring; healing; music (singing).

HL5 (Elsa): Meditation, prayer; non-attachment; spiritual reading.

EPC9 (Caroline): Methodist rule of life, based on 3-month cycle of prayer: includes intercession, contemplation and silence, mindfulness and gratitude. Pastoral relationships; group study; Bible and other spiritual reading and reflection; corporate worship.

GDS5 (Carrie): Prayer (learning about different kinds), Bible reading and reflection including lectio divino; corporate worship.

HH11 (Sally): Being in nature, appreciating beauty and colour; writing (prose and poetry); contemplation; empathy and compassion (counselling).

HH12 (Ginger): 'Pilgrimages' to the past for meaning-making; art as spiritual journeying (painting, photography); appreciating sacred spaces.

HH13 (Neil): Meditation, twice daily at different levels from attunement to deep meditation, use of 'sanctum'; mindfulness; service; healing and other 'energetic' connections; spiritual reading and group study.

HH14 (Pete): Spiritual reading and reflecting; meditation and prayer; mindfulness and non-attachment; service.

HH15 (Paula): Meditation, contemplation and prayer; spiritual reading; mindfulness; creativity (sculpture and painting); gratitude and states of 'bliss'.

HH16 (Josh): Prayer and meditation; spiritual reading, reflecting and writing; group study; intuition and healing, service.

HH17 (Veda): Meditation (mantra) daily; reflecting and acting on teaching (Hindu based); service to the Wxxxxx School (Meditation, reflection and service was the School's three-fold spirituality of practice); retreats / summer school; mindfulness.

HH18 (Doug): Meditation daily; reflection on teachings and service to the Wxxxxx School; other spiritual reading; mindfulness; other service; retreat-style summer school.

Source: Case summaries from data

Appendix M Self-directed learning of individual interviewees

Examples of self-directed learning included a range of more purposive learning (compared with incidental learning) pursued by older spiritual learners in response to ideas or situations that prompted a learning need. These examples were collected in NVivo under the node 'Informal learning, self-directed'. They were further analysed as two types: *Self-organised*, where the content of the learning was selected by the learner; and *non-formal*, which is an adult education term for learning opportunities devised and organised by someone else, but not for accreditation or awards. A few participants had followed their learning journeys into more formal, accredited programmes; these are noted at the end as 'formal' learning, but cannot logically fall within my model of informal adult spiritual learning.

Self-organised:

Meetings with a spiritual director (spiritual mentoring) (4 instances mentioned)

Other informal pairings for spiritual discussion or prayer / meditation (3 mentioned)

Personal use of particular spiritual exercises, eg. Ignatian, Lectio Divino, Qi-gong, various forms of meditation.

Reading – books, articles, blogs (20 instances mentioned)
- Systematic reading / study of scripture and sacred texts
- Particular book titles (5 mentioned)
- Particular reading topics mentioned eg. astrology, Buddhism, healing, re-incarnation, spiritualism, spirituality, theology, Theosophy.
- Online learning resources, such as daily or other regular inspirational messages or writings, in some cases following a particular spiritual leader.

Non-formal:

Spiritual /religious voluntary organisations: short course programmes, topics such as
- Ancient wisdom
- Counselling
- Dead Sea Scrolls
- Healing
- Meditation / mindfulness
- New Testament Greek
- Painting
- Photography
- Prayer

- Regression (past lives)
- Spiritual direction
- Yoga

Local groups, part of networks for particular approaches to spirituality:

- Light Workers (alternative spiritual practices)
- Quiet Garden (contemplative practices)

Local church learning opportunities:

- Sermons
- Study and fellowship groups
- Week of guided prayer
- Workshops on leading prayers or reading scripture in church.

Conferences and summer schools (3 mentioned): programmes from religious and non-religious

organisations.

Practitioner training in spiritual practices and techniques

- Healing
- Hypnotherapy
- Meditation
- Spiritual direction

Secular learning providers such as local authority or University of 3rd Age (U3A)

- Art (painting)
- Creative writing
- Poetry
- Men's Shed (wood and metal crafts)

Religious membership courses

- Anglican Confirmation
- Roman Catholic instruction

Spiritual / religious community learning opportunities

- Music
- Pilgrimages
- Retreats
- Quiet days

Long-term spiritual learning programmes, with progressive levels of study

- School of Economic Science (local branch, Wxxxxx School of Pxxxxxxxxx)
- Rosicrucianism

Formal:

Religious accredited courses or training

- Anglican lay ministry
- Methodist local preacher course

Higher education accredited courses eg. degree level study in religious studies, world religions, spirituality.

Examples of self-directed learning journeys:

HL1 (DELIA) (individual interview extract)

I decided to join the non-denominational group, the National Federation of Spiritual Healers, and I went to one of their conferences in Bournemouth in 1979. And one of the speakers, a woman called BJ, was talking about healing the energy field. I wanted to know more about that and I found out she lived at L (local). So I trained with her and began to make sense of what I was feeling. And she introduced me to Alice Bailey and the study of Theosophy, which is academic spirituality … And they're still going strong, and they do meditation and teach spiritual study. So B introduced me to that, and from there I got involved in teaching it. … And in the process of meditating, I'd found out aspects of myself which I'd wanted to talk about. So I've been into therapy every now and again. (pause) … And I read. I read a lot. I'm interested in other people's ideas. I'm reading a new psychology of well-being at the moment. Which is quite hard-going but fascinating … I go to a few (conferences), I'm very interested in the 'Beyond the brain' series that Medical Scientific Network do.

GDS (ANNA) (written response to FGD)

I have therefore looked outside church for extra help and found it, to begin with,
a) in the Living Spirituality movement led mainly by Eley McAinsh (who has also worked for the BBC producing programmes like *Something Understood*)
b) through meditation - I was introduced by a friend to the World Community for Meditation.
c) through a theology group - originally set up for vicars/ priests who felt unable to express different views/ doubts in their congregations. It includes a number of thinking ex-academics and is a bit high powered for me but they are very kind and I really enjoy listening (and increasingly contributing) as we discuss topics like confession, de-cluttering, forgiveness and books like Rowan Williams' *Being Christian* and others by (mostly) modern thinkers like Richard Rohr.
d) through my own reading of theologians like Spong. I like his definition of God as source of life and love, ground of our being.

Appendix N   Ageing and spirituality, case summaries

This Appendix presents a list of the case summary elements on ageing and spirituality, which I used subsequently to associate participants with one of three ways of viewing the relationship of ageing to spirituality: as continuity, as later life-course, or life-as-story.

CASE	PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'AGEING AND SPIRITUALITY'
(In alpha order)	*Continuity* *(most conscious of ongoing spiritual development over changing terrain)*
CARRIE 65+	Argued for continuity & experience rather than age effects on spirituality. A sense of life-course location, due to second marriage and delayed retirement, but not identifying with 'age' per se – distancing from it.
DELIA 75+	Continuity of searching /seeking envisaged. Finitude not an issue. Ageing identified as 'challenge' but not spiritually?
GREG 75+	Ageing not particularly recognised as spiritually significant – need of continuity for 'self-improvement'; intimations of mortality
NEIL 65+	Not currently acknowledging ageing; a few considered ideas, but more from second age perspective.
SALLY 65+	Ageing/spirituality not particularly discerned; continued searching envisaged alongside recent life-stage markers; finitude not an issue.
SIAN 60+	Ageing/spirituality not perceived, except in terms of retirement transition; glimpse of finitude. Looking for continuity through sense of calling.
TOM 70+	Still in retirement transition, with voluntary roles instead of work. Not much sense of being 'older' so later life spirituality seen as continuity.
VEDA 60+	Ageing not recognised as relevant to spiritual outlook; more an extended opportunity to learn from experience. Wisdom not related to age. Ageing part of cycle of life, thus a learning opportunity.

CASE	PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'AGEING AND SPIRITUALITY'

Later life-course

(most conscious of period of life or recent markers of ageing & spirituality)

BEN 70+ — Sense of age now to do with finitude (in remission from acute illness).

CATH 60+ — Conscious of hoped-for retirement period, recently entered; age-awareness linked to health condition, but not seen as barrier to spiritual development.

DOUG 65+ — Working out relationship between finitude and future lives.

ELSA 85+ — Finitude and death awareness as existential rather than spiritual issue?

GINGER 80+ — Finitude and death awareness; some change in artistic practice, from planned to more open-ended approach.

JACK 90+ — Sense of status as elder, with benefits as well as detractions; adapting teaching, pastoral care and mentoring; conscious of generativity.

ROD 60+ — Increased spiritual searching, reportedly not linked with age, but more with life context - second marriage in late-50s and p/t work in retirement.

'Life as story'

(most conscious of the changing / unfolding story of spiritual life)

ALICE 70+ — Age-aware but only recently relating to later life spirituality? Pondering the meaning of 'wisdom' attributed to her by others; discerning need for change within dwelling.

CAROLINE 70+ — Working with / around disability, now more significant in later life; happy with lower profile roles to fulfil ongoing calling and ministry; exploring new meanings within dwelling.

CASE	PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'AGEING AND SPIRITUALITY'
JEN 80+	Recognised continuity but was significantly re-framing long spiritual experience; age-aware by setting her story in terms of her cohort and times lived through
JOSH 75+	Minimal acknowledgement of ageing and spirituality; finitude not an issue. Life as series of episodes that teach. Entrepreneur outlook, making stories happen.
PAULA 75+	A dramatic story with a sense of a liberated, ageing spiritual self. A touch of gerotranscendence in her changed relationships with people and time.
PETE 60+	Age significance minimally perceived, but strong sense of life story and spiritually relevant episodes; significant later life meanings being re-framed and a 'coming together' of spiritual searching into a path.
PRUE 75+	Stories of age-related changes in outlook: currently, 'connect rather than correct'; head vs heart; return to simplicity and intuition.
SASHA 70+	Sense of an account of spiritual life now available through reflection on past events and markers: bereavement, 70th birthday, grandparenthood; conscious construction of story through life review and spiritual practice.

CASE	PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'AGEING AND SPIRITUALITY'

Appendix O   Third-age spiritual learning journeys, case summaries

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
CATH 60+	Developing her own spiritual path; ongoing searching now in seeker mode; using experiential and s-d learning (2-year p/t course on healing).	Early as 3rd ager, but spiritual journey well established. Exploring the opportunities of retirement release & discovery of later life 'flourishing' through spiritual development.
PETE 60+	Spiritual learning from earlier & mid adulthood now enabling focus on spiritual practices to achieve spiritual goals of connection & enlightenment.	Journey established and ongoing quest now seen in terms of a spiritual path, rather than the 'random' seeking of earlier life; A 'coming together' story.
ROD 60+	Searching within dwelling to deepen spirituality; exploring contemplative practices and other less 'cognitive' styles alongside more traditional reading and study.	Well engaged spiritually but not particularly conscious of 3rd age; still work-oriented. Aware of need to discern next phase of 'calling' with partner.
SIAN 60+	Discerning next phase of spiritual vocation in (recent) retirement; experiential learner & activist focus on spiritual community and world.	Fairly new as 3rd ager but spiritually mature. Open to learning to find way forward within well-established dwelling, following a recent setback.
VEDA 60+	Continuing as senior learner on progressive path within School and co-learner with her tutees; lifelong (and beyond) learner within Vedic tradition.	Mature spiritual learner though recent third-ager; recent retirement seen as opportunity to learn / teach / serve more; continuity rather than change.

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
CARRIE 65+	Identifying how to be of service to her spiritual community; current focus on non-formal s-d learning, self-defining as 'catching up'. Aware of experiential learning reframing earlier (adult) spiritual practice.	Mid-life changes enabled spiritual re-engagement & searching. Delayed retirement, in transition with a work ethic towards spiritual learning, looking for role-related outcomes. More critical understanding of faith in maturity.
DOUG 65+	Progress along known path within School; lifelong learner and tutor within Vedic tradition. Ethos of service to community and family.	Recently a 3rd ager; transitioning into retirement through voluntary roles based on professional skills, as spiritual service.
NEIL 65+	Progress within Order; ongoing lifelong self/spiritual development on progressive path. Active in spiritual teaching role; voluntary service in several settings, including other spiritual communities.	Mature spiritual learner; spirituality seen as continuity of development in adulthood, but adapting as necessary. Envisages life-long (and beyond) progress to goal of true self.
SALLY 65+	Learning from life is main learning mode; primarily responding to people and the world through gift work and ethical response to environment. Strong identification with natural world.	Established as a third-ager, enjoying incidental spiritual learning. Now seeking more about practice than in previous adult explorations of spiritual teachings. Current voluntary role facilitates spiritual expression & learning.

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
ALICE 70+	Wishing to explore more contemplative spirituality despite context of 'activist' spiritual community; to continue exercising spiritual gifts as appropriate and fulfil calling.	Mature spirituality from adult life experience and extensive s-d learning. Now identifying third age spiritual needs; some searching and adjusting within dwelling.
BEN 70+	Needing to manage illness and reflect on life. Strong feelings about worth and status of animals, reflected in personal lifestyle (vegan).	Minimal spiritual engagement; continuity of adult spirituality featuring spiritualism; but seeking & receiving comfort in HL spiritual community.
CAROLINE 70+	Pursuing s-d and experiential learning to support ongoing voluntary roles for extended service and ministry; aware of spiritual development in changing circumstances and outlook.	Mature and well advanced. Actively searching within dwelling for adaptations; open to new understandings for spiritual growth; valuing community for spiritual expression.
SASHA 70+	Ongoing spiritual development through contemplative practice, creativity and music. Aware of ongoing experiential learning through life-review. Active in voluntary roles and in spiritual leadership (groups, Quiet Days).	Well established spiritual journey, due to life events, reflective skills and spiritual practices. Exploring a more seeking style, extending her spiritual network, but still currently within dwelling.
TOM 70+	Focused on learning that supports discipleship and service, incremental learning from life-long spiritual experience. Training courses to facilitate his overall purpose	Mature spirituality and third-age lifestyle but not particularly age conscious; confident of inner life and

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
	(voluntary work at home and abroad) and strong sense of mission. Some tutoring and mentoring roles.	spiritual connection which nurture spiritual learning and spiritual identity.
DELIA 75+	Development of practice (healing and meditation) and its teaching; conferences and training to support practice. S-d learning on interface of spirituality and science; intellectual curiosity in service of spirituality.	Advanced seeker, continuing to gather from wide variety of experience and self-directed learning; knowledgeable and aware of self-constructed spiritual learning path taken.
GREG 75+	Ongoing spiritual development based on learning in spiritual community. Wishing to develop better connection and relationship to higher power; self-improvement as theme, but need to develop inner life not clarified – 'yearning'.	Mature spirituality from adulthood dwelling; consciousness of 3rd age spirituality emerging but not yet motivating self-directed spiritual learning (as it had been at 40+). Reported being 'bit stuck'.
JOSH 75+	Pursuing intellectual quest for spiritual understanding and desire to communicate it. Curiosity to 'make sense' through spiritual teachings was main driver for ongoing spiritual learning.	Well engaged spiritual journey; enjoying retirement as opportunity for voluntary service linked to professional skills, and more time for spiritual seeking.
PAULA 75+	Responding spiritually to everyday life; 'in the moment' incidental learning; practicing gratitude and self-acceptance. Valuing experiential	Well engaged in third age spirituality; discovery of self-acceptance and universal love as key spiritual principles fuelling activist journey.

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
	learning as source of being 'good at community' and relationships.	
PRUE 75+	Avid self-directed learner, active and consciously pursuing spiritual self-development and supporting the growth of others. Experiential learning, now pursuing intuitive connections over intellectual understanding.	Third-age spirituality well established and experienced; making sense of increasing challenges to dwelling (searching beyond adjustments so far). Large spiritual learning network in which she could be seen as a boundary dweller.
GINGER 80+	Engaging in periodic life-review for experiential learning. Searching for meaning / making sense of past. Ongoing expression through creative arts, primarily painting and photography. Creation of art works said to be 'spiritual journeys'.	Seemingly not particularly spiritually engaged (more rumination than reflection). Age-aware through life-review; strong need to tell the story (including to himself) but limited opportunity due to isolated life style.
JEN 80+	Exploring a new path; reflecting on and re-framing a long life. Moving from long-standing dwelling to seeking, through extensive, purposive reflection and s-d learning.	Well advanced third age and spiritual journey; mature and experienced. Recent change of spiritual outlook as result of searching; open to more development in new seeking mode.
ELSA 85+	'Questing'. Access to learning an issue (transport limited and no online). Self-directed reading and talking to others 'about things that matter'; elements of yearning.	Established as a seeker, but conflicted about wanting 'answers' vs keeping open, resisting certainties or dwelling. Hampered by early years' damage?

Appendix O

CASE	Spiritual learning project? (what are people doing?)	Where on third-age spiritual journey? (what does it represent?)
JACK 90+	Doing whatever learning that supports ongoing ministry; includes reflection on experience in long life context and ongoing adaptations to practice and ministry.	Well advanced, mature spiritual journey "near the end of the road". Acceptance of self /role as elder, as attributed by family / community. High value placed on life review; acceptance and gratitude.

Appendix P   ERGO for stage1 research

From: ERGO [ergo@soton.ac.uk]
Sent: Tuesday, June 28, 2016 2:13 PM
To: Walker J.K.
Subject: Your Ethics Submission (Ethics ID:20728) has been reviewed and approved

Submission Number: 20728
Submission Name: The contribution of informal learning to spiritual development in later life
This is email is to let you know your submission was approved by the Ethics Committee.

You can begin your research unless you are still awaiting specific Health and Safety approval (e.g. for a Genetic or Biological Materials Risk Assessment)

Comments
1.Thanks for this carefully prepared submission. Good luck with your project.

2.Thanks for such a thorough application.

Click here to view your submission
Coordinator: Joanna Walker

ERGO : Ethics and Research Governance Online
http://www.ergo.soton.ac.uk

DO NOT REPLY TO THIS EMAIL

Appendix Q   ERGO for stage 2 research

ERGO <ergo@soton.ac.uk>   ↩ Reply all | ∨
Wed 8/30/2017, 4:55 PM
Walker J.K. ⌄

> You forwarded this message on 8/30/2017 9:12 PM

Submission Number: 30010
Submission Name: Informal learning in later life spiritual development
This is email is to let you know your submission was approved by the Ethics Committee.

You can begin your research unless you are still awaiting specific Health and Safety
approval (e.g. for a Genetic or Biological Materials Risk Assessment)

Comments
1.thanks, all very clear, good luck with your research.

Click here to view your submission
Coordinator: Joanna Walker

ERGO : Ethics and Research Governance Online
http://www.ergo.soton.ac.uk

Appendix R   Codebook for focus group discussion and individual interview data, NVivo 2016-17

Nodes

Name	Description	Files	References
Ageing and spirituality	Aspects of a perceived relationship between getting or being older and one's spirituality (including no relationship between them); eg. changes in values, priorities, understanding, beliefs.	33	205
gerotranscendence	Particular concept from Lars Tornstam involving 3 areas of change proposed within the relationship between ageing and spirituality; the key idea being the qualitatively different nature of later life. GT involves re-definition of self and of relationships with others; less occupation with self and things, but greater solitude; sense of transcendence (cosmic connection).	6	8
late(r) life awareness	A sense of being old, having had experience, travelled a distance; self-consciousness as an 'older person' (or lack of such a consciousness).	24	64
later life spirituality	A sense of a different kind of spirituality that has developed, been acquired or learned, in or by the period of later life; includes changes in spiritual beliefs, practices or communities.	28	96
other Ageing and spirituality	Data from parent code Ageing and spirituality not differentiated elsewhere.	14	34
Finitude	An awareness that life is finite.	22	70
death awareness	An awareness that one's death is a reality and may be in the foreseeable future.	17	36
end of life planning	Actions that respond to death awareness such as will-making, power of attorney, funeral planning, talking to relatives.	6	12

Name	Description	Files	References
other Finitude	Awareness that life is finite and will end at some time; part of the life-course.	9	18
Informal learning	Learning that occurs both incidentally (from life) and as a result of self-directed choices; involves varying degrees of intentionality.	33	370
incidental learning	Informal learning that arises from everyday experience, often in interaction with others and in response to experiences that are noticed and reflected upon.	26	70
incremental learning	Learning that builds, develops or adjusts a current framework of understanding; may reach a critical mass that triggers a change in outlook, thus becoming transformative.	22	50
reflection	Key process in learning, whereby reflection on experience leads to changes in understanding and interpretation; features various levels from 'noticing' to 're-integration' of new outlook.	25	72
self-directed learning	Informal learning that is directed by the learner such as reading or viewing; can include periods of more organised learning (provided by others) identified by the learner as useful for an overall objective.	31	138
transformative learning	Learning that alters one's outlook or mental framework for perceiving the world.	16	36
Inner life	A sense of a reality that is 'inside' or internal to a person, in contrast to an apprehension of what is external or 'outside'; a source of perception and feeling that can also contribute to experiencing, knowing or understanding.	26	92
consciousness	Self-awareness in relation to others, to the external and internal worlds; a place or means of processing perceptions from these sources.	15	24
discernment	Gaining a sense of a situation, a course of action or a choice to make, through (spiritual) interpretation of events or experiences.	6	9

Name	Description	Files	References
inner voice	Sense of being able to receive messages from the inner world of thoughts, perceptions, feelings; also known as intuition (see intuitive way of knowing) or 'gut feeling', or divine / higher self-guidance (see spiritual connection)	12	26
moral code	Ethical ways of thinking and behaving that have evolved and guide responses to others and the world.	13	19
Life-course	Perspective that acknowledges the whole of life; recognises a range of experience and contexts that feature over an extended period creating continuity; sometimes implies the effects of early experience / circumstances on later life.	34	199
experience	Awareness of event, action or interaction of individual (or group) in the external world; interpretation of experience seen as basis for learning and development.	23	67
life challenge	Particular experience or event that disrupts normal or expected flow of life, often requiring a response such as a change in understanding or action.	24	69
other Life-course	General awareness of experience over time: time having passed, being at a different age or time now, or imagining a future time.	13	23
transition	Experience that features a period of adjustment between significant life changes as thoughts, feelings and perceptions are re-figured; period over which change takes place.	24	38
Meaning making	Personal interpretation of or significance attributed to events, experience or data, internally and externally perceived. One of the later stages / outcomes of reflection.	30	217
acceptance	Adjustment of understanding or interpretation of events, such as response to loss; greater tolerance of different views or ambiguity; trust or open-ness regarding others or situations; less need for meaning / sense-making.	12	24
meaning systems	Mental structures that result from meaning-making (such as ethical codes, spiritual practices, habitual interpretations); amenable to change from further meaning-making.	12	25

Name	Description	Files	References
other Meaning-making	Data from parent node Meaning-making not otherwise differentiated.	8	22
purpose and vocation	A sense of life's personal meaning in terms of goals or roles, often looking forward rather than making sense of the past; seeking significance in the context of one's existence.	16	29
re-framing	Process whereby a meaning framework or system is significantly altered, not just adjusted, to make sense of experience that challenges the existing understanding.	13	26
simplification	Process of reducing complexity of meanings, beliefs or understandings; possibly because they are no longer needed or have become inappropriate in the light of experience.	4	14
spiritual meaning	Interpretations of events or experiences that are deemed of spiritual significance (to do with a search for the sacred); attribution of a meaning that is spiritual.	21	72
Self-development	A general sense of personal growth and change, including spiritual development	28	119
generativity	An outward focus on others, particularly younger generations; desire to 'give back'; includes legacy building.	10	16
higher self	A sense of an additional level of consciousness, beyond cognitive processes, which can be accessed through meditation or other spiritual practices; provides a space for connecting with transcendent reality (whether 'other' or ground of all reality/living things).	7	16
integrity	A result of individuation - a fuller 'becoming' or 'rounding out' of the personality; linked in Eriksonian thought with acceptance of the totality of life as a feature of maturity.	11	14
later life potential	A more general sense (than 'higher self') of potential for self-development that can come with ageing/experience.	9	11
other Self-development	Data from parent node Self-development not otherwise differentiated.	4	5

Name	Description	Files	References
self-identity	A description of one's understanding or perception of one's self; subject to development through maturation and ageing via reflection on experience.	17	49
Spiritual learning	Changes in understanding or perception of one's spirituality, or of spiritual issues or practices.	32	364
other Spiritual learning	Data from parent node Spiritual learning, not otherwise differentiated.	14	26
spiritual dwelling	The contrasting concept to 'spiritual seeking' to describe growth that is accommodated within an existing world view (often religious), involving critiquing and adapting but not seeking to move beyond its bounds.	25	75
spiritual formation	A general term for spiritual growth (usually) into a particular religious tradition, such as that taught for membership or other aspects of faith development; implications of character formation as well as programmed learning.	24	61
spiritual journey or path	Awareness of past, present and future spiritual learning and development; of elements that together could be seen as forming a path or journey.	28	106
spiritual seeking	A style of spiritual searching /learning whereby growth in understanding contributes to a more individual world-view, rather than one inherited or chosen from a religious/spiritual community. In practice, freedom to respond to many traditions and interpretations of experience.	25	93
Spirituality	Awareness and search for the sacred, as part of search for meaning in life; often involving sense of transcendent (larger non-material reality)	35	388
definitions and meanings	Participants' understanding of 'spirituality' e.g. values and ethical codes; relationships with self, others and the world; spirituality as distinguished from religion.	25	54
religion	A search for meaning in relation to the sacred usually understood as involving a systematic organisation of beliefs, practices and a community; defined in contrast with spirituality, and as a vehicle for spirituality.	18	37

Name	Description	Files	References
spiritual community	Group or organisation of those who share similar spiritual outlooks, beliefs and practices; may be more or less elaborated into doctrines, practices and traditions; can be religious or non-religious.	20	45
spiritual connection	The sense of making a connection with a transcendent other or transcendent / higher self, often through a spiritual practice such as prayer or meditation.	20	94
spiritual health	Protective or health-promoting aspects that are attributed to spiritual life.	2	6
spiritual perspective	Dimension of one's life that focuses on spiritual interpretation or meaning-making; one's outlook or general views on spiritual matters, sometimes stated as core or overall beliefs / faith position or stance.	14	33
spiritual practice	Outward activities that symbolise, ritualise or otherwise signify (internal) spiritual attitudes, beliefs or commitments; includes means of expressing spiritual realities, such as prayer/meditation, music, movements/postures, worship, acts of service/ministry etc.	27	90
spiritual resources	Life-enhancing attributes associated with spiritual life and practice; associated with capacity and resilience.	22	29
Transcendence	A concept of a different or 'higher' reality beyond everyday conscious awareness leading to a sense of 'otherness' or larger context for one's life; connection with or awareness of transcendence (or a transcendent Other) is a common goal of spirituality.	23	79
immanence	An aspect of transcendence, involving spirituality in the ordinariness of life, in everyday activities, in noticing aspects of the natural or material world; a consciousness of the here and now, in the present moment: Practised consciously through mindfulness.	11	17
self-transcendence	A sense of rising above one's human limitations and difficulties, or life circumstances, to access spiritual resources that support the sense of self; being part of a 'bigger picture'.	12	30

Name	Description	Files	References
transcendent Other	Generic term for the Divine, God, Spirit or The Spirit, Nature, Ground of Being, Source etc. Denotes spiritual entity that is 'other' and external but which may be accessible through a spiritual connection.	13	24
Ways of knowing	A perception that there are different ways that people come to know or understand things, not just using cognitive mental faculties.	30	146
affective	A way of knowing things that engages feelings, so that something is 'emotionally true' or 'emotionally intelligent'; implies perception that is not just (or alternative to) rationale or logical explanation.	8	19
believing	A way of knowing, or position adopted, from conclusions drawn on various bases - rational, non-rational, affective, interpretive etc; comments on the act or nature of faith or belief, rather than its contents.	16	29
intellectual	A most common way in which people perceive that they know or learn things, engaging cognitive mental faculties, often involving rational processes.	8	26
intuitive	A way of knowing that derives from attending to an inner voice or feeling, rather than a rational process that can be tracked; colloquially a 'gut feeling'.	12	23
metaphorical or narrative	An understanding of something that relies on metaphor or a narrative / story rather than direct description or explanation.	8	13
mystery	A way of knowing that accepts the possibility of not knowing; that tolerates ambiguity, paradox, lack of clarity or duality.	8	14
revelation	A way of knowing that derives from an outside source, often taken as transcendent or divine; apprehended through dreams, visions, voices for eg.	7	10
wisdom	A complex, multi-faceted way of knowing incorporating a mixture of several other 'ways' which have been recognised and integrated, often over time; associated with accumulation of learning in later life / with long experience.	5	8

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